A LETTER ON DRAMA AND VIOLENCE 3 April 2013

The following questions were sent by a student. They have been slightly edited. He wrote: As my studies continue I have began to formulate questions which I would be interested to hear your responses to. These questions revolve around the notion of violence, people and their use and portrayal in drama.

1) In an interview in France, you talk about the structural needs of people - specifically in the ways in which people choose to live and how it imposes a structural need on them. You stated that it makes people 'revengeful' - could you expand further on this point?

2) Violence is an area that continues to be displayed, explored and experienced by actors and audiences. Throughout history art and performance have reflected the attitudes and feelings of the age in which they were created. What do you believe violence allows an audience to understand? Can violence allow an audience to truly see themselves by critically reflecting on a display of violence?

3) Violence in theatrical performance is staged to some degree. A playwright has a guiding (but not necessarily a governing) hand in the methods used when displaying violence to an audience. As a playwright, what opportunities do you think are accessible to you when displaying violence for an audience? Specifically in the ways in which language can be utilised in dialogue and stage direction.

4) In the scene 'Eating' in ‘Red, Black and Ignorant’ (‘The War Plays’) a man violently forces bread into a woman’s mouth to make her eat it. At the end of the scene the woman says "We define ourselves by the things we permit to make us angry. If we choose these wrongly, or are wrongly taught, we are blind with rage even when we are most calm." This is one of my favourite pieces of dialogue in the play. It emphasises the need for people to have an inner evaluation of themselves. In order for us to understand our anger, we must first trace the route of the anger back and ask why it angers us in the first instance and how we learnt to respond to these instances with anger. Does this view relate to your intentions for the scene as well as your thoughts on society's need for drama?

3 April 2013

Dear ---
I will try to answer your questions about violence. A general problem of interpretation is the reductive way in which human behaviour is understood. Its understood either genetically, medically. Or legally: X is right or wrong. Drama is about the mutability and instability of behaviour (and cultural interpretations of it). Human behaviour has a basic foundation in the imperative to be human. We cannot be understood as animals and even if all our genes were inherited from animals but human self-consciousness were added to them, then none of our behaviour could be understood by likening it to animal behaviour. This is because an animal is the evolutionary product of its site -- but the site of humans is historically created by humanness. This requires me to say, in the introduction to “The Chair Plays,” that the stoning of the baby in “Saved” is the aggressors' nostalgia for humanness in an inhuman society (or site). Law and public order is now based on us being animals -- as, in the past, it was based on us being the pet animals of god. Recently I was told that modern
drama is haunted by this scene. If it is its because it does not understand it and has not come to terms with it creatively.

1. Justice -- revenge. We are born in the chains of radical innocence -- which is a paradox, because we are born to make the world-home, which socially means to seek justice. This has to be created and only drama can do it -- and this makes us the dramatic species. This is because the contradictions between self and society, and between the self in society and society in the self, can only be resolved or maintained in tension by drama. In several texts I have explained how living in an unjust society may conflict with the human imperative -- but the need for survival may make the self accept (and act out) the unjust culture. This is blatantly so in our culture. But this sets up a contradiction in the self that is then in conflict with its basic imperative need, and so the self seeks to "punish" itself (in the cultural manner): it takes revenge on itself. All revenge is maintained by being directed not only against its social victim but also against the self, and this creates the symptoms of hate and rage or the frozen rage of the psychopath or the holder of high social-office. Revenge does not usually know itself but a main theme in drama is revenge coming to understand itself -- in for example Macbeth. State justice is a form of revenge, justified by the need to maintain a functioning society -- but it must always be culturally degrading. When societies become unstable (through technical innovation for example) drama has to create a new form of humanness. This is the problem of the present Third Crisis.

