

Passion Performative: Reading Cocteau with Proust and Derrida

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Abstract: The article demonstrates that the use of the telephone as a performative medium on stage or in literature introduces the non-existent to the existent, making absence explicit and making it possible to foretell death, especially of a person one loves. This may also be viewed as the author's attempt to use the text to communicate with the beyond and make the voices of the departed audible.

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The demon calls. Socrates picks up, wait here's Freud (what a difference, a very important time difference and the demon speaks to Freud, directly, from the beyond, like his ghost which says to him "wait," hold on, come back with your spool, don't hang up, here's Heidegger.)
Jacques Derrida, *Postcard* (1987, 31)

Introduction

In his 2001 book *Speech Acts in Literature* Joseph Hillis Miller introduces speech act theory, proceeding from John L. Austin, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, and develops the notion of "passion performative," on the basis of his reading of the work of Marcel Proust. As can be seen below, literary performativity is at first glance surprisingly closely linked to technology, specifically the telephone, one of the new inventions of the beginning of the 20th century. The desire of literary characters to use the telephone or, rather, the interest of writers in new inventions is understandable, in view of the fact that technology modifies language use, making dialogues remarkably more complicated than the more conventional face-to-face interaction or epistolary exchange.

The question of love, one of the favourite topics of literature, with the attendant issues of the loss of love or of the beloved, gets heightened attention in periods of social change that alter our modes of communication, thereby creating uncertainty about the success of speech acts. The notion of the passion performative is thus most important not when communication is running smoothly, but when it fails or when people fear its failure. The development of technology has enabled people to communicate increasingly across distances, something we have a heightened

awareness of at the time of this writing. However, in addition to the more successful constative information exchange, this has also created new sources of tension at the performative-emotional level, where the lack of the physical presence of the partner carries considerable significance. Miller writes about the novel, but theatre as a performative phenomenon deserves closer attention in this context as well. While a work of fiction as a whole may be a performative speech act, as Miller argues already at the beginning of his book, can a theatre performance, with its ability to reproduce the reality, achieve even more?

The article will first discuss how Derrida enriches the traditional conception of the performative, by moving the discussion away from felicity or infelicity to the question of promise which allows him to delve into the declaration of love as a speech act. This will also help to elucidate why several key scenes in Proust's work that are related to love involve the use of the telephone. The article innovatively compares the literary performative to the theatrical one.

Derrida

If we are interested in the failure of the performative speech acts, we should not focus on Austin or Searle alone, but also the late work of Jacques Derrida, since performativity appears in almost all of his main concepts: gift, testimony, secret, forgiveness, etc. Derrida develops his main criticism of the speech act theory of Austin and Searle in *Limited Inc*, his main text dedicated to linguistic performativity. Derrida proceeds from the fact that famous examples like "I declare this meeting open" or "I pronounce you husband and wife" can only act as performatives, that is, change something in the world, in felicitous conditions in authentic contexts. The meeting will only be opened if both the speaker and the audience believe this to be fitting. This would suggest that performative speech acts cannot exist without seriousness of intent, something that Derrida, of course, doubts. Derrida believes that in the case of speech acts we need to bear in mind that an ironic speech act can also be performative and that each performative speech act need not work. The unpredictability of the performativity of speech acts is caused by iterability. As Miller states,

Iterability is nothing more [. . .] than the possibility of every mark¹ to be repeated and still to function as a meaningful mark in new contexts that are cut off from the original context, "the intention to communicate" of the original marker of the mark. That originator may be absent or

¹ Derrida uses the word 'mark' (*marque*) which he believes to be wider and more appropriate than the concept of sign (*signe*).

dead, but the mark still functions, as it goes on functioning after the death of its intended recipient. (Miller 2001, 78)

The phrase “*je t’aime*,” Derrida argues, is in most cases not constative but performative “because the one to whom it is spoken has absolutely no way to verify that what I claim is a fact. You must take it on faith that I’m telling you the truth” (Miller 2001, 135). Thus, this phrase is either explicitly or implicitly accompanied by a promise that is performative without a doubt. This allows Miller to define passion as a phenomenon that seeks to own or change its object. A phone call, especially to a person one loves, potentially creates such a passion performative, which makes a really existing other of the addressee into somebody who is not a unity but an indeterminate and uncontrollable multiplicity.

Derrida’s *The Postcard* is, as the title suggests, mostly dedicated to short-form correspondence, but it also contains examples of how the first-person speaker talks to his beloved over the phone. The speech is described as follows:

this is what I say to myself, she² still loves me since she is speaking to me. She is not here but there, she is speaking to me, she brings me near to myself who am so far from everything. She touches me, she takes me in her voice, while accusing me she cradles me again, she makes me swim, she engulfs me, you becloud me like a fish, I let myself be loved in the water. (Derrida 1987, 56)

As can be imagined, Derrida is aware of the fact that the telephone creates intimate closeness while simultaneously stressing distance. The woman becomes the voice that embraces the writer, the voice gains a voice. If everything goes well (a drunk is circling the phone booth in London from which the author is calling and staring at him), the voice is filtered, parasitised, and becomes a revenant. Speaking on a phone is thus speaking “through parasites”³ and the result is symmetrical: it is not just the addressee that turns into a revenant or parasite but also the speaker. Only “I love you” (*je t’aime*) allows love to exist and the lovers not to dissolve into eternity:

When I told you yesterday from the station, on the telephone, that we will not be able to replace each other, I was very sincerely talking about forgetting. And about the eternity of my love. You substitute yourself for yourself all the time. I forget you in order to fall in love, with you, from the

2 In French *elle* may refer to the woman addressed – which is the case here – but also to voice (*la voix*).

3 Parasitism (*parasitage*) is one of Derrida’s central concepts, which is also manifest in the case of speech acts. In contrast to Austin, Derrida’s position is that the possible infelicity of speech acts, their being affected by different disturbances, is not random but can be viewed as a central feature of language use.

