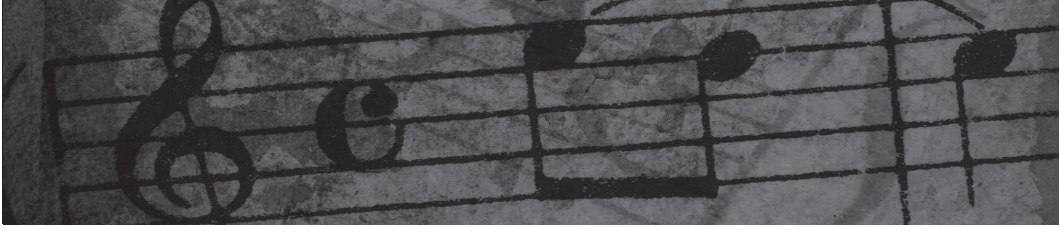


# **The Theatre of the Real**





# The Theatre of the Real

*Yeats, Beckett, and Sondheim*

GINA MASUCCI MACKENZIE



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To Daniel T. O'Hara  
Teacher  
Mentor  
Friend





《 contents 》

<b>acknowledgments</b>	ix
<b>one</b> What Is the Theatre of the Real?	1
<b>two</b> W. B. Yeats: The Missed Steps of Salome's Daughters	40
<b>three</b> Beckett: The Missing Link	77
<b>four</b> Stephen Sondheim's "Many Possibilities": Theater of the Manifest	114
<b>bibliography</b>	163
<b>index</b>	171





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“Look at all the things you’ve done for me. / Let me give to you / something in return / I would be so pleased” (“Move On,” *Sunday in the Park with George*).

## What Is the Theater of the Real?

a shriek from the stage pierces the consciousness of a quiet Broadway audience. It is visceral, tangible almost, and absolutely terrifying, yet it is also an echo. This scream belongs to Giorgio and is uttered near the end of Sondheim's *Passion*, his brilliant exploration of the Real experience of love. The play, Sondheim's most recent work for the Broadway stage, is the perfect example of the theatre of the Real. Theatre of the Real, the concept to which this book is devoted to developing, is a new way of examining works of Modern drama whose presentations exemplify the Lacanian concept of the Real, or the psychic position of complete break with both one's ties to Symbolic convention, and Imaginary phantasy. The experience is simultaneously liberating and crippling, and can only be achieved under very unique circumstances, as *Passion* demonstrates.

The plot of the play, recounted in mostly epistolary fashion,<sup>1</sup> begins as Giorgio, a dashing soldier, is transferred away from his beautiful mistress, Clara. At his new post, he meets Fosca, the colonel's hideous and hysterical cousin. She falls in love with him, and after some resistance, he grows to feel passionately about her. Their affair is inexplicable in conventional

1. The epistolary structure is obvious in the play's staging, but credit for this terminology must be given to Raymond Knapp in *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*.

terms. He is almost a caricature, a soldier/lover equally skilled in war and romance, a symbol of society's ultimate man, both hard and sensitive. She is nightmarish, sallow, and moribund, breaking all expectations of usual feminine beauty. Her demeanor is eerie and certainly antisocial. Their relationship is conventionally inexplicable. After their love affair is consummated, she dies, ostensibly of the physical exertion of their love making; he is forced to fight a duel with the colonel for her honor. During the duel, Giorgio suffers a breakdown, embodied by the scream.

This is not, however, the first time *Passion's* audience has heard that scream. It is the same one that Fosca sounds early in the play, while reading alone in her room on the first night of Giorgio's new assignment. That scream acts as Giorgio's introduction to the concept of Fosca, but at that point, he does not actually meet her. The scream is an evocation of the vocative drive, which gives expression to the process of abjection, or expulsion of Symbolic convention that must occur before these two characters can create a partnership in the Real and help Sondheim's work exemplify the theatre of the Real, as defined by this text.

Giorgio makes love to Fosca, but not until he screams, experiencing a pain and longing similar to what she has known, is their partnership Real. This instance in Sondheim's work perfectly parallels Lacanian theory. Fosca screams first to rid herself of the pain of the Symbolic order, or society's refuse that has been dumped on her as a woman, because she is a woman and thus already on the fringe of society's rules. At the beginning of the play, Giorgio is so fully enmeshed in society's rules that he must undergo a longer journey to the Real, and he can do so only with Fosca's help. Her scream, however, can never be his, and thus, they must experience similar conditions but must reach those points isolated from each other. Their partnership can only exist in the Real and must not be condoned or accepted by the Symbolic.

The scream is much more than a blood-curdling awakening for the audience. It is the mark of the theatre of the Real. The scream is a *sinthome*, or the material embodiment of a relationship which has had the experience of *jouissance*. Very few couples in Modern theatre experience such a relationship, but Giorgio and Fosca do, making Sondheim's most recent Broadway venture the most Real example of Western theatre to date.

This scream is not independent of theatre tradition. It can be linked in spirit to Yeats's dancer figures, such as the Woman of the Well in *At the Hawk's Well*, who screams to announce the coming of the warrior women of the Sidhe. The Woman of the Well does not achieve her own Real because she does not scream for herself, but for an Other. Beckett's tragic-comedic

couples are so mired in their abject wastelands that they cannot scream. Instead, they mutter endless repetitions of words that keep their drives enabled but do not allow them the sheer freedom of the cry.

Sondheim's *Passion* also links more broadly to several schools of Modern theatrical practice, needed to achieve theatre of the Real. The play contains elements of Expressionism, which links to the Real's explosivity, as it heightens and highlights the slightest human emotion, making the play almost painful for the audience to endure. Symbolist experimentation, which helps a play achieve its presentations of the unconscious mind, is used, especially in Fosca's character, and helps to create a surreal atmosphere and tone.

Distinctive displays of pastoral convention are also characteristic of theatre of the Real, and they are certainly present in *Passion*. The main settings of the play—the barracks and the ruined castle—are degenerated symbols of masculinity. The barracks should be a place of über-manhood, but no actions of war reach this post. Its potential is wasted. The ruined castle, where Giorgio and Fosca first kindle their relationship, is a crumbling mess of what used to symbolize power and strength. Both places fail to fulfill their expectations of phallic power, allowing Fosca, who already fails feminine expectations, to enter. The failure of the pastoral spaces opens the possibility for these characters to create their own space, in which something new can occur. The new space they create is the physical merging of their bodies during their love making; that new space can be built exclusively upon a foundation of ruins. Such construction is also characteristic of theatre of the Real.

Sondheim's rare work of art exemplifies each of the theories that are important to theatre of the Real: convergence with the tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis, employment of Modern theatrical experimentation, and deployment of pastoral convention. Although few works are so fully Real as *Passion*, much of the work of Yeats, Beckett, and Sondheim explores the founding concepts of theatre of the Real.

## › OPENING THE CURTAIN

### *Types of Modern Theatre*

A play is a living entity that exists on the pastoral stage of the theatre, which it creates and refashions as each performance develops. Drama begins with a text, or written word, that on the surface functions parallel

to other literary prose, but theatre does not end with its text. As Antonin Artaud claims, the language of the theatrical text is always exceeded by the language of the *mise-en-scène* (Quigley 23). Artaud uses different terms of language to point out the difference between the static literary text and the living theatrical one. He writes, "Dialogue—a thing written and spoken—does not belong specifically to the stage, it belongs to books . . . concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, had first to satisfy the senses . . . the concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of the spoken language" (Artaud 37).

At the beginning of a performance, the audience feels that the characters of the play are using the same language, and living on the same terms that the audience lives. Very quickly, the audience realizes that the terms of art are totally different from the terms of life. This puts the audience in the position of the child, ready to engage in an Oedipal struggle with the parent performance. Instead of this Oedipal struggle ending in the audience's assimilation into the world of the drama, the audience can extend the performative dimension of the play according to the dictates of the Real, a Lacanian concept that will be explained shortly. The transgressive power of Modern theatre poses a threat to the Oedipal order. Fear of disrupting the socially acceptable nature and function of theatre and a too-strict focus on mimesis help to explain the lack of attention in theatre theory to its transgressive nature.

Modernism's commitment to experimentation with form did lead to a number of variations on the theme of traditional theatre. A variety of theatre styles, including Realism, Symbolism, Naturalism, Expressionism, Theatre of Cruelty, Epic Theatre, and Poor Theatre, were developed and enjoyed differing levels of artistic and commercial success. To understand the uniqueness of the theatre practitioners discussed in this book, it is important to understand how these major Modern theatre movements both accepted and rejected conventional concepts of the well-made play and relate to Lacan's Real.

The well-made play, codified most notably by Edmund Scribe, is now an artifact of nineteenth-century melodrama. It is based on Aristotle's demand for *peripetia*. The well-made play consists of five parts: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion. The climax comes very near the end of the play and allows for a neat ending, in which all component parts are drawn together and solved. The plot is based on a cause-and-effect structure and is philosophically linked to Nietzsche's definition of

Apollonian theatre, which, he says, is governed by order and reserve. The well-made play was the major, and most popular, form of theatre in the Victorian era, but as theatre began to embrace Modernism, it sought many forms of reaction against this unnatural and often unintentionally comedic form. In Lacanian terminology, the well-made play is the quintessential version of the Symbolic, because it adheres to strict guidelines and upholds society's norms. Such strictness and conservatism of form was bound to be overthrown by the experimental nature of Modernist artists. Although each Modern theatre school advances the progress away from the Symbolic nature of the well-made play, none adequately articulates a theatre of the Real, even as each form tries to achieve it.

Realism is the first, and most easily accessible, Modern reaction against the well-made play. Popularized by playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov, Realism aims at verisimilitude of daily life. There is an emphasis on domestic situations, staged with accuracy of set, lighting, and costume detail. Realism wants to replicate daily life; it is based on Aristotle's concept of mimesis. Mimesis, though, takes into account the contingency and ambiguity of real life that the well-made play eschews. There do not have to be happy endings or satisfying conclusions in Realistic theatre. For example, neither Nora nor Torvald is happy at the end of *A Doll's House*. Nora leaves her husband and children to begin her new life, but she does so knowing the life she faces will be much more difficult, and potentially less fulfilling, than her current situation. In a well-made play, Nora would have either stayed with her family and her forgiving husband or would have forged her new life, confident that it would be better than her old one. Realistic theatre places characters in outcomes which deviate from the expectations of conventional society, but the simulacrum of real life still links the characters to the Symbolic.

Naturalism is an extreme form of Realism that seeks to recount the minutiae of daily life with hyperaccuracy. In Naturalism, there is intense attention to design and detail. The language and situations are intentionally unpoetic and can evoke from the audience a sincere dislike for the leading players. Such is the case in August Strindberg's *Miss Julie*. It is very difficult for the audience to have sympathy for either Jean, the social-climbing, viral butler, or Julie, the pathetic, malcontented mistress of the estate on which Jean works. Just as in Realism, the causal nature of human action is questioned. The title character of *Miss Julie* commits suicide at the end, not of her own volition, but because her lower-class lover commands her to do so. Her decision-making skills, so necessary for causal relationships, are

lacking. Common to Symbolist theatre is a controlling, patriarchal figure or force reminiscent of the law-giving Big Other of the Symbolic order, thus limiting the genre's potential for truly radical invention.

Progressing from the same impulse as Naturalism is Expressionism, which distorts reality for evocative response from the audience. Expressionist theatre seeks immediacy of response through the warping or heightening of a situation presented on stage. O'Neill's theatre provides excellent examples of Expressionism. The inexplicable decisions made by Abbie and Eben at the end of *Desire under the Elms* exemplify Expressionism. Abbie's thoughtless murder of her baby and Eben's willingness to claim himself as an accomplice, followed by their disturbing proclamation of passion for each other as they are led to jail, typifies Expressionism. The form explodes the melodrama of the well-made play to stage something akin to the chaotic passion of Nietzsche's Dionysian theatre. Expressionism is limited in approach only to the Lacanian Real, when the hyperemotional content is misunderstood by director or audience as farce.

Theatre of Cruelty advocates a violent shattering of the false attempts at reality made first by the well-made play and then by Realism itself. Theatre of Cruelty mounts an assault on audience expectations. It relies heavily on spectacle, an element of little importance to Aristotle or Scribe, to connect with the primal impulses of artistic presentation. Artaud seeks naked honesty through the purging of conventional Realistic tendencies, in favor of primitive expressions of raw emotion and physicality. It is only the carnivalesque potential of the Theatre of Cruelty that risks engaging the Imaginary instead of the Real register.

Jerzy Grotowski's Poor Theatre reverses Theatre of Cruelty. It returns to Aristotle's notion that spectacle is the least important theatrical quality. Poor Theatre removes spectacle, so that the presentation focuses on the relationship between audience and actor. While the well-made play makes the audience the ultimate voyeur peeking through the fourth wall, Poor Theatre, following Theatre of Cruelty, tears down the fourth wall completely, so that actor and audience have total interaction. It is only because such collaboration is often unexpected and feared that Poor Theatre is not Real.

Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre also seeks a new form of interaction between actor and audience. By using the alienation effect, made possible through gestic acting, Brecht wants to eliminate all of the emotional components of theatre. Instead, Brecht wants theatre to incite intellectual evaluation, resulting in individual changes for the audience members. Reliance on logic, an agent of the Symbolic order, severely limits the Real possibilities of



Epic Theatre, even as it is monumentally different from the well-made play.

It is very difficult to relate Symbolist theatre to any other Modern theatre experiment. Underlying the movement is the notion that absolute truth can transcend reality and can be accessed through a dreamlike state. The staging of Symbolist theatre frequently involved spectacular visual effects, using gas lights and scrimms. The actors were frequently instructed to change their speech patterns, slowing down the monologues to sound as if they were somnambulists. This very disconcerting theatrical style did not survive for long, but it was used by a variety of authors, from Stringberg, in *Dream Play*, to W. B. Yeats in his dancer plays. The technique survives in modified versions such as the dream sequences of *Death of a Salesman* or the psychological pacing of O'Neill's *Strange Interlude*. As it approaches the interior workings of the psyche, it offers great Real potential, to be demonstrated in the next chapter.

Compared to pure Symbolist theatre, Theater of the Absurd seems tame. The movement includes many of contemporary theatre's greatest writers: Beckett, Pirandello, Ionesco, Albee, Pinter, and even Stoppard. Theater of the Absurd modifies the dreamlike presentations of Symbolist theatre to present scenes or characters whose logic is similar to that of a dream or nightmare. The movement advocates the fluidity and contingency of life. Like Realism, it eschews logical causality, but its tone is radically different from Realism. Theatre of the Absurd is most often comedic in tone, using a variety of comedic strategies from slapstick to farce. It forces the audience to question its place in the world, and whether or not that place, or even that question, is relevant to contemporary life. Through ironic and irrational questioning of the Symbolic, Theatre of the Absurd is also a gateway to the Real, as illustrated in chapter 3.

