

Staging Aphasia: Jean-Claude Van Itallie's *The Traveller*

Gene A. Plunka

Ludwig Wittgenstein's *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* is largely devoted to the problem of how language, the tool by which humans orient themselves to their physical and social environments, organizes knowledge. In short, language differentiates humans from animals and is the predominant factor in distinguishing what constitutes culture. Wittgenstein investigated cultural acquisition, i.e., how we become linguistically competent or how language is possible. Wittgenstein's theoretical assumptions gain further significance when examined in conjunction with Benjamin Whorf's research into how language shapes culture. One viable method of studying cultural acquisition through the development of language skills is to examine how adult aphasics reacquire their cognitive skills after brain damage has caused severe language deficit. This relationship between language and cultural acquisition is well illustrated in American playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie's 1987 drama, *The Traveller*, a partly fictitious account of director Joseph Chaikin's aphasic condition.

In his *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Wittgenstein explored the notion of how a sequence of words can have meaning that will be understood. Wittgenstein and the logical positivists believed thoughts are made perceptible to the senses through a proposition of language. Wittgenstein viewed sentences as logical pictures of reality. He wrote that humanity "... possesses the ability to construct languages capable of expressing every sense, without having any idea how each word has meaning or what its meaning is—just as people speak without knowing how the individual sounds are produced."¹ But how are sentences learned? Wittgenstein found that there is a relationship between empirical objects and the signs for them. A child learns language through example and practice of using signs in an ordinary way. Signs, however, have meaning only in the context of a proposition, a model of reality as we imagine it. In short, propositions form the basis of language—thought expressed in perceptible signs.

Benjamin Whorf applied Wittgenstein's tenets to linguistic anthropology, the study of language in various societies. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis (Whorf

Gene A. Plunka is professor of English at the University of Memphis, where he teaches courses on modern and contemporary drama. He has published articles on the plays of Edward Albee, Peter Shaffer, Jean Genet, John Millington Synge, Jean-Claude van Itallie, and John Guare. Dr. Plunka's books include *Peter Shaffer: Roles, Rites, and Rituals in Theater* (1988); *The Rites of Passage of John Genet: The Art and Aesthetics of Risk Taking* (1992); and *Jean-Claude van Itallie and the Off-Broadway Theater* (1999). He is also the editor of *Antonin Artaud and the Modern Theater* (1994). His latest project is a book on the black comedy of John Guare.

studied with Edward Sapir when the latter came from the University of Chicago to take a position as Professor of Anthropology at Yale University in fall 1931) states that all higher levels of thinking are dependent on language. Humans perceive the world principally through language. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis implies that the structure of one's language conditions the manner in which the speaker of that language thinks. In other words, the structures of various languages force the speakers of those tongues to view reality differently. If, as Wittgenstein noted, a sentence is a logical picture of reality, and if, as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis states, signs change from culture to culture, then individuals do not have the same mental pictures of objects. Speakers of different languages view the universe differently since thinking is relative to the language learned. Linguists argue that the investigation of the internal structure of individual languages helps us to understand the complexity of our own thinking habits. We see, hear, and think the way we do largely because the linguistic habits of our culture predispose certain choices of interpretation. Every language is a vast system in which we channel our thoughts and build our day-to-day consciousness. As Whorf acknowledges, "A change in language can transform our appreciation of the Cosmos."² Essentially, the study of linguistics becomes the quest for meaning, a heuristic approach to problems of psychology.

Aphasia, from the Greek *aphatos* (speechless) or "out of phase," is a loss or impairment of language due to some type of brain injury such as a direct blow, trauma, infection, or stroke. The form that aphasia assumes depends upon what area of the brain is damaged. Broca's aphasia, in which there is a lesion in the frontal lobe, results in damage to the area that supplies instructions for muscle movements associated with speech. These aphasics cannot pronounce words, although language comprehension is intact. Wernicke's aphasia, which occurs because of a lesion in the temporal lobe, adversely affects the recollection and interpretation of spoken and written language. Wernicke's aphasics cannot associate learned words with inner thoughts or stored memories and thus speak in gibberish. Generally, the aphasic has lost the capacity for using language to communicate meaning or for what Wittgenstein might refer to as "propositioning." Aphasics have difficulty using signs to express or comprehend ideas and must relearn the relationship between signifieds and signifiers.³