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very next second. This is my condition, on the condition that one loves. I felt it right away, I was uplifted, a kind of levitation, and as soon as you called me, the first time, I forgot you, I lost consciousness. I am going to sleep now. You should not have left me. You should not have let me depart alone. One day, when one of us will no longer be able to say "I love you," it will suffice that the other still have wind of it, nothing will have changed. (Derrida 1987, 180)

Thus, it could be said that at this juncture that the telephone as a technological apparatus marks both absence and presence. The telephone blurs and distorts the speech act, but the speech act may be (and mostly also is) performative, despite this distortion.

Proust

At the beginning of the 20th century, the period into which Proust has placed his characters, the telephone had already become an everyday phenomenon. Thus, a friend of Madame de Verdurin in his *In Search of Lost Time*⁴ even uses the telephone to order food from the shop, while the horrible maid Françoise sees the phone as the means through which to acquire another vice:

Thus Dr. Bell's invention has enabled Françoise to acquire an additional defect, which was that of refusing, however important, however urgent that occasion to be, to make use of the telephone. She would manage to disappear whenever anybody was going to teach her how to use it, as people disappear when it is time for them to be vaccinated. (SG 120)⁵

Proust got a telephone quite early but, as its ringing bothered him when he was writing, he gave it up, using the phone in a nearby café when he needed it.

The telephone, however, does not just mark the period or technology, but three longer scenes are dedicated to it, focusing on three central characters who are all objects of the narrator's attachment and who die: the narrator's grandmother, Robert de Saint-Loup and Albertine. The death of the grandmother is one of the most significant scenes in the novel as a whole. Saint-Loup is the closest friend of the

4 This article refers to Proust's *À la Recherche du Temps Perdu* as *In Search of Lost Time*, although the first English translation used for the quotes was titled *A Remembrance of Things Past*. *In Search of Lost Time* is closer to the French original.

5 The English translations are from C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation first published by Chatto and Windus in 1929. This quotation comes from vol. IV, translated by Moncrieff as *Cities of the Plain*, but here referred to by its original, *Sodom and Gomorrah* (SG hereafter).

protagonist who dies in battle and Albertine is his great love, who abandons him and then dies.

The first of the three scenes is introduced by the author's meditation on the switchboard operators (*demoiselles de téléphone*), who are also defined as vigilant virgins, guardian angels, the all-powerful, the Danaids of the invisible and the priestesses of the invisible (*Vierges Vigilantes, Anges gardiens, Toutes-Puissantes, Danaïdes de l'Invisible, prêtresses de l'Invisible*). It is these mythological creatures who make the call possible, but they may also prove to be obstructions, and the more one deals with them, the greater the likelihood that the call, especially with a loved one, will be disrupted. Perhaps this is why the otherwise admiring list contains a reference to the Danaids, the fifty daughters of King Danaus, forty-nine of whom killed their husbands on their wedding nights.

Even more, as Miller⁶ points out:

One thing, as Marcel indicates, what disappears with the telephone is the sense of privacy we used to associate with being safe within the home. The telephone brings the outside in, breaks down the inside/outside dichotomy, and endangers the possibility of private communication. (Miller 2001, 190)

The supernatural power of the telephone and the help of the switchboard operators bring a loved one to us, but the person's arrival is ambivalent. Thus the narrator muses: "It is she, it is her voice that is speaking, that is there. But how remote it is!" (GW 178).⁷ He remarks somewhat later, "A real presence⁸ indeed that voice so near – in actual separation. But a premonition also of an eternal separation!" (GW 178)

The person whom we hear through the telephone is thus something else. She or he is not the same person who we talk to in the salon. This makes Miller claim the following:

That the telephone, by dispensing with the bodily presence of the person and resurrecting him or her as a ghostly voice, presages the real death of the person is reinforced later in the passage, when the connection is suddenly broken. Marcel is left with a lifeless apparatus pressed against

6 Estonian writer Toomas Raudam's essay *Teie [You]* (2003, 29–82) also highlights the importance of the telephone in Proust's work and also looks into the same scenes.

7 C. K. Scott Moncrieff's translation, first published by Chatto and Windus in 1925 as *The Guermantes Way* (hereafter GW).

8 Real presence is a theological concept that marks Christ's real presence in the Eucharistic bread and wine.

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his hear, "vainly repeating 'Granny, Granny' as Orpheus, left alone, repeats the name of his dead wife." (Miller 2001, 196)

The two scenes discussed below demonstrate that the disconnected calls, wrong connections and the helping but at the same time controlling actions of the switchboard operators are not just the technological characteristics of the era, but devices that metaphorically represent something more general that accompanies communication from a distance. In the first scene this is associated with Robert Saint-Loup, who is in Doncières, and has quarrelled with his mistress Rachel who is tired of the screeching of the parrot that lives in Robert's apartment (alongside canaries, dogs and a monkey). She has moved out. As a result, Robert has to make daily phone calls to the concierge to keep things under control. Rachel is a simple prostitute whom Robert has elevated to the status of a courtesan, and it is clear that the conventional option, reconciliation via a letter, is impossible for an aristocratic man. The modern means of communication is within reach, but its use displeases the narrator: "Besides, it hardly seemed to me quite proper to make my parents, or even a mechanical instrument installed in their house, play a pander between Saint-Loup and his mistress, ladylike and high-minded as the latter might be" (GW, 163). The telephone itself and entrusting it to somebody is significant and would assist the performative act, that is, bringing Rachel closer to Robert and thus facilitating reconciliation, which would transgress the rules of social politeness for the narrator.

