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## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

### CLOSE READING AND THEORY – THE DAVID PLAYS

Frans-Willem Korsten

#### *Close Reading: Sensing the Text*

It would not be far-fetched to state that *theory* is the answer to what some have called the ‘crisis in representation,’ which is caused, or rather explored, by philosophical postmodernism. Friedrich Nietzsche would then act as its pivotal figure. Still, instead of considering the latter as the figure that marks a fundamental divide, his work can also be seen as a powerful voice in an ongoing discussion within the Western tradition. Both classical writings and many sorts of religious texts (including the Tanakh and the Bible) testify to a mistrust of language or, more fundamentally, to the inability to know what language, ultimately or finally, represents. One need only consider the vehement discussions in the Middle Ages between nominalists and realists.<sup>1</sup> To put this differently, it would be rather chronocentric to call the crisis of representation typically or solely postmodernist. The humanists in the Renaissance, for instance, experienced a different but partly similar crisis in representation. They too decided to start to close read, in relation to what was then a new kind of theory, and one that was different to what is nowadays called *theory*. In both cases, and despite historical differences, the desire that fuels close reading is to postpone the process of meaning-making. The impulse of both is to stay with the text, on the literal level, as long as possible.<sup>2</sup>

To be sure, the seemingly simple notion of ‘text’ and the difference between literal and figural remain extremely complicated issues. This,

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<sup>1</sup> Since Carre published his study in 1946 on the issue of realism and nominalism, relatively few specific studies have been published on the medieval discussion recently, which may be surprising, considering the vehement debate in the last decades on the role and status of language.

<sup>2</sup> One of the best studies on literature and theory is Jonathan Culler’s *The Literary in Theory*. The phrase ‘making meaning’ refers to Mieke Bal’s study in semiotics, *On Meaning-Making*, see note 11.

too, is not new. On the one hand, Plato's attacks on the sophists and their instrumental use of language in *Gorgias* and his attacks on theatre in the *Republic* were based on the desire for an unequivocally clear, epistemologically decisive and ontologically ideal form of representation. Yet on the other hand, his texts on the matter testify to a fundamental problem. Plato can only attack a specific use of language by making use of language in the very same way, not because he is a flawed philosopher, but because he cannot escape language's rhetorical nature. Likewise, he can only attack theatre by making use of his persona Socrates. Had he taken himself as protagonist he would have appeared not as the individual Plato, but in and through language as the artificial *persona* Plato.<sup>3</sup> So, generally speaking, the crisis is one in which language principally cannot rid itself of its own manipulation. There is no way of speaking, thinking or acting without some kind of persona or mask. To put this differently, one cannot say that the meaning and operation of language or subjectivity in the end goes back on some pristine and untouched X. If that would be possible, language would be truly representational. It would present x as the valid and meaningful replacement for, or a temporary instance of, what is supposed to be the real presence X.

One could say, consequently, that there is only a *crisis* for those who think that there is or should be an untouched, extra-lingual, definable, expressible truth. With respect to this issue, close reading can be called a pivotal, but also ambiguous instrument in the history of Western humanism. This history was characterized by George Steiner in his *Real Presences* as one in which a religiously inspired or philosophically underpinned trust in language is possible, and is key to the organization of truth, faith or knowledge. In Steiner's view, in classical humanism the house of representation stands because it remains possible to know what language is *about*. This knowledge of the about-ness of language allows one to stick to the notion, however imaginary, of finality in meaning or of some kind of truth (*Idea*, *Geist*). Within this context, close reading served to value the text for its intricacies in order to trace the arrows pointing to the text's true, original, proper or ultimate meaning. Epistemologically speaking, language, if studied closely

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<sup>3</sup> On the way in which Plato is being read in relation to his manipulation of language and masks, see Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos*, in which she considers the way in which Nietzsche, Strauss, Heidegger, Gadamer and Derrida have read Plato.

enough, would lead to the right answer. Ontologically speaking, language could then be the embodiment of truth. It may be clear that close reading consequently was not, and cannot be, just a matter of technique. Close reading is not like the ability to ride a bike, drive a car or fly a plane. Close reading concerns a scholarly, political or aesthetical *choice* to approach the object in a certain way. For the humanists it was important to counteract the obsessively allegorical ways of reading in the Middle Ages. Their desire for a more literal meaning necessitated close reading, as performed for instance by Spinoza in his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (*Politico-Theological Treatise*). In this study he decided to read the Bible as a historically determined text in order to get to its proper meaning. I will call this humanist endeavour the *hermeneutics of close reading*.

