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The Forms of Language in the Plays of Eugene Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, and Harold Pinter

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THE FORMS OF LANGUAGE IN THE
PLAYS OF EUGENE IONESCO,
SAMUEL BECKETT, AND
HAROLD PINTER

BY
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THE FORMS OF LANGUAGE IN THE
PLAYS OF EUGENE IONESCO,
SAMUEL BECKETT, AND
HAROLD PINTER

This thesis is approved as a creditable and independent investigation by a candidate for the degree, Master of Arts, and is acceptable for meeting the thesis requirements for this degree. Acceptance of this thesis does not imply that the conclusions reached by the candidate are necessarily the conclusions of the major department.

Thesis Adviser

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INTRODUCTION

Edward Albee has written a humorous little skit in which he depicts how the popular mind views the Theatre of the Absurd. He imagines Ionesco, Beckett, and Genet meeting on a Paris boulevard:

IONESCO

(At a Left Bank cafe table, spying Beckett and Genet strolling past in animated conversation.)
Hey! Sam! Jean!

GENET

Hey, it's Eugene! Sam, it's Eugene!

BECKETT

Well, I'll be damned. Hi there, Eugene boy.

IONESCO

Sit down kids.

GENET

Sure thing.

IONESCO

(Rubbing his hands together.)
Well, what's new in the Theatre of the Absurd?

BECKETT

Oh, less than a lot of people think.
(They all laugh.)

Their laughter may be directed at their audiences and it may be well deserved. Less is going on in the Theatre of the Absurd than many people think and yet, at the same time, more than they know. The author believes that much of the misunderstanding about Absurdist drama is a result of trying to extract a "moral" or "message" from such plays as The Bald Soprano or Waiting for Godot. It must be

admitted that these plays lend themselves to analyses of metaphor, symbol, and theme. And many perceptive and sensitive critics have explicated the work of Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, Pinter, and others. Nevertheless, it is important to realize that we are dealing here with a type of drama which, as Martin Esslin has pointed out in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, differs from the body of nearly all previous drama, and that this difference is found chiefly in the form and style of the Absurdist playwrights.²

Such an attitude does not, however, obviate the possibility or the importance of interpretation. Nevertheless, Susan Sontag is quite right in suggesting that we as readers, as audiences, must "recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more."³ Therefore, this thesis intends to focus not so much on what Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and Samuel Beckett are "saying" as on what they are doing with the forms of language, and how and why they are doing it.

The Theatre of the Absurd is, to a large degree, a child of its times. Certainly the vision of life's futility is nothing new in literature, but certain features peculiar to our century have heightened our awareness of this futility and deepened our despair. Chief among these features, along with the triumph of the


technological society which we have fashioned for ourselves, is the decline of belief in traditional mythologies. "The decline of religion in modern times," William Barrett writes in *Irrational Man*, "means simply that religion is no longer the uncontested center and ruler of man's life. ... [Religion is] no longer the final and unquestioned home and asylum of his being. ... The waning of religion ... penetrates the deepest strata of man's psychic life. It is, indeed, one of the major stages in man's psychic evolution. ..."\(^4\)

The loss of religion signifies the loss of a whole series of symbols, images, archetypes, rites and rituals. But man, Barrett explains, "was bound to feel homeless in such a world which no longer answered the needs of his spirit."\(^5\) Furthermore, in *The Hero With A Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell states that "religious pantomime is hardly more today than a sanctimonious exercise for Sunday morning, whereas business ethics and patriotism stand for the remainder of the week."\(^6\)

In short, modern man is experiencing the spiritual sickness which C. G. Jung writes about in "The Collective Unconscious, Myth, and the Archetype":


\(^5\)Barrett, p. 25.

In reality, we can never legitimately cut loose from our archetypal foundations unless we are willing to pay the price of a neurosis. . . . If we cannot deny the archetypes or neutralize them, we are confronted at every new stage in the differentiation of consciousness to which civilization attains, with the task of finding a new interpretation appropriate to this stage, in order to connect the life of the past that still exists in us with the life of the present. . . . If this link-up does not take place, a kind of rootless consciousness comes into being, no longer oriented to the past, a consciousness which . . . is susceptible of psychic epidemics.7

Jung compares a civilization which has lost its awareness of myths to a man who has lost his soul. This loss, he concludes, is a "moral catastrophe," anywhere and everywhere, even among the most technically advanced civilizations.8 In the plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, we will see the results of this moral catastrophe in characters who suffer from the neurosis of modern man cut off from his metaphysical roots.

If the loss of myth includes an attendant loss of the rites, rituals, and archetypes connected with myth, man, in losing these, has also lost his sensitivity to, and his ability to understand, the language of myth, the "forgotten language" as Eric Fromm terms it. Fromm observes that the language of myth is symbolic and that our problem today centers around "understanding it rather than . . . interpreting [it] as if one dealt with an artificially


manufactured secret code." Although this connotative language of myth is universal, according to Fromm, it defies the logic of the rational mind and, hence, is rejected by the rational man who, because he is, or chooses to be wholly rational, cannot understand it. In losing touch with myths, then, we have also lost touch with the affective language in which they are written. We have imprisoned ourselves within the limits of logic and reason.

Having lost his soul, man has sought to replace it by scientific, rationalistic substitutes, glorifying his reason and his technology. But science cannot be an effective cure for this problem because it is, in fact, one of the causes. Science, according to A. N. Whitehead, conceals "the radically untidy, ill-adjusted character of the fields of actual experience." which is distinctly opposite to "the neat, trim, tidy, exact world which is the goal of scientific truth." The world around us appears to be basically chaotic, a seemingly random collection of apparently unrelated events. "This fact," Whitehead points out, "is concealed by the influence of language, molded by science, which foists on us exact concepts as though they represented the


10Fromm, p. 7.

immediate deliverances of experience."\textsuperscript{12} Later in this discussion, it shall be seen how Eugene Ionesco, in particular, reveals the limits of scientific thought by employing a technique described by Jules Feiffer as "logically extending a premise to its totally insane conclusion, thus forcing onto an audience certain unwelcome awarenesses."\textsuperscript{13}

While the loss of myth is indeed a catastrophe for Western civilization, that loss is by no means irrevocable. In fact, we need not look too far afield if we truly do wish to renew our awareness of myth, if we wish to recover our souls. Jung tells us that besides our immediate consciousness, "there exists a second psychic system of collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This . . . is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes. . . ."\textsuperscript{14}

According to Joseph Campbell, in The Hero With A Thousand Faces, what we are dealing with here is a pattern repeated throughout time, irregardless of place. "Dream is the personalized myth," Campbell observes, "myth the depersonalized dream; both myth and dream are symbolic in the same general way of the dynamics of the psyche."\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{12}Whitehead, p. 12.

\textsuperscript{13}Jules Feiffer, interviewed by Larry DuBois, Playboy 18 (September, 1971), p. 92.


\textsuperscript{15}Campbell, p. 19.
Much anthropological research tends to bear this out and indicates that, despite widely different cultures and geographical locations, myths arise from experience and problems that are universal, not particular. According to Jung, the archetypes are experienced originally not as content-filled images, "but at first as forms without content." This concept is important to an understanding of all three playwrights. "The primitive mentality," according to Jung, "does not invent myths, it experiences them." He points out that: "Reduced intensity of consciousness and absence of concentration and attention... correspond pretty exactly to the primitive state of consciousness in which we must suppose myths were originally formed." In other words, contemporary man most closely approaches the original conditions in which myths were formed when he experiences dreams, reveries, delirium, and the like. "This mode of origination," Jung declares, "is the general rule." Furthermore, the interest in, and attention given to, dreams by Jung and Campbell is shared by both Beckett and Ionesco.

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
If dream is, as Campbell suggests, the personalized myth, if "the latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stand this afternoon on the corner of Forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change,"\textsuperscript{21} it is this personal, even common element of myth in everyday life that we will notice in dealing with Harold Pinter. It is Pinter who, of the three dramatists under consideration here, most tries to communicate the awareness of the mystery inherent in everyday life, in ordinary people, objects, and situations.

This essay will attempt to show how, especially in their use of the forms of language, the plays of Eugene Ionesco, Harold Pinter, and Samuel Beckett reflect the contemporary loss of belief in traditional mythological guidelines and the growing distrust of scientific, rationalistic, substitutions, and how they attempt to put us back in touch with the importance of myth by increasing our sensitivity to the "forgotten language" of myth. This thesis will attempt to show, too, how these playwrights attempt to communicate the sense or experience of absurdity and its attendant feelings of chaos and fear.

"Real art," writes Susan Sontag, "has the ability to make us nervous."\textsuperscript{22} It is the reflection, in the art of these

\textsuperscript{21}Campbell, p. 4.

\textsuperscript{22}Sontag, p. 8.
playwrights, of this nervousness or dis-ease of twentieth-century
man that will be examined. As we sit in our rooms, telling our-
selves stories to pass the time while waiting for our own personal
Godot, we eventually come to the point at which all we can do is
say, like Garcon at the end of Sartre's No Exit: "Well, we might
as well get on with it."

23

23Jean-Paul Sartre, No Exit, in No Exit and Three Other Plays
CHAPTER I

EUGENE IONESCO

In his short play Salutations, Eugene Ionesco stages an everyday phenomenon. Three men meet on the street and inquire after each other's welfare:

1st Gentleman to the 2nd: Glad to see you. How are things going?
2nd Gentleman to the 1st: Fine, thanks. And you?
3rd Gentleman to the 1st: Nicely. And you?
2nd Gentleman to the 3rd: Nastily. And you?
1st and 2nd to the 3rd: And you?
3rd Gentleman: Peculiarly. And you?
2nd Gentleman to the 3rd: Melancholically. And you?
1st Gentleman to the 2nd: Early-morningishly. And you?

The salutations continue until the first gentleman finally exclaims:

"Things are going famously, we're getting on ionescoically."¹

One need not look very far or listen very hard to perceive that in much of our daily conversation we are, indeed, "getting on ionescoically." Robert Wernick has said that Ionesco's message is a deeply pessimistic one which holds that man cannot communicate with other men, that he is cut off from his own kind because of the forces and pressures of his own nature as well as those of modern history. In Ionesco's plays, Wernick believes, these pressures "all combine to stifle everything that is alive and beautiful and individual and turn mankind into a set of squeaking.

interchangeable robots. . .

2 In other words, all our speech is little more than gabble and our efforts at verbal communication are doomed from the outset.