Many adult aphasics have not lost judgment or the ability to reason but are instead unable to express thoughts through language. The retraining process is similar to how a child learns language through auditory recognition of words and then by understanding the meaning and concomitant use of words in sentences. The reacquisition of phonemic distinctions by the adult aphasic parallels the same order as observed in the child. However, the adult aphasic's language, previously learned, has been distorted by a lesion in the brain whereas the child is encountering language for the first time. Retraining aphasics to understand language and use it

appropriately is a process that enables us to study how language organizes human knowledge, or as Whorf might state, how cognitive differences are related to lexical differences, and therefore how culture is transmitted.⁴

In April 1984, breathing difficulties and angina pain forced Chaikin to quit rehearsals for *Waiting for Godot*, which he was to direct at the Stratford Festival in Canada. An X-ray taken at New York's Presbyterian Hospital confirmed the prognosis: without open-heart surgery, Chaikin would die. On 7 May 1984, Chaikin, for the third time in his life, underwent heart surgery. Before he was anesthetized, Chaikin, in response to his friend Stephanie Lafarge's query about how he felt, recited a speech from *King Lear*, a play that he had been working on in preparation for its staging at the Public Theater in the fall. During the operation, a blood clot momentarily cut off oxygen to his brain, creating a lesion on the left side of the brain, a type of stroke. Van Itallie, who was the first to see Chaikin after the operation, recalled, "His speech was all blather."⁵ The stroke resulted in what was diagnosed as severe aphasia, most likely a combination of Broca's aphasia and Wernicke's aphasia. Chaikin could not understand the speech of others and was not able to put words together in an articulate sentence. He did not realize that his inarticulate babble was virtually incomprehensible to those who spoke with him. He could read words but not music, was barely able to write, and had no ability to work with math or sign language.

A couple of months after the operation, van Itallie was driving Chaikin to the hospital. Chaikin, who at this time could read much better than he could speak, was reading aloud, as speech therapy, the captions of the Gustave Dore book of illustrations for Dante's *Inferno*. Van Itallie immediately saw that similarities between Chaikin's life and Dante's *Inferno* were perhaps the subject for a new play. In July 1984, van Itallie began work on the play with Chaikin. Van Itallie stated, "It became clear quickly that the Dante story was too abstract by itself—that there was a very personal story as well. So I decided to tell it in parallel."⁶

Much of the play is based upon Daniel Moses's (*The Traveller*) perceptions of everyday reality, but during periods of aphasia, his distorted vision is depicted on stage stylistically.⁷ Van Itallie has stated that experimental stage techniques work better to express the Traveller's aphasic perceptions: "It [*The Traveller*] is within a more Chekhovian framework, if you will, but within this there are other forms that are more appropriate to different realities, such as dreams and hallucinations."⁸ Van Itallie said he began with a conventional structure: "It's a passion play which follows the patterns of the old Mysteries—a descent into Hell, a confrontation with the self, ego death and a rebirth into reality. That's a very traditional journey."⁹ The play's naturalistic framework, which van Itallie associates with Chekhovian realism, coincides with the real, intense struggle of an aphasic who goes into a type of hell, an *Inferno*, and when reborn, attempts to find

his identity again almost as if he is learning from birth. Van Itallie discussed how he juxtaposed conventional and experimental forms in *The Traveller*:

The play starts out in “real” reality—whatever you want to call that, Chekhovian reality or high-pressured New York reality. And then the Traveller begins to get drugs and anesthetic, and his mind begins to fuzz a little. The conceit of the play is that at this point he goes down into the Inferno world, and he’s in a dream reality, a very profound dream reality . . . The play has a kind of parabolic shape. It goes down at that point, and then you start coming back up, and as you surface, you come back into the more Chekhovian reality. But there are still some leftovers: when the Traveller sees the horse neighing or when he has hallucinations. And so then there are juxtapositions of realities. But more and more as he deals with people and has to find a new language to do that, is reborn into the world really, there is more of the Chekhovian reality.¹⁰