Still, with regard to this hermeneutics, even Spinoza would have had to admit that there is no such thing as ‘the’ literal meaning. Language is, in a sense, allegorical *per se*. Saying ‘tree’, I mean something other than the word, and the tree is not made present as tree. Besides, the question is why we chose to call the object-tree a tree in the first place. There is a fundamental arbitrariness in language, as was analyzed succinctly by Ferdinand de Saussure.<sup>4</sup> The vast implications of this arbitrariness would play a major role in the course of the twentieth century, and a paradigmatic discussion on the issue took place between Jacques Derrida and Hans-Georg Gadamer.<sup>5</sup> Gadamer, in his *Truth and Method*, contended that interpretation, understood hermeneutically, is aimed at general consensus. Derrida argued that interpretation can and will lead to radically different meanings.<sup>6</sup> His case may be exemplary for the way in which close reading would be hooked on to completely different ways of thinking about or dealing with art, which – taken together – were to be called *theory*. Scholars adhering to ‘theory’ would accept the impossibility of an ultimate kind of truth. Consequently, for them a

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<sup>4</sup> One of the best studies to date on structuralism with its roots in De Saussure is Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics*.

<sup>5</sup> The discussion was dealt with in a separate volume, edited by Michelfelder and Palmer, *Dialogue and Deconstruction: The Derrida-Gadamer Encounter*. The vast implications of the arbitrariness of language led to strong opposition from left to right. On this see Eagleton, *Illusions of Postmodernism*; Steiner, *Real Presences*; or Posner, *Law and Literature*.

<sup>6</sup> Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, ‘Text and Interpretation’ and ‘Reply to Jacques Derrida’; Derrida, ‘Three Questions to Hans-Georg Gadamer’.

'crisis of representation' did not exist as such. It could positively, and preferably, be defined as the rhetoricity or theatricality of representation. It implied, in the end, a fluid or 'flat' conceptualization of language and representation instead of a hierarchical and 'deep' conceptualization. This was not just a matter of epistemology or ontology, or politics. As the texture of language was considered differently and the text itself was sensed differently, this approach to language was also a matter of aesthetics.

The very term close reading came to prominence through the work of the so-called New Critics. As was already hinted at, this did not mean they invented something new. Their work, in the 1930s, '40s and '50s, was a response to what were the dominant ways of dealing with literature and art at the time. One figurehead of the New Critics was I.A. Richards, the author of important studies such as *Practical Criticism* and *Principles of Literary Criticism*, and also, tellingly, of *Science and Poetry*. An important goal of the New Critics was to consider the work of art as an autonomous object and not as a derivative of extratextual circumstances. In a sense their main question was epistemological: what kind of thing is this object? This was primarily a reaction to the tendency to reduce the work of art to the author's life and thoughts, something W.K. Wimsatt called the intentional fallacy. The New Critics protested against this tendency to explain art without having understood or having paid real attention to what the work itself was. Like the humanists before them, the New Critics in a sense wanted to take the text literally. Their desire was to have a better understanding of, or to acquire knowledge about, the object of art through the object itself. However, in the process they ignored the interpreting subject. As for this subject, Wimsatt dubbed the undesirable effect of this elusive figure the affective fallacy. Trying to avoid both fallacies, the New Critics strived to achieve some kind of objective knowledge that could be found through close reading.<sup>7</sup>

The New Critics did not reign supreme. Simultaneously, especially in Europe but also in the States and elsewhere, different forms of critique of ideology were being developed, which in one way or another were connected to Marxism or which had existed since the thirties in the form of what later became known as the Frankfurt School (accompanied in the fifties and sixties by several Latin-American, African and

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<sup>7</sup> On this, see Littau, *Theories of Reading*, p. 97.

Asian postcolonial scholars). By and large they would criticize the type of close reading proposed by the New Critics. Scholars interested in ideology could not accept the autonomous status of the work of art as such, or consider it solely in terms of knowledge. According to them, texts were embedded in sociocultural circumstances. Different contexts were always determining the work of art, or were presented through it. In that sense art was principally sociopolitically charged and active. The type of close reading advocated by the New Critics was seen as the correlate of a decision to consider the work of art as non-political. This option was rejected or vilified by those of the critical schools, who were only able to think of the autonomy of art in a negative sense. Adorno, for instance, saw such a form of autonomy as an adequate response to the forces that beset and alienate modern human beings.<sup>8</sup>

In this context, for a while, close reading served as a watershed. To some it was 'in', whereas for others it was 'out' – out of the question. Still, important scholars within the critical schools of the sixties and seventies not only cherished close reading but found it politically important. Consequently, from the 1960s onwards close reading came to be considered in a radically different setting. The first conscious reflection on this shift may be Paul de Man's *Blindness and Insight*. De Man once recalled how the favourite course he took as a student was one in which students would do nothing but read a single text. For people such as De Man, close reading was 'as old as the hills.'<sup>9</sup> They intended to use it, however, within the parameters of a radically different kind of humanism, often called post-humanism. In that context approaches such as deconstruction and feminism, which in turn were both heavily interested in psychoanalysis, would reconceptualize close reading as well.