## > REHEARSING THE POETICS

### *Theories of Modern Theatre*

Each of Modern theatre's experiments constitutes a revolt. Revolt, although looking to overthrow a particular political or cultural movement, does not intend to disrupt the notion of society as the primary organization of human existence. Some excellent work has been done exploring the relationship between revolt and modern drama. Robert Brustein's classic *The Theatre of Revolt* explores three different types of Modern theatrical revolt:

*Messianic revolt* occurs when the dramatist rebels against God and tries to take His place—the priest examines his image in the mirror. *Social revolt* occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conventions, morals, and values of the social organism—the priest turns the mirror on the audience. *Existential revolt* occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conditions of his existence—the priest turns the mirror on the void. (16)

Despite the use of psychoanalytic language in the defining terms, Brustein points out that each of these revolts takes place within the play's content, not necessarily in the relationship between the playwright and his text. A play's protagonist enters into a battle with conventional notions of religion, culture, or self. Brustein finds examples of his theory by tweaking traditional interpretations of modern classics and does not regard a play's experimental style as a prerequisite for a certain type of revolt. Instead of viewing Strindberg as simply a Naturalist, interested in exposing society's underbelly, Brustein categorizes Strindberg as a messianic revolutionary. Although Brustein does not offer an in-depth analysis of *Miss Julie* in these terms, it seems feasible to name both Julie and Jean as would-be god figures warring on an eroding Mount Olympus. They revolt against a conventional god to take his place, but that revolt leads only to misery for both. As Brustein does point out, ". . . even in *Miss Julie*, where the male triumphs, Jean becomes a sniveling coward at the end, shivering at the sound of the Count's bell" (103).

It would be easy to classify Bertolt Brecht as a social revolutionary whose work draws extensively on Marxist theory, but Brustein sees beyond that surface. By linking Brecht, via the German Neo-Romantic movement to Buchner, Brustein is able to posit Brecht as a metaphysical writer with existential leanings (236). Brustein writes, "And his [Brecht's] concentration on the more insuperable human limitations, the source of his quarrel with existence, leads him to attack not only the God of the Christians, but the God of the Romantics as well" (241). The conflict between the desire for transcendence and the backward pull of convention makes Brecht a writer who uses the social realm to rage against an inherently problematic existence.

Brustein's actual assessment of social revolt is fairly standard. He cites authors such as Ibsen and Odets. Ibsen's social Realism is well known, as are Ibsen's own statements of wanting to use his drama to advocate for human rights. Odets uses non-Realistic, episodic structures, combined with exploitation of crowd dynamics, to achieve his social revolt. There are, however, other great modern writers about whom Brustein does not write.

Female writers, especially Elizabeth Robbins, Ibsen's great British champion, and Hella Wuolijoki of Finland, respectively wrote *Votes for Women* and *Hulda Juurakko*, both plays about women in the political sphere. *Votes for Women* extols the women's suffrage movement in Great Britain. *Hulda Juurakko* explores the ability of a woman to run for public office. The subject matter of these works, combined with their female authorship, makes them terrific examples of Brustein's social revolt. Not only do they challenge the norms in their textual confines, but also their authors enact a revolt against the male-dominated world of authorship. Although most social revolutionary drama is based in Realistic theatrical performance, it is also possible for Realism to merge with other modes, such as Symbolism in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, to achieve a potent call for social awareness.

Brustein is careful to remind his readers, "Still the theatre of revolt is only partially subjective; the rebel dramatist continues to observe the requirements of his form" (13). Although Brustein recognizes the Modern theatrical revolt, he does not assess modern theatre's transgressive tendencies. For him, revolt is only the beginning of the power of modern theatre. This opens up a void, to use Brustein's and Lacan's term, which we can plumb to explore Modern theatre's drive.

Benjamin Bennett's recent *All Theater Is Revolutionary Theater* pushes Brustein's ideas to their logical conclusions and argues that theatre, as a representation of genre, always purposefully fails, and thus it ironically accomplishes a more complete revolt than society could ever produce. According to Bennett, genre is an attempt to place a limit on a form; such a limit would turn a form into a mere representation. For Bennett, a representation is an attempt to practice the predetermined rules and expectations of a genre. Genuine form, for Bennett, is an ironic term that gives structure to freedom and escapes from the expectation of any aesthetic categorization.

For Bennett, because drama is the merger of two genres, theater and literature, it is already uncategorizable, and having achieved a status beyond conventional confines in its conception, it is already revolutionary and has the ability to embody revolt. Bennett argues that even Aristotle did not intend theatre to be an imitation of manner, or genre, but only to be an imitation of medium, something akin to style. Bennett claims, "The whole category of 'manner' of imitation is invented for the sole purpose of defining or separating dramatic form" (15). If this statement is true, then form should not be imitated; it is related to genre, or an attempt to categorize the uncategorizable. Such an attempt would always fail because theatrical form must

arise from the play's content, not from some conventional notion of what the play should look like. Although Brustein's and Bennett's works begin a dialogue about the nature of Modern theatre, they do not provide definite explanations of Modern theatre's radical nature. This is because they, like nearly all dramatic theory, continue to separate the textual aspects of a play from its performative function.

Bertolt Brecht's theatre is another example of performance conception and practice that demands radical separation. Brecht's Epic Theatre calls for a dissolution of all former dramatic forms and acting styles. He longs to replace old cathartic desires with the impetus to action that defines his concept of Epic Theatre. Very early in his career, Brecht states about this theatre practice, "I don't let my feelings intrude in my dramatic work. I'd give a false view of the world. I aim at an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I'm not writing for the scum who want to have their hearts warmed" (Willet 14). For Brecht, emotion is a façade that society uses to keep itself in check. Brecht wants his actors to alienate themselves from the audience; he wants barriers erected that make the audience all too aware of the pretense of typical theatre. To achieve such awareness, Brecht, in "The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre," calls for "*separation of the elements*" (Willet 37), which means that his theatre will call attention to the vast disconnects between music, lyric, plot, and spectacle, pulling away from Wagner's notion of the "integrated work of art." When "words, music and setting [must] become independent" (Willet 38), then the play exposes its suture marks. It is at the suture marks, or the weak links that hold society in harmony, that Epic Theatre can begin to break down the idea of the society, or the individual audience members, as a harmonious unity. Instead, the radical disconnects of art forms and artists are highlighted. Awareness of pretense, combined with the nearly didactic political content of his plays, is designed to spur the audience into action.

Brecht's theatrical goal is to produce a play that encourages its audience to go out and change society, because "radical transformation of the theatre can't be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time" (Willet 23). Brecht does not simply want his audience to act within conventional society and political structures; he wants his audiences to change, from within, the very nature of the world in which they live. Such complete upheaval is not simple revolution, but a total disavowal of all that is familiar, to enact a structure whose motto is not to feel, but to act. No longer are audience

members simply reacting, or procreating, but, in being spurred to action, they are forced to create something new.

Epic Theatre creates distance between the audience and the actor through its dramaturgical advances. Instead of employing a Stansislovskian approach of emotional reality, the Brechtian actor makes himself as unlikable and unreachable as possible. As Brecht explains in “The Question of Criteria for Judging Acting,” the performance should affect the audience by “concentrating on the principal nodal points of the action and cutting it so as to bring out the gests in a very abbreviated way” (Willett 55). No audience can feel pity for characters whose positions they believe they could never assume. Instead, the audience moves away from the characters, anxiously aware of them. Instead of emotive reactions, the Brechtian audience is spurred into physical action.

Although “All Theater Is Epic Theatre” outlines a Modern, Marxist revisioning of theatre presentation, it does not exhaust the limits of experimentation, as it sacrifices the emotive and psychic realms of theatre in favor of a nearly myopic focus on the drama’s intellectual components. It seems Brecht wants to cure the Modern mood through intellectualized action, in a way that modifies Artaud’s nearly Futurist Theatre of Cruelty.

Other classic theatre texts, such as Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*, explore the need for radical performance but do not take the text, content, or message of the play into account. In this seminal work, Brook envisions the theatre as being a null plane on which the action of theatre can occur. To put this vision into psychoanalytic terms, the theatre, both stage and house combined, is the site of the original lack. The performance can enact its Symbolic repertoire, while simultaneously exposing the failure of the Symbolic, so that the lack can be regained. Brook identifies four types of theatre that are active in the Modern and contemporary theatre scenes. “Deadly Theatre” is frequently linked to commercial theatre and occurs when all passion and pleasure are gone from performance. It is a theatre obsessed with the slick, or simplistic, replication of meaning. Deadly Theatre fails because it relies too much on the text without the variation and creative modifications of a good director. Theatre frequently becomes deadly when practiced by those afraid to take risks. It is common in community theatres and high school productions, during which blocking and stage direction is taken verbatim from the script.

“Holy Theatre” is the positive link between performance and ritual which focuses on illumination of the invisible, or the coming to light of the lack itself. In historical terms, it is related to the mystery plays of the

Middle Ages. Such ritualistic performance can also be heard in contemporary conceptions, such as *Stomp*, whose theme and variation of pounding rhythms highlights percussive potential, while constantly reminding the audience of the variety of omitted instruments.

“Rough Theatre” is the noisy, dirty, obscene theatre that “saves the day” because it allows for disclosure in its willingness to display abject materials. This theatre is one that abandons convention and expectation. Street performance and fringe festivals, popular across the United States, are means for emerging or nontraditional artists to showcase their works. In fringe festivals, atypical theatre spaces are used for theatrical endeavors with a total run of one or two performances each. Another, more readily accessible example of Rough Theatre is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Despite its commercial success, combined with merchandising opportunities and cult status, *Rocky Horror* is Rough Theatre because it is the quintessential obscene performance piece. The play focuses on debauchery and raw sexuality combined with the “conversion” of two virgins from their asexual lives to a night of limitless passion and exploration. While the play’s moralistic underpinnings, found in the Frankenstein’s monster plot, threaten to temper its obscenity, Richard O’Brien’s willingness to explore power and sexuality through unappealing and frightful characters makes the play a great example of the depiction of the abject required for Rough Theatre.

Finally, Brook settles on “Immediate Theatre,” which emphasizes the fantastic inability for theatre to replicate itself. For Brook, the value of Immediate Theatre is its ability to impart to the audience a kernel or trace of impact. As we will learn, immediacy may not always be enough to make theatre Real. Yeats’s drawing-room theatre, with its spontaneous choreography, is immediate, but it does not allow total access to the Real.

Although each of these divisions or types is extremely useful for analyzing performance, there is little mention of specific texts that lend themselves, either positively or negatively, to each category. Brook is able to give dramatic theory a necessary emphasis on the primacy of performance, but he sacrifices attention to the drama itself. An even more effective theory of modern theatre must incorporate both the traditional aspects of dramatic criticism and a new outlook on the significance of the play enacted.

Scott McMillan’s delightful last work, *The Musical as Drama*, achieves, at least of the dramatic subset of the musical, a theory that incorporates both the traditional and the nontraditional, which he terms “the legitimate” (drama) and “the illegitimate” (musical theatre) (79). Naming musical theatre as illegitimate marks it as perverse, which we will soon see is a quality beneficial for achieving the experience of the Real. McMillan uses the term

“difference” to explain the merger of structure and content in musical theatre that makes it unique from other theatrical works: “*Difference* can be felt between the book and the numbers, between the songs and dances, between the dance and spoken dialogue—and these are the elements that integration is supposed to have unified” (2). The integration that McMillan references is the common term in musical theatre applied to shows whose musical numbers arise from the plot and do not stop the progression of action in the play. Integrated musicals are supposedly higher forms of musical theatre than revues, which have little plot, or operetta, which relies on arias as psychological commentary and show of virtuosity. McMillan rightly argues that integration is not a primary asset in musical theatre, as the best musicals are cognizant of their differences and use those rifts to their advantages.

To explain how difference operates, McMillan names “Two Orders of Time” (6). He writes, “The musical’s complexity comes in part from the tension between two orders of time, one for the book and one for the numbers. The book represents the plot or action . . . This is progressive time” (McMillan 6). Drama operates with this basic principle, even when it employs episodic or surreal time lines. It does not have the second order, which McMillan calls lyric time. The musical alone has lyric time, as “the song inserts a lyrical moment into the cause-and-effect progress of the plot, a moment that suspends the book time in favor of lyric time, time organized not by cause and effect (which is how book time works), but by principles of repetition (which is how numbers work)” (McMillan 9). Lyrical time, especially as it relates to repetition, does not have to be limited to musical theatre but can be applied to any play that strives to break away from causality. That break can lead a play out of the realm of desire and into the circulation of the drive. McMillan’s work stays mostly within the confines of close reading and musicology but does not attempt to use literary theory, which I believe is necessary to create a fuller understanding of the art and its power to affect its audiences.

Dramatic theory also lacks a significant understanding of Modern drama’s transgressive nature because the field is frequently too focused on theatre as representation or imitation. Despite Bennett’s claims about Aristotle and imitation, a vast majority of critics write drama theory that, beginning with Aristotle’s “On Poetics,” is focused on dramatic performance as a representation of some aspect of human existence. Although drama practice and theory certainly do not limit themselves to realistic representations, they do center on the concept that what is presented on stage is mimicry. We read this again in Michael Goldman’s *The Actor’s Freedom*, in which



the author's theory of drama's power relies on the ability of the actor to achieve psychological imitation of humanity. Most of the time, the mimicry involved is that of the playwright's text enlivened by the actors, with the goal of presenting an imitative truth about a social, psychic, or existential reality. Even when mimesis is re-envisioned with a focus on evolutionary biology, as in Robert Storey's *Mimesis and the Human Animal*, the textual bent is still moving toward a theory of theatre as representation. Storey's explanation of mimesis can, however, act as a useful bridge between Aristotelian theatre and theatre of the Real.

Mimesis, for Storey, is the voice of the species, making imitation a communal effort. The literature produced by mimetic activity does not provide solutions or didactic instruction, but offers possibilities. Mimesis is an attempt to replicate the process, not product, of mental activity, a theory that Storey claims is rooted in Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty.

Antonin Artaud's Theater of Cruelty is a spectacular example of a theatrical endeavor that tries to overcome the Aristotelian drive for mimetic theatre. In *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud explains that the "double" to which he refers is an uncanny, or spectral, image of life itself, not an imitation of life:

Perhaps it is already understood that the genre of theater to which I refer had nothing to do with the kind of realistic, social theater which changes with each historical period and in which the ideas that animated the theater at its origin can no longer be discerned except as caricatures of gestures, unrecognizable because their intention has changed so greatly. Like words themselves, archetypal, primitive theatre have in time ceased to generate an image, and instead of being a means of expression are only an impasse, a mausoleum of the mind. (Artaud 50)

In the Theater of Cruelty, the audience is directly implicated in, and involved with, the production. There should be a direct assault on the audience, creating an uncomfortable experience for the audience that nonetheless makes the audience participate in the artistic creation. Not all Modern theatre needs to implement Artaud's puppetry and circuslike spectacle to achieve a similar aesthetic inclusively aimed at making the audience participate in the production.

Theatre of Cruelty is designed so that the audience's participation acts like a doppelganger, or example of the uncanny, for the audience itself. The audience, even in the midst of acting outside of its norms, retains some



aspect of its “normal” judgment and uses that judgment to indict the participating self. Engagement of the audience in Modern theatre adds a new level to theatre’s mimetic expression by allowing each audience member to replicate herself. This confrontation with the self is not, however, a pleasant experience, but one that dislodges the audience member from the security of her seat. In his new book, *Theatricality as Medium*, Samuel Weber recalls Artaud’s ideal audience as one “whose blood will have been traversed by violent scenes” (279). “Such a spectator,” Weber comments, “will have been transformed by what he witnessed” (279). This is the key to the development of theatre of the Real; theatre, with Artaud, makes the audience actualize the traumatic effect of the scenes it witnesses as pathways through the self. The ability of the theatre to cut through one’s self-image is a new form of mimesis, in which the audience confronts its own dark side. It is important to note that what the audience sees in Theatre of Cruelty is imitation of the otherwise obscured or unknown self, since Artaud did not consider himself anti-Aristotelian (Weber 279).