Thus Ionesco has become known as the playwright who doesn't believe in communication, who tells us that words are hollow, empty, useless. But this idea has received too much popularity. Ionesco has several times pointed out that the writing profession would be a strange choice for someone who had no belief in the efficacy of language. "An author," he explains, "is by definition someone who has faith in words." 3 For Ionesco, words themselves are not at fault. The blame lies with the people who use words but who have essentially nothing to say.

The dialogue of The Bald Soprano would seem to indicate the banality of the character's conversation:

Mr. Smith: Hm. [Silence]
Mrs. Smith: Hm, hm. [Silence]
Mrs. Martin: Hm, hm, hm. [Silence]
Mr. Martin: Hm, hm, hm, hm. [Silence]
Mrs. Martin: Oh, but definitely. [Silence]
Mr. Martin: We all have colds. [Silence]
Mr. Smith: Nevertheless, it's not chilly. [Silence] 4

This banality is not entirely the fault of their language, however.

"The Smiths, the Martins can no longer talk because they can no longer think," Ionesco has commented. "They can no longer think


because they can no longer be moved, can no longer feel passions."

They are lacking in inner life; they have nothing truly personal
to say and so, in order to conceal this, they fill the air with the
most transparent platitudes and social cliches. These characters
are, in effect, communicating something in this play—their own
emptiness, an emptiness that infects their speech.

But the characters' communication is not that of the play-
wright. What Ionesco is trying to communicate in The Bald Soprano
can be summed up in two seemingly contradictory statements. In his
memoirs, Present Past, Past Present, Ionesco has written: "[L]et
us allow ourselves to be carried along by the waves of chaos. .
. Let everything collapse. I would like for there to be nothing
left at all." And yet, later in the same volume, we find him
saying: "I would like to put the universe in order." I believe
that Ionesco accomplishes both of these goals, through language, in
his work. By plunging language into chaos and, from there, into
nothingness—in terms of conceptual meaning—Ionesco does inject
a sense of order, perhaps even new life, into old words. And as
he has remarked: "To renew one's idiom or one's language is to

5Eugene Ionesco, "The Tragedy of Language," Notes and Counter

6Eugene Ionesco, Present Past, Past Present, trans. Helen R.

7Present Past, Past Present, p. 66.
renew the vision of the world." This process can be examined as it takes place in The Bald Soprano.

Toward the end of the play, language is stripped of all conceptual meaning and the characters simply utter phrases and words. Language is thus plunged into a state of chaos. But the words seem to reproduce themselves of their own accord, and out of this chaotic state one phrase gives rise to another, as in the following passage:

Mrs. Martin: Don't ruch my brooch!
Mr. Martin: Don't smooch the brooch!
Mr. Smith: Groom the goose, don't goose the groom.
Mrs. Martin: The goose grooms.
Mrs. Smith: Groom your tooth.
Mr. Martin: Groom the bridegroom, groom the bridegroom.
Mr. Smith: Seducer seduced!
Mrs. Martin: Scaramouche!
Mrs. Smith: Sainte-Nitouche!
Mr. Martin: Go take a douche.
Mr. Smith: I've been goosed.
Mrs. Martin: Sainte-Nitouche stoops to my cartouche.

Words are plunged into chaos in which they are stripped of conceptual meaning. And yet, out of this state, they proliferate by means of alliteration, assonance, rhyme and pun, thus resulting in new structures:

Mr. Martin: Robert!
Mr. Smith: Browning!
Mrs. Martin, Mr. Smith: Rudyard!

8 Eugene Ionesco, "Hearts Are Not Worn on the Sleeve, Notes and Counter Notes, p. 102.

9 The Bald Soprano, p. 40.
Mrs. Smith, Mr. Martin: Kipling!
Mrs. Martin, Mr. Smith: Robert Kipling!
Mrs. Smith, Mr. Martin: Rudyard Browning.

The terms "Robert Kipling" and "Rudyard Browning" have, of course, no conceptual meaning and yet they are significant in that they are new structures which have grown out of chaos and conceptual nothingness. Although the characters probably are not deliberately engaged in a conscious act of verbal reproduction, the audience would be justified in extracting an optimistic attitude toward language from a passage such as this.

In Love's Body, Norman O. Brown writes of "speech resexualized," the "spermatic word, the word as seed." He maintains that:
"To restore to words their full significance ... is to reduce them to nonsense, to get the nonsense or nothingness or silence back into words." He says that words, in order to be reborn, must first pass through death, and speaks of "a pregnant emptiness. ... Creation is in or out of the void; ex nihilo. Creation is out of nothing."

This is exactly what Ionesco is doing, carrying language to the extreme, killing it, in fact, so that it can be reborn.

By sending words back into, in Brown's phrase, "the chaos which

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10The Bald Soprano, p. 41.
12Brown, p. 258.
13Brown, p. 262.
is the eternal ground of creation,"\textsuperscript{14} by doing violence to the fossilized forms of everyday speech, Ionesco allows new forms to grow out of this violence, this fertile chaos. It is from this that speech is born again.

Richard Coe believes that, in doing this, Ionesco has made a significant effort to end the victimization of man by language. Coe believes that "the death of language [as effected in The Bald Soprano] has plunged man dizzying backwards not merely into everlasting silence, but into primordial chaos...\textsuperscript{15} And it is this chaos which, although frightening in its destructive violence, can lead, as Coe says, "straight towards an experience of the unknowable."\textsuperscript{16}

In another early play, The Chairs, Ionesco actually took the abstract concept of the Void and gave it concrete realization on the stage. Written in 1951, The Chairs involves an old couple who live alone in an old island tower. The old man has devoted his life to formulating a message which he is now ready to present to the world. Accordingly, he invites a large number of people to his tower. The guests arrive but are not seen nor heard to speak. Nevertheless, the old people greet the invisible visitors and, as the "crowd" grows, keep fetching chairs for them until the stage

\textsuperscript{14}Brown, p. 248.


\textsuperscript{16}Coe, pp. 162-163.
is filled with chairs. Finally, the old man announces that he has engaged a professional Orator to deliver the message. The Orator arrives—he is a "real" character—and the old couple, their work finished at last, jump out the window. However, the Orator turns out to be a deaf-mute. After uttering a series of gurgling sounds, he writes an incoherent jumble of letters on the blackboard. Curtain.

Numerous motifs can be seen in this play, but Ionesco maintains that the dominant image is signified by "the chairs themselves, that is to say the absence of people, the absence of the emperor, the absence of God... metaphysical emptiness. The theme of the play is nothingness..."¹⁷

It is the fear of this Nothingness—which is fearful but also creative—that impels man to try to neutralize it with platitudes and rational constructions. Because he is afraid of the Void and repulsed by the chaos leading to it, he shuts himself off from this creative source. But, as Richard Coe says, "it is not death, but the fear of death which dominates and destroys the world; and... once fear is conquered, then (possibly) a new Utopia is in sight."¹⁸

Man's fear is chiefly due to the fact that the Void does not permit itself to be rationally structured, nor can it be expressed.


¹⁸Coe, p. 111.
in the platitude and cliches of a rationalistic society. Berenger, 
the hero of The Killer, is a man who confronts everyone's inevit-
able encounter with the Void--death--but is unable to fit this into 
his platitudeous world-view. At the conclusion of this play, 
Berenger meets the killer who has been wantonly murdering the 
citizens of the "City of Light." A giggling, half-witted dwarf, 
the killer only chuckles as Berenger employs every argument from 
patriotism to humanitarianism, reason, religion, politics, even 
vanity. Each argument is met by an indifferent shrug from the 
killer who, knife in hand, advances toward Berenger who falls to 
the ground, stammering: "Oh God! There's nothing we can do. 
What can we do . . . What can we do . . . ."19 

Berenger has no beliefs, only slogans. He tells the killer 
to "say what you believe, can't you? I can't, I can't."20 As 
Josephine Jacobsen and William Mueller observe, however, "it is 
not an argument which could stop the Killer, but a belief. And in 
belief . . . Berenger is bankrupt."21 Platitudes and reasoned 
arguments must fall under the killer's knife. 

By shutting himself off from the creative past, by insulating 
himself against chaos and insisting on rational explanations, man 

19 Eugene Ionesco, The Killer, in The Killer and Other Plays, 

20 The Killer, p. 107. 

21 Josephine Jacobsen and William Mueller, Ionesco and Genet: 
consequently denies himself one of the main benefits and results of this creative chaos—the archetypes of myth. As we have seen in the Introduction, the loss of myth carried with it an attendant insensitivity to the symbolic, connotative language of myth. It is not surprising, then, that Ionesco should use language as the vehicle for taking us back into the creative element of chaos. But by refusing to attune himself to this chaos, man suffers a double loss—that of both myth and its language.

We see Berenger again in *Rhinoceros*. This time, he is in the midst of the "psychic epidemics" that Jung talks about, men losing their souls, losing their human-ness, and actually being transformed into rhinoceroses. Everyone around Berenger at first is disgusted by the ugliness of these creatures. As more and more people are transformed, however, it becomes popular for one to be a rhinoceros and everyone willingly undergoes the metamorphosis. Huddled up in his room with his girl-friend Daisy, Berenger tries to convince her that it is better to insist on one's humanity than to give in to the epidemic of pachyderms. But he finally admits:

"You're probably right that I've run out of arguments. You think they're [the rhinoceroses] stronger than me, stronger than us. Maybe they are."22 And so Daisy, too, leaves Berenger to join the others, saying as she goes: "They're like gods."23


23 *Rhinoceros*, p. 104.
Although his last statement is a rejection of rhinoceros-itis, Berenger would really like to be transformed. "I was wrong!" he cries. "Oh, I'd love to have a hard skin in that wonderful dull green colour... Their song is charming... I wish I could do it... I should have gone with them while there was still time... Now I'm a monster, just a monster. Now I'll never become a rhinoceros... Oh well, too bad! I'll take on the whole lot of them!... I'm not capitulating!" But this final defiant expression, Martin Esslin believes, "is merely the expression of the fox's contempt for the grapes he could not have." By some quirk of fate, Berenger is condemned to be fully human, spiritually whole, although he would love to succumb to the sickness of all those around him.

In a further attempt to neutralize, ward off, and explain the essential chaos of life, man employs his reason. But, to Ionesco, this is unreliable. As the Smiths converse with the Martins in The Bald Soprano, for example, the doorbell rings. Mrs. Smith goes to the door but no one is there. This procedure is repeated several times and Mrs. Smith concludes: "Experience teaches us that when one hears the doorbell ring it is because there is never anyone there." Mr. Smith, nevertheless, opens the door.

