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Mary Noonan, *Echo's Voice: The Theatres of Sarraute, Duras, Cixous and Renaude*. London: Modern Humanities Research Association and Maney Publishing, 2014. 165 pp. Figures, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-907975-50-9.

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Mary Noonan's study seeks to discover "the extent to which the theatrical work of Sarraute, Duras, Cixous, and Renaude privileges voice and cultivates an intensity of auditory experience" (p. 147); in attempting to determine whether their theatres can be described in terms of a staging of voice, she concludes that they all figure "the oscillation between stage and writing, between orality and textuality," the source of their specificity and interest (p. 147). In attending to voice in the plays under study, Noonan considers how the women playwrights relate to language primarily through the lenses of psychoanalysis and feminism. She reveals, above all, that while cultivating a heightened auditory perception and imagination in their audiences, the four authors in question "developed a distinctive set of theatrical strategies that would enable each to make the uniqueness of her process as a writer heard as a *voice* in a space of acoustic relationality" (p. 8). Because the works of these authors "draw readers and spectators into a state of intense waiting and listening" (p. 147), countering Western society's purpose-driven, high-speed way of life, their theatre, she contends, is counter-cultural.

In her introduction, Noonan discusses the role played in psychoanalysis by the myth of Echo and Narcissus, which represents the primacy of voice in the development of the subject, as well as its feminine nature. She indicates both the position of inferiority and the subversiveness that voice (including musicality, rhythm, resonance, and pure sound) has had in relation to the *logos* or voiced *word*, from which it is set apart by its freedom and uncontrollable nature. Citing Adriana Carvarero, she claims that Echo represents the relational dimension of voice, first seen in the sonorous relationship that occurs in the mimetic cadences exchanged between mother and infant in its early stages of life. She contends that the plays of the authors chosen "place voice and listening at the centre of their dramaturgical activity... [drawing] the spectator into the space of the voice, where she is returned to the primary, pre-verbal moment of separation of body and language" (p. 2). Noonan adds that the plays studied in her work "summon this time of transition between the Kristevan semiotic and the Symbolic, between pre-verbal sonorousness and verbal sense" (p. 2). These playwrights trouble the boundary between oral and written language by highlighting voice and its corollary, listening, creating drama that represents both the source of writing and the writing process. Voice, as opposed to speech, is shown to be the place of indeterminacy in human experience, navigating the in-between of body and language.

The first chapter examines the theoretical underpinnings of her work: psychoanalytical and phenomenological notions that suggest that "the voice is the site of the subject's perpetual crossing between semiotic and symbolic" and "body and language" (p.8); feminist theory on the relationship between the body and language in the formation of the female subject; and theatrical theory on the role of voice in dramatic creation. Noonan's theoretical reflections lead her, in a Lacanian vein, to "suggest above all that voice is the site of division in the speaking subject" (p. 16). She maintains that the voice, especially the maternal voice, is an important site of enquiry in relation to female subjectivity, bearing the trace of early psychic development and psychic splitting. Noonan suggests that the work of theorists

like Irigaray, Kristeva, and Cixous on the maternal voice “is part of an ongoing quest for new ways of configuring knowledge from a ‘feminine’ perspective” (p. 18).

With feminists like Cixous arguing that the auditory rather than the visual must be foregrounded in order to destabilize the “patriarchal vision of the world” that governs theatre (p. 21), Noonan turns, for example, to Don Ihde’s “ontology of the auditory” (p. 21), which offers a way to reassert the role of voice. In theatre, Ihde writes, “sounded language surrounds and penetrates the recesses of the self and other,” because sound, unlike the visual field, is encompassing.[1] The auditory self is a membrane, affirms Noonan, not a fixed point. In discussing several theorists working on the auditory in theatre, she concludes that the theatrical writings of Sarraute, Duras, Cixous, and Renaude “seek—in varying intensities and to varying degrees—to stage a ‘membrane’ self, a self at the threshold of language, at the moment of formation of the subject through separation and primary loss” (p. 24).

Moving from theory to praxis, Noonan turns to the specific playwrights of her study, focusing in chapter two on Nathalie Sarraute’s “Theatre of Interpellation,” as she calls it, or the theme of “desire in language.” Although Sarraute only wrote six plays, she is well suited to this study because she insisted that her theatre was purely linguistic. Her play-texts are almost devoid of stage directions, while containing detailed directions for tone of voice. She wanted to create a theatre devoid of characters, centered entirely on language. As she did in her novels, she ceaselessly probed the realm that lies beneath the surface of language in her plays, revealing indefinable moments at the edge of consciousness. Noonan sees Sarraute’s fictional project in terms of charting and delimiting “a utopia or paradise of the word on the borderline of self and language” (p. 27), postulating that “what Sarraute wished to do in writing was to stage the drama of the body’s relationship with words, and to explore how the self is constituted through this relationship” (p. 28). The starting place of her plays is usually a small hitch in the conversation or a minute crack on the surface of everyday language being used in dialogue. Seemingly trivial moments of conversation “bring the characters to the source of the word, syllable, sound or silence, to the place where naming ceases” (p. 28). While the form of the quotidian is retained through dialogue and situation, there is always a clash between characters who want to stay on the surface and those who would like to plunge into dark, forbidden zones of conversation. It is in the movement between *forme* and *informe*, the in-between of body and language—the space of the voice—that Sarraute’s theatre may be located, according to Noonan.