Van Itallie’s use of the quest as a metaphor for the aphasic’s road to recovery is particularly apropos because neurolinguists have often referred to the relearning process as similar to a journey to the “otherworld.” The long-term treatment of aphasia may last for years, depending on the severity of the damage to the brain, as well as the patient’s age, intelligence, language abilities, and physical condition.¹¹ Although much of the research on aphasia has focused on its pathology (e.g., the work of Broca and Wernicke), other investigators, such as Hughlings Jackson, have emphasized the psychological disorders associated with the disease and the implications for long-term recovery in which the patient must explore unknown terrain.¹² Aphasia causes severe disruption to an individual’s hope for recovery because language, the usual tool for coping (as in swearing or acting out frustrations), has gone awry. Thus, the aphasic feels as if he or she is on a quest in a foreign land or “otherworld” in which language must be reacquired in order to cope psychologically.

In one sense, *The Traveller* conveys the same types of changing realities presented in van Itallie’s earlier play, *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*. After the Traveller has a stroke and experiences the effects of aphasia, he is often in a nebulous condition that is similar to the *Bardo*, a Tibetan term that characterizes the state between death and rebirth. In *The Traveller*, Daniel Moses experiences a type of death after his surgery—a descent into hell. His rebirth is the prolonged growth process in which he must learn to recognize language and how it is logically formed. Most of the play, however, represents the agony of the *Bardo* for the Traveller, the state between death and rediscovering his identity through his close

association with friends and relatives. Van Itallie acknowledged that the *Bardo* state requires stage techniques that would reflect the protagonist's constantly changing realities and his journey through inner space.¹³ When the Traveller transcends this state of mind and begins to interact in the real world of friends, lovers, and family, the form becomes more conventional.

The Traveller begins in the New York City apartment of composer Daniel Moses. Daniel is on the telephone, infuriated that his work, aptly titled *Manhattan Inferno*, was negatively reviewed in *New York Magazine*.¹⁴ Daniel, himself an inferno, is, as the stage directions indicate, "intense."¹⁵ He is the personification of busy activity, always seeming to be in a hurry: "His hands are continually busy jotting a note, searching for something, playing with the cassette tapes and the volume of the music, or putting something into his mouth" (6). He takes two telephone calls at once, putting one of his friends on "hold." His frantic schedule leaves very little time for himself; his appointment calendar confirms that he is booked up days in advance. An unexpected visit by his friend Aaron makes him feel "pressured" (8), and he laments, "I'm going nuts here" (8). Aaron asks Daniel if he would like to walk by the pier to watch the sunset. Daniel must attend to his work first, so he refuses the offer. He asks Aaron, "But how about Tuesday at five fifteen? We can go for a walk then" (10). Daniel is obviously allowing work to interfere with life, and his spiritual state is suffering the consequences. Daniel insists that he is free to meet with his friend until 6:30 p.m. but not longer; the conversation with Aaron becomes frustrating to him, and he begins to internalize his pent-up hostilities. We learn that Daniel has been seeing a cardiologist because of his breathing difficulties. Sipping coffee and wine while smoking cigarettes only exacerbates his health problems. He begins to seethe when Linda places him on "hold" during their telephone conversation. Another telephone call, this time from the Traveller's brother, frustrates him to the extent of nearly banging his fist on the table. Suddenly, the Traveller experiences symptoms of heart failure: fluid in the lungs and shortness of breath. He totters from dizziness as the stage lights black out as well.