In psychoanalysis, one is required to pay attention to the texture and the details of the object in order to open up the potential of meaning in many different directions; these will prove to be traces in both the individual and the collective cultural body. For feminism, a whole range of questions on the status of texts in a predominantly patriarchal society, with the blotting out of female texts and female voices in those texts, required close reading. Only by close reading could specific forms of the distribution of the sensible, as Rancière would call it, be traced. In

<sup>8</sup> On the negatively defined autonomy of art, see Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*.

<sup>9</sup> Phillips, <http://courses.nus.edu.sg/course/elljwp/deMan.htm>.

this way, voices that had been smothered or covered up could be sensed again and brought to light. As for deconstruction, the principal point was that saying something must mean un-saying something, or not saying it. Here, close reading was required to sense and trace the dynamic of what is being said through the not-said. In both cases, a politics of close reading was accepted in macro and micro-political terms. The way in which a text was doing politics, on a macro or micro-level, became a major point of interest and in order to trace how this was done, one had to close read. For this type of close reading, the term *semiotics of close reading* can be used, as has been suggested by Jonathan Culler and Mieke Bal.<sup>10</sup> One could even call it an *aesthetics of close reading*, if one takes aesthetics in the postmodernist sense. Instead of rejecting the affective fallacy, the interpreter will then have to deal with the inevitability of affective relations between object and subject, which is, indeed, a matter of aesthetics.

One of the major contemporary philosophers on the topic of aesthetics, Jean Mary Schaeffer, defined the hermeneutical approach as fitting within the frame of a speculative approach to art, which finds its ground in philosophy and theology and is in the end predominantly cognitive in nature. One studies the work in detail in order to know more about it and to find its deeper, ultimate, or true meaning. Its meaning is 'elsewhere', so to speak. In contrast, the semiotics or aesthetics of close reading fits in with what may be called an affective approach to art. This approach is in the end predominantly concerned with the ways in which art strikes, influences, shapes, binds, and touches us – also politically – in the here and now. In this case, one studies the work in detail in terms of sensation, i.e. in order to sense as fully as possible what it is doing, both in the private and the public domain, individually and collectively, and in terms of both thought and emotion.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas the hierarchical conceptualization of language and representation (in terms of deeper meaning, for instance) can be hooked on to a method and theory that is equally hierarchical and 'deep', the fluid and flat conceptualization cannot. To illustrate this point, one need only look to a shift in the theory of psychoanalysis that has taken place

<sup>10</sup> See Culler, *On Deconstruction*, or Bal, *On Meaning-Making*.

<sup>11</sup> On the dominance of the speculative approach, see Schaeffer, *Art of the Modern Age*; on the political-aesthetic alternative, see Schaeffer, *Les célibataires de l'art*, Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, or Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*.

in the twentieth century. In the Freudian way of doing psychoanalysis, the idea is that one can come close to a conclusion. Obviously, the high-way to the unconscious hits a wall somewhere, as a result of which we can never know ourselves fully. We can, however, get pretty close, because psychoanalysis offers the tools and techniques to decipher the encoded messages we receive in the form of dreams, slips of the tongue, erratic or perverse behaviour, and so forth. Here, psychoanalysis still fits in a hermeneutical, perhaps even scientific model. With Lacan and others later in the century, however, psychoanalysis shifts to the fluid mode, and the constant flight of solutions and conclusions. Winnicott's idea of the 'good enough' fits in this picture. There is no key that will solve all issues in the end, which is why Lacan could state or advise you to 'enjoy your symptom'.<sup>12</sup>

Once we have accepted the fundamental rhetoricity of language or the theatricality of representation, there cannot be one method that fits all texts. What happens depends on the individual text, on the moment, on the actors involved, on the interests involved, and the particular kind of agency that the object or the scholar wants to address. Another way of saying this is that one can never decide beforehand which method or set of questions is required to approach a work of art. If that were the case, all that results after having chosen a distinct approach is a matter of illustration. For those scholars who indeed want to illustrate their point with a work of art this is, of course, not a problem. It is a problem, however, if we consider the work of art as a singular 'thing' that should not be appropriated or instrumentalized. To counter this, we can use *theory*.

The very term 'theory' might suggest that it is one coherent, consistently developed theory. This is assuredly not the case. Theory, here, indicates the willingness of the scholar to wager herself: instead of simply applying a theory, she aims to be guided by a theoretical approach. If there is some kind of coherence in 'theory', it might be that the acceptance of the rhetoricity or the theatricality of representation needs to be underpinned by a philosophy that has worked through both its religiously inspired desire for truth and its scientifically enforced quest for true meaning. With rhetoricity and theatricality, artificiality is implied, as is masking, staging, and acting (in the double sense of that word, as play-acting and doing). The major question in this context

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<sup>12</sup> I am punning here on one of the most insightful and intelligent studies on Lacan and how his work can be used in order to read art: Žižek, *Enjoy your Symptom!*.



becomes not so much what representation points to, but how it affects and shapes the ones involved with, or caught in representation in a particular here-and-now. With regard to that, *theory* is a catchphrase for all kinds of politically informed and theoretically explored approaches that vary from queer theory to ecocriticism, and from gender studies to cultural analysis.