One of the few contemporary theatre theoreticians who tries to envision a new way to assemble theatre out of its limits is Austin Quigley. In his book, *The Modern Stage and Other Worlds*, Quigley uses the term “world” to designate a location or space that is delineated for a certain activity. The two worlds most obvious, in theatre, are the stage and the house. Quigley finds that the exclusion of each world from the other compromises theatre’s potential. To uphold separation is to maintain the homogeneity of each world, which limits growth and change. Instead, Quigley advocates Zola’s idea for the “remaking of the stage until it is continuous with the auditorium” (5). Artaud’s desire for “outbursts over the entire mass of spectators” (Quigley 5) also implies that the audience should be showered with the *merde* of the play itself. Both Artaud and Zola inspire Quigley to want to find a method for theatre in which the worlds of stage and audience can maintain their own special characteristics while meeting and breaking down the barriers that inhibit contact between those two worlds. Quigley claims that in the Modern theatre, the “world motif changes from a measure of largeness to one of limits” (9). This statement is incomplete. Although Modern theatre does attend to limits, it does not do so to maintain them, but to expose and examine borders so as to highlight those locations as meeting grounds, to establish a new vision of community composed of intensely heterogeneous individuals. Again though, radical assertions of self will meet the antagonism of mimetic tradition, if the concept of mimesis is not reworked.

Robert Storey's discussion of comedy in *Mimesis and the Human Animal* helps to redefine mimesis through the concept of the uncanny. Although Storey consistently argues against psychoanalytic theory as a useful method of interpretation, it is still possible to use his theories with psychoanalytic principles. Both Storey and psychoanalysis agree that comedy is antilogical. It moves beyond the realm of the expected to elicit laughter, a physiological response that can carry with it an element of discomfort. According to Freud in "Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious," the discomfort arises because the joke and its subsequent laughter have exposed repressed material. In Storey's cognitive theory, laughter disrupts normal social behavior. He points out that according to primatologists, the smile "is doubtless, the 'bare-teethed display,' . . . and is a reaction to 'some threat or strong aversive stimulation'" (Storey 159). Both theories point to the conclusion that comedy hides something a little sinister behind its immediate jocularity.

Such a menacing character can be found in Storey's description of the rogue figure: "The rogue is, in the terminology of the evolutionist, a 'cheat' at the banquet of life" (171). The rogue is appealing because he "holds out a certain attraction to the spectator, as one who can turn the social scene to his or her wanton advantage. Having silenced that voice that tells us how far we can go without incurring intolerable risks . . . the rogue slips by both shame and guilt to savor the fruits of audacity" (Storey 171). While the audience laughs with the rogue figure, it also smirks with moral superiority. When the rogue falls to disadvantage, the typical audience longs to retain moral superiority as a security blanket.

The duality of laughing with and at the rogue figure allows the audience to make into the uncanny what it does not want to admit is a part of the self. Each audience member has a bit of the rogue figure in her but does not want to acknowledge it, so the audience member projects the simultaneous feelings of shame and awe onto the rogue figure on the stage, who becomes a specular image of the self. We laugh at the rogue figure so that we can maintain our place in society and not jar ourselves out of conventional life. This is expected and seemingly "normal," but the more appropriate response in theatre of the Real is the former one of laughing with the rogue. The greater the rogue's ability to manipulate convention to her advantage, the greater the rogue's possibility of attaining her desires. The rogue acts as a figure on the brink of the Lacanian Real because she is able to ignore social norms. The audience uses the rogue as a projected figure of the uncanny who reveals underlying possibilities. Laughter with the rogue figure is a minor attempt by the audience to identify with her

success. Laughter at the rogue figure becomes a concession prize, or a way to placate ourselves with moral superiority when the rogue's attempts fail, and we must return to convention.

## › SETTING THE SCENE

### *Pastoral Conventions*

Regardless of genre or mode, convention is one of the driving forces behind the assembly and maintenance of literary categorization. Conventions are especially important to the long and complex history of the pastoral mode, which, as we will learn, is a key component in the theater of the Real. The conventionality of the pastoral genre provides the Symbolic backdrop against which the writers and characters working within it can rebel. Such rebellion involves the abjecting or elimination of expected purity and cleanliness to reveal the darker, more Real aspects of the natural world.

We often consider the pastoral tradition beginning with Theocritus' *Idylls*, written in Greece in the third century B.C.E. The term *pastoral* itself derives from the Greek "pastor," meaning shepherd. The concept of the shepherd is connotatively necessary to introduce the figures of the master and his wayward flock. Seemingly, the shepherd is able to control his animals, keep them safe, and lead them to pasture. He is the master of the Symbolic landscape. Frequently, though, we see shepherds, or those in positions of control in the pastoral world, who are far more lax in their duties than they should be. By relaxing the position of authority, pastoral writing opens up the reader to the possibility of the failure of the leader and shows the potential for those who are part of the flock to wander into the brush. The inherent conflict of the pastoral derives from the friction between the façade of peace and tranquility offered by the natural world and the outside forces that threaten to destroy its innocence and generative capabilities. Such is the biblical story of Adam and Eve, often offered as the quintessential pastoral myth. This myth is also useful to expose the inherent flaw in pastoral definitions. The pastoral, especially as conceived in the Renaissance, uses a sanitized, orderly depiction of the natural world to explain and glorify the decorous manners of the court. Ben Jonson's masques provide terrific examples of such pastoral façades merging with the beginnings of musical theatre. Later, we will see how Sondheim's innovations rethink the pastoral for Broadway.

During the Renaissance, one of the only escapes from pastoral decorum was found in satiric eclogues that were used to expose the truth of the pastoral, that nature, whether human or vegetative, is inherently wild and dangerous. Such exposure is built into the Genesis myth, which highlights the intrinsic curiosity and rebellion of human nature. Edenic space, in the Genesis myth, is doomed at its very conception because of the human ability to choose. In light of the Genesis myth, the pastoral is the place already lost, which makes it a space of nostalgia only, one that does not exist in the world but is present only in our minds, or repressed materials. This longing for purity, which can never be regained, is the basis of Laurence Lerner's classic pastoral theory.

Lerner uses a loose interpretation of Freud's dream theory to claim that Renaissance pastoral conventions are wish fulfillments that provide relief from society. This theory is complicated for our purposes, though, since the conventions themselves, in Lacanian terminology, are part of society's Symbolic order. It seems that the wishes fulfilled by the pastoral conventions are wishes of manipulation. The reader can escape into an Imaginary state in which she can envision peace that the pressures of society's Symbolic order cannot grant. In Lerner's theory, the pastoral wish adheres to some sort of order that is advanced through the laws of genre, combined with some mode of transgression of those laws. The pastoral wish is for a merging of opposites, which Lerner finds in the Forest of Arden, a typical pastoral setting that is "out of time and space" (23), making the pastoral both transgressive and transcendent.

For theatrical purposes, Lerner's pastoral divisions are also useful. He separates the courtly pastoral from the provincial pastoral, linking the courtly pastoral to tragedy and the provincial pastoral to the ballad (Lerner 20). The ballad, or song, easily links to comedy, or more precisely musical comedy, even as originated in the antimasque sections of courtly dramas. The comedic elements of antimasque always resolve into the stately virtue of the masque. From such virtue, it is easy to make the step to marriage as the only suitable outlet for sexual expression. Comedy ending in marriage is generative (Lerner 70). If comedy is generative, then tragedy must be its opposite—isolating, alienating, and mortal. Lerner's theory can then usefully be applied to the theater of the Real, which uses a form of tragic-comedy as the outlet through which the socially created self dies, to allow the newly created, fiercely individualistic Real self to emerge. This Real self, perhaps only viable for an instant, fits Lerner's definition of pastoral poetry itself. According to Lerner, "poetry of Arcadia is above all a poetry of moments" (104), which connects the pastoral, the Real self, and Modern

theatre as forms which all employ episodic structural organizations.

In theatre of the Real, the nostalgic aspects of the pastoral remind the audience of all that society claims is possible but cannot be found in the world. Nostalgia infuses theatre of the Real with the sense that convention is an impossible lie. Scholars of the pastoral, especially Empson and Lerner, also point out the ironic use of nostalgia in pastoral poetry, since the space envisioned is “always already” a space of the past, in Freudian terms, the place of repression or the land of the dream. In most pastoral poetry and theory, nostalgic longing exists because the poet, or his character, seeks what is imagined, often falsely, to be a place of serenity and pleasure.

Such a space is found in the original, and now buried, forms of the pastoral—or as Empson identifies in his classic *Some Versions of Pastoral*, the meeting of the heroic and pastoral conventions in Renaissance literature, put to use with ironic intent to become the “mock pastoral,” or the space that exposes the shortcomings of convention while it offers a pastoral vision more honest and dangerous than usually portrayed. To use Benjamin Bennett’s concept of genre with Lacan’s terminology, the pastoral is the site of the Real because the genre of the pastoral displays the greatest disconnect between form and representation as representatives themselves of desire and drive. As a genre, the pastoral wants to be pure, innocent, and nostalgic, but even within its tradition, the pastoral, as a self-conscious genre, knows that it does not possess those qualities.

Though I disagree with much of her argument in *Culture and the Real*, Catherine Belsey’s comments on Marvell’s “To His Coy Mistress” are quite apt to a discussion of defining the pastoral genre. She characterizes the poem’s argument as such: “Give me your virginity . . . or give it to the worms’ . . . That worms devour corpses is widely acknowledged, even if it remains an unlikely thought in a love poem. That worms might wriggle their way into the vagina, however, offers a distinctively repulsive version of this familiar truth” (42). The poem begins with the rather expected convention of the lover begging his beloved for her virginity, but as Belsey proves, the way in which that request is made merges what Freud characterizes as the two drives, or what Lacan would later consider desires: sex and death. This seems conventional enough, but as Belsey points out as the poem continues, “The awareness of their eventual absence from the signifying chain alters the meaning of sex, moves it out of the realm of romantic and uneventful contemplation towards urgent action” (43). The narrator of the poem recognizes that the pastoral conventions of time eternal and purity are false: “Marvell’s lovers, who cannot make the sun stand still, will make him run, the poem defiantly affirms” (Belsey 46). They push nature

itself into the circulation of the drive, making it what George Bataille, centuries later, would term the “solar anus,” or the repository of an expository realm of all sexual transgression. Such a reading of this classic argument is as essential as it is disturbing, and it proves Empson’s claim that the pastoral is aware of itself and its conventions. To be the site of the Real, the pastoral must recognize its conventions as Symbolic remnants necessary to be classified as a genre. The Real pastoral, pushing up through its dirty lines, is the breakdown of convention. Instead of lush meadows and bubbling streams, it is wild brush and roaring tidal waves.

Many examples of pastoral work expose such useful decay. In choral music, the “All We Like Sheep” chorus from Handel’s *Messiah* is an example of the ways in which conventional forms are used to expose the pastoral’s rebellious nature. In this chorus, Handel uses word painting, combined with counterpoint, to let the choral voices and orchestral arrangement gradually take the sheep, which they represent, out of the flock, to “go astray” or fend for themselves. The growing discord of the music and rising dynamic intensity convey not the shepherd’s anxiety, but that of the sheep, over being away from each other. They fear the pastoral alone, without the protection of the group. Handel allows the musicians and the audience to revel in the virtuosity of the performance, until the music reaches a fever-pitch. At that point, Handel, as composer-god, harnesses the musical lines. In that music, just as the oratorio’s plot, God sends his son to “redeem the iniquity of us all.” Handel allows audience and performer to explore the pastoral’s wild side, but he does not want either to remain there. The image of placid pastoral peace must be restored. The Baroque pastoral decadently flirts with escape from the norms of society but ultimately resolves itself into tradition.

By the time we reach the Romantic age, especially with Samuel Coleridge’s work, we see that there is no need to maintain pastoral complacency or simplicity. The pleasure dome of ice in “Kubla Khan” makes an ironic statement about the place of passion or *jouissance* in the old pastoral tradition. The pleasure dome represents any field or grove that formerly hid lovers and nymphs playing innocently at kissing games. The pastoral decorum that prevented overt sexuality has finally frozen such passion, and, in Coleridge’s work, is depicted by the freezing of the pastoral realm. In a world that tries too hard to sterilize nature, retaliation is nature’s only choice. To freeze the pleasure dome is to halt all former and false enjoyment. While doing so, constantly in the background of the poem, Kubla Khan and the reader hear the sounds of encroaching troops. The advancing forces will shatter the dome of ice and leave, in its wake, something more

than the dream of the “damsel with a dulcimer.” Since Coleridge did not finish the poem, we do not know exactly what would have remained; we can imagine, however, that the new valley would not resemble a conventional image of lush and engendering safety; the landscape would be far more Real.

Modern playwrights recognize the nostalgic aspect of the pastoral as well, but they aim to find the true nature of the nostalgia. For the modern playwright, the longed-for and long-repressed material for which the contemporary figure yearns is not the coziness of woolly sheep and the lilt of the lyre. Modern theatre longs for the rawness of nature—the shorn, exposed sheep skin, the bleating of the injured lamb—as forms of repressed material coming to life. Transgression becomes the new nostalgia in Modern drama as the transgressive moves away from conventional exterior areas to interior spaces that house repressed material. The primarily repressed material that underscores the human psyche is able, when brought into contact with a traumatic experience, to awaken that person to the possibility of a Real experience.

The traditional eclogue form of the pastoral, codified by Virgil, is also relevant to theatre of the Real. As Stephen Guy-Bray points out in his recent book *Homoerotic Space*, the origin of the word “eclogue” is related to “eglio,” which, according to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, means either “to pull out, extract (weeds etc.)” or “to select, choose, pick out (persons or things)” (37). Guy-Bray uses the combination of these definitions to show that what is frequently chosen and weeded out is the choice of love object (38). I would like to expand this idea. It is not simply a selection of others, but a selection of traits of oneself, to be kept and privileged, or discarded. If the eclogue is an extraction, then the pastoral space in which it occurs is a space which needs to be tilled. Something important is hidden under its surface. Guy-Bray argues that the hidden nature of the eclogue is its homoerotic content; I would like to expand that notion further. As Freud’s work attests, most sexual expression, unless genitally based, is seen as perverse and must be hidden. The Modern theatre realizes that for true freedom to exist, polymorphous perversity must be brought to the surface, or extracted, so that each person can use sexual preferences of all kinds as part of her unique, self-nominated identity. The eclogue is the form through which the pastoral is able to cultivate the circumstances for the Real. Such a pastoral space can occur on stage.

To see the eclogue as a mistake also explains a unique aspect of the theatre of the Real. If the eclogue is a mistake, it is a Symbolic mistake that relies on representation, instead of inventing a new form. When the-



atre is treated as a representative or mimetic art form, its radical potential is limited. Modern theatre aims at radical structures or forms, which do not merely represent the difference between actor and audience, or the classic competition between artwork and observer. Instead, Modern theatre wants to expose the mistake by creating a new theatrical form which binds, implicates, and includes all people present. Luigi Pirandello's great work, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, embodies such inclusivity. The "actors" in *Six Characters* are mired in the divide between stage and "real" life, actor and role; the "characters" know there is no difference. They are hyperfigures who have no distance between their plotline and their presentation. Eclogue occurs in two ways in Pirandello's work. The first eclogue formation is the competition that develops between the "actors" and the "characters"; the second is the competition raging in each "actor" between herself and the expectations the director and the "characters" have when she plays a particular role. The characters have no such internal eclogue because, for them, there is no difference between actor and role, or art and life. Pirandello's "actors" exemplify my definition of theatre of the Real. They have moved beyond the eclogue, which involves competing or disparate elements, into a type of radical unity through which they define themselves, regardless of the sometimes limited and futile perspective such definition provides.