The Traveller must undergo open-heart surgery, which he has been through before. Like Chaikin, who was quite independent, admitted to van Itallie, the Traveller says to Aaron, "I'm afraid of living . . . diminished" (20). Chaikin's last words before the surgery were Lear's on the heath; Daniel, commissioned to write an opera version of *King Lear*, recites Lear's speech before receiving the anesthesia. The stage directions reveal, "This moment marks a crossing from one state of the Traveller's mind to another. He is entering an altered state of consciousness" (21). Van Itallie views the play as a Dante-esque journey from the hyperactivity of Manhattan life down into a type of Inferno, the near-death state of open-heart surgery and the aphasia that follows the stroke incurred during the operation.¹⁶ Daniel is a traveller who journeys to undiscovered territory during the

surgery. When he awakens, Daniel is in the *Bardo* state; as in *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, the person in the *Bardo* must choose between death and spiritual rebirth. When the Traveller chooses to live, the remainder of the play then deals with his rebirth, a continual learning process in which Daniel must discover the reality of friends, relatives, physicians, and therapists; as is true of any newborn, he must also acquire language skills. As the Traveller, Daniel journeys into the interior of his soul; he must struggle from within in order to be reborn. The play is a descent into hell followed by a phoenix-like rise from the ashes to mature through struggle and achievement. In this sense, the Traveller is similar to the Journeyor in van Itallie's *A Fable*, who learns to recognize that the Beast lies within the soul.¹⁷

Choosing rebirth, the Traveller is now in a state of innocence, allowing us to study the relationship between language development and cultural acquisition. He assesses his newborn status: "Like baby. Like angel./Feeling like that./Like traveling to stars, to friends./Beginning./Beginning like baby" (30). The stage directions indicate, "The Traveller is dazed and weak, like a baby. He expresses wonderment at what he is feeling" (33). The Traveller appears to understand that his retraining process will be similar to a child's ability to learn language through auditory recognition of sounds. Daniel muses, "Myself feeling to child/But cannot spitch to child" (97). Unable to use language effectively to communicate meaning, Daniel feels divorced from his environment: "Wow./Foreign to exile. Feeling like that./Exile to earth. It's true./Like baby . . . to earth . . ." (46). He admits to himself, "Difficult . . . to born" (32).

The Traveller's first words to the nurse, "Shalef nosh shaman. Ponly shingle" (39), reveal that he must learn language as if for the first time. Van Itallie has always been interested in how language can be manipulated to control one's thoughts and actions. In this sense, *The Traveller* is similar to Peter Handke's play, *Kaspar*, which is derived from an actual incident in which Kaspar Hauser, at age sixteen, essentially a feral child, turned up in Nuremberg in 1828 virtually unable to speak. Kept imprisoned in a dungeon for sixteen years by demented parents, Kaspar knew only one sentence, which he spoke in an Austrian dialect: "I would like to become a horseman such as my father once was." Kaspar could recite the words but did not know their meaning; this is similar to the Traveller responding "yeah" to whatever question is posed. Handke, working with linguistic principles formulated by Wittgenstein, demonstrates that as Kaspar, the newborn, learns phonetics, then words, and finally sentences, language creates order in his life. Kaspar learns the relationship between signs and objects and then eventually clarifies objects with sentences. To name an object means to control it. The play demonstrates the importance of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis: Kaspar learns that language influences thought. Kaspar's initial lack of language resulted in disorientation. As his language develops, so does his intelligence and concomitantly his ability to become a productive member of the culture. Handke

intimates that language socializes human beings, thus distinguishing them from animals.¹⁸ Like Kaspar, the Traveller gradually accepts the fact that language organizes knowledge and is an integral part of the socialization process.

Even more apropos is a comparison between *The Traveller* and Arthur Kopit's play, *Wings*. Kopit and van Itallie first met as students in Robert Chapman's playwriting course at Harvard University in 1957. Over the years, they shared several acquaintances active in the New York theater scene and would occasionally meet each other at social events. Kopit was also on the S.S. France in April 1968 when van Itallie, Chaikin, and other Open Theatre performers were en route to Europe to stage *The Serpent*. Furthermore, Van Itallie, Kopit, and John Guare all taught together one semester at Yale University. Kopit introduced Chaikin and van Itallie to Jacqueline Doolittle, the model for Amy, the speech therapist who worked with Emily Stilson after her stroke in *Wings*. Like van Itallie, who based *The Traveller* on Chaikin's real bout with aphasia, Kopit modeled *Wings* upon the actual life of a wingwalker who lost the ability to speak coherently after suffering a stroke, and on his father's own aphasic condition due to a stroke that he had in 1976. In an interview that I conducted with him on 26 June 1993, van Itallie explained that while *The Traveller* was conceived with Chaikin's aphasia in mind, Kopit's play was never considered during any of the drafts he wrote.¹⁹ Van Itallie, however, has seen *Wings* performed. Although acknowledging certain similarities between the two plays, he believes that there are substantial differences.