24Rhinoceros, p. 107.
25Esslin, p. 151.
26The Bald Soprano, p. 23.
on the fourth ring and finds the Fire Chief standing on the step. This precipitates an argument between the Smiths. When the doorbell rings, does that mean that someone is at the door? Or does it ring because no one is at the door?

Mrs. Smith: Never anyone.
Mr. Smith: Always someone.
Fire Chief: I am going to reconcile you. You are both partly right. When the doorbell rings, sometimes there is someone, other times there is no one.
Mr. Martin: That seems logical to me.
Mrs. Martin: I think so too.
Fire Chief: Life is very simple, really.27

Their method of ordering experience appears to be rational. However, the conclusions they arrive at show that rational ordering is a thin veneer over the confusing, chaotic reality, thin and misleading. The Logician's syllogism in Rhinoceros is a similar example of the deceptive quality of logic:

Logician: [to the Old Gentleman] Here is an example of a syllogism. The cat has four paws. Isidore and Fricot both have four paws. Therefore, Isidore and Fricot are cats.
Old Gentleman: [to the Logician] My dog has got four paws.
Logician: [to the Old Gentleman] Then it's a cat.28

Through such examples, Ionesco shows that our scientific and rational attempts to replace the departed myths and neutralize the chaos from which they came are specious and misleading, that they

27The Bald Soprano, pp. 26-27.
28Rhinoceros, p. 18.
are no substitutes, really. Berenger's platitudinous arguments, the Smiths' reasoning, and the Logician's syllogisms are all found wanting.

The dictates and rules of society are, likewise, attempts to order, control, and stave off any wellings-up within us of the creative part of ourselves. In *Jack, or the Submission*, and its sequel, *The Future Is in Eggs*, Ionesco shows how a conventional, rational society tries to control the irrational aspects of both speech and sex.

In *Jack*, the young hero is admonished by his family for being unmarried. "History has her eyes on us," his sister warns him.29 His parents exhort him to prove his love for them, to say the words that will reassure them. They are overjoyed when he declares:

"Oh well, yes, yes, na, I adore hashed brown potatoes... I adore hashed brown potatoes! I adore hashed brown potatoes!"30 Still, this is not enough; he must marry. His parents have just the girl for him—Roberta, a lovely woman who, as her admiring father points out, has "green pimples on her beige skin, red breasts on a mauve background, an illuminated navel... and all the meat needed to meet the highest commendation. What more do you need?"31

29 Eugene Ionesco, *Jack, or the Submission*, in *Four Plays*, p. 86.

30 *Jack, or the Submission*, p. 87.

31 *Jack, or the Submission*, pp. 91-92.
But Jack wants a girl with three noses, and so they bring him one—Roberta II.

But wedded bliss is not theirs. In the sequel, *The Future is in Eggs*, we find Jack's father complaining: "It's three years now since we arranged this marriage. And they've been stuck there ever since, caterwauling, with us watching them. And nothing happens ... nothing at all! We must get some results quickly!" 32

Roberta, therefore, is taken off-stage, and Jack is lifted onto a "hatching table." Jacqueline, his sister, then proceeds to carry in basket after basket of eggs until the stage is covered with them. As the eggs proliferate, the words, likewise, proliferate, a word for each egg:

**Father-Jacques:** We'll make officers, officials, and officious people.

**Jacqueline:** Valets and masters!

**Father-Jacques:** Diplomats.

**Mother-Jacques:** Knitting wool.

---

**Mother-Robert:** Leeks and onions.

**Father-Robert:** Bankers and pigs.

**Father-Jacques:** Citizens and country yokels.

**Mother-Jacques:** Employers and employees!

**Jacqueline:** Popes, kings and emperors.

---

**Grandmother-Jacques:** Omelettes!

**Jacqueline:** Humanitarians and anti-humanitarians!

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32 Eugene Ionesco, *The Future is in Eggs*, in *Rhinoceros and Other Plays*, p. 121.

33 *The Future is in Eggs*, pp. 139-140.
Mother-Jacques: Opportunists!
Father-Robert: Nationalists!
Father-Robert: Internationalists!
Father-Jacques: Revolutionaries!
Grandmother-Jacques: Anti-revolutionaries!
Jacqueline: Radishes! Radicals!
Father-Robert: Householders!
Father-Jacques: Housebreakers!

Their attempts to linguistically codify the unruly, non-rational aspects of sexual reproduction only result in an unruly verbal reproduction. "The tongue," Norman O. Brown believes, "was the first unruly member. ... And the penis is a symbolic tongue, and disturbances of ejaculation a kind of genital stuttering."34 The non-rational breaks through the logical encasement and proliferates by means of its own inherent nature.

In The Lesson, such an attempt at structuring the non-rational is seen as actually disastrous. "Philology," the Professor's maid warns, "leads to calamity."35 But the Professor does not heed her warning and goes on to harrangue his female student with a long, contradictory barrage on the differentiation of languages. The student actually experiences a toothache as she listens to him. He then decides to teach her "all the translations of the word 'knife'", even though the maid insists: "You're going to go too far."36 But he repeats the word "knife" and insists that the

34 Brown, p. 251.
35 Eugene Ionesco, The Lesson, in Four Plays, p. 60.
36 The Lesson, p. 72.
student keep saying it after him. The pain in her tooth extends throughout every part of her body until the Professor tells her:

"Pay attention. . . . the knife kills. . . ." Striking her with an invisible knife, he exclaims: "Aaah! That'll teach you."

The girl lies spread-eagled on the chair as the Professor mumbles:

"Bitch . . . Oh, that's good, that does me good . . . Ah!" 37 The use of, and insistence on, rational language, then, leads to verbal rape and murder which, in The Lesson, are given literal form.

Attempting to logically order and control the creative elements of sex or language can be disastrous. As Richard Coe has said,

"in a world where rational communication has failed . . . love, sex dreams, poetry, nightmare—these are the only means of communication in a world where rationality has finally strangled the sense of language." 38

In an interview with Claude Bonnefoy, Ionesco remarked: "There are times when the world seems emptied of all expression, all content. There are times when we look at it as though we'd just that moment been born, and it looks astonishing, inexplicable." 39

In another "Berenger" play, A Stroll in the Air, this emptying of content is translated onto the stage when the scenery changes and objects begin to disappear. Berenger exclaims: "I've never been

37The Lesson, pp. 74-75.
38Coe, p. 77.
39Bonnefoy, p. 123.
so relaxed; I've never been so happy. I've never felt so light, so weightless. . . . When I look around me, it's as though I was seeing everything for the first time. As though I'd just been born. . . . Like some feeling of joy . . . forgotten but still familiar. . . . You lose it everyday and yet it's never really lost.\(^{40}\) Berenger suddenly begins to float above the roof-tops. He exclaims that "everyone knows how to fly. It's an innate gift, but everyone forgets."\(^{41}\)

Although man has forgotten how to "fly," Ionesco believes that the gift of the creative past can be recovered. As his career progressed, Coe points out, Ionesco started searching for "an absence of construction which is itself a construction,"\(^{42}\) And this he slowly discovered in the loose, apparently disordered associations of dreams. By being sensitive to dreams, Ionesco feels, we may reach an awareness of the creative element of chaos. "In dreams there is no rigorous progression," he points out. "We move from one image to the next. . . . Dreams are natural, they are never insane. It is logic which runs the risk of madness; dreams being the very expression of life itself, in all its complexity and its incoherence, cannot be insane. But logic can."\(^{43}\)


\(^{41}\)*A Stroll in the Air*, p. 74.

\(^{42}\)Coe, p. 96.

\(^{43}\)Bonnesfoy, pp. 110-111.
Ionesco has remarked on the similarity in the experiences of mystics from widely different cultures. "Everyone's universe is universal," he maintains. Speaking as a character in one of his own plays, *Improvisation*, he says that "it is in my dreams, my anguish, my dark desires, my inner contradictions that I reserve the right to find the stuff of my plays. As I am not alone in the world... my dreams and desires, my anguish and my obsessions do not belong to myself alone; they are part of the heritage of my ancestors, a very ancient deposit to which all mankind may lay claim." And so he dwells on his dreams, recording them in detail in his memoirs, seeing them as "feeding me myself with vital sap." Furthermore, Claude Bonnefoy has noted that there is a very characteristic attempt in Ionesco's plays to get back to the great universal themes, the archetypes of myth. Ionesco agrees that the function of the theatre is to represent the archetypes, although he warns that the creation of an archetypal character or situation cannot be realized through a rationally conceived process. It comes, he believes, "from the uncontrollable and unconscious depths."

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47 Bonnefoy, p. 166.
Ionesco insists that it is essential to surmount our fear of chaos in order to reach the creative center. He believes that this can be done, that a man can get there, and that the experience can, in fact, be one of an almost other-worldly tranquility. He writes of having had this experience himself, in which everything had freed itself of arbitrary labels, and the result was, for him, "a sort of grace, a euphoria." And it is this experience of the Void, of forms without content, which Ionesco wants us to feel.

He intentionally shows Nothingness on the stage, forms emptied of content, language emptied of thought, thus allowing, even demanding, participation by the audience in the process of aesthetic creation as well as in the process of spiritual regeneration. As Martin Esslin remarks, "it is not the conceptual, formulated moral that Ionesco tries to communicate, it is his experience, what it feels like to be in the situations concerned. . . ." Such a theatre evokes an essentially visceral response in the audience. Such an experience can possibly be creative.

It is interesting to observe that Ionesco, not too surpris-ingly, finds himself in a nervous, agitated state of mind when he begins to write, a state in which his thoughts are loose and incoherent. "When I'm in this semi-chaotic state," he told Bonnefoy, "it's often . . . the moment when I have to write a play:

48 Present Past, Past Present, pp. 150-151.
49 Esslin, p. 161.
the chaos must take on shape. . . . It is from this that creation arises, as it did with the great macrocosm. . . ."50 Ionesco, in other words, is consciously surrendering himself to the chaos that the Smiths and the Martins surrendered to, although it is doubtful that their surrender was deliberate. The result, however, is much the same: creation, new shapes. The art of Ionesco is a fusion of two seemingly paradoxical elements, chaos and order.