The telephone permits people who have quarrelled to make up, but it also can easily sow discord. This happens to Albertine who, instead of coming to the narrator's place late in the evening when he has been impatiently waiting for hours, calls to ask him whether he is not too tired. If previously Albertine had two options – to keep her promise or not – the telephone now allows her to use obfuscation, to hide indifference under the guise of consideration (she had become more entranced with her relationship with Andrée). Albertine's calls place the narrator in a complex situation as the initial joy (she is coming) is replaced with suspicion (where is she) and then the understanding that she is lying. Burning with desire and longing, the narrator coolly answers that, since the woman had wasted one of his evenings already, he will not be able to see her for three weeks. It is the phone call that allows the narrator to understand the distance between the two of them: "About Albertine, I felt that I should never find out anything, that, out of that tangled mass of details of fact and falsehood, I should never unravel the truth." (SG 123) The phone makes it easier to lie, but also increases the other side's scepticism and jealousy. It makes the addressee indeterminate and uncontrollable but also leads to the understand-

ing of the overall impossibility of determining or controlling the addressee. The telephone allows Albertine to lie but it also allows the first-person narrator to catch her on a lie. Technology not only changes society, but also makes visible what already exists in a covert form.

The telephone and probably also other technological innovations reveal to our consciousness something that we do not want to admit in the context of emotional attachment: we are speaking to somebody who is present during the act of speaking and yet each moment of the conversation also stresses the fact of the beloved's physical absence and reminds us of his or her future physical absence, that is, death and with it the death of love. We are in an intimate dialogue, but this dialogue is controlled by the outside world and mediated: there can be interruption, the call can be disconnected at any moment and, perhaps most importantly, the telephone breaks the central illusion of love, that of owning another person. The telephone is an ideal means for creating jealousy as it makes the speaker deictic: unaware of the location of the partner, it reveals that love is not based on facts, but fantasies. In other words, love does not allow one to distinguish the fictional and the real.

Cocteau

One of the first plays that brings the telephone to the theatre stage is the two-act play *At the Telephone* (*Au téléphone*) by André de Lorde that is based on a short story by Charles Foleÿ and staged in 1901 by André Antoine who also played the lead. In the first act of the play we see the head of a family depart from his home, leaving his young wife and child with the servants. The audience hears different scary voices, barking dogs and then oppressive silence. In the second act we see the husband who has reached his friends who live 70 km away. He receives a phone call from his worried wife. He initially tries to calm her down, but becomes increasingly anxious as by the end of the play the house is invaded by bandits who execute the whole family, with the husband being forced to listen to the event, powerlessly, on the telephone. As can be seen, the telephone, called a "a wonderful invention" (II, 1) in the play that can be used to call "the master miles away – and yet he can talk to us as if he were quite close to us in this room" (Lorde 1901), plays a central dramatic role here.

The play was very popular when it came out and also in the subsequent decades, although the telephone, initially an exotic instrument the principles of whose use had to be explained at the beginning of the century, had become a common household item. Thus, critics complain about the technological naiveté of the text in the reviews of the staging at Théâtre d'Antoine in 1944 (Lauberaux 1944), but it can be seen that the play has lost none of its dramatic tension. The play is based on the

classical tragic model in which danger is removed from the stage and the disaster is suggested by the gradually approaching external threat. We see different signs of danger in the first act, the tension is maintained by sinister events and the second act brings the feared resolution. No violence is shown to us. The telephone as a medium is similar to the convention of the informants in classical French tragedy or the Greek chorus who tells us about the horrors that have taken place. It is not surprising that the telephone is described as being mysterious or supernatural in making it possible to make invisible violence accessible to our imagination. The impact of the violence is increased by the intensity of the premonition and the limited visual representation of the event.

More optimistic versions of the text have also been produced. For example, David W. Griffith's 1909 short film *Lonely Villa* reverses the French tragedy in an American manner by making the telephone into an instrument of rescue that allows the loving husband to give useful instructions to the household under siege and, when the bandits still get an upper hand, to arrive in time to save the victims. The culmination of the film, however, is in the moment when one of the villains cuts the cable and the call is disconnected. The popularity of the play can be seen in the fact that a parody was created in the 1920s in which, according to Marcel Lapierre (1944), it is not the beloved wife and child that are in danger but the mother-in-law of the protagonist who listens to her last breaths with pleasure.

The telephone is also a useful device in another play of the same period, Tristan Bernard's *Les Coteaux du Médoc* (1903)⁹, in which the protagonist, after a wrong connection, ends up talking to a lovely woman who he falls in love with and who fortunately is revealed to be his new neighbour. Additional flavour is given by the switchboard operator girls whose duty is to ensure smooth connections and who are called either "evil deities" or "elusive and malevolent demons" because they are both able to make miracles happen and end the call at any moment.