Kopit divides Emily Stilson's stroke into four distinct phases. In "Prelude," the stroke is represented by an alarm clock coinciding with Emily's inner state. The second segment, "Catastrophe," reflects the hospital setting seen through Emily's distorted perceptions. In "Awakening," Emily is essentially reborn, like the Traveller, as she begins to connect words with ideas. Finally, the last segment, "Explorations," indicates Emily's rejuvenated sense of confidence as she conquers her fears and renews the spirit of wingwalking again. Emily Stilson regains her wings by mastering language, viewing sentences as logical pictures of reality and relearning the meanings of signifiers. Both plays reflect the idea that one's identity is established by language, which frames how the universe is depicted for us. However, one substantial difference between *Wings* and *The Traveller* is that, as Doris Auerbach has noted, the former play is a metaphor for the despair of the human condition, whereas the latter drama does not focus *per se* on the difficulty of communication in the modern world.²⁰ Margot Anne Kelly sees *Wings* as belonging to a series of "disability plays" that offer models for attaining personal freedom within the confining structures of social institutions. She writes, "While Emily is not committing suicide, we do sense that her contentment is in part relief—a liberation from having to try to conform to a social order that had become untenable."²¹ In *The Traveller*, van Itallie, however, seems to keep the focus on

psycholinguistics rather than on sociology.

This emphasis on psycholinguistics is similar to Susan Yankowitz's treatment of the subject in her play, *Night Sky*, which premiered at the Judith Anderson Theatre in New York City on 14 May 1991. Written at the request of Joseph Chaikin, who directed the play, Yankowitz's stage depiction of Chaikin's recovery from aphasia parallels van Itallie's exploration of cultural acquisition through the use of language to create meaning. In her "Introduction and Dedication" to the play, Yankowitz wrote, "*Night Sky* is about listening and language, about inner and outer space, about a medical condition, a family's ordeal, an individual triumph—but most of all, it is about communication."²² The play traces the arduous recovery of Anna, a forty-year-old astronomer, whose aphasia has resulted in acutely impaired syntax, damaged comprehension of verbal formation, and memory loss. Anna, formerly a strong-willed, confident woman, now frustrated that her inability to use language has left her virtually without a future and thus without an identity.

Night Sky takes us through the various stages of aphasia as Anna first struggles with nonsense language or gibberish, begins to understand words but cannot verbalize the relationship between objects and their signs, gradually struggles for words and then mouths morphemes, and then finally learns how to string words together without the proper use of prepositions or verbs yet still developing propositions that have meaning and can be understood. Meanwhile, during Anna's long recovery, Yankowitz explores the notion that cultural acquisition is more subtle than merely relearning one's native tongue. Anna must be able to communicate with Jennifer, her fourteen-year-old daughter, who is learning French in school. Daniel, Anna's boyfriend, a baritone who sings operas in French and English, presents a different problem for her as she tries to sing along with him. The Doctor tells Daniel, "Just keep in mind that there are many ways of communicating" (28) and that because the left part of her brain was damaged and the musical area of the brain is located in the right hemisphere, understanding *music* is not the same process as knowledge of a foreign language. Moreover, since Anna is a scientist and views her full recovery based on her ability to deliver a scientific paper that she has been writing for delivery at an important upcoming international conference, Yankowitz is also investigating how science language acquisition compounds the difficulty in achieving full acculturation. Finally, *Night Sky* explores the notion that relearning the relationships between signifieds and signifiers is insufficient since language must be applied in various cultural milieux; Anna becomes overwhelmed with a world filled with impatient, fast talkers, answering machines, and fashionable party talk, underscored, as the stage directions indicate, by a variety of voices and sounds, "*such as a news report, rap or rock music, a paid political announcement, a football sportscast, a commercial, etc.*" (39). Thus, *Night Sky* in its exploration of how various new languages

(foreign, musical, and scientific) are acquired and also how language must be framed in its cultural context is similar to van Itallie's investigation into the relationship between language and cultural acquisition in *The Traveller*.