Eugene Ionesco grapples with the chaos and the Nothingness which most of us seek to deny. But he uses it as a source of value, taking our cliches and the words which compose them, and hurling them into chaos until they explode into conceptual nothingness. "It cannot be said," he exclaims, "that what I propose to do is easy."51

In the second act of this play, Vladimir asks Estragon whether he has killed his own brother. "I don't know," Estragon answers. Vladimir asks Estragon, exasperated, "Did you kill him? Did you kill him?"

In and of his work, a distinct distinction between his work and those of the others in which indicates Beckett's underlying parallelism may be seen. "The more they know the more

50Bonnefoy, pp. 67-69.

51Present Past, Past Present, p. 168.
CHAPTER II
SAMUEL BECKETT

While strolling through Paris one evening in 1937, Samuel Beckett was stabbed by a street apache. Several months later, having recovered from the wound, Beckett visited the man in prison and asked him why he had stabbed him. "Je ne sais pas, monsieur," the thief replied.¹

"I don't know." One is constantly encountering this phrase in the course of studying the plays of Samuel Beckett. Bert Lahr, who played Estragon in the American premiere of Waiting for Godot, answered "Damned if I know" to a reviewer who asked him what the play was about.² "Haven't really the foggiest idea. . . ." said Peter Hall, the British director.³ In the second act of this play, Vladimir asks Estragon why he threw his own boots away. "I don't know," estragon replies. "Why?" Vladimir asks. Estragon exasperated, says: "I don't know why I don't know!"⁴

In an interview, Beckett made a significant distinction between his work and James Joyce's, a distinction which indicates Beckett's underlying attitude toward his art. "The more Joyce knew the more


he could," Beckett said. "[But] I'm working with impotence, ignorance. . . . There seems to be a kind of aesthetic axiom that expression is an achievement. . . . I think that anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er (somebody who cannot)." 5

The artistic result of such an attitude is to weave a web of impotence, a levelling down of everything—objects, words, people, and their ability to effect any change in, let alone understand, their situation. For Beckett, as a playwright, as one who works with words, this results in a paradoxical attitude toward his tools. "As a human being," Martin Esslin says of Beckett, "suffering from this compulsion [to use words] Beckett rejects language; as a poet . . . he loves it." 6 Unable to know, unable to do, all that Beckett's characters can do, therefore, is to try to pass the time while waiting. En Attendant Godot, in fact, can be literally translated as "While Waiting for Godot."

Who is Godot? Since he never comes, we can only speculate. In other words, we don't know. Nor does Beckett. "If I knew," he told Alan Schneider. "I would have said so in the play." 7

In 1957 Beckett described this work as "a matter of fundamental


6 Esslin, pp. 60-61.

sounds . . . made as fully as possible. . . . If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin. We could follow Lionel Abel's line and say that Godot is Pozzo and that Pozzo is James Joyce. But we could save the cost of a bottle of aspirin and, more importantly, gain a better understanding of Beckett's play if we follow the author's advice and look at it as "a matter of fundamental sounds."

The sounds are achieved as a duet between Estragon and Vladimir on the one hand, and Pozzo and Lucky on the other. Each character is half of a whole (Vladimir and Estragon, Pozzo and Lucky) and each pair is half of another whole. Critics have seen a resemblance in Beckett's characters to Charlie Chaplin, but I believe it would be more accurate to make the comparison with a comedy team such as Laurel and Hardy, fat and thin, the bow and the fiddle, complementary and inseparable. The confusion that Vladimir and Estragon have about their hats in the second act is similar to a scene in Laurel and Hardy's The Music Box. And just as it is impossible for us to imagine Laurel without Hardy, so would it be impossible to separate Vladimir from Estragon, or Pozzo from Lucky.


The complementary aspect is brought out in terms of personality. As Esslin observes: "Vladimir is the more practical of the two, and Estragon claims to have been a poet. . . . Estragon dreams, Vladimir cannot stand dreams. Vladimir has stinking breath, Estragon has stinking feet."\(^{10}\) But the most important aspect of the Vladimir-Estragon relationship, as well as the Vladimir-Estragon/Pozzo-Lucky relationship lies in its similarity to the relationship between a player and his audience.

"Expand! Expand!" Estragon pleads with Pozzo after the latter has made a remark about how wonderful his eyesight used to be.\(^{11}\) Since there is nothing to do, they must pass the time which, as we shall see, means to literally try to go past time and try to ignore it. And so they try to pass it by suffocating it with their little duets: let's contradict each other, let's ask each other questions, let's abuse each other, let's play Pozzo and Lucky. "Carry on," Estragon says after a long silence:

Vladimir: No no, after you.
Estragon: No no, you first.
Vladimir: I interrupted you.
Estragon: On the contrary.
Vladimir: Ceremonious ape!
Estragon: Punctilious pig!
Vladimir: Finish your phrase, I tell you!
Estragon: Finish your own!

Silence. They draw closer, halt.

\(^{10}\) Esslin, p. 27.

\(^{11}\) Waiting for Godot, p. 55b.
Vladimir: Moron!
Estragon: That's the idea, let's abuse each other.

And so the epitaphs fly: "Moron! Vermin! Abortion! Morpion! Sewer-rat! Curate! Cretin!" And when they've finally run out of insults, Vladimir exclaims: "How time flies when one has fun!"\(^{12}\)

After a similar exchange consisting of "let's contradict each other," and "let's ask each other questions,"\(^{13}\) Estragon remarks: "That wasn't such a bad little canter." Vladimir, however, points out they now have to find something else to do.\(^{14}\) It is their good fortune when Pozzo and Lucky arrive; it is the arrival of a new audience and, too, new players.

Pozzo is also an actor in need of an audience. He sprays his throat with a vaporizer and then launches into a long monologue which alternates between the poetic and the prosaic. He tells his audience to look at the sky. Vladimir and Estragon do so but Lucky dozes off and Pozzo, needing all the audience he can get, gives the rope around Lucky's neck a vicious jerk and says: "Will you look at the sky, pig!"\(^{15}\) At the end of his monologue Pozzo asks for his audience's reaction. "How did you find me? . . . Good? Fair? Middling? Poor? Positively bad?" Vladimir and Estragon

\(^{12}\)Waiting for Godot, pp. 48a-49a.

\(^{13}\)Waiting for Godot, pp. 41a-41b.

\(^{14}\)Waiting for Godot, p. 42a.

\(^{15}\)Waiting for Godot, p. 25a.
express their compliments and Pozzo replies: "Bless you gentlemen, bless you! I have such need of encouragement."\textsuperscript{16}

Everyone in Beckett's work has need of an audience, of encouragement and applause. This is the chief need, in fact, of Vladimir and Estragon; they may not need Godot, but they vitally need each other to serve as both actor and audience, ear and tongue. They seize every opportunity for conversation, goading each other, almost begging one another to keep up the talking. "You wanted to speak to me?" Estragon inquires hopefully of Vladimir. "You had something to say to me?"\textsuperscript{17} Since, as Estragon points out, they cannot keep silent, they need to talk to prevent them from thinking, to prevent them from hearing what Vladimir calls "all the dead voices":

\begin{verbatim}
Vladimir: What do they say?
Estragon: They talk about their lives.
Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.
Estragon: They have to talk about it.
\end{verbatim}

\textit{Long Silence.}

\begin{verbatim}
Vladimir: Say something!
Estragon: I'm trying.
Long Silence.
Vladimir: (in anguish). Say anything at all!\textsuperscript{18}
\end{verbatim}

For these characters, speech is not primarily used as a means of communicating conceptual thoughts and ideas. It is more analogous

\textsuperscript{16} Waiting for Godot, p. 25b.
\textsuperscript{17} Waiting for Godot, p. 12a.
\textsuperscript{18} Waiting for Godot, pp. 40b.-41a.
to what Eric Berne, in *Games People Play*, calls "stroking." 19
But it is a desperate kind of stroking, vital in that it reminds
and reassures both speaker and listener of their existence. Far
from showing any "breakdown in communication," *Godot* reveals the
necessity of keeping open the lines of communication, both with
one's self and with the complementary other. As William York
Tindall says, "The best way to pass the time without thinking ... is talking. No longer a way of communication--for that is
impossible--talking together, generally at cross-purposes, is
'occupation [and] recreation.' And talk will serve, even con-
tradiction or abuse." 20

Basically, what Pozzo, Vladimir and Estragon are saying in
this play are various declensions of the verb "to be." These
occur frequently throughout the play, sometimes in the form of a
question, more often as a definitely affirmative statement. "So
there you are again," Vladimir says at the start of the play.
"Am I?" Estragon asks. 21 In the second act, Vladimir goes through
the declension of the verb of existence: "There you are again.
... There we are again. ... There I am again." 22 Lucky's


21 *Waiting for Godot*, p. 7a.
master exclaims "I am Pozzo,"\textsuperscript{23} and Vladimir asserts that "We are men."\textsuperscript{24} That, in fact, is all he can say with any degree of certainty. It is impossible for him to say anything with any certitude beyond the words "I am" or "you are" and, over and over again: "We are waiting for Godot." For, as he remarks at the end of the play:

Am I sleeping now? To-morrow, when I wake, or think I do, what shall I say of today? That with Estragon, my friend, at this place, until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be? (Estragon . . . is dozing off again. Vladimir looks at him.) He'll know nothing. . . . At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (Pause.) I can't go on! (Pause.) What have I said?\textsuperscript{25}

Beckett is indeed working with impotence and ignorance. Vladimir's and Estragon's existence is definitely that of "a non-knower, a non-can-er." All they can do is talk. To live is not enough; they must keep talking. As soon as one "little canter" dissolves, they must quickly start another "to give us," as Estragon says, "the impression we exist."\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{23}Waiting for Godot, p. 15b.
\textsuperscript{24}Waiting for Godot, p. 53a.
\textsuperscript{25}Waiting for Godot, pp. 58a-58b.
\textsuperscript{26}Waiting for Godot, p. 44b.
The beginning of the scenario for Beckett's recent Film is "Esse est percipi," to be is to be perceived.\textsuperscript{27} This enunciates the motivation of the characters in Waiting for Godot, along with such extensions of this dictum as "to be is to be heard, to be is to hear, to be is to see." These characters all need to have their existence confirmed by an audience which watches and listens and then responds. "Tell him," Vladimir says to Godot's messenger, "tell him you saw me and that . . . (he hesitates) . . . that you saw me. (Pause . . . With sudden violence.) You're sure you saw me, you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me!"\textsuperscript{28}

Identity, then, comes from perception and from the verbalization of that perception. "C'est les mots; on n'a rien d'autre." Beckett says.\textsuperscript{29} Words are all we have to remind ourselves and each other of our existence. But to build an identity on words is to build on a very precarious foundation since language can so easily contradict both itself and the external situation of the speaker. Martin Esslin has observed that in Beckett's plays "dialogue . . . is often built on the principle that each line obliterates what was said in the previous line."\textsuperscript{30} When Pozzo


\textsuperscript{28}Waiting for Godot, p. 59a.