Thus, already starting from its first stage appearances, the telephone is not just a technical device but a full-fledged medium. It enables the creation of a specific stage reality of something completely absent with the help of a quasi-monologue. The audience sees a character talking on the telephone but does not hear the responses, which creates a credible conversational situation. The inaudible voice of the interlocutor is present on the stage, but this presence is, as we already know, at the same time proof of its absence. In addition to heightening absence, the telephone call also demonstrates the precarity of the speech act, as it may be interrupted or

⁹ For more detail on this, see Sakamoto (2006).

wrongly connected at any time, the other speaker may hang up, either by accident or on purpose, there might be an interruption by the switchboard operators, the call may be interrupted by other people and technical difficulties.

Jean Cocteau's play *La voix humaine* (*The Human Voice*) may have been influenced by *Au téléphone*, as suggested by Claude Jamet in his review in *Germinal* (1944). However, Cocteau's close relations with Proust are also well known and the scenes from *In Search of Lost Time* cited above were certainly familiar to Cocteau.

The play was first staged in 1930 and is probably one of the more popular texts of the author to this day: there are at least five stage versions from France in the past five years (excluding the stagings of Francis Poulenc's opera version). In Estonia, too, in addition to a recent staging at Tallinn City Theatre (March 2020, director Kristjan Suits), the play has appeared in radio theatre and on television in three performances with the genre designation of a *digital monodrama*. There are also several film versions, the most influential of which is probably Roberto Rossellini's from already 1948. Pedro Almodóvar's fondness for the play can be seen in his *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* (1988), a transfiction inspired by Cocteau's play, as well as *The Human Voice*, his free interpretation of the play from 2020.

The one-act one-woman play introduces us to a woman. The author says that she is not a specific woman who is either smart or stupid but an anonymous woman. We do not learn much about her beyond the fact that during the play that lasts about 45 minutes she talks to a man with whom she has had a five-year relationship and who has left her a few days earlier but whom she still loves. They do not appear to have (shared) children but do have a dog whose fate becomes a matter of discussion after their breakup. Nothing is said about the age of the woman but it is clear that the text works more dramatically if the role is played by a mature woman, not a teenager. Berthe Bovy, who played in the first stage version, was forty-three, Ingrid Bergman, who played in one of the more evocative versions in the late 1960s, was fifty-one, Evelin Võigemast was forty in the Tallinn City Theatre version and Tilda Swinton sixty in Almodóvar's recent film. Cocteau was also almost forty when he wrote the play.

In the introduction of the play the author writes that the protagonist is an "average victim, head over heels in love; she tries to achieve only one thing, to offer a straw to the man to make him confess his lie, to not leave behind a dishonourable memory. The actress has to leave the impression that she is bleeding, that she is losing blood like a wounded animal and that she ends the act in a room covered in blood" (VH 16).¹⁰

10 The direct translation of the French original is provided in the text to retain the emphases of the text.

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The remark above states that the act opens with a crime scene. A woman in a long night gown lies on the floor next to the bed, as if she had been killed. There are other references to death: the phone call at times becomes almost the call of a dead person: "This is unpleasant. It is as if I was dead. I can hear but not make myself audible" (VH 31), "if you had not called me, I would have died" (VH 43), "when you talk to me, I get air, [...] when you hang up, you sever the tube" (VH 45). This is what happens at the end of the play: "she falls on the bed, face down, head limp and lets the receiver fall like a stone" (VH 14). Thus, the text is circular: the already dead character rises for a moment to talk to somebody who has abandoned her.

In order to stay alive, the protagonist has to avoid hanging up and thus has to maintain the conversation at any cost. In addition to the practical questions (like what to do with the man's things), descriptions of states of mind, thoughts and memories of the protagonist are also motivated – as the author suggests in the quote above – by the desire to catch the man at a lie. The play's culmination can be found in the moment when the call breaks off and the woman calls him back only to find out that he is not at home, as it had seemed earlier, but somewhere else. Without daring to ask explicitly and probably because there is no way of verifying the truth (because the woman is also lying, confessing some lies but not all), she makes a complex linguistic move: "if you lied to me out of kindness and I would find out, I would care about you even more" (VH 56). This speech act does not yield a result, but reveals the paradoxical tragedy of the conversation: the discovery of cheating is relevant only while people are in a relationship. When the relationship has ended, cheating and its discovery have no weight. The woman has accepted the loss of love but she at least hopes for a lie.

The text indeed works because of the tension that reflects, on the one hand, the acknowledgement of the fact of breakup by the protagonist and, on the other hand, her inability to fully accept it. This inability is situated somewhere on the outer limits of consciousness, creating occasional rays of hope, similar to tropisms¹¹ of Nathalie Sarraute, that are immediately extinguished by consciousness. The audience understands that the woman is pleading and hoping, but does not hear it as consciousness interferes before the words are uttered. The tragedy does not lie in abandonment, about which the protagonist says that she has known that this day would come even-

11 This concept that was created at the beginning of the 20th century has been interpreted in different ways, for example, by André Gide. In her *L'ère du soupçon* (1956), Nathalie Sarraute (1987, 3) defines it as "Mouvements indéfinissables qui glissent très rapidement aux limites de la conscience ; ils sont à l'origine de nos gestes, de nos paroles, des sentiments que nous manifestons, que nous croyons éprouver et qu'il est possible de définir." (In direct translation: the indeterminate moments that occur at the limits of our consciousness and initiate our gestures, words and feelings that we express and believe to be experiencing.)

