

Read the following passages and answer the questions.

Part I (50 %)

As Bertolt Brecht notes about *Fabel*, the story's incidents are "episodes rearranged so as to allow the story-teller's ideas about men's life to find expression. In the same way the characters are not simply portraits of living people, but are rearranged and formed in accordance with ideas". This statement seems rather obvious, but it contains one of the strongest insights of Brecht's interpretational dramaturgy -- that the idea content of a play should be looked for not in an extrapolated thematic structure, but in the moment-by-moment development of the text's concrete action and characters.

At the same time, Brechtian interpretation focuses on the story by looking for a very specific idea-content; the most important thing about a story is "its sense, that is, its social points". The particular idea-content the original playwright may have considered primary becomes secondary to this interpretational focus; it becomes an element in the interpretation the playwright made of the historical situation, or material, he used.

Brechtian interpretation, then, concentrates on 2 aspects of a historical text, both of them reflected in the story: first, on the historical situation depicted; second, on the playwright's response to this situation, the way in which the play's forming of the incidents themselves reflects the playwright's personal ideology and that of his class and time. Clearly, this kind of interpretation cannot be carried through until both aspects of the text are properly understood from a historical perspective. And this requires extensive research: In order to see the work anew

we must bring out the ideas originally contained in it; we must grasp its national and at the same time its international significance, and to this end must study the historical situation prevailing when it was written, also the author's attitude and special peculiarities.

The goal of the research was not, however, the historical reconstruction of the text following its author's original intentions. As Brecht put it:

Old works have their own values, their own subtleties, their own scale of beauties and truths. Our job is to find these out...The variety of perceptions and beauties in old works is just what allows us to derive effects from them that are in tune with our time.

It's the modern observer who interprets the text, conditioned by the observer's own historical determinants, benefiting from all that he has learned from the historical developments that have taken place between the author's time and the present, and intent on restructuring the text to make it useful for an audience of contemporaries.

Brechtian interpretation involves a paradox, but an immensely fruitful one – that the most radically modern interpretation must first ground itself in a total historical understanding of the text.

Brechtian interpretation also proceeds from a historically radical point of view – that interpretation has the right to intervene within the text itself, to cut out parts of the text and add parts of its own, to change the rhythm and sense of the original language, to do, in short, anything necessary to clarify the connection it is drawing between the text and contemporary experience. Brechtian interpretation proceeds always with this reservation, however, that such changes not collapse the historical distance between the text and ourselves, that they not treat the text simply as an ahistorical mirror of contemporary experience; such an approach would, after all, import the bourgeois theatre's indifference to history into Marxist historical interpretation. Indeed – and this is the ultimate difference between Brecht and Piscator – the entire interpretational process is undertaken in the first place not because an old text can be changed to reflect modern experience, but because the old text can teach the modern observer something about the present, can clarify the observer's understanding of his own historical situation.

To Brecht, the text exists independently of the theatre, it can “continue to be printed”. A production, on the other hand, exists only for a few short weeks or months. Its responsibility must be primarily to the specific historical moment it shares with its audience. What a production cuts from the text is not lost; it remains in the books, waiting to be used by a production in another time. What it adds can be checked against the original. But, by the same token, what a production cannot use from the text should be deleted, and what it needs to add, should be added. (from John Rouse's *Brecht and the West German Theatre*)

Questions:

1. Summarize the main ideas of the **entire** passage in your own words (at least 200 words). (15 %)
2. Why is Brechtian interpretation of works involving a paradox? Why is it “an immensely fruitful one”? If possible, give examples to support your points. (15 %)

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97 學年度

外語

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文學

組碩士班入學考試

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英文

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3. Do you agree with Brechtian interpretation of classics? Discuss its advantages and disadvantages. (20 %)

Part II (50 %)

The question of how the nonmaterial – author or work – is materialized outlines the ideological problematic of modern stage performance: how the verbal text (a version of the work whose text is recorded in specific documentary form) is transformed into a nontextual event, while this event nonetheless claims to reproduce text, work, author. Is a text or a performance the vehicle of the work, or does it produce the work anew? Jerome McGann has directly addressed this question, in an influential critique of editing that revalues the relationship between work and text. McGann asks, “must we regard the channels of communication as part of the message of the texts we study? Or are the channels to be treated as purely vehicular forms whose ideal condition is to be transparent to the texts they deliver? How important for the reader of a novel or any other text, are the work’s various materials, means, and modes of productions?” (“Case” 153–54). Resisting the notion that the text is transparent to the work, McGann moves the work from origin to consequence in the process of production: the work at any time consists in the multiplicity of its versions, the history of its transmission, reception, consumption. Like Shillingsburg, McGann sees the text as intangible, a specific order of symbols. Unlike Shillingsburg, McGann sees each text as restricted by time and space – “a ‘text’ is not a ‘material thing’ but a material event or set of events, a point in time (or a moment in space) where certain communicative interchanges are being practiced” (*Textual Condition* 21). Like performances, texts produce the work as an event in time, an event which has its immediate participants (say, the first readers of a given edition of Shakespeare’s *Works*), but also becomes part of the ongoing negotiation of the work’s changing identity in history (the implicit dialogue between the Pelican, Bevington, Riverside, Oxford, New Cambridge, and Signet *Shakespeares* on my shelf). The work’s authority is also temporal, a function of the rhetorical structure of each textual event, how the event – production and reception – generates its own version of the authoritative experience of the work.

The “text” is the literary product conceived as a purely lexical event; the “poem” is the locus of a specific process of production (or reproduction) and consumption; and the “work” comprehends the global set of all the texts and poems which have emerged in the literary production and reproduction process. (*Textual Condition* 31–32)

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97 學年度 外語 系(所) 文學院 組碩士班入學考試

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The work is not necessarily immanent in the material text, waiting to be actualized in a performance-as-reading (the "poem"). McGann sees the work as the entire complex of a culture's past and present encounters both with the text and the poem. As D. C. Greetham puts it, for McGann "the concrete is not only the way in which we may know the work but *is* the work itself" ("[Textual] Criticism" 10).

McGann's sense of the work is reminiscent of the condition of Shakespearean performance, where any staging necessarily produces a new work, one in dialogue both with a panoply of texts, and with all other performances, including parodies, spoofs, and allusions in popular culture, as well as stagings in the "legitimate" theatre. This sense of the text is common in the theatre as well, as Philip McGuire notes:

The playtext of a Shakespearean play is not its enduring essence abstracted from the particularities that inhere in all performances. It is a verbal (rather than mathematical) construct that describes that ensemble of possibilities. It establishes a range, a distribution of possible events during a performance, including acts of speaking, but it does not determine in minute and complete detail all of the events that happen during a specific performance.
(*Speechless Dialect* 138-39)

(From W. B. Worthen's Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance)

Questions

1. Summarize the main ideas of the **entire** passage in your own words (at least 250 words). (25 %)
2. Write a critical response to Jerome McGann's opinions cited in this passage. (25 %)