After the operation, the Traveller begins to receive visitors in the hospital. Jodie, the Traveller's sister, visits with Aaron, who realizes that Daniel has had a stroke during surgery. Daniel's brain has trouble processing words; thus, he cannot understand what is being said to him. English has become a foreign language to Daniel. For example, when Laurie, the nurse, speaks to the aphasic, her language appears to be gibberish because Daniel cannot make any correspondence between words and signs: "Share. Shash mush me nore momargible" (38). In response to questions, he can only utter "yeah" even when the expected response should be "no." Asked to put matches in an ashtray, Daniel lights a candle with a match. Van Itallie also notes, "His words and speech rhythms are relearned, so his speech sounds clipped, as if he had a slight British accent" (24). When encouraged to identify a brush, Daniel refers to it as "klicklop," much in the same manner that Emily Stilson struggled with "toovebram" and "toove-britch" but could not articulate "toothbrush." In short, Daniel cannot make the relationship between empirical objects and the signs for them. He is forced to relearn the relationship between the signified and the signifiers. This linguistically fragmented world of the aphasic is represented stylistically on stage. As the nurse hops like a kangaroo or as Doctor Steiff whinnies and then paws the ground like a horse, the audience perceives the protagonist's altered state. As the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggests, a change in language does indeed alter our perception of the cosmos. As Daniel learns the structure of language, he will gradually be socialized to think like others in the culture.

The Traveller begins to learn how to express thoughts through language. His quandary is the same as the dilemma that plagued Emily Stilson, who frankly asked her therapist how names of objects are derived. What we see on stage in *The Traveller* is essentially the transmission of knowledge through language acquisition, similar to the learning process observed in children. Through language, the Traveller will unite self and universe. Aaron must use charades in order to communicate with his friend. The charades allow Aaron to use signs in an ordinary way, as Wittgenstein suggested, to transmit language. Meanwhile, Doctor Sullivan is instructing Daniel through auditory recognition of words. She explains the technique to the Traveller's nephew: "Don't ask him to repeat your pronunciation. He must retrieve words from his mind. A subtle process. There's no prescribed methodology. We hope speech exercises help a little, but mainly we must help him surprise himself into going around the blocked area in the brain" (101-102). By watching television, Daniel is inculcated with the notion of inflection and tone: "Words myself nothing, of course—/It's 'tone./It's word: 'tone./'Tone': it's 'secret language'" (64). Television provides Daniel with a

logical picture of reality in which the relationship among signs, tone of voice, and morphemes becomes more meaningful. Daniel is gradually being acculturated through linguistics. While watching television, Daniel states, "It's 'secret language.'/'Communication.' Wow. It's word./Humans' face communication to me" (64). He then switches channels quickly, trying to mimic the faces on television.

After ten days, the Traveller begins to connect words with ideas and to learn the meanings of individual signifiers. When Daniel sees a lightning storm outside his window, he begins to speak in cadences: "Crash, fash, crash pash pash mash!/Pash! Crash! Plash flashpash crash!/Mashafalash, prash" (76). Aaron determines that the Traveller is trying to recite Lear's words on the heath in the storm. For the first time during his rebirth, the Traveller has associated words with meanings and is beginning to interpret language denotatively. This is the initial step toward how Wittgenstein believed thoughts are made perceptible through logical pictures of reality that cement the relationship between signifieds and signifiers.

