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English 45: Introduction to Literary Theory

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The Πραξις of the Apostles

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

—*New King James Bible*, John 1:1

The term *praxis* has its roots in classical Latin where it is recorded as a Greek word, *πρᾶξις*, meaning act or deed (“*praxis*, n.”). While the current definition of the term has expanded somewhat to include specifics such as “the practice or exercise of a technical subject or art, as distinct from the theory of it” or in slight contradiction, “that through which theory or philosophy is transformed into practical social activity,” or even more linguistically “the rhetorical or performative aspect of language; speech as an action,” the core of the term has remained unchanged—it continues as “accepted or habitual practice or custom” (“*praxis*, n.”).

This last definition is especially true when the word is translated to Coptic, an Afro-Asiatic language developed from the ancient Egyptian language, taking from the Greek alphabet and lexicon as well as Egypt’s native demotic script (a derivative of the hieratic script which in turn originated from hieroglyphics) (“Coptic Language”). While the practical use of Coptic gradually declined following the forced adoption of Arabic soon after the Muslim conquest of Egypt in the 7th century, the language endures in the tradition of the Coptic Orthodox Church, one of the oldest standing sects of Christianity. Within this setting, the Coptic word *ἡπραξις*

(pronounced almost identically to its Greek counterpart) lives on in an unusually literal sense.

Ἐπραξις (hereafter referred to as the Epraxis) not only refers to the first book following the Gospels, the Acts of the Apostles (Acts for short), but the ceremonial reading thereof. It is a text brought to life. When this cultural text is “read” alongside the post-structuralist texts of Roland Barthes—“The Death of the Author” and “From Work to Text”—the pieces engage, enhance, and even challenge one another; words become song, theory becomes practice, theology becomes life, and then it all comes crashing down as the roles reverse and intertwine, enmeshing into an experience that claims to have the power to move and to save lives...or to destroy them.

But, things don't start out quite that dramatically. At first, the text on the page is all that there is—and that observation is not at all meant to detract from it. As Barthes asserts, the text is an “*irreducible*” self-sufficient body carrying within it a “plurality” that inevitably and inherently moves toward “an explosion, a dissemination” (“From Work to Text” 1279). In this way, Acts provides a literal example as it describes the spread of Christianity and expansion of the church from Jerusalem throughout the Roman empire. While “the *Text is experienced only in an activity of production*” or praxis, the book of Acts, as the name suggests, takes this a step further by giving a historical account of theory being put into practice. Throughout the twenty-eight chapters of Acts, the apostles attempt to apply the teachings of the Gospel across the globe before forming a text which makes that practice once again theoretical. While this might seem revolutionary, just as Barthes's essays were at the time of their publication, the apostles are doing nothing new (and neither is Barthes). This implementation of text appears essential to the Biblical tradition, from the Ten Commandments as a text to live by to the life of Jesus Christ himself, uniting humanity and divinity, theory and practice, in a way that the apostles only hope to replicate. This repetition of ideas across texts serves as an ode to Barthes's claim that no text

is quite original, not even his; they are all mere paraphrases of each other derived from one relative lexicon (“The Death of the Author” 1270). However, while Barthes seems to take this in a direction that suggests a text exists outside of history, these Biblical examples could be used to argue that the text is history, the essence of the cycle that is time with nothing existing beyond its bounds. Still, the two ideas do not necessarily need to clash. Pushing the parallels, the book of Acts puts Barthes’s ideas into action by preaching to Jews and Gentiles alike—acknowledging that salvation is for all—“the reader is without history, biography, psychology” (“The Death of the Author” 1271).

Once the book of Acts is *performed* in the Epraxis though, the experience of the text becomes shaped by one individual experience, one moment in that history. In this act, the plurality and the singularity of the text become readily apparent. Consistent with Barthes’s “Death of the Author,” it is the reader who is responsible for how the infinite possibilities existing within the text are embodied in one physical reality. However, unlike in Barthes’s explanation, the reader in this scenario is very specific, serving to narrow the text’s potential ever so slightly through a defined background. The Epraxis is read by a deacon ordained to the second rank of the diaconate, a rank known as αναγνώστης, a Greek term translated “reader” (St. Mary and St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada). Notably, this rank is above only the ψάλτης, or “chanter,” suggesting the respect and responsibility associated with the act of reading (St. Mary and St. Mark Coptic Orthodox Church, Edmonton, Alberta, Canada). Today, to be a reader one must be a male above the age of 16 with a good reputation among the church community. During the reading of the Epraxis, which precedes the Gospel during liturgy, one deacon stands and sings the Epraxis to a specific tune. This song is pre-defined and memorized, but the personality and individuality of the deacon’s performance allows for the rise of the reader