## › THE LACANIAN MISE-EN-SCÈNE

### *A Theory of the Real*

Theater, especially as exemplified in the Modern dramas of W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, and Stephen Sondheim, is a theatre of the Lacanian Real. The Real is the third psychic position that Lacan defines. It is a position of radical disconnection from society and culture that allows a subject to experience her *jouissance*, or moment of frozen anxiety that holds the subject in an experience of the most intense and simultaneous pleasure and pain. The Real is the lack, or hole, that constitutes the center of human subjectivity. Modern theatre seeks to create a pathway to the Real by inventing forms, not representations, that will traumatically open the hole or establish transgressive pastoral space in which the audience, along with the actors, finds a place that welcomes and encourages the radical transformation of the self, by the self. Such theatre of the Real would be an experience during which both actors and audience members would simultaneously,



but without each other's cooperation or even volition, begin the process of abjection, or ridding oneself of the refuse of conventional life, through either an experience of catharsis (for Yeats and Sondheim) or comedy (for Beckett) that will then leave the theatre participants empty, nameless, and ripe for self-nomination. I do not wish to claim that Yeats, Beckett, or Sondheim actively tried to craft a theatre of the Real, but that their works lend themselves to this new type of analysis and staging.

Exposure to the entrails of conventional life is a very Real activity, in the Lacanian lexicon. The Real is the last of the three psychic phases Lacan posits as possible formal shapes for human subjectivity. The first two phases, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, are phases through which we all pass. The Imaginary phase is clearly defined in the *Écrits* as the phase during which the infant recognizes her reflection in the mirror, first joyfully as she believes she is standing alone, and then aggressively, as she realizes that she is supported by a parental figure. During the first portion of the Imaginary phase, there is

the jubilant assumption of his [the infant's] specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to be to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialects of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. (*Écrits* 4)

Appreciation of the specular image, before parental support is detected, introduces the infant to the concept of the *imago*, or Lacan's version of Freud's uncanny. The haunting vision of parental support soon replaces the apparition of self-generation. According to Lacan, "[T]his moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one's semblance and the drama of primordial jealousy, . . . the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations" (*Écrits* 7). This battle with authority, akin to Freud's definitions of the Oedipal Complex, ends in the initiation into the Symbolic order. Notice that Lacan uses the phrase "drama of primordial jealousy" to describe this situation. For Lacan, the movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic is essential to human subjectivity. That transition plays out on the stage of the psyche.

Lacan's Symbolic begins not only with the collapsed fantasy of original autonomy, but with one's initiation into language, or the constantly

mismatched signifying chain. Despite its overwhelming *méconnaissance*, the subject, now laden with the weight of the chain, accepts the patriarchal law-giving figures first apprehended as support. When a subject is part of the Symbolic order, she does not experience the effects of her autonomous drives, but is prey to the capricious desire of the Other. The Other occupies the primary position for the subject, and the subject feels indebted to it for validation. The subject believes the Other desires it, and appropriates that desire in a minor fashion by longing for erotic attachments to *objets petits a*, miniaturized, but incomplete, versions of the Other that can momentarily satisfy the desiring subject. Just as language is a never-ending chain of misunderstanding, so desire is an endless and futile repetition of foreplay, orgasm, and afterglow, sublimated as dramatic structure into rising action, climax, and denouement that is forced to replicate itself because it can never fully satisfy.

The subject's relationship to language is situated in her position in the Lacanian grid of the four discourses. Lacan's discourses—the master's discourse, the analyst's discourse, the university discourse, and the hysteric's discourse—constitute the various ways in which the subject can position herself in relationship to her desire. Desire is always a social relationship, which governs not just the way in which a subject relates to a particular object choice, but also the way she relates to the world as the space housing that object. Lacan writes in typically frustrated fashion, "I can say until I'm blue in the face that the notion of discourse should be taken as a social link (*lien social*), founded on language" (*On Feminine Sexuality* 17).

The master's discourse is based on the false confidence that knowledge and truth are interlinked. Lacan uses Hegel's master/slave dialectic to explain this relationship. The master has knowledge or Symbolic power but is totally reliant on the slave for truth; that truth is based on the actual circumstance that the master can do nothing without the slave, for as the master has allowed the slave to take care of him, he has lost all of his actual potency. Lacan explains that "the slave knows many things, but what he knows even better still is what the master wants, even if the master does not know it himself, which is the usual case, for otherwise he would not be a master" (*Other Side* 32). The heart of the master's discourse is the agreed-upon lie that the person in power is the person who should be in power.

In the university or in academic discourse, power shifts from one person or master to an institution, in this case made up of the former slaves of the master. The students, or in more Lacanian terms, the S2 or slave, is in the position of knowledge. As Lacan points out in *Seminar 20*, this position is doomed to impotence precisely because, as Lacan stated in *The Other*

*Side of Psychoanalysis*, “[t]he university has an extremely precise function, in effect, one that at every moment is related to the state we are in with respect to the master’s discourse,—namely its elucidation” (148). The university discourse assumes that knowledge can be transferred by the formerly subservient position. This assumption, of course, is more accurate, since the slave always knows more than the master.

In the analyst’s discourse, the analyst is in the position of the master, but that position has undergone a total upheaval. The analyst’s discourse is used to expose the falsity of knowledge in the master’s discourse. Lacan writes that it is “distinguished by the fact that it raises the question of what the use is of this form of knowledge which rejects and excludes the dynamics of truth” (*Other Side* 91). The analyst’s discourse is the conduit to the hysteric’s discourse, as it eliminates the power of knowledge and introduces the potential revelation of truth.

The hysteric, in her discourse, is the only subject, in the position of the master, who has access to the truth. The hysteric has the desire for knowledge, not because she believes it, but because she longs for the position of power associated with it. As Lacan explains, “[w]hat hysterics ultimately want one to know is that language runs off the rails concerning the magnitude of what she as woman is capable of revealing concerning *jouissance*” (*Other Side* 34). The hysteric’s discourse seeks to find the limits of knowledge that she can then manipulate into a new way to define herself. From the limit, the hysteric can form her *sinthome*, as she is radically dissatisfied with knowledge as presented to her by the master.

The inability to satisfy is a challenge to the Symbolic. For those not ready to explore another register, desire is constantly, yet futilely, pursued. For others who are ready to explore an alternate psychic experience, the denial of satisfaction leads to the new register of ultimate tension, the Real.

The Real is perhaps so intriguing because it is the last of Lacan’s phases to be explained in his writing, and thus the one least clearly explicated. To enmesh all of Lacan’s hints about the Real throughout his career, the Real is the moment of *jouissance*, or the exquisite mixture of pleasure and pain that locks a subject into eternal tension. Such tension is directly related to the endless circulation of the drive, without the interrupting thrust of desire, making the Real, or its remnant, a scaring force for those who have experienced it.

The Real begins when the subject no longer wishes to pursue false representations, and thus is no longer willing to be defined by the sexual chase of her object choice. The Real also occurs when the name of the father, or the patriarchal order, is recognized as a lack that leaves the subject without

support. At the point of recognition, the subject has also exhausted the limits of logic and Cartesian reason. As Lacan explains in the “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” the cogito exhausts the question it asks until the subject reaches the point that addresses the unthinkable within, or the position of God that Descartes originally theorizes in his *Discourse on Method*. Lacan continues this point in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* when he writes that “the cogito lurches toward a Real” (36), like Yeats’s creation “slouching toward Bethlehem.”<sup>2</sup> Here, the cogito is not only a philosophical concept, but also a term used to remind the reader of the inherent split in the subject. For Descartes, the split is between mind and body; for Lacan, that split is more complicated and occurs between the concept of self as autonomous and the concept of self as subject to the Other. The recognition of the split is the liminal point, or the lintel that supports the Real. The doorway, though, is cluttered and needs to be cleared of Symbolic trash. While Lacan does not offer much insight as to how this ridding process occurs, we can find a good template in Julia Kristeva’s work. In *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva describes the process of abjection as a literal voiding of the body of all waste materials from tears to feces and sexual fluids (*Powers of Horror* 3–5). The power of generation is halted; the subject is no longer interested in reproducing biologically, but in re-producing herself anew. Such re-production of oneself is a terrifically painful process which involves the rejection of all society’s conventions, entrapments, and enjoyments. It is a total abandonment of the representative world, which, when completed, ends in self-nomination or the creation of the *sinthome*, allowing the newly formed subject a form beyond traditional representation.

In *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, Lacan gives some details which help define the Real, especially in terms of Freud’s dream theory. To gloss *The Interpretation of Dreams* briefly, the dream is the fulfillment of a wish that originates in childhood, is repressed, and is then brought back via the day’s residue, or a trigger in present life that acts as the impetus for the dream. The dream’s capacity to fulfill its every wish is limited by the nodal point, or navel, of the dream, which is the barrier to an analyst’s understanding of the wish and a barrier to total fulfillment itself. Lacan takes that nodal point as the entrance to the Real when he explains that the subject uses the dream to “rediscover where it was” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 45). The act of rediscovery, in Real terms, is the act of turning inward to face pre-Oedipal psychic life, or the phantasy struc-

2. W. B. Yeats, “The Second Coming.”

tures that cover the Real. We need to revisit those places, because, Lacan points out, the Real always returns to the same place, making the Real echo the circularity of the drive, instead of the thrust of desire. In this way, the Real is “the obstacle to the pleasure principle” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 167). Such a definition leads the reader to connect the Real with *jouissance*, or the moment of the most extreme and simultaneous pleasure and pain a subject can undergo. Because the Real is not part of the structure of desire, it is able to incorporate previously excluded elements, which “by the fact of its economy, later, admits something new, which is precisely the impossible” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 167).

For the Real to operate, both the subject in and the subjects out of the Real deem the situation impossible. It is nearly unmanageable for the subject approaching the Real to refuse domination by any remnant of the unconscious, which belongs to the Symbolic order. Because the subject’s prior immersion in the *cogito* has placed logic and language at the top of society’s knowledge hierarchy, it is impossible for the Real subject to understand herself. In his most recent work, *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek comments that “the *cogito* is not a substantial entity but a pure structural function, an empty place” (8). As such, the lie of knowledge must exist to hold up a space that can act as a container for the Real when it emerges. The contents of that container can never seep into the “knowing,” or Symbolic, register.

As Lacan states in *Feminine Sexuality*, “The real . . . is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious” (131). Here Lacan is using the term *mystery* with its connotative Christian meaning, as that which must be accepted as a matter of faith. The unconscious can never know the Real, because “in its [ex]sistence outside of the imaginary and the symbolic, it knocks up against them, its play is something precisely in the order of limitation; the two others, from the moment when it is tied into a Borromean knot with them, offer resistance. In other words, the real only has ex-sistence—in rather an astonishing formulation of mine—in its encounter with the limits of the symbolic and the imaginary” (*Le Sinthome* 14). It defies all structures and representations known to the unconscious, and thus cannot be articulated in language. The Real can be present only in material, which Lacan says, in *Television*, is “understood as a grimace of the real” (6). This statement gives readers a clue to Lacan’s final position on the Real. If reality is a grimace of the Real, then from the point of view of the Real, reality must be an unsatisfactory psychic position, as it is only a smirk, a joke, a glimpse at the full truth below the surface.

The Real needs to expel all the refuse of reality, which makes it turn up the corners of its mouth. The fact that the Real engages in what appear to be bodily activities makes the Real akin to an organism, a categorization that carries with it the precariousness of life itself. In *Seminar 11*, Lacan states that fantasy, or the Imaginary, is a screen that protects the Real. If we image the screen as a scrim, or a flimsy white curtain often used as a translucent barrier in theatrical set design, the screen is that which is able to diffuse the blinding light of the Real trying to emerge from the subject.

Lacan was quite interested in depicting such structures and frequently used topological figures from mathematics as diagrams of the interrelationships between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In both *Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety* and *How James Joyce Made His Name*, Roberto Harari reproduces and analyzes these figures with special focus on their relationships to anxiety and *sinthome* formation. As Harari points out, anxiety, for Lacan, is the trigger point, or the Symbolic affect, that cannot be assimilated into the order. Anxiety is the meeting place for Lacan's three psychic registers. The "object" of anxiety is not a physical manifestation, but a goal. That goal is to generate constant motion, but the constant motion itself has no object or limit. Anxiety does not put a subject in touch with her desire but acts as a gateway to the Real by stimulating the drive. As Harari writes, anxiety is "a hinge between *jouissance* and desire" (*Anxiety* 99). Depending on the subject's psychic readiness, the hinge swings either outward to invite back the trappings of the Symbolic, or inward, opening the floodgate of unending drive. This is the point at which Žižek theorizes one can find the parallax. It is the oxymoronic opening that one finds between the Symbolic and the Real:

the parallax of the *Real* (the Lacanian Real has no positive-substantial consistency, it is just the gap between multiple perspectives on it); the parallax nature of the gap between desire and drive (let us imagine an individual trying to perform some simple manual task, say grab an object which repeatedly eludes him; the moment he changes his attitude, starting to feel pleasure in just repeating the failed task, squeezing the object which again, and again, eludes him, he shifts from desire to drive. (*Parallax View* 7)

Žižek shows us that the Real is the brass ring on the carousel of the drive. We, in the Imaginary or Symbolic, will never grasp it, as we circle around, riding the horses of our drives, but we will revel in the process of trying. Before we can enjoy the endless repetition of that process, though, we must embrace the drive.

For us to be able to embrace our drives, anxiety must act as the catalyst for abjection, which results in the creation of *le sinthome*, or the material letter, out of a mound of Symbolic trash.

In *Le Sinthome 1975–1976*, otherwise known as “The Joyce Seminar,” Lacan develops the concept of the *sinthome* in response to Joyce’s writing. Lacan claims Joyce’s writing is the artistic form of the material letter divested of all Symbolic meaning, and now intelligible exclusively to the subject creating it. The concept of the *sinthome* is what makes up for the original lack of the phallus, as it takes the place of the parental naming process. The infant recognizes that she has no phallic authority, and her subjectivity is built around this lack, as she is forced to accept the name by which she is called by her parents. As Harari explains, instead of a subject accepting the name she is given, when trying to escape the Symbolic the subject begins a process of self-nomination, during which she is able to embrace her lack as the thing upon which her subjectivity is based. The creation of the *sinthome* is this process of individual self-generation. The *sinthome* allows a subject to have autonomy over herself. When a subject enjoys freedom, she can never be satisfied because satisfaction relies on an Other; she actively chooses to abandon her desire and throw herself into the widening gyre of her drive. Because the Real and the *sinthome* are transgressive, individualistic creations, no template can be given for how to achieve the Real. But Lacan feels he must offer James Joyce as an example of someone who used writing, the usual tool of the Symbolic, against itself to create a *sinthome* powerful enough for the world to ponder.

Owing to the intensely complex and mysterious nature of the concept of the Real, many contemporary Lacanian critics who work with the concept reveal misunderstandings of its nature. Two of the more recent and misdirected Lacanian critics are François Roustang and Catherine Belsey. Roustang, in *The Lacanian Delusion*, makes the valid point that Lacan’s work is deeply hypocritical. Even as Lacan wants to discredit the master’s discourse, or the speaking position at the top of the Symbolic order, Lacan himself tries to attain that position, making himself into the Cartesian god figure that he ironically criticizes in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Roustang also provides a description of Lacan’s writing style that makes it sound suspiciously like Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic structure. While such variation may be good in literature, Roustang rightly attacks Lacan’s oeuvre for being intentionally elusive. Roustang’s usefulness in providing a critique of Lacan’s work is limited by his gross misreading of the Real. Roustang claims that the Real is “mathematical order” (46) and discusses Boolean logic, but he does not consider the latter and more



important topographical models of the Real Lacan uses to defy such logic. When Roustang claims, “The Real is what is situated outside us, it is the substrate of phenomena; it lies behind appearances and is independent of our consciousness; the Real is being which underlies seeming” (61), he is correct. It seems that Roustang understands that the Real, in being beyond consciousness, might also be beyond the unconscious and thus not subject to human thought in any recognizable form. His assessment fails when he claims that “it [the Real] is rational, which is why it is calculable and amenable to logic” (61). As Lacan states, the Real is impossible; the impossible is what defies logic and logic lies in the conscious, so the Real must not be reasonable at all. If the Real was within the realm of reason, then it would pose no threat to the human psyche and would be readily accepted. Perhaps Roustang wishes to disarm the Real’s power, but by disusing its potency, Roustang denies the transgressive power of humanity and its artistic creations.