The latter part of the play takes place in Daniel's New York apartment where he is receiving therapy as an outpatient. The Traveller's once incomprehensible language is now interspersed with recognizable words. As the weeks go by, Doctor Sullivan's therapy, which includes slow repetition of words while instructing Daniel, becomes more effective. Soon, the Traveller begins to read words and attempts to articulate their meanings. Aaron has placed markers throughout the Traveller's apartment. When he sees the sign marked "aphasia," the Traveller says, "A-phasisia—it's word./It's Greek: a-phasisia./It's 'rats.'/It's to cancer—/Peoples running away" (112-113). Daniel then mimics people running in fear of his condition. As an aphasic, Daniel has had his culture taken from him. Daniel is no longer a composer; he is incapable of composing even a sentence. He is considered to be a foreigner, and when a stranger asks him about his native country, Daniel amusingly replies "Poland." Yet he has actually made considerable progress on his journey toward full rebirth because he is soon able to carry on a partial conversation with someone and can even recognize the names of close relatives. He is trying to make sense of his condition through a proposition of language in which signs are related to ideas:

THE TRAVELLER: Wow.

It's improv-e-ment.

Slow improv-e-ment . . . but stroke—it's quick—

It's

(He mimes lightning.)

AARON: Lightning. It's lightning.

THE TRAVELLER: Yeah . . . to brain.
Stroke, it's, of course—

AARON: Say it slowly.

THE TRAVELLER: Stroke, it's curse.
Everything puzzle. (115)

The puzzle is slowly being unraveled as the Traveller learns to apply words to various contexts.

By the end of the drama, the Traveller is able to put nouns, verbs, articles, and prepositions together to form a picture of reality. His goal is to speak in sentences, a proposition of language. Daniel realizes, "Sentence: it's organization—/It's human organization" (126), the first vestige of cultural acquisition. He reads, "Take off your gloves, please," puts the newspaper down, and proudly announces, "It's a sentence" (126). As an aphasic devoid of intelligible language, the Traveller was culturally deprived. Language acquisition now allows the Traveller to view the universe differently. He makes the connection between language acquisition and acculturation: "Sentence, it's—/(He reads from his notebook.)/'Civilization'" (128). Daniel understands that language is the key to his rebirth and will influence one's cultural distinctions: "It's a sentence: coming to earth" (128). The last lines of the play indicate his achievement in which Daniel is using thoughts as a proposition of language to create a sense of order in which there is meaning in his life: "I am a composer./My name is Daniel" (129).

Staging the drama of aphasia allows us to understand the importance of language in determining cultural acquisition. Daniel Moses's progression from an aphasic who has lost his artistic heritage to an intelligent composer who is trying to regain an appreciation for an operatic version of *King Lear* is accomplished by language acquisition. Van Itallie's play demonstrates how language creates order in our lives and influences our various cultures. In his prelinguistic state, Daniel was close to an unthinking animal; loss of speech means an inability to create propositions. Language has socialized him, providing meaning in his life, albeit through a system of external conditioning controlled by "prompters." The world may not be as we perceive it, but language offers the means for us to construct logical pictures that provide an orientation to the universe.

Notes

1. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Prototractatus*, trans. D.F. Pears and B.F. McGuinness (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1971) 83.

2. Benjamin Lee Whorf, "Language, Mind, and Reality," *Language, Thought, and Reality: Selected Writings of Benjamin Lee Whorf*, ed. John B. Carroll (New York: John Wiley, 1956) 263.

3. For more information, see Harold Goodglass and Sheila Blumstein, *Psycholinguistics and Aphasia* (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins UP, 1973) passim.

4. In this sense, aphasia is particularly pertinent to psycholinguistics, which studies the decoding process by which messages to the brain are received and interpreted, as well as encoding processes in which the message is conceived and articulated.