In chapter three, Noonan discusses the role of voice and listening in the theatre of Marguerite Duras, highlighting the playwright’s belief that “theatre happens less on the stage than in the minds and auditory imagination of those present” (p. 83). In staging “the movement between inner landscapes and ‘outer’ images” (p. 82), Duras obliges her spectators to *see* by means of the “soundscape,” Noonan maintains, because “what is told by the voices is only ever partially represented on the stage” (p. 82). As the characters piece together fragmented narratives, the spectator captures the vision of their lives through voice. The notion of character, Noonan reveals, is minimized by Duras, whose first play, *The Square*, shows the effect—appreciated by Beckett—“of deracinated voices coming out of the dark” (p. 56). Plays like *Savannah Bay* explore the relationship between voice and identity, meaning that “for Duras, presence is made manifest, above all, through voice” (p. 57). Furthermore, the relationship between present voices and absent voices is also foregrounded in Duras’s theatre, Noonan asserts. In *India Song*, for example, four off-stage voices try to remember the story of the seductive Anne-Marie Stretter, rediscovering her story at the same time as the spectator does, while the actors on stage portraying her story do not speak, although the sounds of the reception on stage penetrate the auditorium. While the alluring body of Anne-Marie Stretter appears on the playing area of Duras’s stage, Noonan explains, “the uninhabitable terrain of her stage...suggests the lost source of the woman’s voice, lost source of her writing, lost source of herself” (p. 62). However, Noonan contends, the explosive cry of the Vice-Consul, the only real voice heard from the stage, shows that Duras was also “engaged in active exploration of the disruptive powers of sound in her work” (p. 80), and often staged “the eternal movement between

inside and *outside*, as the body's boundaries are dissolved: words, cries, sighs, tears, laughter flow out of the bodies of those on the stage" (p. 78).

Noonan also portrays Duras's theatre as a "journey of perpetual return" (p. 62), as shown by the role of memory not only in *India Song*, but also in other plays such as *L'Éden cinéma*, *Agatha*, and *Savannah Bay*. Although Noonan discusses both the role of the gaze (in *Agatha*, for example), as well as that of the mirror image in certain plays, she focuses mainly on the fact that Duras "perpetually returns to the fringe or horizon of language" (p. 71), in attempting to capture the inner space of auditory imagination. "All of the later plays," she affirms, "represent the activities of seeing and hearing as effort, [as] struggle to see and hear what is absent, unavailable" (p. 74). Duras leads "both actor and spectator to an intense auditory apprehension of loss at the threshold of symbolic representation" (p. 85), she claims, bringing us to "a borderland, on the threshold of the written word" (p. 85), to which we have access through voice.

Noonan argues in her fourth chapter that Hélène Cixous "developed a form of theatre that performed the enmeshing of writer and writing--the embodiment of the text, the textualisation of the body--in the space of the voice" (p. 88). She claims that for Cixous (as for Duras), it is in waiting and listening that the woman-writer can "contact something of the materiality of her life outside or beyond signification... relinquishing the constraints of speculative reason in order to listen to and hear [her] own bod[y]" (p. 89). Cixous's first play, *Portrait de Dora* (1976), presents a fluid interplay of five voices, while focusing on Dora's betrayal by her father and then Freud, followed by her extrication of herself from the patriarchal voices that surround her. Intertwining Dora's narrated memories, dreams, and fantasies, the play was "sufficiently fragmented to draw the listener into the intimate space of the voice and to *create* in the spaces between the voices [requiring the listener to distinguish] between levels of reality and fantasy, between genders, between temporal and spatial frames" (p. 94), explains Noonan.

The disjunction of body and image from voice allowed the play to become a model for staging the instability of gender positions and exploring the boundary of the conscious and unconscious mind, she remarks. *Le nom d'Œdipe: chant du corps interdit*, centers on the prohibition of female desire and uses language which undermines the laws of grammar and syntax in order to show the abandonment of the law of the Father and the rule of the Name. Through language, Cixous achieves "the interchangeability of names and social roles..." advances Noonan, "allowing them to become freely attributable" (p. 95). In her earlier theatre, Cixous appears "to have been motivated by a desire to create a form of theatre that would be characterised by a destabilising of positions of knowledge, and a poetic reworking of language that would open up the space for 'flights'--endless *movement between* knowledge and invention, between word and body" (p. 99), attests Noonan. She shows, however, that although Cixous began by wanting to stage a woman's body and its relationship with language, and to transcend the limitations of cultural representations of the feminine, her aims evolved after her encounter with the Théâtre du Soleil and its director, Mnouchkine. Cixous moves away from the development of a subversive theatre of the voice to a theatre "that aspires to the metaphorical power of classical theatre, appealing... ultimately to the spectacular realm of images [more] than to the auditory" (p. 112). "The later plays do not effect a linguistic dismantling; the principles of waiting and listening for what might make itself heard in the in-between have been almost banished from the Cixousian stage. Instead...she has created a sequence of powerful metaphors for the writing process as rebellion and resistance" (p. 113), concludes Noonan, who sees in the later texts "a meditation on the role of the imagination, and ultimately, the reading encounter, in the contemporary world" (p. 113).