What can this kind of theory bring us when we close read the David plays? We cannot decide beforehand. The plays will have to provoke the relevant questions as much as we pose them ourselves. Turning to Vondel's David plays, then, I wish to emphasize the fact that my initial reading was accompanied by a lack of knowledge as to what they would invite me to do. In a fascinating way (as I started to notice), the difference between the two ways of doing close reading as described above was embodied in both plays. As a consequence, the plays allow me to say more on the combination of close reading and *theory* – this perhaps to some elusive and yet so utterly transparent approach to the literary work or art.

### *Theatricality and Mise en Scène*

Vondel's *Koning David in ballingschap* (*King David Exiled*) forms the prequel to *Koning David herstelt* (*King David Restored*). Both plays date from 1660. Both relate to history in a double sense. There is first of all the collection of histories on which the plays are based, which are taken from Samuel 12, 13 and 14. For the audience of Vondel's times, these histories would have been well-known.<sup>13</sup> Therefore they need not be presented by the play, although some of them are presented explicitly in a summary that precedes the printed version of the play. Subsequently, there is the history in the play itself. In *Koning David in ballingschap*, its history is developed within the limited amount of time prescribed by classical poetics, i.e. in less than twenty-four hours. In this case it concerns the actions and events from the moment David's son Absalom asks his father permission to go to Hebron (where he will start his revolt) up until the moment David has to flee eastward, away from

<sup>13</sup> Vondel was also an avid reader of Josephus's *Jewish Antiquities*, and whilst there are often telling differences between Josephus and the Bible, in this case the two are by and large the same. In this case, the text of the Bible, or of the Tanakh, contains more details than Josephus's text, whereas most of the time this is the other way around.

Jerusalem. As a result not all elements from the entire biblical history of Absalom and David can be dealt with in the play, although many of them will pop up in a veiled or masked way, or in the form of references and condensed narratives.<sup>14</sup>

The history of Absalom and David is a complex one and cannot be grasped entirely by the summary. Its complexity is mostly due to the fact that David had many wives with whom he begot several sons. The eldest son of David is Amnon, by his wife Ahinoam of Jezreel. Absalom is the third son, by the daughter of King Talmai, Haggith, who is also mother to Tamar. Now the eldest son, Amnon, happens to be madly in love with Tamar and feigns illness in order to be able to ask David to assign her to him as a comforting nurse. When Tamar is with Amnon, he asks her to make pancakes, and this is what she does in his room, kneading the dough and shaping the cakes in the form of hearts. Then Amnon sends away his servants, and asks her to bring him the cakes herself. Having her near him, Amnon grabs her and rapes her. Immediately after the act he is suddenly filled with rage and hatred and sends her away. Tamar decides not to sneak away but to turn her exit into a public performance. With torn clothes and ashes thrown over her head and body, she walks through town, where she is seen by everyone – and met by her brother Absalom, who of course asks what has happened. After he has been told, he is the one who takes her with him to his place, in hiding, in an attempt to cover up the entire matter. From now on she will be cut off from the world (as the text has it). As one can imagine, Absalom is filled with contempt for his rival brother, although he decides to wait for some years. Then he goes to David in order to invite him and his sons to a feast in honour of the shearing of sheep. When David refuses, Absalom asks whether his beloved brother Amnon will not be allowed to come. David grants his permission. At the feast, when the wine has gone to Amnon's head, Amnon is killed.

When reading the plays, I could not fail to notice that their preliminary history is determined by both rhetorical and theatrical strategies of faking and masking, by skilfully presenting or arranging things, by publicly telling and showing, or veiling and hiding what should not be shown. In fact, three characteristics of rhetoricity and theatricality

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<sup>14</sup> The term 'condensed narrative' is developed in Korsten, *The Wisdom Brokers*, in order to indicate how one word, metaphor or reference can embody an entire narrative that is used in or projected into some line of argumentation in order to either serve the running argument or contradict and complicate it.

come into play: (1) characters do not present themselves as what they are, but are intentionally manipulating language and masking their actions; (2) characters present themselves publicly as what they are (rape victims, for instance), but in doing so they turn a space into a stage, thus installing the reign of theatrical representation and turning onlookers into a participating audience; (3) subjectivity is shaped by different forms of manipulation and *mise en scène*, i.e. things happen in such a way that subjects find themselves through the *mise en scène*, or their subjectivity is defined within and through the context of the *mise en scène*.