5. Bernard Ohanian, "The Lost Words of Joseph Chaikin," *Hippocrates* (January/February 1989): 76.

6. Philip Reed, "Author Jean-Claude van Itallie," *Drama-Logue* 5-11 (March 1987): 5.

7. The genesis of the play began with a workshop; during October, van Itallie brought actress Rosemary Quinn and director Robert Woodruff in to work on the project. They discussed the structure of the play and how Chaikin might have a role in it. These ideas reached fruition on the boards when, during the winter of 1985, Ellen Stewart provided space for Joan McIntosh and a few other performers to experiment with the piece. Van Itallie spent two months during summer 1985 writing *The Traveller*. A staged reading of the play was given at the River Arts Theater in Woodstock. Van Itallie was also keeping a journal of Chaikin's progress during his recovery; some of this information would eventually be incorporated into *The Traveller*. The role of the Traveller was originally conceived of as a female because, as van Itallie explained to me in an interview that I conducted with him on 26 June 1993, "The Traveller was a woman for a little while because we were thinking of using Joan McIntosh, an actress that Joe and I both admire a great deal." However, when the play was later staged in Los Angeles, Joan was not able to leave her son in New York to play the role, so the Traveller became a man.

The play premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles on 4 March 1987 and ran until 5 April. Van Itallie revised *The Traveller* before it was performed at the Leicester Haymarket Theatre in Leicester, England, from 30 September 1987 to 24 October; afterwards, it transferred to London's Almeida Theatre from 8 December 1987 to 9 January 1988. Van Itallie continued to revise and tighten the play. The next major draft of *The Traveller* was completed in March 1990. Two years and five months later, at the end of August 1992, van Itallie finished the final draft of the play. In this version, Aaron is a male in his mid-forties and Jed Moses, originally the Traveller's brother, is now Jodie Moses, the Traveller's sister, modeled in part upon Shami Chaikin and upon Joe's brother Ben. Van Itallie is more comfortable with this edition of the play in which he can identify with Aaron as the Traveller's friend and confidant. Obviously, this version required some rewriting during the segments between the Traveller and Aaron, but, for the most part, the August 1992 edition remains essentially the same as the March 1990 draft.

8. Steven Simmons, "Opposites Attract," *A.C.T. Preview* (Spring 1987): 6.

9. Kevin Jackson, "One From the Inferno," *Face* 90 (October 1987): 37.
10. Alexis Greene, "An Interview with Jean-Claude van Itallie," *Studies in American Drama, 1945-Present* 3 (1988): 143.
11. See Aleen Agranowitz and Milfred Riddle McKeown, *Aphasia Handbook for Adults and Children* (Springfield: Charles C. Thomas, 1964) 8.
12. See Theodore Weisenburg and Katherine E. McBride, *Aphasia: A Clinical and Psychological Study* (New York: Hafner, 1964) 19.
13. Kathryn Bernheimer, "Their Lives in Art," *Sunday Camera* (25 January 1987): 2D.
14. The reference to *New York Magazine* may not be evident to someone unfamiliar with van Itallie's theater. Van Itallie, an artist, like Daniel Moses, is taking a swipe at John Simon's vicious attacks on his plays, all of those reviews published in *New York*.
15. Jean-Claude van Itallie, *The Traveller*, unpublished manuscript, 29 August 1992, 5. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically in the text.
16. Reed 5.
17. The origins of this archetypal quest derive from van Itallie's interests in fairy tales, in myths discussed by Joseph Campbell in his books, and in Tibetan lore.
18. Handke's play goes one step further than *The Traveller* by suggesting that language can also brainwash people, destroying their individuality. The prompters manipulate Kaspar into sounding like everyone else. Kaspar becomes an automaton, a cipher reciting the inanities espoused by the Other. In this sense, *Kaspar* is similar to Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* in which the Smiths and Martins recite nonsense language without any meaning, almost as if they were mouthing clichés that they frequently have heard others speak.
19. Gene A. Plunka, interview with Jean-Claude van Itallie, 26 June 1993, Rowe, Massachusetts.
20. Doris Auerbach, *Sam Shepard, Arthur Kopit, and the Off Broadway Theater* (Boston: Twayne, 1982) 105-106.
21. Margot Anne Kelley, "Order Within Fragmentation: Postmodernism and the Stroke Victim's World," *Modern Drama* 34.3 (1991): 390.
22. Susan Yankowitz, *Night Sky* (London: Samuel French, 1997) "Introduction and Dedication" [unpaginated]. All subsequent citations are from this edition and are included within parentheses in the text.