\textsuperscript{29}Esslin, p. 62.

\textsuperscript{30}Esslin, p. 61.
arrives, in the first act, several lines of dialogue are spent trying to establish his name; Vladimir and Estragon almost seem to be two actors who, having forgotten their lines, contradict each other with everything that is said:

Pozzo: I present myself: Pozzo.
Vladimir: (to Estragon). Not at all!
Estragon: He said Godot.

Pozzo: PPPOZZZO!

Vladimir: Is it Pozzo or Bozo?
Pozzo: You took me for Godot?
Vladimir: Oh no, Sir, not for an instant, Sir.
Pozzo: Who is he?
Vladimir: Oh he's a ... he's a kind of acquaintance.
Estragon: Nothing of the kind, we hardly know him.
Vladimir: True ... we don't know him very well ... but all the same ... Estragon: Personally, I wouldn't even know him if I saw him. 31

And speech does not always agree with action; even though Estragon announces that he is leaving, he still remains. 32

Pozzo is reminiscent of a writer trying to catch the right phrase, to create the words that might explain Lucky's relationship with him. "He wants to impress me, so that I'll keep him." Pozzo says. "Perhaps I haven't got it quite right. He wants to mollify me. ... No, that's not exactly it either. ... He wants to cod me, but he won't. ... He imagines that when I see how well he carries I'll be tempted to keep him. ... In reality he carries

31 Waiting for Godot, pp. 15a-16a.

32 Waiting for Godot, p. 20b.
like a pig."33 Numerous other examples occur to show the importance to these characters of finding the right words and yet, on the other hand, the weakness of words in positing any sort of definite statement. The two tramps are called Vladimir and Estragon in the stage directions, but they call each other Gogo and Didi. Godot's messenger addresses Vladimir as "Mister Albert" and Vladimir answers to it.34 And at the end of each act, one character suggests that they should go, the other agrees, but the stage directions indicate: "They do not move."35 Language is hence put into a contrapuntal relation both with itself and with action.

In a dialogue with Georges Duthuit, Beckett voiced his dislike for an art which assumes the power to order and interpret, an art which suggests that the artist can both perceive and present an ordered expression of a knowable reality. He speaks of "an art . . . weary of its puny exploits, weary of pretending to be able, of being able, of doing a little better the same old thing, of going a little further along a dreary road [and he prefers, instead, the] expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."36 Beckett

33 Waiting for Godot, p. 21a
34 Waiting for Godot, p. 32b.
35 Waiting for Godot. p. 35b, 60b.
is the first to admit, to insist, even, that artistic expression compels the artist to fail, for, as he puts it, "failure is his world." However, since he is an artist with "the obligation to express," Beckett uses the failure of having nothing to express as a creative act in itself and turns "this submission, this admission, this fidelity to failure, [into] a new occasion, a new term of relation. . . ."37

Beckett's art, then, is one of contraction, taking the scalpel to all reality--words, objects, people--and lopping everything off until absolute Nothing is reached, the point which is the beginning point of all reality. As he is often fond of saying: "Nothing is more real than nothing."38

In *The Shape of Chaos*, David Hesla points out that such a process is similar to Edmund Husserl's phenomenological reduction, "reduction," Hesla explains, "meaning not 'diminution' but 'leading back'--namely back to the Beginning."39 Husserl sought to accomplish this, Hesla notes, "by clearing philosophy of the accumulated rubbish of doctrines, traditions, prejudices, formulas, and anything else that would prevent the serious thinker from encountering reality."40 Beckett's intention is of a similar

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37Beckett and Duthuit, p. 21.
38Esslin, p. 51.
40Hesla, p. 170.
kind, to reduce everything back to point zero and, from that point, allowing something to take its course. And, as objects and characters are annihilated, so are the words which nominate them.

In his second play, *Endgame*, Beckett pushes reduction as far as he possibly can without presenting an empty stage. Apparently some great catastrophe, unnamed and unexplained, has left the world depleted of everyone save Hamm, who cannot see or stand, Clov, who cannot sit, and Hamm's parents, Nagg and Nell who, legless, are kept in ash-cans. In *Endgame*, Beckett makes all things equal. Everything is gone, and Hamm's small store of supplies is nearly exhausted: no more people, no more rugs, no more pain-killers, no more food. Thought processes, hopes, ideas and ideals are also brought to a neuter point. "I'd like to pee," Hamm tells Clov.41 The conversation then turns to something else until, some time later, Clov asks Hamm: "What about that pee?" Hamm replies: "I'm having it."42 Later still, Hamm asks Clov what he is doing. "Having an idea," Clov replies.43 Clov refers to a flea, and Hamm refers to God as "the bastard."44 And when Clov remarks

42 *Endgame*, p. 34.
43 *Endgame*, p. 47.
44 *Endgame*, pp. 34, 55.
on how many "terrible things" there are in the world, Hamm quickly
points out: "No, no, there are not so many now."^^45

Furthermore, as people and things decompose and run out,
there is a parallel loss of vocabulary. Ruby Cohn points out that
"there is an astonishing stinginess in the number of words Beckett
allows himself in Endgame. Again and again we find the same words
repeated... In spite of his extraordinary vocabulary and impress-
ive command of several languages, Beckett deliberately limits the
words of Endgame..."^^46 And even the words that remain are,
themselves, exhausted. "I use the words you taught me," Clov
exclaims. "If they don't mean anything anymore, teach me others.
Or let me be silent."^^47 But even those remaining do not mean
anything anymore because, as Clov realizes: "They have nothing
to say."^^48

And yet the compulsion to keep going, to speak, to create,
is itself not yet dead in either Hamm or Clov. In his novel
The Unnamable, Beckett's narrator concludes his monologue with:

I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must
say words, as long as there are any, until they
find me, until they say me, strange pain, strange
sin, you must go on, perhaps it's done already,
perhaps they have said me already, perhaps they

^^45Endgame, p. 44.
^^46Ruby Cohn, "Endgame," in Twentieth Century Interpretations
of Endgame, p. 46.
^^47Endgame, p. 44.
^^48Endgame, p. 81.
have carried me to the threshold of my story, before the door that opens on my story, that would surprise me, if it opens, it will be I, it will be the silence, where I am, I don't know, I'll never know, in the silence you don't know, you must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on.49

In *Endgame* we can watch as Hamm attempts to go on, to say words, since to say is to be. If talk stops, being stops and, although he would love to drop dead, Hamm must continue to be, for at least a little while longer.

Hamm has his story, the main occupation of his hours. But he needs an audience and, since Clov doesn't want to listen to the story, Hamm bribes his father with a bon-bon.50 And so he relates how a man once came crawling to him, asking him for shelter for his child.51 Later, he tells Clov that he's gotten on with his story. When Clov makes no response, Hamm irritably prompts him: "Ask me where I've got to." Clov plays his part well for a few lines, but again Hamm has to prod him: "Keep going, can't you, keep going!"52

Even while he and the world around him are undergoing physical decomposition, Hamm continues with his story. "Ironically, composition takes place during decomposition," Ruby Cohn writes.


50*Endgame*, p. 49.

51*Endgame*, p. 52.

"Just as dying had a sexual connotation for the Elizabethans, so it seems to have a creative one for Beckett--artistically creative."⁵³ In the face of the decay of all the bastions of civilization--"family cohesion, filial devotion, parental and connubial love, faith in God, empirical knowledge, and artistic creation" as Ruby Cohn enumerates them⁵⁴--the "play" of art is increased in direct proportion to the decay all around. "Me to play," Hamm says at the start of the play.⁵⁵ At the end, with Clov ready to walk out, and with Nagg and Nell both dead and silent, Hamm repeats this line and goes on with his story even as he "discards" his gaff, his toy dog, and his whistle. Furthermore, he is consciously aware that he is in the act of creation. "Nicely put that," he tells himself after a particularly well-turned phrase. But finally he concludes, "reckoning closed and story ended. . . . Well, there we are, there I am, that's enough. . . . Since that's the way we're playing it . . . let's play it that way . . . and speak no more about it . . . speak no more."⁵⁶

Hamm can finally stop because he has been absolved of the burden of "going on." While he and Clov, Nagg and Nell, have been "taking their course" in the room everything outside has been dead

⁵³Cohn, p. 52.
⁵⁴Cohn, p. 42.
⁵⁵Endgame, p. 2.
⁵⁶Endgame, pp. 82–84.
or, as Clav describes it, looking out the window: "Zero. Zero
... and zero" in every direction.57 But near the end of the
play Clav looks again and sees what he believes is a small boy,
a "potential procreator." And Hamm realizes that: "It's the
end, Clav, we've come to the end."58 Things have come to the
end and now a new beginning may be underway.

Martin Esslin has noted an important difference between the
English and the original French versions of this particular
passage. In the French, Hamm wants to know what the child is
looking at. "His navel," Clav replies. "Or thereabouts."59
Esslin believes that this episode suggests the possibility of re-
birth, that the child is "like Christ the moment after the
resurrection [who now] has been newly born into a new life, leaning,
a babe, against the lifted stone... Also, the little boy
contemplates his navel; that is, he fixes his attention on the
great emptiness of nirvana, nothingness..."60 And, recalling
Beckett's penchant for Democritus' phrase, this is the center of
reality.

Such a passage, of course, employs one of the most prevalent
of all the archetypes, the child-god. Jung points out that this

57Endgame, p. 29.
58Endgame, p. 79.
59Esslin, p. 50.
60Esslin, pp. 50-51.
archetype is "extremely widespread and intimately bound up with all
the other mythological aspects of the child motifs." He observes
that in some cultures this motif was representative of the
"personifications of the hidden forces of nature." 61 Eva Metman
has offered the analogy of the child-god in the Hindu myth of
Markandaya. In this myth, according to Metman, the child tells
Markandaya: "I am the procreator... I am the primal being
out of whom everything is born..." 62 But Clov curses the child
and Hamm has to stop him from going after it with a bludgeon.
For, as Jung points out, some cultures considered such an appa-
rition to be an evil omen, a sign of disaster. 63 In any event, the
symbol is left ambiguous in Endgame. If the child does indicate
new life, perhaps this simply means that, as Ruby Cohn suggests,
"the whole absurd, heartbreaking cycle begins again," 64 and that
the play is, essentially, "a bitterly ironic version of creation
and resurrection." 65 We do not see any further indication of
restoration, nor does Clov leave Hamm at the end, even though he
is dressed for travel. "This hesitation in Endgame," Eva Metman

61 Carl G. Jung, "The Collective Unconscious, Myth, and the
Archetype," in Literature in Critical Perspectives, ed. Walter K.