tually, but the fact that some obscure corner of consciousness has failed to accept this knowledge. At some micro-level, forgetfulness appears at times, making the body and the brain work on some earlier default regime, leading to the forgetting of the breakup in dreams and wakefulness and thus heartbreak is not created by the act of abandonment but by the remembering that follows the moment of forgetfulness. The audience is not just looking at a woman in the throes of love but a person who has lost her love for good and who is re-living the loss again and again. This is why the text mentions crying and tears repeatedly in the text, although Cocteau ruled them out in his stage remarks:

Cocteau directed Bovy to play it impassively, in order to emphasize her suffering by contrast. Having no stage partner but a Bakelite telephone receiver, the actress got to borrowing his intonations, as if internalizing the everyday heroism he had developed in his daily life. The tears he had rigorously forbidden her seemed to flow from inside her body, through the cord, to dampen the receiver – the only thing allowed to suffer. (Arnaud 2016, 501)

Almodóvar's *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown* can be viewed as an analepsis of Cocteau's play or a prequel that shows the colourful events preceding the events described in the play: seeing the rival in a magazine, smoking, burning letters, suicide attempt. The events in the film end in the evening of the third day, the moment when the phone rings in the play. The emotional turmoil, as a result of which even the dog does not recognise its mistress, has ended by the time the curtain rises. "You cannot kill yourself twice," the protagonist says (VH 54). Hence Cocteau's instructions to the actress as the character has been reduced to a husk of a human, a person who has let everything out, accepted everything, surrendered, become jaded, except that something in her has not been able to do this. This something is love that does not yield to will, however steely, and that consciousness cannot fully control. Thus, at the end of the play, when there is nothing left to say, she seems to emit the busy signal (an anachronistic but accurate analogy) repeating *je t'aime* five times in a row.

It is the telephone that both symbolises the finality and irreversibility of the breakup and makes the protagonist conscious of it. "It felt that we were facing each other but all of a sudden there were basements and sewage system, all of the city, between us" (VH 57). But this separation is not only spatial: "At that time we saw each other. We could lose our minds, forget our promises, risk with the impossible, persuade our beloved by kissing him, by clinging to him. One glance could change everything. But this apparatus is finished" (VH 54). The designation of time – *dans le temps* ("at the time") – is interesting as it marks both spatial and temporal distance.

The telephone does not separate the characters only because they are in different places but because they are also in different times.

The theme of death is thus symmetrical. On the one hand, the character herself is symbolically dead, murdered by the man, rising for the brief period in which she is nourished by the call. On the other hand, her companion is dead (for her), his voice emanates from the past, constantly reminding her of the time before the breakup, while the phone itself incessantly reminds her of physical absence. Communication with the netherworld plays a central part in all of Cocteau's oeuvre, for example in *Orpheus*, written in 1926 and in the 1930 film *The Blood of a Poet*, to mention examples from his later work. Morbidity is stressed by the "basements and the sewage system" (*ibid*) that lie between the characters, as if the conversation took place underground.

The popularity of the play up to today is understandable. The text has a contemporary feel as it shows the relationship between the human (humanity) and technology that is topical to this day; it speaks about love and the pain of separation which, in its universality, permits easy identification with the protagonist; it enables great (female) role interpretations. Thus it is not surprising that this role has been played by stars like Ingrid Bergman or Simone Signoret. The text has often been interpreted in a psychological and realistic key. This is not impossible and we can find examples that try to recreate the other, missing part of the dialogue, in a realist mode (see Lorgnet 1983). Theatre history traditionally stresses the reserved intimacy of the text (Deshouilières 1989, 43) or generally regrets the under-appreciation of Cocteau's plays and stage versions in general, the reduction of his work to "dressing the characters of Sophocles into Chanel outfits" ("*habillait en Chanel les personnages de Sophocle*") (Jomaron 1992, 797). However, there are also more innovative recent productions that differ from this model. For example, the young Montréal director Stéphane Saint-Jean (Théâtre de la Névrose) brings the play on stage with nine actors, eight female voices and one male, consciously choosing an anti-psychological perspective (Le Devoir 2003).

Divergence from psychological theatre seems productive within this article for two reasons. The first is the biography of the author before the writing of the play and the second the use of the telephone as a magical element.

Already at the premiere of the play some of the audience realised that the protagonist is inspired by Cocteau himself, as Paul Éluard shouted "This is obscene, this is obscene. You are calling Desbordes" from the balcony ten minutes into the play.¹² After Éluard had been asked to leave, losing his hat and getting a cigarette

12 Both the description of this episode as well as other factual material about Cocteau's life is derived from Claude Arnaud thorough biography, *Jean Cocteau. A Life* (2016).

burn in the process, the play continued and ended with ovations. However, the scandal was not completely over as somebody (Robert Desnos) called to Cocteau's friends and acquaintances (including André Gide and Pablo Picasso) and told them that Cocteau had just killed himself in a bar. Projecting their desires from fantasy to reality does not leave the best impression of the surrealists, from Cocteau's perspective, but also testifies to their having understood the message of the play better than they wanted to admit.