As for the first characteristic, Amnon fakes that he is ill; Absalom fakes that he loves his brother Amnon and invites him to a feast (in order to kill him). Both are theatrical actors in this way. As for the second characteristic, Tamar decides to show herself as what she is: a raped woman. However, she cannot remain to be seen as such if one wants to keep up appearances. This is why Absalom immediately has to hide her, and will have to keep her hidden. Tamar's appearance on the street will have to become an event, the veracity of which people will have to doubt. There is no way in which they will be able to test its realness. By removing Tamar from the world, something is lifted out of the realm of reality and installed in the regime of un-reality, which charges the event more strongly. This is also where the third characteristic comes in, that of *mise en scène*, which does not simply concern the spatial arrangement of props and actors, but also the arrangement of these in relation to actors and audience. It concerns the production of subjectivity. In each of these histories, independent actors are suddenly thrown into the position and status of an audience. They find themselves in a situation that is not entirely of their making, and can never entirely be of their making. Any audience is, in a complex way, intrinsically part of the *mise en scène*. It finds itself somewhere. Consequently, the status of all subjects involved becomes unclear. Insecurity is established as to the question of how to read that which happens: from what position, in relation to what, and being what? Maaïke Bleeker (2008) has defined this set of questions as a defining marker of *theatricality*.

Because of all this, and because of the fact that the preliminary history is indexically taken up in the history of the play itself, the issue turns to one of how we are supposed to see and read. How are we to decide what makes sense and what does not; how are we to consider what we can and cannot know; how are we to establish by what and by whom we are affectively touched; how are we to decide who is what in

doing what? The plays provoke, or almost demand, close reading, and they ask us to reflect on the way in which we, as a participating audience, are being framed in terms of theatricality.

The dynamic of theatricality is made explicit at the beginning of *Koning David in ballingschap*. The play starts in the middle of the night, with Absalom and Tamar. The reason for the nocturnal scene appears to be that Absalom is in a sudden hurry to get away from court and has to ask David permission, who is on his way to say his prayers with the Levites. Another significance of the nocturnal scene, however, is connected to Tamar being cut off from the world. She can only appear during the night, for with daylight others will be able to see her. This, in its turn, is an index for the theme of theatricality on two other levels, namely within the play and in the historical context of the play. As for the latter, the orthodox ministers in Vondel's times had great concerns about the newly built theatre in Amsterdam, which they defined as a space of darkness, in which things were played out that could not bear the light of day. And indeed, something is happening in the play that cannot bear the light of day, for Absalom is not on his way to do penance, but to assemble his men with whom he will rise against David.

The theatrical play on dark and light leads to several forms of irony and insecurity. One ironic twist is that Absalom needs the dark because he is too nervous to play his act well. Hence it is rather ironic that David compares Absalom to the sun at a certain moment, and then goes on to state that the sun's face is less dear to him than Absalom's (l. 48). In the dark, however, Absalom's face is far from radiant. Then, when Absalom anxiously asks his sister Tamar whether he can really go to David, she reassures him: 'Feel as free as if it were day' (l. 57). But if it had been day, he would not have felt free at all. The confusion becomes most charged when David becomes irritated because Absalom has recalled recent histories, especially the one of Amnon and Tamar. 'Be silent about that', David orders (l. 115). That history has to be kept in the dark, as the metaphor in the following line suggests, since David's mercy covers up Absalom's guilt for his brother's death 'as the tombstone does its grave' (l. 116). Finally David confesses: 'This piety and this message this night I had / not expected from my Absalom, that beautiful one. May he enlighten others, whilst keeping his word in God' (ll. 119–21).

The first act, in which the night is a dominant element of the *mise en scène* whilst in the text light plays a dominant role, installs what Bleeker described as the key characteristic of theatricality: the heightened

awareness that is the result of an as yet indecisive morphing of subjects in relation to what is apparently being staged, being played out, being acted out, and being experienced and read. None of the positions is certain. Even for those who would argue that David, at least, is the one stable subject, it is of importance to note that several times in the play the prophecy of Nathan is recalled. When David had fallen in love with Bathsheba, who happened to be the wife of one of his supreme commanders, Uriah, David had ordered the latter to be killed, though in a veiled way. Uriah's death had to look like an accident on the battlefield. This did not please God, as the text of the Bible states. The prophet Nathan is chosen as mouthpiece for God's displeasure and he prophesies that because of this vile act David's house will become a place of familial murder.

That is obviously what this play is concerned with. In this sense one can see Absalom as the instrument of the prophecy – and of God. That latter element may be the most confusing one. Indeed, how are we to read what is happening? Is Absalom God's instrument or not? It is extremely unclear who is in charge of the *mise en scène*, or who is acting in the name of what. Consequently, the *mise en scène* is a determining factor in the production of subjectivity, both for the actors involved and the audience, which is not simply the actual audience as a group of onlookers but the status of an audience as a role.<sup>15</sup> Such theatricality is reaffirmed once more in the last act of the play. This act starts with clarity, or so it would seem. We see Absalom and his major advisor, Achitofel:

Absalom: This is how Jerusalem was won without battle!

