

Playing with Differance

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'listen to the metronome, the ticking....each sound is the same. the repeating sound. but something arises out of this repetition, something else, something different. yes difference emerges out of this repetition, and this difference is time.

'space is the difference from one location to the next.....space is not where I step, but around my steps.'

Being in Proximity to the Other
David Read Johnson (04)

'Difference is time' and 'space is the difference'. What then is 'difference' this thing as fundamental as space and time itself? What is its role in DvT, and how may we gain presence and proximity to clients within such ubiquity of difference. David Read Johnson, the founder of DvT, writes that Jacques Derrida's philosophy of deconstruction is one of the key theories of DvT (ref). This paper explores Derrida's writings on 'differance' (a core aspect of deconstruction) and the role it plays in DvT.

In a 1968 lecture to the Society of French Philosophy, Derrida articulated his ideas on the subject of 'differance'. He began by outlining the 'problem of the sign', referring to Ferdinand De Saussure's writing on Semiotics. Saussure's famous distinction concerned gaps or differences in language. He found that words were composed of 'signifiers' and 'signified', for example, the word 'mountain' and the 'psychical imprint' (p.10 Derrida, 1982) or meaning of the word, in the individual are two quite different things. Furthermore, Saussure claimed that the very meaning of a word or signifier can be ascertained only by reference to other signifiers; for example, the word 'mountain' has meaning only by referral to different words, such as 'hill', 'mound' 'valley' and 'height', i.e. to other things that a mountain is not. In much the same way that a single coin refers to its wider coinage system (i.e. lots of other different coins). This leads to Saussure's famous dictum: In language there are only differences with no positive terms.

The problem that this leaves for Derrida is one of presence: 'the signified concept is never present in and of itself'. This is not just a problem of language, but rather, concerns any sign or 'any system of referral in general', (p.12 Derrida 1982) including gestures and movements. If I wave to another person, the movement or gesture of my hand (the signifier) refers to 'a greeting' (the signified). The 'greeting' itself is then merely something referred to, so it doesn't have a meaningful presence in-itself. Signs are then arbitrary - based on cultural connotation and context rather than carry any inherently true meaning. This then brings Derrida's problem right into dramatherapy practice. If we claim to be present to our clients, what exactly are we being present to when a client makes a gesture or a movement? It seems that we can only be present to something different than what the client attempts to signify.

To explore this further, let us look at what Derrida means by 'difference'.

Eytemologically, 'difference' is derived from the Latin: differre, which has two meanings:

1/ *to differ*: to be not identical with, to be other

2/ *to defer*: the action of putting off, until later.

The first meaning is probably simpler to grasp, differences are not the same: 'there' is not 'here', 'I' am not 'you', I am sitting not standing. Differences presuppose something other than. For there to be both something and something other, necessitates a space or 'interval' between the two things. Derrida calls this fundamental aspect of difference 'spacing'.

The second meaning of difference concerns time and is a little more difficult. If differences defer, then they produce a kind of postponement or procrastination, something is put to one side, until later on. Derrida calls this detour 'temporization'.

We can see this at work in the context of signs: the signifier defers the moment in which we encounter what is signified. Instead of arriving at the signified, we detour via other signifiers, which in turn, defer us to other signifiers and so it continues. *Differance* (footnote on spelling) is then Derrida's term for the simultaneous spacing and temporization that occurs when we are presented with a sign.

If we cannot then be present to what the client is signifying, in his gesture, movements or speech, perhaps we can be present in more fundamental ways. We enter the movement of *differance* (footnote – *differance* is the very movement) we enter the spacing and temporization with the client. We do this by responding to the client's signs with our own signs, which in turn, for the client, differ and defer to other signs, and so it goes on. Derrida describes the flow of *differance* as moving through a sheaf-like structure - an 'interlacing which permits different threads and different lines of meaning....to go off in different directions' (p2 derrida –check). Perhaps in every-day life we need to limit such wandering, we need a clarity of meaning, to know who we are, how we respond to signs and other people, with integrity and consistency. Yet, such well formulated pathways can lead to a paralysis in play:

'And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall
Then how can I begin'

The Love Song of J.Alfred Prufrock
T.S.Eliot

Due to *differance* we are always in the process of becoming, rather than being. The playspace provides the arena (or theatre) for the threads of our becoming to be realised in a form. For Derrida, the absence of a 'transcendental signified' leaves us with free-play. It is 'free' because our movements, speech, facial expression....etc are freed or unpinned from any necessarily fixed or tied meaning. It is 'play' for Derrida as we enter a kind of game, we may get the meaning right or wrong; we may score and win or equally miss and fail. Yet we are not in a contest in the play-space, the intention is not to score the highest number of accurate 'meaning points'. We learn to play – we have to play. For Derrida it is perhaps the only thing we can truly, authentically do. We succeed. We fail. 'We fail better'. (ref beckett).

Differance then highlights the fundamental gaps or spaces not only in language and signs, but in the roles we play too. The pretend nature of the playspace allows us to try a plethora of roles, in playing we are exposed to an inherent paradox, that we are what we play and at the same time that we are not what we play:

‘.....so in the playspace we enact a murder that is not a murder, a touch that is not a touch, a death that is not a death....’

Much like in real-life, the spacing and temporization of *differance* reminds us that we are not our roles, our words, our gestures and movements. They all mean something different – we are something different. In the playspace as we substitute one role for the next, one scene for another, we de-role. For Read Johnson, to de-role is not just a feature of DvT, it is the ‘modus operandi of the entire session’ (Ref – Poor). In changing one role for another and another, we mirror the chain of ‘non-synonomous substitutions’ of *differance*. In letting go of roles we loosen our attachments to who we are, how we are con-structed, we then deconstruct as we de-role in the playspace.