Both Roustang and Belsey also classify Lacan’s Real as an anti-Idealist position. Belsey goes on to draw a distinction between Lacan’s Real, as anti-Idealist, and Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of Lacan’s Real, which is Idealist. She explains, “For him [Žižek], the Real constitutes a structured absence, the void, finally empty. In Lacan, by contrast, the Real is represented as emptiness at the *level of the signifier*, but it is not denied; indeed, there is nothing missing in the real itself” (54). This assessment is absolutely correct. The Real is missing nothing because it is the moment of the subject’s instantiation of her newly defined self, whose definition is not based on desire. The new self always lacks, but it relies on drive, which is ironically fulfilled by the lack of the lack. The problem with Belsey’s anti-Idealist positions comes from her equation of that which is outside of the self with the objective. Belsey risks making the Real into something universal and not fiercely individualistic and dependent on the subject. The concept of the Real is anti-Idealist because, even theoretically, it does not rely on a person, but is only interlaced with other concepts of psychic registers that operate as metastructures of the mind. Once the Real is brought down to the subjective level, it is intensely personal and dependent. If the Real was not radically different for each person, then it could be accessed and understood by the unconscious or conscious mind and would lose its transgressive power.

Modern theatre has the drive to get beyond drama’s former conception as a purely representative art. Theatre, because of its innate structure, can never be reproduced. In the Modern theatre, the audience does not watch actors engage in self-nomination, but in a together-but-separate space, all



participants expose themselves to scenarios of the Real that could trigger their own movements into such a space.

Weber comes close to describing Real theatre when he writes that theatre is “the medium of a displacement or dislocation that opens other ways not bound to arrive at a final destination—or at least not too soon” (29). Theatre of the Real allows the audience to forestall repose. To rest is to limit one’s capacity for *jouissance*. While perpetual *jouissance* is nearly impossible, as it is linked to psychosis, some expanded experience of *jouissance* is psychologically beneficial. Real theatre gives the audience an alternative to conventional life, which broadens the audience’s own, even previously discovered, pathways and possibilities. It does so by staging what Peggy Farfan, in *Women, Modernism, and Theater* calls the ob/scene. Her term specifically refers to the staging of lesbian possibilities and homoerotic materials, especially in reference to women. The ob/scene, in Real theatre, is the performance of any action that may exemplify a character’s Real, or lead an audience to its own internal glimmers of the Real.

I do not want to advocate such theatre of the Real as the only true, or even most desirable, form of theatrical experience. Theatre of the Real is not an event for which every theatre-goer is prepared. First, an audience member must have significant exposure to both conventional and avant-garde theatre performances. Second, an audience member must be psychologically prepared to enter into the Real, meaning that she is already willing to begin, or has begun, the process of abjection and seeks an experience of *jouissance*, knowing it will include equal amounts of pleasure and pain. This is not to say that an unprepared audience member at a performance geared toward theatre of the Real will be psychologically damaged. In the best-case scenario, an unprepared audience member will be led to new explorations of her psyche and will perhaps see the value of release from convention. At worst, the unprepared audience member will be so disturbed, disappointed, or confused that she will not venture into the nonconventional theatre world again.

## › LEARNING THE LINES

### *New Theatrical Jargon*

Not all theatre of the Real achieves the same level of *jouissance* or approaches that experience in the same way. To explain the variety of ways in which theatre can approach the Real, I will use the terms *the Missed*, *the Missing*,

and *the Manifest*. The Missed theatre of the Real exposes the lack, or void, at the center of the subject most likely to experience a Real moment. That subject has knowledge that the Symbolic is a façade, but does not have a new self-determined truth. Knowledge without truth positions the subject in the analyst's discourse. The subject of Missed theatre of the Real uses repetition as the unary trait or *sinthome*, but it is too frequently interrupted by an Other to allow itself to spin out of control. This interference leads to a *jouissance* of the Other, which is a compromised form of *jouissance*, related to phallic pleasure instead of to polymorphous perversity. The *sinthome* is not able to manifest itself fully because the energy cathexis of the subject is too pointed or sharply focused on the Other. To use Freud's terminology, transference without countertransference occurs. In pastoral terms, this type of theatre of the Real, made evident in Yeats's plays for dancers, is an *eglio*, or mistake.

Beckett's tragic-comedy displays a second *eglio* of the theatre of the Real. His work, even in its excessive use of language, stages what I call the Missing moment. Beckett revels in the repetition of words or phrases, the only grounding forces which his characters can experience. Such dependence on and trust in language, even when it fails, links to Lacan's description of the master's discourse. The repetition of word, thought, or movement is a formalization of the drive, but frequently is not internalized enough to become an unconscious force. The subject who ponders her repetitiveness and tries to give those repeated words or actions meaning is too mired in the Cartesian split to have a fully Real experience. There is too little energy expended to destroy the conscious thoughts governing the actions, even if and when logical thought is abandoned. There are too many parapraxes, or mistakes, in the repetitive actions, too many variations on a theme to make that action into a *sinthome*. The subject's energy is so excessive, trying to get the repetition right, that it disperses the focus, or materiality, of the potential *sinthome*. The only *jouissance* experienced is phallic, as it is centered on one particular thing or action.

Only when the *sinthome* is allowed to be present on the stage can theatre of the Real be fully Manifest. The manifestation of the *sinthome*, or the dangerous moment that displays the Real on stage, corrects the mistakes made by other characters trying to achieve their own Reals. Manifest theatre of the Real creates a careful, pivotal balance or flux of excess and lack. It makes the void at the center of the subject into a mass of energy that drives the subject. It is related to the hysteric's discourse, which Lacan explains tries to master the master by co-opting his *jouissance* and making it into an experience of surplus *jouissance*, which breaks apart the expecta-

tions of Symbolic sexual economy. The *sinthome* is present on the stage for both characters and audience to see or hear, but not to understand. Sondheim's theatre, especially Fosca's ending shriek in *Passion*, stages the Manifest theatre of the Real.

## › PRELUDE

### *Yeats, Beckett, and Sondheim*

W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, and Stephen Sondheim are three Modern theatre practitioners who stage the ob/scene. W. B. Yeats uses the formal innovation of Symbolist drama, especially in his plays for dancers, most of which were designed, even if not first performed, as drawing-room dramas, to embody the concept of the theatre of the Real. Yeats conceptualizes his own theatrical productions as attempts to erase the boundaries of individual characters and plot in an attempt to transcend traditional dramatic confines and achieve a structure new enough to disrupt his audience. The characters in many of his plays for dancers, especially *Purgatory* and *Resurrection*, are nameless, as is the Hawk-woman in *At the Hawk's Well*. The lack of a name underscores the notion that these characters have already broken away from traditional society and expelled the refuse that society heaps upon them. In *At the Hawk's Well*, the nameless dancer figure never speaks, but simply moves, and her movements become the basis for the other characters to encounter their own Real. The first musician describes the scene as the Hawk-woman dances: "The madness has laid hold upon him now, / he grows pale and staggers to his feet" (*Hawk's Well* ln. 216–18). To be a Real encounter, the madness young Cuchulain experiences must not be a direct result of the dance, but it is the psychic consequence of the dance's ability to awaken in him a repressed traumatic experience that can lead him to the Real. He is viewed as mad because his stance is beyond conventional expectations. The Old Man in the play does not understand this process. He believes the dancer figure should be able to induce the Real, when he exclaims, "She has but led you from the fountain. Look! / Though the stones and leaves are dark where it has flowed, / There's not a drop to drink" (*Hawk's Well* ln. 237–39). To lead him away from the well means, for the Old Man, to have been robbed of a chance at the Real. His mistake highlights the mistake in theatrical expectation that Yeats wants to avoid. Yeats is eager to point out that the experiences in his play's contexts are individual. He

does not want his audience to copy them, but to retain and use their spiritual power. Yeats's use of the occult or supernatural is another formal element employed in his work to differentiate his theatre from that of his predecessors and to give substance to the very idea of the Real. The supernatural most commonly appears as dancer figures. They act as Real structures that cannot be touched and cannot stop the motion they have begun.

Dance in Yeats's drama is not the highly stylized ballet choreography of most dance contemporary with his work. It is, instead, movement designed to be free-flowing and expressive. Dance is the trancelike element within the play that embodies the pull of the drive itself. The other characters in the play, who witness the dance, do not want to imitate its movements, but do admire its ability to transform the dancer. When they do want to imitate the dancer, the outcome is negative. Lazarus does this in *Calvary*, when he says to Christ, "You took my death, give me your death instead" (ln. 53). Lazarus is forced back into society, denied by those who represent the possibility of the Real. If the audience is sufficiently inspired by the dance, it will choreograph its own path to the Real.

The paths to the Real, which the dancer figures take, are grounded in the pastoral tradition. The setting of most of the dancer plays is the natural world and usually operates in mythic time, of either Gallic or biblical origin. Yeats does not, however, employ Realist spectacle to achieve his theatrical goals. Instead of painted backdrops and lifelike set pieces, he frequently uses only pieces of cloth to suggest a setting and its mood. By staging some of the plays in a drawing room, Yeats allows the audience and the actors to have intimate contact with each other, thus implicating the audience in the action and chipping away at the notion that the pastoral is something distant and untouchable. For Yeats's theatre, the pastoral setting is the result, or natural encounter, of actor and audience during a play.

Such contact itself results in a form of eclogue that derives from the content of the play. Within the dancer plays, the figures of the Real battle with the figures who want to co-opt their power. This is the situation that occurs between the Hawk-woman and the Young Man in *At the Hawk's Well*. If the Young Man could achieve his goal and drink from the fountain, he would not achieve the same eternal life as the Hawk-woman. Only the Hawk-woman can have such power because the well is her Real. If the Young Man took water from the well, he would make a mockery of his own quest for the Real by simply enacting a Symbolic mimicry, but he is unaware of that consequence.

The audience, however, is set up, through years of theatrical conditioning, to wish that the protagonist gets his wish; at the beginning of the play, we, as an audience, want the Young Man to succeed by drinking from the well. As the play moves forward, the audience's sympathy for the Hawk-woman grows, and the struggle between audience and actor begins. As we turn against the notion of rooting for the hero, we are able to identify with the new iconoclast, one who works not only against law or institution, but against herself. We open ourselves to experiences of the Real and become outcasts from society and from our self-images, moving agitatedly in our seats.

In Samuel Beckett's theatre, the characters on the stage are the outcasts, but their potential to reach the Real is compromised by their conviction in the power of repetitive words or actions. Beckett's characters are mired in their drives, which should give them incredible access to *jouissance*, but they define the drive in terms of the Symbolic instead of the Imaginary. A drive, which begins with an Imaginary conception, would lead to self-nomination, as fantasies are used as fodder for creating a *sinthome*. Drives that are too mired in the Symbolic are dependent on words as the repetitive forces. Even as the words start to lose their potency for the audience, who hears them repeatedly but sees no accompanying action, the characters still have belief in the power of language.

In *Krapp's Last Tape*, the title character listens to the same recorded story three times, because he falsely believes that somehow the words can manifest for him the situation, namely, sexual consummation that he could not manifest for himself at the time of the original action. Words fail Krapp, a failed writer, who should be able to recognize their insufficiency to bring him joy, but he does not, and foolishly clings to them via his tapes and his career.

Beckett uses the repeated phrase, "time she stops" in *Rockabye*, to a slightly different end. The last time that phrase is uttered, the protagonist of the piece does halt what had been, to that point, the ceaseless rocking of her chair. The protagonist, who has been listening, like Krapp, to painful memories on tape, knows that she cannot gain anything from her masochist repeated listening. She stops the flow of words, but also stops her motion. As she breaks the hold the Symbolic has over her, by casting out language, she also halts the motion of the drive, staged in her rocking, and misses her chance for *jouissance*.

Beckett engenders an ironically barren and desolate pastoral world. The break provided from the conventional pastoral or trite postindustrialist visions of the urban landscape is exciting for the audience, who can see a

new space of freedom. Beckett's characters, however, do not see the liberty offered by, or beyond, their dead spaces. *Waiting for Godot's* Vladimir and Estragon have the choice to leave their self-imposed waiting room or to hang themselves in it, but they do neither. They, unlike the title character of Joyce's "Eveline,"<sup>3</sup> choose to stay in a space which will not afford them any chance of *jouissance*, as they have no new material with which to create a *sinthome*.

The spaces of Beckett's drama are deadened, absurd wastelands, as displayed in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. These three plays, his only performed evening-length works, stage, or directly reference, the outside decimated world. It seems too easy to assume that these landscapes are postnuclear representations. Instead they turn inside out the psyches of the characters who inhabit, or even engender, the spaces. Gogo and Didi, Hamm and Clov, Winnie and Willie, the couples of the three aforementioned texts, want to be out in the world. Gogo and Didi chose to wait for Godot in the forest instead of trying to find shelter; Clov longs to leave his shelter for the world, albeit a ruined one, outside. Winnie burns in the sun, but somehow claims to love it, as she is at least still able to process the fact that she is burning. These cruel, killing worlds display the internalized aggressions of the characters, as they wage a futile war with the Symbolic.

In Beckett's short dramatic works, the landscape is the internal space of the psyche itself, as it struggles against its own Imaginary and its uncanny ghosts. Krapp is taunted by the outcome that he imagines could have occurred with his lover, had he been able to stay faithful to his drive. *Rock-abye's* protagonist wants to expel her internalized mother figure, who has monopolized her daughter's Imaginary creation of her self.

Beckett also presents internal wasted landscapes that show his innovation of a traditional genre, merging the exterior and interior spaces. Both interior and exterior spaces, for Beckett's characters, are doomed to remain unproductive, as they do not allow for growth. Beckett's plays have no set changes, representing the stilted states of his characters' psyches. If they cannot move, either physically or emotionally, then they cannot embark on the endlessly repetitive journey of the drive. They know there is a Real moment, somewhere in the distance, but they cannot arrive at it, and so, instead of fighting against stasis, they fool themselves into believing that

3. Much has been written about the friendship between Beckett and Joyce. Beckett most certainly read and was influenced by all of Joyce's work. "Eveline," found in the *Dubliners*, tells the story of a young woman so oppressed by the routine of her life that she refuses to choose to either leave with her lover or leave him behind.

they will move someday. The audience recognizes their foolishness and laughs at them, which helps to motivate its drive.

Sondheim's musical theatre is also not a theatre that, in practice, expects its audience to enter into the Real. Only an ideal audience can do that, one as highly selected as Yeats's drawing-room audience; instead, the public performances of Sondheim's work aim to expose a wide range of people to new theatrical and psychic possibilities. It may take more than one Sondheim play to open a person to an experience with her own Real, but the appeal of his work allows for such gradual transformations to occur.

Sondheim's theatre is able to get closer to the Real than Yeats's or Beckett's theatre because the merging of music and lyrics in musical theatre, which is serious in nature, without the use of cute chorus girls or contrived plots, accesses the auditory drive in a very Real way. Although he points out that the gaze is a worthy competitor of sound repetition, Lacan writes, "It is because the body has several orifices, the most important of which is the ear—because it has no stop-gap—that what I have called the voice has a response in the body" (*Le Sinthome* 4). Lacan goes on to describe that response as "a call [*appel*] to the real, not as linked to the body, but as difference. At a distance from the body, there is the possibility of something I termed last time resonance or consonance. And it is at the level of the real that this consonance is situated. In relation to its poles, the body and language is what harmonizes [*fait accord*]" (*Le Sinthome* 11).