62 Eva Metman, "Reflections on Samuel Beckett's Plays," in

63 Jung, p. 513.

64 Cohn, p. 52.

65 Cohn, p. 41.
writes, "to move on to a further cycle after the hint of a new life would amount to taking sides—and that Beckett refuses to do."\textsuperscript{66} The hint is dropped but the promise (or threat) is not seen fulfilled.

The emphasis on talking, on "going on," is impelled by the actions of time, the great destroyer. As soon as anything—a person or a word—is brought into being, it is entrapped by time and subject to its inevitable process of annihilation. Therefore, even though every word is, as Beckett says, "like an unnecessary stain on absence and silence,"\textsuperscript{67} it is essential that the words continue to flow. As each one is destroyed by time, another one must replace it, which, in its turn, is destroyed, and on and on.

Vladimir's little song in Godot expresses this cycle:

\begin{verbatim}
A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with the ladle
And beat him till he was dead.
Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb.
And wrote upon the tombstone
For the eyes of dogs to come:
A dog came in the kitchen
And stole a crust of bread.
Then cook up with the ladle
And beat him till he was dead.
Then all the dogs came running
And dug the dog a tomb. . . . \textsuperscript{68}
\end{verbatim}

\textsuperscript{66}Netman, p. 136.

\textsuperscript{67}Anon. "From Ashcans, a Nobel Prize," \textit{Life}, 67 (7 November, 1968), p. 93.

\textsuperscript{68}Waiting for Godot, pp. 37a-37b.
Time carries us, in Joseph Campbell's expression, "from the tomb of the womb to the tomb of the tomb." The blind Pozzo furiously tells Vladimir: "Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! ... They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams a second, then it's night once more." And Clov defines "yesterday" as "that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day." Speech, therefore, is a constant process of giving birth to words which, although they affirm one's existence, are doomed from the moment of utterance. "The desire to live is tantamount to the desire to say," Tom Bishop observed in Saturday Review. Each word is condemned from birth, hence the longing to be "finished," yet at the same time the necessity to speak. To cease speaking is to cease being, thus life, Bishop writes, "is manifested not by a heartbeat but by the word."

The effect of time on language is well-illustrated in Krapp's Last Tape. Krapp, a constipated and obscure writer of little or no fame, has been in the habit of tape-recording his diary for the past thirty years. In the play, we see him at the age of sixty-nine as he listens to himself, to his voice, recorded thirty years ago. Hearing himself use the word "viduity" on the tape, Krapp...


70 Waiting for Godot, p. 57b.

71 Endgame, pp. 43-44.

existence, they are subject to time and, as Esslin observes: "It is time itself that drains language of meaning." The reality of the present mocks and distorts that of the past.

In his radio play, All That Fall, Beckett shows language blending in and being absorbed by other sounds, all basically non-expressive. As fat old Mrs. Rooney makes her way to the train station to meet her blind husband Dan, she points out to one of the people she meets that, although she uses only simple language, she finds her way of speaking very odd. This simple language of hers is merged in with other sounds on the road: a whip, a bicycle bell, the squeak of breaks, a truck with a "thunderous rattle." She calls out to other people journeying along the same road, but is met by silence or indifference. "I estrange them all," she exclaims. "They come towards me ... full of kindness, anxious to help. ... A few simple words ... from my heart ... and I am all alone ... once more." And so, like all of Beckett's characters, she longs for extinction, wishes that she could just lie in bed and slowly waste away. Her world, according to Esslin, is devoid of meaning, and in such a world

78 Esslin, p. 64.
79 Samuel Beckett, All That Fall, in Krapp's Last Tape, p. 39.
80 All That Fall, pp. 53-54.
81 All That Fall, p. 51.
language, too, is simply equated with the "meaningless buzzing" of all the other sounds along the road.\textsuperscript{82} Interestingly enough, in \textit{All That Fall}, the characters and landscape are specific, unlike the no-man's land of \textit{Godot} or \textit{Endgame}. In the radio play, as Grossvogel expresses it, "the misery of existence has a Celtic note to it."\textsuperscript{83} It could be anywhere; it is--somewhere.

The identification of words with non-meaningful sound is carried on in \textit{Embers}, another radio play. Old Henry muses internally; we hear his voice and that of his wife, Ada, who, it seems, is dead. But we also hear, outside of his head, the continuous sound of the sea. The equalization of the human voice with the sound of the sea is made when Henry hears Ada's voice tell him that the sea, though alive on the surface, and forever swelling and falling, is really a tomb. "It's only on the surface you know," her voice tells him. "Underneath all is quiet as the grave."\textsuperscript{84} Underneath all sound there is the grave-like silence of nothingness and so, even though Ada suggests that he should see a doctor about his constant talking, Henry implores her to "Keep on, keep on [talking]! Keep it going Ada, every syllable is a second gained." But she replies: "That's all, I'm afraid."\textsuperscript{85}

\textsuperscript{82}Esslin, p. 61

\textsuperscript{83}Grossvogel, p. 122.


\textsuperscript{85}\textit{Embers}, p. 1
In Beckett's drama communication is, above all, a matter of keeping open the lines of communication with the self. Buried up to her neck, Winnie, in *Happy Days*, her mirror smashed, still struggles to be aware of herself:

And now? (Long pause.) The face. (Pause.) The nose. (She squints down.) I can see it. . . . (squinting down). . . the tip . . . the nostrils . . . (pouts) . . . a hint of lip . . . (pouts again). . . . if I pout them out . . . (sticks out tongue) . . . the tongue of course. . . .

She has a shopping bag full of sundry items but her lipstick, her toothpaste, her medicine, all are running out. Even her husband, Willie, whom we only glimpse sprawled behind the mound of dirt, is also "running out." She must constantly reassure herself that he is there so that she knows that her words are being heard, so that she has a reason to go on, to go on talking.

Winnie's constant remark is "Oh, happy days!" Martin Esslin believes that, in her refusal to be dismayed, her days are happy. But it is her very capacity for adaptability which is the most terrible aspect of *Happy Days*. In her compromise with, and her resignation to, the humiliating and painful processes of life and time, her optimism is not "courage nor a virtue," according to Michael Robinson. It is, instead, "her way of joining the

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87 *Happy Days*, p. 9.

88 Esslin, p. 60.
situation and reducing its imponderables to a palatable dimension
... [in what Beckett calls] 'the haze of our smug will to
live.' "89 To Samuel Beckett, it would seem that "happiness" is
not deserving of any congratulation.

Beckett takes his scalpel to all of life's paraphernalia, its
people, objects, and words, in an attempt to return to the point
of beginning, to reach zero. But it is ambiguous whether this
reduction is a desirable end in itself, or a way of getting a
second chance. In other words, if life does start over again
after having been first stripped down to the barest essentials,
Beckett does not allow us to see this as a cause for rejoicing.
Nor is he openly pessimistic about the possibility. He is a "non-
knower," and so cannot say for sure. Speaking of Beckett's
characters, and perhaps of Beckett himself, Ethel P. Cornwell
remarks: "His life is one long ambivalence between the desire
for and fear of its termination, one long attempt to ... speed
his return to the state of pre-conscious nonbeing from which he
came."90 Subject to the processes of time, creating words, ideas,
friendships and alliances that are destroyed by time, the Beckett
hero crawls with his face in the mud and can make only one certain
statement: "Je ne sais pas."

89Michael Robinson, The Long Sonata of the Dead (New York:

90Ethel P. Cornwell, "Samuel Beckett: The Flight from Self,"
CHAPTER III

HAROLD PINTER

Harold Pinter once received a letter from a woman who expressed some confusion about one of his plays. "Dear Sir," she wrote, "I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your play The Birthday Party. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are the two men? 2. Where did Stanley come from? 3. Were they all supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to my questions I cannot fully understand your play." According to Martin Esslin, Pinter replied: "Dear Madam, I would be obliged if you would kindly explain to me the meaning of your letter. These are the points which I do not understand: 1. Who are you? 2. Where do you come from? 3. Are you supposed to be normal? You will appreciate that without the answers to your questions I cannot fully understand your letter."¹

Pinter’s disinclination to comment on his work, as John Russell Taylor has pointed out, is not simply a personal whim; it is a part of his craft as a playwright.² Although Pinter realizes that the desire for verification is understandable, he insists that it cannot always be fulfilled. He suggests that: "The assumption that to verify what has happened or what is happening


presents few problems I take to be inaccurate. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behaviour, or his aspirations... is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. By refusing to cut off the possibilities of his plays by "explaining" them, Pinter, according to James R. Hollis, allows each member of the audience to identify the mysterious elements in the plays according to that individual's own personal fears, his own private sense of mystery and menace.

Pinter's technique is one of paradox. By focusing on the trivialities of everyday life, he draws our attention to the metaphysical issues inherent in those trivialities. By concentrating his characters in a room, he makes us aware of what may be outside of it. By presenting characters who attempt to defend themselves, he allows us to see how they concurrently attack another. And, finally, by having them talk incessantly he draws our ears to the speech which we do not hear, the speech that lies beneath the platitudes and which is intensified in the long "Pinter-esque" pauses.

Pinter's characters are not the forlorn tramps or trash-can dwellers of Beckett, nor are they like Ionesco's air-borne pedestrians or three-nosed women. They are recognizable people:

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3Esslin, pp. 33-34.

housewives, college professors, truck drivers, all performing the
routines of everyday life. In his first play, The Room, the stage
directions focus on Rose as she performs some very ordinary
activities:

She places bacon and eggs on a plate, turns off
the gas and takes the plate to the table. . . .
She returns to the stove and pours water from
the kettle into the teapot, turns off the
gas . . . cuts two slices of bread . . . .

The significance of such stage directions, Walter Kerr believes,
is in creating an implied juxaposition. "At the same time the
tangible is insisted upon," he says, "literally thrust into our
faces, the surrounding void is implied. The void is outside the
room, upstairs, downstairs, everywhere beyond the walls. The
real is real. The void envelops it." Pinter makes us feel the
presence of the void by drawing our attention to the everyday, yet
temporal, objects and actions which we use within that void.