Before explaining the identity of Desbordes, mentioned by Éluard, it is worth noting another possible addressee of the phone call, Raymond Radiguet. Cocteau met him in 1919, when Cocteau was 30 and Radiguet a 15-year-old precocious poet who lied that he was four years older, for his work to be taken more seriously. The extremely narcissistic and talented young man was admired by everybody but acted insolently in society. He was already an alcoholic and had many sexual liaisons, preferring older ladies, in addition to partners of his own age. Cocteau was especially chagrined by Radiguet's affair with man-eater Béatrice Hastings who was older than both Cocteau and Radiguet's mother¹³. Radiguet also consorted with older gentlemen but, it appears, out of vanity or because of his intellectual interests. They had a complicated relationship with Cocteau, in which the older man ended up being the more vulnerable partner who developed a strong and admiring attachment to the younger man, mixing intellectual and physical admiration.

When it is finally clear that there will be no reciprocal love, the results are rather dire:

When he came to understand that a person so important to him didn't love him, Cocteau began not loving himself. Worse, he soon convinced himself that people in general didn't love him – a change that marked the beginning of the end for the former wunderkind, who feared being an anomaly after his transformation. (Arnaud 2016, 300)

It is unclear how close the two were sexually, but at the time when Radiguet wrote two of his published novels they were in a very intense relationship for a year. In December 1920 Radiguet contracted typhoid fever and died. The following years were very hard for Cocteau, characterised by periods of opium use and withdrawal, as well as creative anguish.

¹³ To be more precise, five years older than Radiguet's mother and ten years older than Cocteau. It would be possible to speculate that the play can also be viewed as an act of revenge against these older women who Cocteau often had to compete with. However, this is not a focus of this article.

T A N E L L E P S O O

Things changed in 1925 when he received an admiring letter from a 19-year-old young man of literary ambition named Jean Desbordes. This relationship developed into Cocteau's first great love that was also reciprocated. It had taken him more than five years to get over Radiguet's death:

Radiguet's ghost, which had been maintained by a constellation of photos on the walls of the rue d'Anjou, was dispelled. "Memories of my room no longer gnaw at me," he wrote to Maurice Sachs, the first to hear of the end of this possession – which had not after all been diabolical but angelic. The dead no longer had a hold on him; he could breathe again among the living. (Arnaud 2016, 458)

The first emotions had waned a few years later and by the autumn of 1928 Cocteau understood that the younger man had become attached to an older woman, with the symbolic name of Geneviève Mater, whom Desbordes himself at times called *la Mater*, and who, in addition to being married to a Mr Mater also had a lover, a girl named Blanche. There is no need to spell out the similarities between Desbordes and Radiguet. Although sexual desire had waned and, as has been said above, this did not dominate in his relationship with Radiguet either, Cocteau needed somebody to adore unconditionally and to devote himself to and without whom he could not create.

However, Desbordes was less talented and more superficial than Radiguet and could not provide comparable intellectual tension. He tired of Cocteau's crises, scenes and constant apocalyptic moods and preferred to spend time in the cosier and merrier company of the Maters. Cocteau understood that the affair had ended and he again and forever lost his lover, but not in the form of a romantic drama this time but in that of a mediocre melodrama.

The first draft of *The Human Voice* grew out of the depression and opium of the autumn of 1928. The first complete version was written during rehab treatment and in March Cocteau was allowed out of the hospital briefly to attend the read-through in front of the creative committee of the Comédie-Française. Five years of being together that the protagonist mentions in the play are close to the time that had elapsed between Desbordes's letter and the premiere but it is also possible to see the text as a declaration of love for Radiguet, as much as to his paler and less worthy successor. Desbordes not only betrayed Cocteau's love (it was not a betrayal in the strict meaning of the word), but also Cocteau's memory of Radiguet.

One of the difficulties with interpreting this text lies here. The focus on the psychological state of the female protagonist draws the attention away from the fact that the performance does not focus on what we are seeing or hearing at the moment

but what we do not hear or see. The telephone possesses a dual power. On the one hand, it can bring something into the stage reality through a performative act (in this case, the voice of a man that the audience does not hear but that is not imaginary; the female character is not deranged but sane). On the other hand, it helps to create deictic confusion about the identity of the speaker – we do not know where he is, who he really is, is he dead or alive, is he lying and when. The protagonist's speech is not primary, but secondary to, illustrative of and mirroring the male voice. It is his voice that is primary (how could it be otherwise?) but we cannot hear it.

The autobiographical plane is not just an illustration here that explains where the author got his inspiration. We can also see Cocteau's intuition as a dramatist who was able to capture the operating mechanisms of the theatrical stage design. As demonstrated by Arnaud Rykner (1996, 317–18), already at the end of the 19th century we can see developments that challenge classical theatre: we are no longer witnessing the story of a speaking character but the story of a character who remains silent (for the audience); the speaker only illustrates the silent person. The telephone is one part of stage magic here. It is not simply a technical device of exchanging information but, like the theatre stage on which an actor acquires a new being, the telephone also brings a departed or deceived love and beloved back to the real world. However, this world will disappear when the performance ends and the author-protagonist is naturally aware of this from the beginning but staying in this moment gives both parties the opportunity to exist.

All of *The Human Voice* is an "I love you," Cocteau's passion performative that is addressed to Radiguet, to Debordes or to both of them or to neither of them. However, as Derrida argues, a performative speech act may also work when the addressee, the addresser or even both are dead.