Achitofel: And not by deceit, but in beautiful daylight.

Absalom: The court's evening sun is setting rapidly in the east.

Achitofel: Against her nature, yes: who has ever seen such miracle?<sup>16</sup>

At first, both men boast that there was no need to act in disguise, since they could operate in the crystal-clear light of day. The source of that light is defined precisely the other way around, however, in the following two lines. There David is compared to the sun, which is not setting in the west but in the east – which is the direction that David has

<sup>15</sup> On this conceptualization of *mise en scène*, see Bal, *Travelling Concepts*.

<sup>16</sup> Vondel, *Koning David in ballingschap*, ll. 1441–44: 'Absolon: Zoo wort Jerusalem gewonnen zonder slag: / Achitofel: En niet door laegen, maer by schoonen lichten dagh. Absolon: Deze avontzon van 't hof gaet snel in 't oosten onder / Achitofel: En tegens haer natuur. wie zaght oit grooter wonder!'

fled, across the river Jordan. The metaphor indicates there is something unnatural here, something that will backfire on the speakers. Accordingly, at the end of the play, Achitofel will lose his mind, and then regret that he has provoked the son to rise against his father by means of ‘fruitless ruses’ (l. 1861). He will be on his way to committing suicide.

As for Absalom, the most marked way in which the final act works with theatricality mirrors the opening act, and does so painfully. Achitofel has advised Absalom that the best way to get the people irrevocably behind him, is to sleep publicly with David’s ten wives, who David had left behind to take care of the castle. Here it is very clear who is in charge of the *mise en scène*. The space and all its props are described explicitly: ten beds, food, candles, all put on display on top of the palace. The theatrical nature of the event is made explicit by David’s wives themselves, using the word ‘toneel’ (play, performance, stage) when they ask Absalom: ‘[...] Let this despicable performance / not be shown in the face of the entire community’ (ll. 1698–99). The confusion as to how this community can read the spectacle in which it is simultaneously involved is produced by the fact that Absalom’s ‘performance’ intends to mark a difference between divine law and political law. His sleeping with David’s wives, as is indicated three times, is normal according to Asian custom (l. 1516), or the way of the Easterners (l. 1776), or according to the laws of Brahman (l. 1783). When Tamar protests against this appeal to the law of infidels, Absalom asks whether he may give her an ‘enlightening’ example: David’s murdering Uriah and marrying Bathsheba. With that same Tamar we are being redirected to the first act, and from there to her being raped by Amnon. The result of that act was that she could never again enter the world. The same will happen with David’s wives, who, after Absalom has used them and after David has defeated Absalom, will be locked up in a house, never to be seen again.

### *Sincerity and Embodied-ness*

Considering what Absalom has done to David, it may come as a surprise that in the sequel, *King David herstellt*, David is obsessed by one thing only: not the threat of his own defeat, but the preservation of the life of his son Absalom. With a small band of soldiers, but in the company of his major commanders, David has fled across the river Jordan and Absalom is approaching with a much larger army. Although David

is clearly threatened, he refuses to fight, in order not to risk Absalom's life. Two characters are David's major counterparts in the ensuing argument: Joab, David's most important military leader, and Bathsheba, the ex-wife of Uriah, and now mother to David's son Solomon, who will later be appointed as David's heir. Both argue that David should fight Absalom.

Whereas Bathsheba only uses arguments, Joab is a trained political player who cheats and will use lies to influence David, or who bluntly sees to it that any possibility of a truce or reconciliation between father and son is made impossible. When Absalom sends an envoy with a peace offer, Joab cunningly takes him aside, makes sure that David will not see him, and sends him back again. When David discusses military strategies with his commanders, he again appears to be beside himself. He decides to stay in the castle of his host and not fight along with his army. The only reason he would want to fight is that he would like to save Absalom's life. After he has made the decision to stay behind, however, he emphasizes time and again that nobody may touch Absalom.

How can we understand this puzzling element in the play? The standard explanation has been that David feels too much parental love for his son.<sup>17</sup> Such an explanation is in accordance with what Vondel explicitly describes in the preface to the play (or in accordance with what the chorus already put forward after the first act in *Koning David in ballingschap*). In terms of psychology such an explanation may have its merits, but it ignores the fact that God, via his mouthpiece Nathan, has prophesied that David's house will become the stage of internal bloodshed. David's attempts at saving Absalom appear to counter this prophecy, hence God's will.

As I have argued elsewhere, this is not the only play by Vondel that presents us with a sovereign who attempts to forestall the prescribed development of history.<sup>18</sup> To my analysis, this position is distinctively comparable to the figure of the *katèchon*, as described in Paul's *Second Letter to the Thessalonians*, written in the first century after Christ.<sup>19</sup> The letter is written in a time of crisis and despair. Considering the future, Paul describes how, before what ultimately needs to happen according to the divine plan, first something else will have to take place:

<sup>17</sup> On parental love, see Konst, *Fortuna, Fatum en Providentia Dei*.