Because, according to Lacan, the body cannot prevent material from entering the ear, the auditory drive is most vulnerable to assault. Sondheim combines music and lyrics in such an appealing way that the ear welcomes the material and is then assaulted by unexpected form and/or content, pushing the hearer closer to the Real. The material resonates throughout the body, which then harmonizes the new Real material with older Symbolic and Imaginary remains, which allows the hearer to come back from the experience of the Real without being too damaged.

Formally, Sondheim reinvents musical theatre by making it less commercially appealing and more politically outspoken than many of his Broadway contemporaries. Sondheim uses song and dance as means to advance the plot. Like Beckett, Sondheim chooses protagonists who are frequently unlikable, such as those in *Sweeney Todd*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, and *Passion*. The murderously psychotic, selfishly greedy, and disconcertingly ugly are not typical musical theatre heroes. Even Sondheim's master teacher, Oscar Hammerstein, used a socially unacceptable protagonist in only one musical, *Carousel*. After Billy Bigelow, Hammerstein returned to convention with a singing nun in *The Sound of Music*.



Like the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Sondheim's work clearly returns to the pastoral tradition by using pastoral settings in works such as *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods*. In *Sunday*, the pastoral acts as the impetus for the work of art, which in turn traps its subjects in the artist's aesthetic contemplation. In the musical, Seurat's work on his masterpiece, *Sunday on the Isle of la Grande Jatte*, alienates him from his lover and keeps him locked in his own creation. The pastoral is exposed for being the scene of subjugation, although that subjugation is ironically desired. *Into the Woods* presents a pastoral setting of the Real, in which the characters are forced into a natural world, which assaults them with their deepest fears and longings, ultimately showing them the futility of wish fulfillment and favoring the constant drive of the wish itself as the form of the *jouissance* of the Real. The play's last line, "I wish," expresses Sondheim's own drive to keep creating musicals, even when they fail, like the recent *Bounce*, which died in its pre-Broadway trials.

Sondheim's music also employs one of the original notions of eclogue as a song competition. In his music, recitative is adapted into a competitive dialogue, in which several actors are forced to vie with each other for both rhetorical argument and audience attention. For examples, we can recall the witty repartees between Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett, or the angry accusations hurled among Ben, Sally, Buddy, and Phyllis in *Follies*. The nearly unending solo recitative sections of his work, such as Dot's opening of *Sunday in the Park with George*, force the singer to compete with the composition itself. Strings of seemingly endless rhyme, without breath marks, make the singer fight with herself for breath, literally creating tension in her body that is palpable to the audience, no matter how talented the performer. In many Sondheim works, such as *Sunday* and *Follies*, there are moments of climactic cacophony which compete with the harmonic structures that usually govern the work. This cacophony acts like a Brechtian assault on the audience to create a tension that should push the audience toward its Real. Repetition, especially the name "Bobby" in *Company*, also becomes a cacophonous structure, as it disrupts the normal story-telling goal, to reiterate one driving force, a person's identity, which through its countless repetition is lost, thus leaving the character open to create a new one and setting the example for the audience to follow.

Many approaches to the Real in Sondheim rely on staging. In Philadelphia, the Arden Theatre Company brilliantly stages Real Sondheim performances. In its 2000 performance of *Into the Woods*, actors at the Arden carried puppets of their characters with them, as reminders to the audience that story telling is a means of manipulation that imitates the ways



in which society manipulates its participants. The exposure of the façade of the story-telling process in society is essential to making an audience realize that theatre is a way to get from only listening to stories to creating our own stories to tell only ourselves. The 2003 Arden production of *Pacific Overtures* made use of theatre-in-the-round to remind the audience that it, as representative of America, is part of the political climate and can be part of the political choices made. The 2005 staging of *Sweeney Todd* had the entire cast use the seating areas as playing spaces, with Sweeney charging audience members with his razor drawn. By making the audience part of the play, the audience was forced to act, in some cases literally forced to shield itself from assault, in an attempt to showcase that audience and actor should not be in different positions. All present in the theatre are part of a Real life-and-death experience. Sondheim's plays alternate between the whirling intensity of Yeats's dancers and the utterly silly stasis of Beckett's protagonists, allowing them to manifest the theatre of the Real.

## W. B. Yeats

### THE MISSED STEPS OF SALOME'S DAUGHTERS

**I**n both *Plays for Dancers* (1921) and *Wheels and Butterflies* (1934), Yeats channels the figure of the dancer to embody the merger of the muse and the daemon, creating a character type who can simultaneously inspire and terrify. His use of the dancer figure creates one of the first presentations of dance within drama, which was destined to become one of the staples of musical theatre. Unlike drama, though, which relies almost completely on words and silences, “dance creates an immediacy of action that words can impede” (McMillan 140). The dancer figure is a representation of the hysteric, giving body, but not example, to the idea of a non-Symbolic theatrical character and suggesting a close proximity to the Real. The dancer figures are characters who are caught in the motions of their own drives or have reached a state of ultimate, willed separation from society. They are marked in the plays by their singular ability to move; thus, movement becomes the *sinthome*, or self-defining characteristic, of the dancer figure. The dancer figures, however, do not dance for themselves, but always dance in the service of an Other.

Yeats's dancer figures exemplify the “missed” element of Yeats's concept of Modern theatre. To recall chapter 1 of this book, the “missed” is the lack, or it is knowledge without truth. Lacan poses the question “What is truth without knowledge?” in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* (36). He goes on to explain that the position of truth without knowledge does exist

in the form of the enigma, which he likens to the figure of the changeling or “a half body, with the risk of disappearing altogether once the solution has been found” (*Other Side* 36). The dancer is hyper-real, to forestall the inevitable overtaking of her truth by the knowledge of the figure for whom she dances.

She enacts the discourse of the hysteric as she dances. In the hysteric's discourse, the hysterical figure positions herself in relation to the dominant position of the master's discourse. According to Lacan, “It is around the symptom that the hysteric's discourse is situated and ordered” (*Other Side* 37). It is important to remember that the symptom, not the *sinthome*, is the thing around which the hysteric situates herself. If the hysteric centered her energy on her own *sinthome*, she would be free, but as she is still marginally tied to the master, she chooses her symptom as her default position. Lacan goes on to explain, “If this place [the hysteric's discourse] remains the same, and if in a particular discourse this place is that of the symptom, this will lead us to wonder whether the same place is that of the symptom when it is in use in another discourse” (*Other Side* 37). The site of the symptom or its staging is the dance itself. The dance, from that position, is able to suggest the position of the Real that Yeats does not fully allow to enter his plays. He prefers to suggest the Modern condition, which forecloses on the Real as it approaches in a pathetic version of self-punishment for the human condition, which is always split and unsettled.

## › CONTRADICTIONS AND CONTINGENCIES

The duality of daemon and muse, terror and inspiration, found in each dancer figure is a condensed embodiment of Yeats's complex theories of drama. Three great dichotomies exist within Yeatsian drama. Yeats's plays are plagued with the seeming contradiction between his affinity for aristocracy and coterie drama and his longing to create a national theatre built, at least partially, on Celtic peasant mythology. As Yeats's plays demonstrate, however, Yeats does not perceive a contradiction between coterie and peasant drama. Yeats believed that the former peasant class was the aristocracy of mythic times; they were the people best able to embody Irish nationalism. Yeats feels that in his historical moment, members of the aristocracy are not best equipped to carry on the fight for nationalism, and he longs to merge contemporary characters and audience with peasant sensibilities.

The second contradiction commonly identified in Yeats's drama centers on the tenuous hierarchy of words and action. As Richard Ellman points out in his biography, *Yeats: The Man and the Mask*, "Yeats himself is a contradiction of reverie and action" (2). In his poem "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," Yeats most directly addresses this profound divide of character. The self is the earthbound, mask-wearing component of the human person who "is content to live it all again" (Finneran ed. ln. 57), whereas the soul, prefiguring the great question of "Among School Children," states, "For the intellect no longer knows / Is from *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known*—" (Finneran ed. ln. 35–36). That "great question" is found in Yeats's famous lines, "O body swayed to music / O brightening glance / How can we know the dancer from the dance?" McMillan explains that these lines resonate for all dance in theatre as "[t]he meaning of the dance is the dancer engaged in the dance" (141). The repetitive circularity of McMillan's phrase is remarkable. It points to the whirling of the dancer figure as she creates a centrifuge, pulling in all surrounding elements to create one new one. All is equal to the dancer as she dances, just as the soul is unable to distinguish differences in connotation and possessions. The dead fuse together idiosyncratic differences because, to them, meaning is unimportant, yet that meaning remains significant to the living. While Yeats did not have Lacan's terms, it is feasible to consider an equation between the dead soul and the Real character, as both are figures who cease to function in society. Despite the apparent differences in Yeats's dramatic approaches between those plays he staged for the Abbey and those intended for drawing-room audiences, their essences are the same. Each play, regardless of form, is intended to function in the same fashion as Yeats's landscapes; as Paul de Man in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism* claims, the plays give a "pattern of motion . . . with a final drop into nothingness" (de Man 135). Whether stories of contemporary Irish nationalism, mythic reconfigurations, or religious allegories, all of Yeats's dramas stage the instability and changes of state inspired by action, regardless of the actor involved. By making action primary, Yeats upholds Aristotle's ancient *Poetics*, at least in this one respect.

The third seemingly unresolved difference found in Yeats's dramatic body of work is one identified by Gordon Armstrong as "the failure of W. B. Yeats to develop a dramatic technique for dealing with dissociated phases of consciousness as they are, or can be, connected with normal experience" (136). Yeats, however, does not indicate this dissociation is a problem, because he makes no attempt to create a realistic drama that would require the explanation or justification of the "phases of consciousness" or the blurring of the lines between psychic registers. Yeats seems

to suggest that the only way to redeem oneself in the Modern world is to, in fact, eliminate these hard-lined distinctions. In his introduction to his collected plays, Yeats asserts that the very purpose of his drama is to rid the theatre of conventions. He states, "I wanted to get rid of the irrelevant movement, the stage must become still that the words might keep all their vividness and I wanted vivid words" (*Collected Plays* 23). This paring down that Yeats demands is an effort that removes false constructs or distinctions as they limit potential, but Yeats's words create another problem. The reader wonders how a playwright who longs to eliminate movement writes his best works for dancers. If Yeats's dancer figures are hysterical and they are governed by a symptom which they simultaneously want to embrace and escape, then they are both the silence and the word, the merger of all that sparkles and conveys non-Symbolic meaning.

Yeats's dramatic characters are not fully developed psychological portraits, as are the characters of many of his Realist contemporaries such as Ibsen, O'Neil, or even Wilde. Instead, Yeats's characters are reduced to one particular trait, equated with a specific goal. Such condensation increases the potency of each character's actions and prefigures Lacan's *sinthome*, or the uninary trait of the individual in the Real. For the dancer figures, that trait is the motion of the dance, which is the aim or the tract which the dancer figure's drive takes. As Lacan states, "The satisfaction of the drive is reaching one's Zielk, one's aim" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 165). That aim, or uninary trait, is the outcome of the subject's self-directed thrust into her drive. The drive of the character, though, must not be confused with a goal or conclusive outcome. The drive is the sustained motion of the character's physical and mental projections of the self. The formation of the *sinthome* allows each person, or character, the chance to project an image of self derived from the self. This *sinthomatic* creation, then, need not be tragic or even serious, but it can be quite playful and entertaining as in the manic *elation* that Lacan describes as being the tone of Joyce's *sinthomatic* work, *Finnegans Wake*. Yeats's *sinthomatic* characters, however, do not frequently display this potential amusing nature, although more of the figures in Beckett's and Sondheim's works do.

The hero and dancer figures of Yeats's drama are exclusively defined by their self-instantiated relationship to one drive. For the Young Man of *At the Hawk's Well*, it is achieving immortality by drinking from the well; for John Corbet of *Words upon the Window Pane*, it is proving or disproving the presence of the occult. The characters and their actions become Real because there is no subplot or history. The characters are hyperpresent and fixated on and in their drives. As David Richman reminds us in *Passionate*

*Action: Yeats' Mastery of Drama*, personality makes passion individual, but Yeats did not want the "intricacy and detail of ordinary life to limit characters" (36). The nuances of fully developed characters would trap the audience in the minutiae of daily life, reminiscent of the Symbolic, and thus limit the play's transgressive potential.

Instead of the conventional nature of mimesis, Yeats's plays lead to what he terms "tragic reverie." This state or mood requires the loss of character-driven narrative, which is sacrificed to lyricism, according to John Rees Moore in *Masks of Love and Death: Yeats as Dramatist*. Moore terms the compression of personality in Yeats's plays the building of a "master image" (9), which is again a direct correlation to Lacan's *sinthome*. The usage of the term "master image" at first makes Yeats's usage of the mask sound remarkably like Roberto Harari's version of the Lacanian *sinthome*,<sup>1</sup> which states that the *sinthome* is a formulation of the psyche that makes up for the lacking phallus, or the master signifier, of the Symbolic order. Since Yeats does not believe in primary images or any one dominating, natural image, which using de Man's definition "starts from the perception of an actual thing" (152), such an image would be too mimetic for Yeats's plays or the version of the *sinthome* found within the plays. Instead of the image, according to de Man, the emblem is the most important characteristic of Yeats's writing. The emblem is that which has "its meaning by a traditional and not by a natural right" (165) and is equated with the divine. In Yeats's *A Vision*, each human being is endowed with the ability to be his own god figure or emblem that resembles Yeats's "self-born" entity, a form akin to the *sinthome*. Thus, the Yeatsian *sinthome* is the result of the recognition that the phallus is unnecessary. A subject in the Symbolic believes the image of the phallus holds his psychic well-being together or binds the rings of the Borromean knot. Yeats's dancer figures know that the phallus is a myth, and it is the *sinthome* which holds together the knot. The Yeatsian hero does not need a "master image" or individual beyond the self to help create his identity. Instead, the Yeatsian hero uses his internal modes of self-generation to formulate his presentation. He becomes his own daemon.

The donning of masks in many of Yeats's plays, especially those deriving from the Japanese Noh tradition, helps simultaneously to eliminate idiosyncrasy, particularly of the actor himself, while creating a fiercely stylized character. James Flannery in *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre* claims that "donning a mask . . . make[s] a virtue out of the war of 'incompatibles' that prevented 'Unity of Being'" (13), but I would argue the opposite is cor-

1. See Harari's *Lacan's Seminar on "Anxiety": An Introduction*.

rect. The usage of masks removes the physical particularities of each actor playing the role, condensing the actor's portrayal with the text's lyric intent to achieve a being that is, in fact, made whole through the addition of a new artificial element.

The use of masks assists in another Yeatsian dramatic demand, his desire for "tragic pleasure," which merges disparate elements of performance and character on the stage. By condensing and reducing physical attributes into the mask, the playwright, with the scenic director, is able to construct physical presentations of character that totally support that playwright's vision.