Simply joining the client in a directionless play of *differance* may be enough to start. However, Read Johnson writes that the aim of DvT is to play with ‘depth and intimacy’ (ref). This suggests that the direction of the play ought to flow downstream: a sideways movement towards deeper waters, the more we de-role, the more we throw into the river, the more we can be ‘carried away’ (DRJ). As the play moves deeper in the playspace, so too does the inner journey

This evokes Grotowski’s *Via Negativa* method, which Read Johnson often cites in DvT literature. The *Via Negativa* method focuses the actor not on collecting or acquiring skills, but rather on an ‘eradication of blocks’ (p.17 Poor theatre). Blocks which restrict the revelation of inner impulses – the pure impulse, which ‘transluminates’ through the body as a sign. This distilled sign for Grotowski, is an ‘elementary integer of expression’ – that is a whole or total thing in itself. Accordingly, Grotowski’s method evokes the philosophy of Merleau-Ponty more than Derrida. Similar to Grotowski, Merleau-Ponty points to the body as the essential component of our being-in-the-world; the body is there ‘before any possible analysis’ (ref P.xi M.P.). With the irreducible presence of the body, so cleansed through Grotowski’s method of distillation, its signs can then claim an authenticity, a foundational stone which works to (re)construct the actor, in the same way that a great poet may create his ‘own language of sound’ (ref).

Whilst one senses a Grotowski-like purity or wholeness in Read Johnson’s descriptions of Deep Play i.e. the simple presence of being of ‘sensate bodies’, it seems that there is more to it than Grotowski or Merleau-Ponty allow. Read Johnson talks of an ‘appreciation of multiplicity’ that characterizes Deep Play. The revelation of the elementary whole sign does not seem to allow for such multiplicity, rather it becomes something self-evidently true for actor and spectator. If we arrive in Deep Play because of the play of differences, then differences and *differance* do not just come to a halt. Even in the stillness of Deep Play, we sign, we signal, we continue to *be* and therefore *differance* continues too. If we erect an authentic and embodied foundational stone, or utter the birth pains of our new language of sounds, differance then radiates too.

The radical alterity of *differance* defies essence or existence, it is not something that *is*, in any

existential sense, for Derrida *differance* only *is* - 'under erasure' (footnote). The non-being of *differance* therefore subverts and interrogates every 'kingdom of being' (ref). What Derrida calls for is not a distillation to a purer state of being, but rather an appreciation for something (but perhaps not a 'thing' at all) that is other (and 'older') than mere being, something rather that 'exceeds the truth of being' (p.23). In this way, Derrida radically points to the need for a 'necessarily violent transformation' (p.25) of the language of being. Being does not allow for the mark of the absent in the present (footnote – trace), it historically only talks of what is present. In this way the language of 'being' is inadequate as a goal for Derrida and perhaps as a goal for DvT. Perhaps poetry more than philosophy is better able to elucidate Derrida's vision:

The space we stood around emptied
Into us to keep, it penetrated
Clearances that were suddenly open
High cries were felled and a pure change happened.

Clearances
Seamus Heaney

Heaney is writing of the death of his mother and the ensuing absence, though the absence is not a passive entity. It seems active ('penetrating') and alive with vivid spontaneity and potential. To reach a space (or clearing) through deconstruction may too necessitate the 'felling' of some-thing, some part of the self, or some previously fused connection to meaning. This then allows us to be alive to the moment, to live *with*, as opposed to be in denial of, absence, and ultimately, death.

Images and words in Heaney's poem help us to stay with and appreciate multiplicity. Read Johnson talks of being carried away by 'an image' in *Deep Play*. Meaning pulls and pushes, like the roll of the sea, to which we surrender. We acknowledge the image or the sign, in its presences and absences, we move towards it, yet we are not it. Like light it moves towards us and away from us at the same time.

In the introduction to Derrida's *Margins of Philosophy* Michel Leiris writes of Persephone - the 'entirely floral and subterranean name...which is extracted from its dark terrestrial depths'. In the light of *differance*, Persephone seems to serve as a suitable image or metaphor for 'the sign' itself. Persephone dwells in the underworld for part of the year, absent to the barren world, but seasonally returns, bringing vegetation, flora and life to the earth. Persephone, is not to be taken as the final word or analysis, but it does communicate and helps to illuminate the layered, rich and inter-woven aspect of *differance* and points fittingly to a movement between labyrinthine depths and fertile ground.

Persephone will not be the final image, word or sign for this paper; In the same way that an image, word or sign that comes to us (and holds us) in *Deep Play* is also not the final occurrence in a DvT session – or a series of sessions. It is not final because *differance* has its way, even on the illuminating multiplicity that is Persephone. *Differance* also has its way on the very word 'differance' too – even *differance* is not the final word on *differance*. As occurs in DvT, *differance* carries off and 'reinscribes' (derrida p.27) being, it separates and branches, moment

by moment, step by step; but perhaps in Deep Play, we are able let go of the structures that compel us to follow - for a while. Again Heaney seems to provide the words:

I heard the hatchet's differentiated sigh
And the collapse of what luxuriated
Through the shocked tips and wreckage of it all.
Its heft and hush become a bright nowhere,
A soul ramifying and forever
Silent, beyond a silence listened for

Clearances
Seamus Heaney

Differance has its way – it continues ‘ramifying and forever’. There is no word to contain *difference*. It will make its absence felt again in the presence, both in and out of the playspace, of another role or when we express another impulse. It is *differance* that brings us to the next sign, as energy returns to the session. A sign, that perhaps in ironic appreciation of its ‘presence’, we can greet with ‘a certain laughter’ and join its dance.