<sup>18</sup> Korsten, 'The Irreconcilability of Hypocrisy and Sincerity'.

<sup>19</sup> Though there is some discussion as to whether Paul is its true author.

Let no one deceive you in any way; for that day will not come, unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself against every so-called god or object of worship, so that he takes his seat in the temple of God, proclaiming himself to be God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you this? And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains it will do so until he is out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, and the Lord Jesus will slay him with the breath of his mouth and destroy him by his appearing and his coming. (*II Thessalonians* 2, 3–9)

So the one who has to come first is a rebel, an unlawful usurper, who has to position himself as if he were God. Yet, although the usurper's mysterious powers can already be felt, he is being restrained. There is a force operative that does not allow this rebel to come. The figure behind that restraining force will have to be removed first, before the rebel can acquire its full powers. Where the text says 'he who now restrains it', the original has *katèchon* – a Greek term meaning 'resister'.<sup>20</sup>

Due to the prophecy of Nathan, David's house has to fall apart through bloodshed. This may also explain why David so emphatically asks all his men not to kill his son, and why he does not want to kill him himself. He resists the fulfillment of the prophecy. This, of course, brings him into dangerous waters, resisting God's will and God's intervention in history. Worse still, he comes to be the positive or negative mirror-image of God. Within the Christian conceptualization, God is the one who is willing to sacrifice his own son, whereas David is not. Viewed through this resemblance, Absalom comes to resemble Jesus. But that, surely, cannot be the case for someone who has risen against his own father and has usurped power? Still, there are some strong hints in the text that point in this direction.

The play closely follows the story in the Tanakh and the Bible and in Josephus's account, according to which David's small army defeats Absalom's big one. Acknowledging his defeat, Absalom flees the scene on a hinny. At this point, it becomes relevant why earlier we were told that Absalom had such thick hair that it had to be cut each eighth day.

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<sup>20</sup> The figure of the *katèchon* has been studied extensively with regard to sovereignty. On this, see Hoogers, *De verbeelding van het soevereine*. In dealing with this conceptual figure, Schmitt, *Politische Theologie* was a response to a text by Heidegger, 'Einleitung in die Phänomenologie der Religion'.



Thrown up in the air by his galloping hinny, his hair gets caught in a thorny bush, and there he remains hanging. Is it relevant to note that Vondel explicitly states in *Koning David in ballingschap* that Absalom has blond hair? Perhaps it is an insignificant detail, but it would seem to justify a closer look at that passage in the fourth act. A messenger describes what he has seen at the encampment of Absalom. Absalom is being crowned king by a descendant of Aaron:

The blond hair he crowned with vibrating beams  
of gold and diamonds. There you could have seen him shining  
like a morning sun, with such a grace and flair  
that everybody would doubt whether nature, here, or art  
spanned the crown in this one man, from top to toe  
perfectly shaped, without so much as a speck on one of his limbs.  
'Live long, live long, oh Prince, oh king Absalom!  
Live long, most honorable heir. May your name blunt the sun's  
glory and brilliance!' That was what was being shouted without end,  
the hosanna of thousands, consisting of twelve groups.<sup>21</sup>

Of course, for those who need to frame Absalom beforehand because they know his history, this passage cannot be taken seriously. For them its true meaning is located elsewhere. But if we close read what the text presents in the here-and-now, we are affected. It is as if we meet a new Prince of Light, who is more brilliant than the sun, who will be at the beginning of a new era, and who is without flaw. His extra-ordinary status is defined by the fact that it is not sure whether he is natural or artificial. The blond hair is relevant here, because it may now be a crown itself, radiant and glorious, much like the hair, in the Western tradition, of that other extra-ordinary figure: Christ.

The allusion to Christ becomes relevant once more, when we learn how Absalom is killed. The soldiers who find him first respect David's plea not to kill Absalom. But Joab is less inclined to follow David's orders. According to Josephus (VII, 10, 241) he shoots Absalom through the heart. According to the Bible Joab takes three sticks and rams them into Absalom's breast, after which he presumably falls down

<sup>21</sup> Vondel, *Koning David in ballingschap*, ll. 1033–45: 'Hy kroonde 't blonde haer met levendige straelen / gout en diamant. daer had gy hem zien praelen, / Gelyck een morgenzon, met eenen zwier van gunst, / Dat elck in twijfel troock of hier natuur, of kunst / De kroon spande in een' man, van boven tot beneden / Volschapen, zonder smet doorgaens aen al zijn leden. / Leef lang, leef lang, ô Prins, ô koning Absolon. / Leef lang, doorluchtste telgh. uw naem verdoof de zon / In glans en heerlijkheit. dat was 't geduurigh roepen, / 't Gejuich van duizenden, gedeelt in twalef troepen.'

and his men beat him to death. In Vondel's text the three sticks become spears. Hanging in the air, Absalom is pierced with spears. This in itself is not enough to compare him to Jesus. However, a close reading of the structural positions of characters on the axes of father/son and murderer/victim, in relation to God's plans with human history, and in relation to the preservation of law and order, will prove to be telling. This becomes even more evident when we include a passage from the preface to *Koning David herstelt*, in which the orator explicitly deals with that other father who did not want to kill his son, although he felt obliged to, and who was then saved by the bell: Abraham.