as an arbitrator who defines how the text will be converted to reality. The reading is ideally preceded by the reader attempting to practice the theory he will impart. He is encouraged to live a life consistent with the message he preaches and to engage with the text he will deliver, not only by practicing his performance, but also by meditating on it. While this largely refutes the idea of the universal reader that Barthes frames in "The Death of the Author," in reality this ideal, groomed reader might not always be present. The deacon in question, who is meant to symbolize an angel during liturgy in his ceremonial white robe, may very well have been partying with his friends the night before. This adds to the complexity of the reader role. It once again recreates the conditions of possibility under which the reader without history might still exist despite the structure in place to combat that. Still, even in the case of the ideal, devout reader, a level of autonomy exists within his position. Since different portions of the book of Acts are read each Sunday, the reader gains a significant amount of control in that he must fit the given text to the given tune according to his discretion. To an extent this decision can be aesthetic, choosing to sing the text in a way that will sound pleasing to the congregation. The more important consideration though, is meaning. The reader is meant to emphasize the portions of the text he deems most substantial through the performance. Usually this emphasis takes the form of holding a note on a specific word within the text and stretching it, dwelling upon it, playing with the way it is sung and interpreted, the way it is heard and consumed. Barthes's metaphorical imagery is especially applicable to this scenario as the reader is placed "at a loose end" of a thread within the woven fabric that is the text ("From Work or Text" 1279). The deacon is free to unravel and reassemble the text as he wishes in an oft improvised manner. He displays mastery of the text, mastery of his voice, and mastery of raising the text through his

voice for the congregation to appreciate and perhaps gain from. The reader begins to lose himself in the piece and his performance.

But before long, the solo show of skill and understanding comes to an end. Liturgy continues as normal until the priest addresses the church in his sermon. The priest returns to the text as he imparts his own understanding thereof. As an anointed mediator between God and the masses, the priest's word is viewed as law—his interpretation supersedes the reader's. The classical form of criticism, which Barthes seeks to delegitimize, re-establishes its dominance—the priest, effectively the critic, takes on the “task of discovering the Author ... beneath the work: when the Author has been found, the text is ‘explained’—victory to the critic” (“The Death of the Author” 1271). He rids the text of its “anti-theological activity” to resurrect the “Author-God,” quite literally God himself as he writes through Luke the apostle (traditionally credited as the author of the text) in the book of Acts (“The Death of the Author” 1270-1271). Suddenly, the text returns to where it began, as a theoretical work which the congregation must put into action, opening up the possibility of misinterpretation, reinterpretation, or re-birth of the reader once more. Just as in the sacrament of baptism, where the soon-to-be Christian is buried and resurrected with Christ, the re-birth of the reader alongside the resurrection of the Author-God in this scenario is meant to allow for a chance at salvation. On the other hand, re-birth of the reader apart from the Author-God presents an existential danger.

The danger here lies in being separated from the Word. The term, *λόγος* in Greek, meaning word or reason also refers to Jesus Christ in theological and Biblical texts (“Logos”). Separation from the Word denotes eternal death whereas uniting with the Word, the Truth, gives eternal life. This framing of the Word and the text brings about many implications between the works of Barthes and theological texts. Notably, within this description of God as incarnate

Word, God becomes praxis rather than just an idea, or perhaps Barthes would argue that there is no such distinction since language precedes thought—“life never does more than the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, indefinitely deferred” (“The Death of the Author 1271). For the time being, life involves translating the text, the word of God which stands in the place of the Word Himself, “indefinitely deferred” as Barthes puts it, until the promised second coming. The Epraxis is an example of this translation—the act of translating, being a show of faith in works, can be understood through the metaphor of reading and writing. It is perhaps in this sense that the last line of Barthes’s “From Work to Text,” “The theory of the Text can coincide only with a practice of writing,” can be converted from blasphemy to creed.

He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through Him, and without Him nothing was made that was made. In Him was life, and the life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

—*New King James Bible*, John 1:2-5

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