Yeats's associations with theatre practitioners Edmund Dulac and Edward Gordon Craig help Yeats to realize on the stage his concept of Unity of Being. Drawing on the Wagnerian practice of unified presentation, Yeats sought ways of making his plays completely integrated and interrelated presentations. Even in an integrated production, however, one element must be the primary motivation or governing aesthetic concept. Recent analysis by David Richman in *Passionate Action: Yeats' Mastery of Drama* states that Yeats "advocated the word as the theatre's most important element" (19). While Yeats's plays certainly display admirable attention to diction and verse, their construction reveals an element more essential than the spoken word. If we stretch Hartman's comments outlined in chapter 1, we can assert that not only the written word but also the articulation of the written word will always be limited in Lacanian usefulness by its desire to heal the wounds it creates. In Lacanian terms, the spoken word belongs to the Symbolic order and thus does not have the transgressive power with which Yeats wants to endow his plays. Instead, Yeats, especially in his use of ritualized theatricality as a connection to the sacred rituals of the occult, gives ultimate primacy to movement that acts like the drive. Paul de Man in *The Rhetoric of Romanticism*, as we have seen, claims that Yeats's poetic landscapes give "a pattern of motion" (135). The Old Man in *At the Hawk's Well* describes to Cuchulain the dance, or action, that precedes the running of the well: "It was her [the guardian of the well] mouth, and yet not she, that cried. / It was that shadow cried behind her mouth" (ln. 185–86). Words are useful for description, but when the well is ready to bubble again, and the Guardian is ready to dance, there are no words. Even the voice is detached from the figure, acting not as its speaker, but as its conduit. Words, in Yeats's dancer plays, fail in the face of potent action. Words belong to the realm of desire, or the wish for action, while motion belongs to the realm of the drive, or engagement with the wish itself.

When directing his own plays, Yeats tried to make the voice into an agent of motion, or the drive, by instructing his actors to use the “subtle monotony of voice which runs through the voice like fire” (Flannery 201). The vocal outcome of such a demand must have sounded something like the low rumble of an approaching avalanche or the constant lapping of the waves on the shoreline. The rhythm and consistency would gain primacy over meaning, rendering definition and syntax unimportant and giving significance to sound itself. In her early work, especially *Desire in Language*, Julia Kristeva identifies the echolalia, *la langue*, or pre-linguistic babble that occurs between mother and infant. She goes on to assert that the conversational language of adults can never possess or convey the same intensity and intimacy as *la langue*, but poetic language, especially in its attention to rhythm, can. She goes on to claim that “poetic language pursues an effect of *singular truth*” (Kristeva 146). Since Kristeva did attend Lacan’s seminars and draws extensively on his theories in her writing, it is quite a small step to connect that *singular truth* to the *sinthome*. Through verse, combined with his specialized vocal presentation, Yeats’s plays, as originally staged, were able to exemplify the *sinthome* or *singular truth*. The *sinthome* itself is not composed of a single trait, action, or residue; it acts as an amalgamation of many disparate instances that allows the subject recognition of the failures of the governing Symbolic and their personal Imaginary worlds. That is not to claim that the character whose *sinthome* is displayed understands or wills, in any symbolically comprehensible way, what she is doing. Again, as Kristeva points out, “the artist speaks from a place where she is not, where she knows not” (*Desire in Language* 242). The Guardian of the Well occupies that place; the unknown voice produces fear in the Old Man. The Old Man fears the Guardian because she is able to produce something that emanates from beyond herself, or his perception of her. Her *sinthomatic* presentation causes his apprehension as she is able to access all that he is denied. The operative key to Yeats’s vocal demands is obviously actresses, trained as singers, who can perform the required technique without calling attention to it. In the voices of both Maud Gonne and Florence Farr, Yeats found satisfaction.

Yeats’s dramaturgy is essentially minimalist, to gain the greatest intensity of presentation. Flannery describes his style as “relatively uncomplicated though compelling dramatic situations within ritualistic context” (83), with the “appeal to his audience on both a conscious and unconscious level simultaneously” (83). The appeal of ritual also leads Yeats to appreciate Edward Gordon Craig’s development of the acting style of the Über-marionette. The actor abandons himself in total service to the play-



wright in much the same way Yeats demanded that his actors abandon their natural speech patterns in favor of his vocal style. Such acquiescence appealed to Yeats because it supports the idea that the playwright is the most important figure in theatre, and it presents an actor in body, totally void of preconceived meaning or interpretation. The actor himself is abject. As such, Craig states, “The Über-marionette will not compete with life—rather, it will go beyond it” (Kolacatoni et al. ed. 154). The actor, as “it,” is no longer human, but is an empty shell and represents the first stage in moving toward the Real. While Yeats certainly did not have the Real in mind, he did want theatre to be a means for the Irish citizenry to realize their true selves as related to Irish nationalism. The true Irish citizen, one who merges intense nationalistic loyalty with fierce individualistic assertions, rarely exists beyond mythology or the stage. To give his audience examples of what they should strive to become, Yeats creates a theatre that merges feminine space and truth, which predates Lacan’s assertion that “truth is firstly a seduction, intended to deceive you” (*Other Side* 185). The feminine space reveals its truth as it tempts its audience into communion with it, so that the audience member remains rapt in the dance that clears the way for a truth that the protagonist is always doomed to miss.

Drawing primarily on Julia Kristeva’s concept of abjection and Hélène Cixous’s theories of theatre, I define the feminine space as the edge of womanhood, the border of abjection where a woman rids herself of the refuse of the Symbolic order, or phallic society, so as to begin a process of creating a new person via the construction of the *sinthome*. Still relying on the Other as a means of allowing the woman engaged in the process of abjection to see herself, Kristeva describes the process as one in which “they see that ‘I’ am in the process of becoming an other at the expense of my own death. During that course in which ‘I’ become, I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs, of vomit” (3). We see from this passage that abjection is localized, not on the body, but on that which the body expels. The waste material of a woman becomes the fertilizer for her new growth. Abjection can then be considered the Real pastoral, as it uses elements of nature in their most unsanitized and raw states. Such pastoral elements may be disorienting, or even repulsive, but they bring a person closer to the Real by allowing her primitive sensory access to those substances that cannot be governed by society, no matter how much society tries to impose its rules.

Abjection alone, however, is doomed to fail because there is not sufficient distance placed between the abject object and the person in abjection. The person in abjection, without constant reminders of the circulation of the drive connecting the person to the Real, will wallow in the

abject material, unable to fully break her link with that refuse. This lack of distance between abject subject and object is what causes tragedy in Yeats's drama. Yeats purposefully makes his characters miss their chances for distance to show the danger of overstimulation targeted at someone else's pleasure. The character who misses her opportunity to create the new pastoral space is the same dancer figure who moves for an Other. Abjection, especially in Yeats, can be considered the Real pastoral wasteland, as it uses biological elements to bring a person closer to the Real by allowing her primitive sensory access to those substances that cannot be governed by society, no matter how much society tries to impose its rules.

The new female growth that arises out of abject material is not rebirth or metaphorical springtime of perennial revitalization. It is an entirely new creation. For that reason, the woman must experience her own death. In its literal sense, death may end the cycle of adherence to the patriarchy and the expectations that order puts on women, but it does not leave much hope for a physical future. Cixous gives us the theatre as a way for a woman to experience her own death, through the catharsis resulting from the stage experience. For Cixous, theatre "gives back to us: the living part of death; or else the deadly part of life" (Sellers 153). Theatre is a sacred space that allows the audience to think about death and experience it vicariously, emotionally, and psychically without enduring the biological finality of the act itself. Yeats provides several interesting examples of figures resurrected from the dead in his first collection of plays for dancers. The first is the figure of Cuchulain in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, and the second is Lazarus in *Calvary*. The resurrected dead figures in these two plays react to their resurrections in opposite ways. Cuchulain is thrilled to be returned to life after being held in the grips of the Sidhe, and rejoices in the arms of his lover. This convention reaction adheres to the audience's expectations.

## › YEATS'S DEAD MEN WALK

In his second dancer play, Yeats presents the hero Cuchulain, hovering between life and death while his wife and lover join forces against the Sidhe to bring him back to life and save him from his would-be daemon lover. Neither Emer, Cuchulain's wife, nor Eithne Inguba, his mistress, is a well-rounded figure. Instead, each takes the form of one psychic quality, or comes close to being defined by a *sinthomatic* characteristic. Their singular defining characteristics go beyond limits and stereotypes because

the characters themselves are beyond a society which acknowledges such things. The space of the play is a mythic world, in which the confines of society are nonexistent. Emer, the older woman, embodies contemplation as she is able to create the plan to save him, but she is not able to carry it out. In that way, Emer also represents unsatisfied desire that longs to use another figure, Eithne Inguba, to satisfy her desire. Eithne Inguba is pure action, or drive, but she is not self-directed. Instead, she is prey to Emer's plot. Neither woman can achieve her goal, to bring Cuchulain back to life, without the other. It seems that Yeats's work is claiming that desire and drive need each other to achieve a goal, but what the play actually demonstrates is that each of these two female characters acts as an audience member experiencing a death staged before them. Emer believes that she, acting as director, has power over both Eithne Inguba and the Sidhe, but she is mistaken. At the end of the play, she learns that the only way she can achieve her desire is to subject herself to the will of another. She must give in to the figure of Cuchulain, possessed by the Sidhe, and shun him. Only when she concedes her power can she attain her wish. She is laid bare but is not abject, because the cry she issues is not of her own volition. While the release of fluids of any kind associated with Kristevian abjection can, especially in violent and aggressive instigation, be instigated by another, the state of abjection must be self-generated. In simplified terms, abjection is not just the fluid release but the psychological drainage process that accompanies the physical loss. Such a psychological state can come only through the volition of the subject. Without such willing adherence, as in Emer's case, abjection fails. Thus, Yeats reminds his audience that the only true freedom, or means to attain one's passion, is through one's self-directed actions. The play shows that characters who miss their chances at new expression of definition after abjection are doomed to tragedy. Emer's is a tragedy of the missed, because she is fated to sacrifice herself for her Other as she encourages her husband's desire for another at the play's end. If she no longer desired her husband and if his shifted desire brought her freedom, her choice would be positive, but she still longs for him, and this desire is doomed by her missed chance to escape desire altogether.

Unlike Cuchulain's joyous return from the underworld, Lazarus, in *Calvary*, is angry about his resurrection. Instead of exultation and gratitude, he demands, "You took my death, give me your death instead" (*Calvary* 331). Lazarus goes on to explain, "Alive I could never escape your love. . . . You dragged me to the light as boys drag out / A rabbit when they have dug its hole away" (*Calvary* 331). In the mytho-Christian world of the play, death assumes an afterlife, or a new space of generative possibility. That place,

according to Lazarus, is one not buried under the “burden of love,” which suffocates the potential of the individual to achieve mastery over himself. Love forces submission to a master, and Lazarus, in death, temporarily conquers that pressure to surrender. When Lazarus is awakened by Jesus, Yeats creates a character who is forced by an Other to miss his opportunity for self-assertion. The play reflects Yeats’s massive distrust of purely Christian teachings and stages the problem and result of blindly adhering to expectation and tradition. In *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, the title character misses her opportunity for freedom from desire by showing her rival how to arouse that object of desire to return; in *Calvary*, it is the raised man who is forced to miss his opportunity to escape the limits of love and desire. Yeats uses the action of rising from the dead as a single step or miniature of the dances he stages more fully elsewhere in these two plays.

## › TREADING ON THE TRUTH

Dance is Yeats’s most prominent form of action. Toni Bentley, a Balanchine dancer, addresses the feminine space of the theatre, or encounter with death, that is experienced most readily through the action of the dance. Whether performing the steps of ballet or burlesque, she claims the dance is “about removing our self-directed will in order to reveal the unseen, the unspoken, the feared, and the desired” (Bentley 6). Bentley’s concepts are a contemporary refashioning of comments made by Yeats’s contemporary, Isadora Duncan. Since Duncan was romantically involved with Edward Gordon Craig, it is likely that some of her ideas were filtered down to Yeats. In her recent book, *Women, Modernism and Performance*, Peggy Farfan reminds readers that Duncan disliked the traditional choreography of the ballet and musical theatre because, she claimed, it encouraged female subjection. Duncan’s reactions to Auguste Rodin’s comments on her work reveal the origin of this opinion. Rodin commented to her that dance is a form of the quintessential realization of the female form. That form is the material from which male artists create.

Despite Yeats’s sometimes ambivalent attitude toward women in his poetry, his dancer figures consistently adhere to the first part of Rodin’s comments, the part Duncan believed. Yeats, like Duncan and Bentley, believed in choreography that would allow the female figure to express herself in a fiercely unique and untried, perhaps nonreplicable, pattern. Yeats’s texts provide short descriptions of the dances he envisioned, but

there is no dance notation or record of specific choreography. In Yeats's Noh dramas, like *At the Hawk's Well*, the choreography was left up to the dancer himself.

*The Only Jealousy of Emer* is again a useful play to illustrate the fierce self-direction of the dancer. In this play, the title character is unable to dance or act because she will not relinquish her desire; she chooses to maintain it by working toward Cuchulain's resurrection. The self-direction of which Bentley speaks is actually the guidance of our internal censor, or the Other or phallic law, guiding us to act in a socially prescribed manner. To abandon that, to get beyond the law into the realm of the soul, a realm in which a woman has "power and safety within her own circumscribed world" (Bentley 4), would entail the creation of Real pastoral space, where woman can be herself without recourse to preconception or desire.

Theatre, the region of the object which allows us to know death, becomes the thicket from which truth can emerge. My notion of truth is directly indebted to Alain Badiou's *Ethics*, in which he theorizes that a person does not become a subject until she has encountered an event of truth. Badiou begins by defining truth as multiplicity: "There is not, in fact, one single Subject but as many subjects as there are truths, and as many subjective types as there are truth procedures" (Badiou 28). If no two people are alike, which in Lacanian terms is accurate, since no two people have the same *sinthome*, then no two people can have the same truth event which will shock them into subjectivity, the position from which they can live their self-defined lives.

As Badiou states, "the subject of truth as pure *desire of self*" (56) is not easy for any person, especially a woman, to accept. Badiou's "desire of self" seems reminiscent of Yeats's "passion," a quality which he required of all his tragic actors. Yeats believed, despite his affinity for Craig's Über-marionette, that each actor relies on both her personality and instincts as the basis upon which she builds her performance. Speaking specifically about Olivier, Yeats claims the best tragic actor should be so focused "on the dialectic within his own soul" (Flannery 194) that he forgets the audience. The intense solipsism required of the performer can lead, in theatre of the Real, to a position of truth, not for the character, but for the actor, as that person uses performance as an opportunity to delve into his own soul. Because theatre lives, like a *sinthome* itself, its nuances are nonreplicable; thus, an individual performance act becomes truth itself, even though its psychic complement, the drive, requires repetition.

In Yeats's work, at least as exemplified by the plotlines of many female characters, it is more difficult for a woman than for a man to find a truth. A

woman has been socially conditioned to desire others or, even more accurately, to desire that others fulfill their desires. We can again use *The Only Jealousy of Emer* as our reference point. The title character cannot become a subject and does not find truth because her desire to bring Cuchulain back to the world of the living is not solely for her pleasure. She sacrifices herself to give him new life. Thus, she denies her own subjectivity. An actor performing that role must use it as an example of how not to act instead of an illustration of freedom.

For a woman to obtain a subject position, she must be made abject by the visceral knowledge that, through facing death, she can begin to desire herself when she encounters truth, a singular event so dramatic that it forever alters her concept of self and allows her to be a subject for herself and not a subject for others. It is important to remember that the knowledge a woman has here is not that of intellectual comprehension, but that of the intimate working of her sexuality in both physical and psychological form. What one woman may find extreme, another woman may find tame. Such are the intended actions of the dancer figures in Yeats's plays.