Furthermore, many critics have noted the commonplace, even
mundane quality of Pinter's dialogue. In its long pauses, its
use of colloquial British slang, its emphasis on cliches and
platitudes, Pinter's language is very accurate, very close to
"real life." Gus' account of a murder he committed is characterized
by a search for the not justo within his limited vocabulary:

5Harold Pinter, The Room, in The Birthday Party and The Room

6Walter Kerr, Harold Pinter (New York: Columbia University
I was just thinking about that girl, that's all.

She wasn't much to look at, I know, but still. It was a mess, though, wasn't it. What a mess. Honest, I can't remember a mess like that one. They don't seem to hold together like men, women. A looser texture, like. Didn't she spread, eh? She didn't half spread, Kaw!

But such language is indicative of more than simply a paucity of vocabulary. There is a poverty of spirit, of inner life within these characters, a poverty which they try to fill with teacups and cornflakes and, most especially, with language. And along with the emptiness within, there is a terrifying emptiness without, outside of the room, outside of their routines and rituals. These are empty people, cut off from their sources of strength and meaning, oblivious to the elements of the creative past that lie within them. "I never had a dream in my life," Davies asserts in The Caretaker. Ben and Gus, in their inability to fulfill the orders of the unseen operator of the dumb waiter, are likewise representative of men played out, their capacities exhausted. This chapter, therefore, will examine how Pinter's characters employ language to protect themselves from the outer void, to hide and disguise their own inner emptiness, and to stop silence from speaking. This chapter will also show how Pinter himself uses language to kill language and how, by so doing, a new awareness may take place.


8 Harold Pinter, The Caretaker, in The Caretaker and The Dumb Waiter, p. 23.
Pinter has called the conversation of his characters "continual evasion, desperate, rear-guard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves." Consequently, we often find his characters hiding in a silence which is actually disguised as a flood of verbiage, as in his radio play, *A Slight Ache*.

This play centers around three characters: Edward and Flora, a middle-aged, upper-class couple who live on a small country estate, and an old matchseller who has been standing in the lane behind their house for the last two months and who does not speak a word throughout the entire play. We never find out who the old man is, why he stands in a remote country lane, or why Edward is apparently so terrified of him. By the end of the play, however, Flora invites the matchseller into the house, prepares lunch for him, drops some not-so-subtle sexual hints, then hands his tray of matches to Edward as she leads the matchseller into the garden.

Because of his fear of the man, Edward employs a plethora of speech in order to protect himself:

> Now and again I jot down a few observations on certain tropical phenomena—not from the same standpoint, of course. [Silent Pause.] Yes. Africa, now. Africa's always been my happy hunting ground. Fascinating country. Do you know it? I get the impression that you've . . . been around a bit. Do you by any chance know the Membunza Mountains? Great range south of Katambaloo. French Equatorial Africa, if

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9Catherine Hughes, "Pinter is as Pinter Does," *The Catholic World*, 220 (December, 1969), 125.
my memory serves me right... I understand in the Gobi Desert you can come across some very strange sights. Never been there myself. Studied the maps, though. Fascinating things, maps.\textsuperscript{10}

Just as he prefers the abstraction of maps to the territory of Africa, so, too, does Edward prefer talking around whatever is at the root of his fear of the matchseller. It is only when he finally collapses on the floor in front of the silent old man that Edward whispers what he really wants to know: "Who are you?\textsuperscript{11}

Both men, in effect, are silent, but Edward's silence is that of incessant chit-chat in an attempt to, as Pinter says, "keep away from the danger of knowing and of being known.\textsuperscript{12} But, although Edward tries to conceal himself from the matchseller, through language, he reveals himself, at least to the audience. As Pinter has commented, we do reveal ourselves, not so much through what we say as in what is left unsaid.\textsuperscript{13} Just as the focusing on bacon, eggs, toast and tea in The Room implies the surrounding emptiness, so too does the emphasis on a torrent of words--Membunza Mountains, Katambaloo, French Equatorial Africa, the Gobi Desert--suggest the inner emptiness of Edward. Words here are a defense mechanism rather than a vehicle for conceptual thought.


\textsuperscript{11}A Slight Ache, p. 39.

\textsuperscript{12}Hollis, p. 13.

\textsuperscript{13}Esslin, p. 42.
Like Edward, Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter* nervously pass the
time by talking about the current football scores while they await
their "instructions" to murder someone. Likewise, Davies in
*The Caretaker* will go to any length to keep talking, lest someone
should penetrate his verbal walls and find whatever is behind them:

Davies. I got a knife, sure I got a knife, but
how do you expect me to cut a good loaf of bread
with that? That's not a bread knife. . . .
No, what I want--
Mick. I know what you want. Pause. Davies rises
and goes to the gas stove
Davies. What about this gas stove? He tells me
it's not connected. How do I know it's not
connected?14

Davies is surly, rude, stubborn, sullen, but also basically afraid,
of what, we can only surmise. Although he is glad that he has
been befriended and given shelter by Aston, he finds it necessary
to keep the conversation away from himself. Whenever Aston asks
one of his rare and basically innocuous questions, Davies is quick
to retreat into the verbal shelter of his non-sequiturs:

Davies. Shoes? It's life and death to me. I had
to go all the way to Luton in these.
Aston. What happened when you got there then?
Pause.
Davies. I used to know a bootmaker in Acton. He
was a good mate to me.

14 *The Caretaker*, p. 59.

In its attempts to conceal, to keep himself from being known, Davies' language reveals the fear and insecurity of an old man, homeless, insulted, pushed around, anxious and afraid. Juxtaposed against the silence of the lobotomized Aston, his halting, stumbling, but persistent speech is highly effective in highlighting his basic sense of insecurity. "One way of looking at speech," Pinter suggests, "is to say it's a constant stratagem to cover nakedness." 16

One of the images that Pinter employs in many of his earlier plays is that of the room, the small area of light and warmth in the vastness of the universe. 17 His characters regard their rooms as a haven protecting them from the unknown forces outside. "It's very cold out, I can tell you," Rose says in The Room. "Still, the room keeps warm. . . . This is a good room. You've got a chance in a place like this." 18 But words are used for both offense and defense, as parts of furniture that one can either pile up against the door or use to batter any intruder. "What you've got to do is you've got to learn how to defend yourself, and you've got to learn how to attack," Max tells his boxer son Joey in The Homecoming. 19 Mick, in The Caretaker, is adept at both tactics. None too happy with Davies' presence in his apartment, Mick employs a

16 Esslin, p. 40.
17 Esslin, p. 232.
18 The Room, pp. 95-99.
labyrinth of esoteric jargon to put Davies in his place, to make sure he realizes that he is an outsider. As Mick describes his plans to renovate the flat, Davies is intimidated by the flow of such words as "parchment linoleum squares ... colours re-echoed in the walls ... afromosia teak veneer ... white-topped-heat-resistant coffee table, white tile surround."20 Mick intimidates Davies and, consequently, protects his own situation when he first threatens to have the bum arrested on charges of "trespassing, loitering with intent, daylight robbery, filching, thieving, and stinking the place out." He then offers to rent the apartment and verbalizes a fantastic bill-of-sale composed of "down payments, back payments, family allowances, bonus schemes ... benefit extension, compensation on cessation ..." and concludes by asking the woe-begone old hobo: "Who do you bank with?" Davies "retreats to his corner" in silence.21 In a room full of broken furniture and appliances, Davies is simply one more bit of junk, and Mick literally puts him in his place, in a corner of the room, next to the disconnected stove.

Edward, in *A Slight Ache*, likewise employs esoteric names both to protect himself and to verbally attack the matchseller. "Now look," he says, "what will you have to drink? A glass of ale? Curacao Fockink Orange? Ginger beer? Tia Maria? A Wachenheimer Fuchsmantel Reisling Beeren Auslese? Gin and it? Chateauneuf-

20 *The Caretaker*, p. 60.

21 *The Caretaker*, p. 36.
du-Pape? A little Asti Spumante? Or what do you say to a straightforward Piesporter Goldtropfschen Feine Auslese (Reich-Piesporter von Kesselstaff)? Any preference? 22 The use of such jargon is similar, in Martin Esslin's view, to the protection of the room. 23 It is also, however, a means of attacking the intruder; the rasping out of the hard German syllables in the passage above would indicate a by no means friendly attitude on the part of the speaker. For Edward, as for Mick, the best defense is a good offense.

The offensive-defensive verbalization is well illustrated in The Birthday Party. Through a cross-fire of meaningless questions, Goldberg and McCann reduce Stanley to a non-verbal state:

Goldberg. You verminate the sheet of your birth.
McCann. What about the Albigensenest heresy.
Goldberg. Who watered the wicked in Melbourne?
McCann. What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett?
Goldberg. Speak up Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?
Stanley. He wanted to--he wanted to--he wanted to.
McCann. He doesn't know!

Goldberg. Which came first?
McCann. Chicken? Egg? Which came first?
Goldberg and McCann. Which came first? Which came first?
Stanley screams. 24

By the end of the play, Stanley is only able to utter: "Uh-gug

... uh-gug ... eeehhh-gug. ...

Goldberg and McCann have

22A Slight Ache, p. 25.
23Esslin, p. 225.
25The Birthday Party, p. 89.
thus brought him to their own level, which is also essentially nonverbal. Stanley's inner life has been destroyed just as Goldberg, too, is lacking in an expression beyond the most trivial platitudes. Goldberg explains to McCann that his success in life has been due to the fact that he has never lost a tooth, has always been "fit as a fiddle," and never went too near the water. He concludes his platitudinous credo by saying:

Because I believe that the world . . .
(Vacant.) . . .
Because I believe that the world . . .
(Desperate.) . . .
BECAUSE I BELIEVE THAT THE WORLD . . .
(Lost.) . . .

Stanley and his speech are brought to the same level of Goldberg and his. It is a reduction to nothing through a fullness of speech which, although it runs on and on, finally runs out; it is brought back to the zero point from which a new beginning, possibly, can be generated. Thus, the failure of language may foretell success, for now, as Goldberg and McCann tell Stanley, a change can be made:

McCann (at the table). He looks better, doesn't he?
Goldberg. Much better.
McCann. A new man.

Having broken his glasses, they promise to buy Stanley a new and better pair:

Goldberg. It's true. You've been cockeyed for years.
McCann. Now you're even more cockeyed.
Goldberg. He's right. You've gone from bad to worse.