Staging *The Human Voice* at the beginning of the 21st century is a serious challenge. If the staging is to remain true to the author and the period, the result might not speak to today's audiences. Thus, it is understandable that directors wish to speak about love and separation from the perspective of today's society and today's women. It was impossible for Cocteau to represent love between men on stage without raising questions of gender (this is complex to this day) and the woman character is thus a conventional figure, for the same reason that Proust represents Albertine as a woman, not a man. Today's audience is not paying attention to the fact that the text is dedicated to a rather emancipated woman (this would indeed be impossible if the staging is brought to today): she is unmarried (or a widow), has for five years lived with a man whom she had not married or had children and is well off. Even if it is not quite fair to accuse Cocteau of reproducing patriarchal stereotypes, as some critics have done (Pulver 2020), this does not mean that the text would not

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have this effect if it is mechanically transposed to today. Thus it is not surprising that Almodóvar has decided to replace the loving and submissive woman with a loving but resisting woman who hangs up first, saying “I have to learn to hang up on you, darling. Good bye.”

However, the film has an even more interesting element than making the protagonist believable in today’s world: its avoidance of psychological realism. Already the opening shots of the film show not just a luxurious (and rather tasteless) apartment but also reveal the film shoot behind the decorations between which the character walks from time to time. The audience also understands from the text that the protagonist is a successful actress. This can be seen in the acting of Tilda Swinton whose gestures and facial expressions are at times theatrical. We do not know whether she is actually experiencing these feelings or is rehearsing for a role. Almodóvar thus moves the focus from Cocteau’s theme of love and death to the theme of love and theatre (play, pretence, lies). Depending on the camera angle, the audience is at times immersed in the illusion of reality but is regularly yanked out of it. Similarly to Cocteau’s character who at times forgets that the man has left her, the audience discovers that they, too, have temporarily lost the sense of reality.

At the end of the film the protagonist pours lighter fluid all over everything and sets fire to it. This gesture seems final in its destructiveness, but this, too, is putative. The writer burns her manuscript, the director sets fire to the set, the person in love burns letters and photos. The work of art, however, has been created and love does not vanish. Probably because of this we see the arrival of fire-fighters, as similarly to the difficulty of letting go of love, Almodóvar leaves the artistic suicide incomplete. (“I knew the number of pills to not die,” the protagonist says.) This, too, is theatre: the actress cannot kill theatricality inside her and truth cannot be separated from lies in love, as Proust demonstrated.

Conclusion

In *The Postcard* Derrida carefully reads the analysis of the future by a Mr Bréguou, principal investigator of the postal services, that predicts the disappearance of paper-based communications (with the exception of private correspondence), until “the day will come that, thanks to the ‘telepost,’ the fundamentals will be transmitted by wire starting from the user’s computer going to the receiving organs of the computer of the post office nearest the residence of the addressee” (Derrida 1987, 105), Derrida sighs, watching with increasing curiosity how the high-ranking official carelessly and in self-satisfaction rejoices at the end of private postal service (embodied by the delivery of a sealed envelope) and the mingling of private and official communications in a unified and omni-present system or a collective envelope,

as Derrida calls it. This situation where a message addressed to someone will be accessible to third parties, including psychoanalysts and the police (that is, institutions of analysis and discipline), fills Derrida with “terror” as it means the end of literature. He muses: “I don’t know what terrifies me the most, the monstrosity of the perspective or on the contrary its ancestral antiquity, the very normality of the thing.” (Derrida 1987, 107)

The end of literature is not, of course, the end of fiction, writing, novels, drama or poetry, even less the end of the art of writing. It is the end of the kind of literature that developed in Western Europe after Gutenberg and found its symbolic absolute at the end of the 19th century. This literature is based on a clear distinction between the self and the other, the intimate and the public, to the extent that this distinction can be manipulated with, like in Choderlos de Laclos’ *Dangerous Liaisons*. Derrida, together with Mr Brégou, is witnessing the arrival of the Internet. He is not terrified by the fact that paper letters will move into an electronic format (today we know that an e-mail is no less secure than a paper letter) but that telecommunications will deconstruct the sender and the receiver. What was true about the postcard has become a norm now when we post something into that collective envelope, for example Facebook or Twitter and address our post to everybody and become the addressees for everybody. This changes the relationship between the external and internal, public and private. This marks for Derrida the end of literature and other grand institutions like the nation state or psychoanalysis or, in softer terms, the need to re-conceptualise them.

As the past decades have shown, messages circulating on social media do not just move around in vain but may be addressed to those not addressed initially. They act as passion performatives, creating all kinds of negative affects like anger and fear, among other things because it is easy to offend when there is no addressee, but it is impossible to declare love without an addressee. But let us hope that when Socrates calls Freud, he will say something nice (and that the person overhearing the conversation will not be offended).

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Performatiiv ja kirk: lugedes Cocteau'd Prousti ja Derridaga

Tanel Lepsoo

Võtmesõnad: kireperformatiiv, telefon, armastus, surm, Jacques Derrida, Jean Cocteau

Lähtudes viisist, kuidas Jacques Derrida mõtestab performatiivsust, on J. Hillis Miller analüüsinud Marcel Prousti teose „Kaotatud aja otsing“ mõningaid võtmetseene, kus on olulisel kohal värske tehnoloogiline leiutus – telefon. Huvitaval kombel on see aparaat, mis möödunud sajandi 20. aastatel enam ei ole lihtsalt kurioosum, vaid juba leidnud oma koha igapäevases eluolus, seotud uuritavates episoodides kolme tegelasega, kes on jutustaja jaoks väga lähedased: vanaema, armastatud tütarlaps Albertine ning sõber Robert de Saint-Loup. Kõik kolm tegelast lahkuvad minategelase elust traagilisel moel, mistõttu näib telefonil olevat võime otseselt seostada ühelt poolt armastust ja teiselt poolt surma. Tuginedes kõneaktide teooriale, võib mõista, et telefon, mis toob kuuldavale kalli inimese hääle ja koos sellega ka tema enda isiku peaaegu füüsilisel kujul, annab ühtlasi teravalt märku selle isiku puudumisest. Vanaemaga vestlemisel, kus olulisel kohal on lisaks veel kõne võimaliku katkemise oht, tajub jutustaja väga selgelt tema kohalolu, kuid samas ka eemalolekut, mida tõlgendab läheneva surma ettekuulutusena. Vanaema surm ongi Prousti teoses üks olulisemaid sündmusi.