Pursuing her inquiry into theatre as a place of reading, where the spectator is "engaged in a reading of the actor's body as it sounds the writer's transcription of her origins in the in-between of body and word" (p. 117), Noonan lastly turns to Noëlle Renaude, whom she sees as a natural inheritor of the theatrical experimentation begun by Sarraute, Duras, and Cixous. She believes Renaude is "prospecting the space of the stage as the ideal venue for exploration of the (woman) writer's relationship with words,

and with the unconscious threshold where the self comes into being through the appropriation of linguistic and gender identities" (p. 117). Once again, Renaud's theatre, for Noonan, is centered in voice, rather than in plot or character development, being at the same time a theatre of listening for both actors and spectators, and of hearing "traces of the first impulses of the written text emerging from the writer's unconscious" (p. 118).

Noonan examines Renaud's theater from early works such as *Renard du Nord* (1988), in which the playwright blends different styles and linguistic registers, to her more recent works where "she has abandoned nearly all theatrical conventions" (p. 118), going farther than the other dramatists in that she works with both the spoken word and the visual dimension of the printed page. Noonan sees her theater as "perhaps the first theatre truly to stage the *movement* of the self in the in-between of body and language, in the gap between the visual image (the body narrating) and the narrative text (the narrated body)" (p. 119). In Renaude's many plays, sonority has always been her subject, according to Noonan, while she has progressively dismantled theatrical traditions and questioned the limits of theatre. Through a close analysis of a number of her texts, Noonan shows how Renaude moved "from a form that retained links with narrative representation, to forms that staged the interplay of voices in plays where space, time, and character are indeterminate" (p. 120), and finally to more recent texts where she uses typography and pictograms to create a "theatricality of the page, a staging of the processes of reading and writing" (p. 120). The pictograms, of which several examples are included, function "as stage directions, narrative or descriptive elements of the text, or as framing devices" (p. 130), Noonan informs us.

Renaude plays with the notion that the printed text is a map that must be decoded by the reader and actor, who must "get the text to move off the page" (p. 134), Noonan discloses, adding that "it is the disposition of the text on the page that indicates the location of the characters in relation to each other, and their movement in space" (p. 134). Providing no access in these plays to historical modes of reading, Renaude "re-locates the theater in the reader-actor's body" (p. 134) as she seeks to "evoke a world on the borders of self and world" (p. 141), and creates a theatre "where the power of the stage's vocal and auditory dimensions are fully exploited in order to collapse the boundary between body and text" (p. 141).

In her conclusion, Noonan reiterates her aim of discovering the role of voice and the auditory in the theatrical work of Sarraute, Duras, Cixous, and Renaude, finding in the oscillation between voice and writing a key component of their work. She also presents the practice of intense waiting and listening required of readers and spectators as a defining feature of these theatres. Her study of the four playwrights in question has provided a detailed analysis of their plays along with extensive theoretical references to support her conclusions. The chapters on particular authors underscore their overall contributions to contemporary theatre, while elucidating their specific contributions as woman writers seeking to define and transcribe into writing the place of the feminine in theatre, in relation to voice. Noonan believes that the driving force of the authors she has studied has been "the desire to explore the process of writing and the nature of the self in writing" (p. 147), producing an enmeshing of body and word in writing. She also maintains that "the theatres of Sarraute, Duras, Cixous, and Renaude give voice, to varying degrees, to the distress, grief, and anger at losses incurred at the point of transition from Imaginary to Symbolic, and that it is the transition or crossing that is their main focus" (p. 148). As well, she notes, the "translation of the language of the unconscious, of the body on the frontiers of language has been the project of all four playwrights" (p. 148). In troubling the boundary between oral and written language, Renaude has gone the farthest, because "it is the relationship between bodies and signs in the space of the page that is played out on her stage" (p. 149). Finally, Noonan perceives that in attempting to write the voice, the authors under consideration have all sought to capture the absent voice, the radical difference of voice, and have "created texts that tell of the pain of longing for something that can never be brought within the frontiers of text" (p. 151).

These authors, Noonan contends, “inscribe in writing the umbilical scars of loss and division that tell of the birth of the speaking subject” (p. 151). Each of them is “concerned with prospecting uncharted terrain in [her] writing” (p. 149), and has struggled to produce highly innovative theatre, by “plac[ing] voice and the auditory at its centre” (p. 151), she affirms. Her fascinating and comprehensive work, solidly grounded in psychoanalytical theory, successfully uncovers the complexities, intentions, and modalities of the audio-vocal theatre she sets out to explore, revealing both the specificity of the authors she addresses and the overarching unity of their focus, as each one purposed to create a new form of auditory theatre.

NOTE

[1] Don Ihde, *Listening to Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1976).

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