26 The Birthday Party, p. 80.
McCann. Worse than worse.

Goldberg. But we can save you.
McCann. From a worse fate.

Goldberg. We'll make a man of you.
McCann. And a woman.
Goldberg. You'll be re-oriented.
McCann. You'll be rich.
Goldberg. You'll be adjusted.
McCann. You'll be our pride and joy.
Goldberg. You'll be a mensch.
McCann. You'll be a success.
Goldberg. You'll be integrated.
McCann. You'll give orders.
Goldberg. You'll make decisions.

And so they take him away to the mysterious Monty, "the best there is" for "special treatment."27

The Birthday Party, then, concludes with the total collapse of Stanley's personality and, as James Hollis says, "his reversion to primitivism," foreshadowed in the first act by his wild and savage beating on a toy drum.28 He is thus pushed to a nonverbal state prior to language, from which, it seems, there is a possibility of renewal. Although it would be overly sanguine to suggest that The Birthday Party is an optimistic play, it does indicate a chance of renewal, but only after a complete destruction has first taken place. If, as Hollis believes, Pinter makes language reveal most when it seems to fail,29 he also makes it succeed most when it finally does collapse.

27The Birthday Party, pp. 86-89.
28Hollis, p. 39.
29Hollis, p. 93.
Certainly the banality of the conversations in Pinter's work indicates a poverty of the spirit, a lack of inner life. Meg's conversation with Petey about his cornflakes would indicate a lack of anything significant to say. "Are they nice?" she asks. "Very nice," Petey replies. "I thought they'd be nice," Meg concludes.\textsuperscript{30}

Furthermore, we have already seen how, when his platitudes run out, Goldberg is reduced to a desperate silence. But despite the "Pinter-esque" pause and the long silences, the characters do persist in attempting to enunciate some kind of inner belief, as if this belief might spontaneously verbalize itself if one simply keeps talking long enough. These characters are simply doing the best they can with the scanty materials available to them. Unable to articulate any belief, Goldberg, falls back, exhausted, and must have the breath of life blown back into him; but he receives this, not from God, but from McCann.\textsuperscript{31} In the absence of the breath of God, the breath of McCann is used to substitute. In the absence of any expression of a true inner faith or ordering of the world, cliches and homilies are used instead.

These characters, then, are incomplete; they are, in fact, stuttering from the loss of the soul that Jung says attends the loss of the archetypes.\textsuperscript{32} In \textit{The Homecoming}, however, Pinter leaves

\textsuperscript{30}The Birthday Party, p. 11.

\textsuperscript{31}The Birthday Party, p. 82.

the image of the enclosed room and moves on to the image of an incomplete circle, composed of members who are trying to complete it and themselves by restoring the creative heritage of myth.

The plot of this play is simple enough. Teddy, a Doctor of Philosophy in an American university, is in England to visit his family. He is accompanied by his wife, Ruth. He introduces her to his family: his brother Lenny, a small-time pimp, his brother Joey, a small-time boxer, their father Max, a retired butcher, and Max's brother, Sam, a chauffeur. At the conclusion of the play, Teddy leaves to return to America and Ruth stays to become one of Lenny's prostitutes.

The kernel of this play is contained in a speech which Lenny makes to Teddy in the second act:

No, listen, Ted, there's no question that we live a less rich life here than you do over there. We live a closer life. We're busy, of course. . . . But nevertheless we do make up a unit and you're an integral part of it. When we all sit around the backyard having a quiet gander at the night sky, there's always an empty chair standing in the circle, which is in fact yours. And so when you at length return to us, we do expect a bit of grace, a bit of je ne sais quoi, a bit of generosity of mind, a bit of liberality of spirit, to reassure us. We do expect that. But do we get it? Have we got it? Is that what you've given us? 33

Although Teddy replies in the affirmative, he has not come back and completed the circle. He has returned as a Doctor of Philosophy of the most narrow, academic kind. The vacancy in the circle

33 The Homecoming, p. 65.
cannot be filled by an academic pedant; the vacancy in the lives of the members of this family was caused by the death of the mother, Jessica. And Teddy, who is detached, who prides himself on observing, on not getting "lost in" the way people "move about," cannot fill that vacancy. But his wife can.

"Go find yourself a mother," Max tells Joey when the young boxer asks if dinner is ready. Ruth, a former model "for the body," is really the one who comes home, who completes the circle in her double role of both mother and whore. Martin Esslin observes numerous points of similarity in the play which identify Ruth with Jessica. "Ruth," James Hollis says, "substitutes her intense physical presence, her concrete reality and reduces all philosophy to idle and irrelevant speculation." Teddy's work is narrow and non-productive; Ruth's, however, has been of the body, more exactly, the female body. She is, in Hollis' words, "all things to all people. She is the point of origin and return. . . . Her circumference is nowhere and her center is everywhere. . . . Ruth is . . . the world navel and vortex of all beginnings."
It is significant to observe that before the arrival of Ruth, the language of this male household was, as Hollis says, "a series of grunts, and grimaces, promises and threats to wheedle or terrify. . . ."\(^{41}\) "Plug it, will you, you stupid sod," Lenny says to Max. "I'm trying to read the paper." The ex-butcher replies: "Listen! I'll chop your spine off, you talk to me like that! You understand? Talking to your lousy filthy father like that!"\(^{42}\) At the end of the play, however, the men are gathered around Ruth, almost in worship, as Max crawls across the floor and grovels for a kiss. "I'm not an old man," he insists.\(^{43}\) The others, however, are silent and Hollis believes that this "is the silence of kenosis wherein each of the characters has emptied himself in order to become fuller. . . . Each of the men participates in the archetype of original unity, the return to the source, the homecoming.\(^{44}\)

The play is over; the boys have found both mother and whore, comforter and sexual companion, the source of fertility and creativity. Max has lost his value as a surrogate mother, and Teddy leaves to return to America which Ruth has described as "all rock. And sand."\(^{45}\)

\(^{41}\) Hollis, p. 108.
\(^{42}\) The Homecoming, p. 9.
\(^{43}\) The Homecoming, p. 82.
\(^{44}\) Hollis, p. 110.
\(^{45}\) The Homecoming, p. 53.
"I certainly don't strive for universality," Pinter once said. "I've got enough to strive for just writing a bloody play."  

Nevertheless, there is a width to his pauses and silences, a width that encompasses human archetypes. Pinter brings the trivia of everyday life—characters, actions, and speech—down to the base level of non-meaning. He accomplishes this by taking the familiarities of daily existence and, by providing no apparent motivation or explanation, frees them from the burden of meaning, thus permitting us to inform them according to our own version of the communal dream. Pinter destroys conceptual language as completely as possible in order to renew our awareness of the language of myth, the language which is contained within our verbal commonplaces but which can only be heard when those commonplaces have been destroyed.

CONCLUSION

In the twenty years since the curtain went up on The Bald Soprano at Paris' little Noctambule Theatre, scores of volumes have been written in response to the Theatre of the Absurd. The theatre-going public, as a result, has become more knowledgeable toward what was, at first, a rather confusing phenomenon. Even more encouraging, perhaps, is the way in which more recent artists have employed the techniques of the Absurdist and assimilated these techniques into their own work. No one can read such plays as, say, Tom Stoppard's Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead, or David Rabe's Sticks and Bones, without being aware of the influence of such men as Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter. Stoppard and Rabe are, of course, significant and independent artists in their own right and it would be fallacious to accuse them of slavish imitation. But just as the Expressionistic drama of Bertolt Brecht can be seen as a precursor to the Absurd, so can Absurdist drama be seen as a significant theatrical style, both by virtue of its own merits as well as an opening up to further possibilities in modern drama.

Although Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter are highly individual writers, each with his own personal outlook and writing style, they are united inasmuch as they are responding to a common phenomenon of twentieth century life: the loss of the creative heritage of myth and the attendant loss of sensitivity to the language of myth. Each writer attempts to remove the fungus growth of social
"communication" and fossilized "meaning" from words in order to restore to language the possibilities of creativeness. As we have seen, Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter attempt to bring language to the zero point of conceptual meaning, from which point, possibly, new forms and new awarenesses may grow. Such growth, however, is only hinted at. Nothing is promised but the possibility of hope.

This refusal to offer a platitudinous "solution" is one of the major attributes of the Theatre of the Absurd. By facing the reality of chaos and, furthermore, by attempting to utilize this chaos as a source of artistic creation, Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter resist the temptation to "explain." In fact, instead of attempting to explain the feeling of absurdity and the experience of chaos, they try to show it on the stage and to communicate that experience to their audience.

Eugene Ionesco attempts the communication of chaos by giving concrete realization to abstractions such as Nothingness and confronting his audience with the experience. He actually shows language in a chaotic state, being reduced to sheer sound, forms without content, using "shock tactics" to convey the actual feeling of chaos.

Harold Pinter, on the other hand, focuses very sharply on the mundane trivialities of everyday life and ordinary speech but, by eschewing any explanation of a character's motives, releases these characters, their concerns and their speech, from the confines of
a particular time and place, thus allowing them to assume the universal, timeless character of the archetypes.

Samuel Beckett stages a world already only an inch away from total annihilation, peopled by characters who yearn for death, who would dearly love everything to be "finished" and yet, as long as they are alive, must therefore speak, must say words as long as there are any. Of the three, Beckett remains the most ambiguous in his attitude toward the possibility of new life. As a "non-knower," he cannot say, with certainty, that a new life would be significantly better than the old one.

Although both critics and public are now more ready to admit the validity of Absurdist drama, it has been necessary, in this discussion, to emphasize the fact that writers such as Beckett, Ionesco, and Pinter are more concerned with transmitting the sense of an experience than a didactic theme, an experience which each individual theatre-goer can identify according to his own inner awareness and hidden fears. According to Martin Esslin, for example, Waiting for Godot was interpreted by the inmates of San Quentin as a play whose chief metaphor was freedom.1 He points out that in Algeria, Godot was believed to refer to "the long-awaited but never forthcoming distribution of land to the peasants." And in Warsaw, this play was seen by many as "a parable of the ever promised but never forthcoming national independence of Poland.

from the Russians.² The interpretive possibilities are potentially as numerous as the number of seats in the theatre.

The theatre is as old as the hills and gives every sign of growing older. As long as it keeps growing, it will continue to be alive. Writers such as Ionesco, Beckett, and Pinter figure as a vital part in this growth, an outgrowth of the past, a significant phenomenon in itself, and a precursor of what may follow.

A SELECTED BIBLIOGRAPHY

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