In the preface, three fathers, three sons, and three different forms of sacrifice are being compared. David's refusal to sacrifice Absalom is compared in a complex way to Abraham's ability to conquer his natural, paternal inclination because he loved God so much:

But the love of the patriarch Abraham, long overlooked as it had been, is proven by the fact that he, by sacrificing his own son, who was obedient to the death, conquered his self and nature, for the love of God, which is why the hero's faith and perseverance are crowned with such a glorious promise, and he represented God the father, of whom God the son himself declared: *For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son.*<sup>22</sup>

David, as the text of the play has it, will not be able to follow Abraham's example. He is not able to resist his natural inclination, as Bathsheba indicates: 'The patriarch Abraham did overcome his nature indeed'. David will retort: 'How many fathers are there who could follow in his lead?' (ll. 1714–15). This may be aimed at Abraham, but is also aimed, obviously, at God. Moreover, the other side is that Abraham, in his willingness to be counter-natural, is not able to resist his love for God. Or that within the Christian frame, God is not able to resist his love for mankind, for whom he is willing to offer up his own child.

It is important to understand that other plays, such as *Gebroeders*, present David as an average patriarchal figure and ordinary practitioner of *Realpolitik*. In *Koning David herstelt*, however, his resistance to the pre-ordained (prophesied) development of history is not driven

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<sup>22</sup> Vondel, *Koning David herstelt*, 'Dedication' – 'To the dear and strict Mr. Cornelis van Vlooswyck [...]', ll. 42–48: 'Maer de liefde van den aertsvader Abraham, dus lang overgeslagen, wort hier door betuigt, dat hy, in het opofferen van zijnen eenigen en ter doot gehoorzaemen zoone, zich zelve en natuur, uit liefde tot Godt, overwon, waerom 's helts geloof en stantvastigheit met zulck eene heerelijcke belofte gekroont wert, en hy Godt den vader afbeelde, van wien Godt de zoon zelf uitroep: Zo lief had Godt de weerelt, dat hy zijnen eenigen geboren zoon gaf.'

by a strategy. Likewise, the *katèchon* does not have a strategy: he is resisting the strange, mysterious forces that beset him because he clings to what he holds dear. Whereas David's general Joab is an average hypocrite and Bathsheba is concerned solely with the future of her son Solomon, David acts in response and in a here-and-now. He gives in and will keep on giving in, even when this will become unacceptable, as when he is not able to rejoice in the final victory of his army. He has to be forced by Joab to show his joy. At that moment he will lose his sincerity, but not to the extent that he will conclude that things have had a happy ending after all. Being sincere, David can only acknowledge himself to be subject to a pre-ordained plot. Consequently, there is almost no play by Vondel that ends in such a bitter way as this one.

In the light of all this it becomes of interest to see how the to-and-fro between naturalness and artificiality appears to apply less to David. His inability to kill his son is a form of sincerity comparable to that of Badeloch in *Gysbreght van Aemstel*. In my study of that character I considered the notion of sincerity as one that is predominantly non-strategic and that can come to life in response to the acts of others, not passively but in a conscious act to defend what one finds valuable.<sup>23</sup> As the comparison suggests, David can be seen more as a mother in his refusal to kill his own son. Again, as the word refusal also suggests, this is not passivity, something that would fit in well with a powerful cliché concerning the roles of women in the European tradition. Instead, it is an active form of resistance.

By analogy, reading is not a passive act. In the play, before rushing on to action in the standard way, David busies himself with reading what is happening to his son and to him. If I consider this in the light of Karin Littau's *Theories of Reading*, I would like to share her contention that close reading cannot be anything other than a *materialist* kind of reading, that is to say a form of reading in which the *mater* indicates a principally gendered body that does not so much disseminate but brings forth.<sup>24</sup> As for close reading, there is no possibility of escaping material concreteness and by implication, sociocultural differences or gendered ones. Close reading can never be, in whatever way, objective or universal. As the word 'close' suggests, such a kind of reading is spatially particular, intrinsically sensitive, sensible, and principally embodied.

<sup>23</sup> Korsten, *Sovereignty as Inviolability*, pp. 180–86.

<sup>24</sup> Littau, *Theories of Reading*, pp. 154–57.