2. Dramatic violence is sometimes misunderstood as abreaction. But this reduces drama to say boxing -- or the intellectual, formal tensions of opposites, in which something becomes its opposite, good becomes bad etc. Winning-and-losing games of chance are actually based on the tension of the boundary between opposites. This is the tension of football and it explains the state's interest in fostering sport and games -- the Roman arena and the recent Olympics. In modern theatre and TV violence is used for abreaction and as an active-tutorial in ideology. I use violence differently by resituating it on the site -- which is to give it its actual situation and not its ideologised situation (though of course people come to live their ideology and a criminal is partly acting out what he or she has been told (and importantly, taught) what a criminal is). Sin adds a special dimension to crime because it establishes guilt in the subjectivity of the self). When I use violence non-ideologically it releases the violence which is held in the ideological distortion (by the characters and also in the audience). The distortion has to be held in place by violence because it conflicts with the self's human imperative. Violence in my dramas is not abreactive or a "state tutorial" in social culture, but the release of the energy which is culturally and intellectually used to impose the ideology -- so that the release of violence shatters the ideological account of the meaning of the event. This is not abreaction because it isn't the evacuation or spending of violence but the release of the distortions in the situation. The release is spectacular because it creates a new understanding of the event: and "spectacular" because this may be literally seen on the stage. This is the difference between acting and enacting. Acting only records the existing state of reality, enacting changes that reality because it changes the perception and conception of the event.

3. Staging violence. Obviously I describe the violence (and other things) in my plays precisely -- because I am anatomising the structure of the situation. I was recently in Malta for a production of "Olly's Prison." In the original TV production the penultimate violent scene was rehearsed (in my absence) as a film-TV macho display of clap-happy hit-along aggression. The actors were doing back-flips over furniture and so on. I re-rehearsed it to be
as written. At first the actors were frustrated because they'd worked out how to do it -- but then they became involved (and so did the fight arranger) because they found how their characters were concealed in the fight, that the fight was producing the meaning of their characters. At the end of the filming (there was only time to film it once) the actor playing Olly was moved enough to break down in tears. In Malta I showed how half-way through the fight the "conventional" violence stops and in the long after-violence reality clarifies the violence, as if the smoke drifted away after an explosion. That is the real "self-violence" of the scene. Again, working on it in this way was a revelation for the actors. But these distortions occur throughout productions of my plays and not only in the violent incidents. Directors restore and reinforce the ideological distortions the dramas are written to undo. They replace drama with theatre. A recent example of the abusive ideological use of violence was in the play "Jerusalem." In it Mr Nasty beats up Mr Confused-but-warm-hearted-and-nice. The play combines Mills and Boon sentimentality with News of the World morality.

I've just returned from Paris where I helped in a production of "Existence" at La Comedie-Francaise. (Incidentally, as you have an interest in The War Plays, the Comedie was also holding workshops on them for its young student actors.) "Existence" could be seen as a violent play. But you can see how halfway through (when the man returns and barricades himself in the room) the nature of the scene changes. I think what then happens is that revenge unwinds and the nature and object of violence change. The character ("x") may sense but may not fully understand this -- but in that he acts out the dynamic of contemporary lost and self-destructive society. I think the play is a proto-type of modern drama.

4. "Red Black and Ignorant" is an earlier play. In the sentence you quote "We define ourselves by the things we permit to make us angry" I might now rephrase "permit" -- though I see the following sentence already comments on this. I think ideological distortions aren't chance but are enforced. A slave maybe shackled in chains, if you knock away the chains is the slave free? -- he or she may not be, because chains in the mind are more adamant than steel. I think one of the most dangerous philosophical remarks ever written is Rousseau's that all of us are born free. In writing that he committed the revolution to terror. We are born in the chains that are the imperative, innate in the human situation, to actively create freedom, the just world-home. The paradoxes and contradictions of morality and history arise because that imperative is a personal motive that can be acted on only amongst, with and for the community. It is the difference between socialism and reaction (and why Thatcher said there was no such thing as society). The market is opposed to drama (and replaces it with the product of theatre) because the market depends on the violence of money.

At the moment I need to limit the time I can have to respond to questions. But your questions were interesting and hopefully my brief comments will be useful. I hope you are enjoying work on your dissertation.