Uurides lähemalt telefoni kui rekvisiidi kasutamist möödunud sajandi alguse teatrilaval, võib märkata, et nii mitmedki autorid on soovinnud ära kasutada selle performatiivset loomust. Ehkki vaataja ei kuule seda, mida teiselt poolt räägitakse, toob telefon sellegipoolest lavale veel ühe tegelase, kes on ühelt poolt küll nähtamatu, kuid teiselt poolt reaalselt olemas. Selline ambivalentne roll on loomulikult hästi mõjuv traagilise armastuse kontekstis, kus telefon toob igatsetud inimese küll kohale, kuid see kohalolu märgib ühtlasi tema eemalolekut.

Jean Cocteau on üks nendest autoritest, kes on telefoni, armastuse ja mahajäetuse teemat kajastanud oma tuntud mononäidendis „Inimese hääl“. Näidend kujutab ligi kolmveerandtunnist telefonikõnet, mida tegelane peab oma kallimaga, kes ta just äsja on hüljanud. Vaataja mõistab üsna pea, et olulisel kohal ei ole mitte see, mida täpsemini räägitakse, vaid asjaolu, et naise jaoks, kes on küll mõistnud suhte lõplikku ja pöördumatut läbisaamist, on see kõne viimane niit, mis teda armastatud mehega seob, ning et selle katkemist püüab ta iga hinna eest vältida. Teost on valdavalt tõlgendatud just naistegelase traagikana, mistõttu kerkib sageli küsimus naise eneseallutamises mehele ja see näib taastootvat tänapäevasele maailmale kohatuid stereotüüpe. Sellest tulenevalt püüavad mitmed lavastused teksti oletatavat patriarhaalset loomust kõigutada, andes naistegelasele jõulisema iseloomu.

Käesolevas artiklis kõrvutatakse seda näidendit episoodidega Prousti suurteosest, mis pärineb samast ajastust ja mida Cocteau ka hästi tundis. Nihutades fookuse mahajäetud naise teemalt telefoni performatiivsele funktsioonile, võib märkata, et ka selles tekstis avaldub jõuliselt surma-motiiv. Kõne katkemine põhjustab otseselt tegelase surma ning ka kujundlikus plaanis on kõne aadressaat teispoosuses, pärit eelmisest elust ja olles vaid viivuks üles äratatud tehnoloogia imelise väe abil. Ehkki peategelasena on siin kujutatud naist, siis vaadeldes lähemalt perioodi, mil autor teose lõi, võib mõista, et teosel on tugevad autobiograafilised jooned. Cocteau oli just äsja läbinud eluperioodi, mille depressiivsus ja enesehävituslikkus oli põhjustatud armastatud partneri surmast ning sellele järgnenud suhte purunemisest ja selles pettumisest. Kui mõelda laiemalt autori loomingule nii teatris kui ka filmikun-

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tis ning sellele, millist rolli mängib suhtlemine teistsugusega tema loomingus, siis võib väita, et nais-tegelases võib kahtlemata ära tunda autorit ennast, seda enam, et see asjaolu ei jäänud paljudele juba esietenduse ajal märkamatuks.

Teksti autobiograafilise loomuse ja telefoni performatiivsusega arvestamine avardab teksti tõlgendusvõimalusi ning toob selle välja naistegelase kitsast traagilisest probleemistikust. Mõistame, et lisaks armastusele ja selle purunemisele räägib Cocteau meile veel tehnoloogiast, mis loob inimeste vahele teistsuguseid suhteid ja mis on kahetise loomuga. Ühelt poolt võimaldab telefon – või näiteks internet, kui tuua arutlus tänapäeva – luua kontakti nendega, kes on kaugel eemal, kuid eriti juhul, kui tegu on armastatud inimesega, kaasneb sellega alati teadmine läheduse tegelikust puudumisest. Kuna armastus vajab füüsilist kontakti, siis on tehnoloogia põhjustatud afektiivne performatiivsus eriliselt tunnetatav ajutise, katkeva, ebatäiusliku ning peatselt lõppevana. Ehkki me teame, et armastus on ka väljaspool tehnoloogiat kaduv ning inimesed surelikud, toob tehnoloogia selle efemeersuse meile silme ette ning näitlikustab, et me elame maailmas, kus tihtilugu ei tea, kas meie vestluspartner reaalselt eksisteerib, kas ta asub, kas ta meid kuulab, kas ta meid usub ja kas meie võime teda uskuda. Nii Proust kui ka Cocteau näitavad meile, kuidas tehnoloogia muutumise tõttu maailm muutub, kuid ka seda, et tehnoloogia toob nähtavale inimloomuses midagi, mis on seal kogu aeg olnud, kuid mida seni pole osatud märgata.

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