It is such a seemingly tame quest for knowledge via which the subject can assert herself that Yeats presents in "Michael Robartes and the Dancer." The female figure in the poem is like an anti-muse for the provincial, stifling male figure, determined to thwart the young female character's drive toward subjectivity. Robartes, in this poem, is closely related to Yeats's own ironic mask, whereas the dancer figure is loosely based on Iseult Gonne, daughter of Maud Gonne, Yeats's long-time obsession. Yeats had also shown a brief romantic interest in Iseult. In the poem, although scholastic learning is usually considered an element of the Symbolic order, the female speaker's longing for it is so great that it becomes akin to her *sinthome*, something that, if she can attain it, will define her uniqueness. The male figure acknowledges this fact, as he tries to keep her from learning. To her unadorned plea, "May I not put myself to college?" (ln. 18), the male speaker answers:

Go pluck Athena by the hair;  
 For what mere book can grant a knowledge  
 With an impassioned gravity  
 Appropriate to that beating breast,  
 That vigorous thigh, that dreaming eye?  
 And may the devil take the rest. (ln. 19–24)

His language, heavy with a caustic use of allusion and imagery, through

negation, depicts the image of a more typically adorned woman, bringing to light the poem's deep irony. The male figure, so opposed to female intelligence, allows the crafty female figure to disarm him so that he gets trapped in the image of sexuality he envisions. The female dancer figure is able to co-opt the male voice as she takes knowledge and makes it her own, leaving the confused male figure in her shadow. As she rids herself of all the typical syntactic associations of female voice, she practices verbal abjection. The male speaker, too mired in tradition to really escape, is left to wallow in the puddles of her disregarded language. Encountering the truth, however, is not enough, according to Badiou, for a woman to maintain her position as subject for self. She must then remain loyal to the event by enacting truth procedures or ways of living her new life so as to remain on the border of abjection, in the shadow of death.

The woman who has experienced a truth event has had the experience of the feminine *jouissance*. The *jouissance* of woman is, however, an ironic position, for it is one that can be set only in relief against an Other. Lacan explains that "what a woman has to deal with, insofar as we are able to speak about this, is this *jouissance* that is her own and is represented somewhere by a man's omnipotence, which is precisely where a man, when he speaks, when he speaks as master, discovers that he is a failure" (*Other Side* 154). The truth of a woman is that her self-definition can be recognized only in the crumbling of her master. For a woman to remain loyal to her truth and acknowledge her experience with the Real, she must always exist in the feminine space on the edge of abjection and force the downfall of her former object of desire. When the truth event ends, the master must collapse while the hysterical dancer looks on. Yeats needs his master figures to live on potently, even if doomed, to expose the underlying tragedy of Modernism, so the dancer figure cannot remain loyal to her truth. In the moment of the truth event itself, she must never stop the whirling der-  
vish of her dance. She never reaches socially prescribed maturity, which would mean literal death, but stays in a holding pattern of intensification, which carries with it all the pain of growth. The dancer figure is then a pastoral impossibility, a figure of immortality, like the Guardian of the Well, who exists in nature but radically apart from its laws. In this state, she has missed her opportunity to generate something new, as she is limited by her immaturity. This is the missed chance to make the dancer's body, as her *sinthome*, into a space for new creation.

Yeats's dancer figures are the daughters of Salome, women who live on the edge. They have experienced their own truths and, through their dances or equivalent actions, stage the theatrical death. The witnesses of



the dance, either other actors or audience members, are not to follow its steps precisely, but use the dance as the template which must be modified for each person's specific needs. The dancer figures are the positive version of Yeats's "Second Coming"; as we see them "[t]urning and turning in the widening gyre" (Finneran ln. 1), anxiety acts as a witness that does not derive from our fear of an ending, but from our trepidation about a new beginning.

As the daughters of Salome, the dancer figures are the silent royalty born of the abject material streaming from Salome herself. Until Oscar Wilde's play of the same name, Salome had "never been herself but always in bondage, serving men's ideas, desires, and fears about the erotic woman" (Bentley 19). As part of the myth, Salome was the ironic antithesis of Toni Bentley's self-possessed female dancer. Through Oscar Wilde's interpretation, Salome gains the assertiveness she needs to fall tragically into her own demise. In Wilde's drama, Salome is a conflicted woman longing to be virginal, like the moon she admires, while expressing a profound, all-encompassing desire for John the Baptist. In her attempt to consummate that desire, by kissing his severed head, Salome's tears mix with the Baptist's blood. Passion and fidelity meet in the merger of abject material, and out of that mingling is born Yeats's figure of the dancer, a female aptly described by Kermode in *Romantic Image* as "unity of being represented . . . so complete as to be unattainable" (71). What Kermode identifies as image is, somewhat confusingly, what de Man defines as emblem. The image, for Kermode, is a nonorganic entity that springs from the author's creation of himself and focuses attention on itself as a nearly divine leitmotif and not a natural mimetic image.

Kermode goes on to explain that "[t]he dancer here reconciles antithetical movements: the divisions of soul and body, form and matter, life and death, artist and audience" (72). Removing the dancer figure from the Symbolic order makes her an emblem of the divine occult and places her in her own female space. She is able to realize a truth, that the artificiality of binary distinctions is unnecessary. We can broaden the definition and function of the "romantic image" of the dancer that Kermode wants to explain by saying that she is the image of wholeness, the simultaneous link to past tradition and future illumination. As she dances, she overwhelms time. The dancer, via that ability to overwhelm time, unifies past, present, and future, essentially making time into space. She takes time out of the Symbolic order, governed by man, and spatializes it, making it subject only to contingent pastoral caprices. The spatialization of time links to Lacan's concept of the drive, as the drive ignores temporality by



its very persistence. This concept is linked to Lacan's image of the drive as montage, "which, at first, is presented as having neither head nor tail—in the sense in which one speaks of *montage* as in surrealist collage" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 169). Montage is lack of beginning, and ending is atemporal and then overcomes the same obstacles which the dancer figure overcomes. The dancers' successes in the plays give witness to the positive action of merging past and future in the present as a way to manifest and continue one's own particular truth. Truth itself is not found in the continuum of time, but is located in an episodic pastoral moment which must constantly be repeated as a theme, with minor variations. The paradox of using the non-natural emblem to create a pastoral or natural space cannot be ignored. Because this pastoral space is one linked to the Real, a position in which the subject is her own father and her own god, the emblematic tie to the divine is necessary. The emblem allows the imagery and language to merge into one consistent presentation, while the temporal and spatial elements split to allow a gap in the social order to open and create a place for the dancer to reside.

The vast majority of Yeats's plays, especially the dancer dramas that will be explored individually now in more detail, do not focus on characters who attain, or even have the ability to attain, the Real. Instead, Yeats's dancer figures are gateway figures, or compromise formations, who can demonstrate *sinthomatic* singularity, and in some cases maintain their own truths, but whose existence is still hampered by the intrusion and backward pull of characters not yet ready to accept the Real. They are figures who miss the chances they create. John Rees Moore describes Yeats's dancer plays as compressed, compact, reduced, and intensified "morsels" (193). It is useful to visualize them in their own theatrical terms, as a form which through the intensity of their language and character becomes the spot around which the dancer figure, or the drive, turns. That form is also visually realized in Yeats's concept and presentation of the pastoral landscape, which reflects tenuous middle ground.

The majority of Yeats's dancer plays are set in the wasteland. The inhospitable clime of *At the Hawk's Well* is the most obvious pastoral setting. As Moore points out, the pastoral conventions, represented by the well, are for Yeats mostly empty and dry (204) and mimic the interior worlds of the characters who come to reside in them (202). In *At the Hawk's Well*, Moore's claim is easily justified. The Old Man, who lives at the well, is only a shell of a subject with no real ambition or drive. He claims to want the water more than anything, but he warns the Young Man against piercing his foot to stay awake, because such an action would produce pain. If the Old

Man were truly committed, he would welcome pain that would fill his emptiness with something; instead, he chooses to leave his emotions vacant.

Death, or near-death, is the most common and dangerous pastoral element that recurs in Yeats's dancer plays. Communication with the figure of death in each dancer play is the only means for the other characters, and subsequently the audience, to approach the Real, but as the living characters engage with death or its representative form, the living characters draw the dead back to life, even if that life is not welcomed. The pastoral form, then, is not hell or paradise, but purgatory, an unsettled and unsettling space whose beneficial quality in Real terms is its status as a borderland.

## › PASTORAL PEEPS AND SQUAWKS

Yeats's first dancer play, *At the Hawk's Well*, was originally performed in Lady Cunard's drawing room on April 21, 1917 (Jeffares 86), but not published until 1921 (Clark and Clark 689). It is the story of the young Cuchulain seeking eternal life at a well spring guarded by a dancer costumed as a hawk. The play is meant to have musical accompaniment, and all performers—three characters and three musicians—either wear masks or wear make-up to give the illusion of masks. It is the first of Yeats's plays to employ elements of the Japanese Noh theatre (Jeffares 83), to which Pound had introduced him. Since the Irish audience was not, however, familiar with the usage of masks in the Noh theatre, the immediate reference for mask tradition among the audience is that of ancient Greek theatre. This connection helps to mark the play as tragic, placing the audience in the position of the detective trying to discover whose tragedy it is. The easy answer would be that the tragedy belongs to both the man young and old, who, distracted by sensuality, miss their opportunity to drink from the well. I believe, however, the real tragic figure of *At the Hawk's Well* is the dancer figure. The dancer figure, or the Guardian of the Well, experiences what Yeats referred to as the "tragic reverie" of the surrendering of personality to lyricism (Moore 3), here in the form of dance. According to Moore, a state of "tragic reverie" enabled an ideal audience member "to recollect his own moments of most intense life and by sharing his emotion with the rest of the audience to enlarge his capacity for exalted experience" (4). Moore's explanation here serves as an unlikely basis for the claim that in theatre, the approach to the Real is a communal experience. As one person begins to experience a truth, she serves as an example for another person

to begin her own quest. The dancer figure is best suited as the catalyst in this process, as her anti-Symbolic movements are simultaneously observed by all. By acting as a conduit for others, she misses her own chance for a sustained Real.

As the Old Man points out, the Guardian of the Well, or the dancer, belongs to “The Woman of the Sidhe herself, / The mountain witch, the unappeasable shadow. / She is always flitting upon this mountain-side, / To allure or to destroy. When she has shown / Herself to the fierce women of the hills / Under that shape they offer sacrifice” (Clark and Clark ln. 160–66). This dancer is not dancing for herself and catching the men in hypnotic spells of her own will. Instead, she herself is under a spell and, like Flaubert’s Salome, “does concentratedly, like a somnambulist, her eyes fixed in front of her but seeing nothing” (Ellis 41). Yeats’s text supports the sleepwalker description when the Old Man again says, “It was her mouth, and yet not she, that cried. / It was that shadow cried behind her mouth; / . . . She is possessed” (Clark and Clark ln. 185–86, 190). If the dancer figure in *At the Hawk’s Well* is possessed, she is under the control of another figure. That means she has not become a subject of her own truth. She is still bound to another, specifically to the Sidhe. Since the Guardian of the Well is under the control of a supernatural female figure and is not a representative of the male order, she does have a greater chance for abjection and death, and she tries to meet those desires in her last dance. Without complete autonomy, without relinquishing all ties to an Other’s desire, the Guardian of the Well cannot abject herself and cannot reside in her feminine space. The Well, which should be emblematic of that space, is an empty marker now, and not the location of female freedom. If feminine space is vacant, it is a place, to varying degrees, of the “missed.”

We learn from Yeats’s stage directions that when the Old Man ceases to look at the Guardian of the Well, because she has so tired him that he falls asleep yet again, she “throws off her cloak and rises. Her dress under the cloak suggests a hawk” (Clark and Clark ln. 207–8). Her presentation of herself as a bird of prey during her final dance is the final indication of her tragic flaw, or her failure to assert her unique femininity as fidelity to her truth. Because she is still tied to another being, this dancer figure is not able to encounter truth. She is not even tied directly to the woman of the Sidhe, but is most directly linked to the image of a bird, or the symbol of the Sidhe, and for Yeats, something that is both in and beyond the confines of the natural world as we know it. Birds are a potent symbol for Yeats, because their ability to fly gives them a means of escape. Such escape for Yeats, though, may not always be a welcome change, as the character

represented by or linked to the bird is fleeing without making a lasting change. Her participation in the dance, though, which represents a mode of expression beyond the confines of language and society, proves that she still longs for such a truth event. As Badiou suggests, we cannot strive for truth; it must crash into us. The whirling of the dancer figure here can do nothing but push away the truth with the winds which she stirs.

It is also significant that the dancer figure dances not as a woman but as a bird of prey. If she had experienced a truth event and danced as witness to that event in an act of fidelity, she would not be preying on those who see her, but she would be sharing with them an example of freedom which they too could have if they created and inhabited the appropriate spaces. For this reason, the dance does not inspire feelings of sublime tranquility that society usually believes dance, especially ballet, will produce. Instead, Yeats's dances, prefiguring Lacan's theory, produce moments of profound and necessary anxiety.

Watching this dancer, this false prophet of truth who is still searching for truth herself, produces negative reactions. First, the Old Man curses her, saying, "You have deluded me my whole life through, / Accursed dancers, you have stolen my life" (Clark and Clark ln. 232–33). A figure who has found her way through the process of abjection would have no interest in taking anyone else's garbage. Second, "She has roused up the fierce women of the hills, / Aiofe, and all her troop, to take your life, / And never till you are lying in the earth / Can you know rest" (Clark and Clark ln. 241–44). Her movements have not brought immortality in the way the male figures believed they would. Instead, the dancer's steps have set Cuchulain on the path that will ultimately lead to his death. Ironically, though, as Jefferies points out, the dance leads to Cuchulain's ultimate immortality through legend. Although the literal immortality that Cuchulain hoped for never comes, the Guardian of the Well's dance locks Cuchulain into a moment of eternal tension and longing, qualities that will eventually lead him to an experience of the Real, found in other Yeats plays when he fights the tides with his sword. The immediate goal of everlasting life is missed, but the metaphoric goal of immortality, through a delayed experience of the Real, is not.

Despite the awkward success of the play for Cuchulain, the dancer figure does not experience such hope because of her tragic flaw, or her inability to recognize her failure at freedom and continued adherence to an Other. This, in turn, sets in motion the tragic destiny of one of the greatest Celtic heroes. If Yeats's dramatic romance with the dancer were to end, instead of begin, with this play, it would be easy to read the dancer figure as an incar-

nation of Eve, leading men to sin through her own misguided desire, but this play only represents the young Yeats. Instead of being a Sidhe herself, the Guardian of the Well is the daughter of the Sidhe who does not live up to her mother's expectations. She does not solely lead Cuchulain to his destiny, but does arouse other women who will then set him on his journey. It is after her dance that Aiofe's troops are roused and spur Cuchulain into battle. The Guardian of the Well misses the chance to create a space for the truth event, but produces the desire in others who possess that creative power. She is the tragic muse.

## › WOMAN AS THE WHIRLING DERVISH

Following *At the Hawk's Well*, Yeats wrote *The Only Jealousy of Emer* about Cuchulain's experience with the space between life and death. *Fighting the Waves*, written in 1930 and published in *Wheels and Butterflies: More Plays for Dancers*, stages the same scene. In both plays, the figure of the dancer is transformed from the servant of Sidhe, as she is in *At the Hawk's Well*, to the Sidhe herself. This transformation makes the dancer figure part of the occult and natural worlds. Yeats's affinity for Hinduism and the yogic tradition helps the audience to understand his connection of the mythic and the pastoral. According to yogic philosophy, Siddha "means a semi-divine being supposed to be of great purity and holiness, and to possess supernatural faculties called siddhis" (Iyengar 116). Yeats was enamored of Eastern religion and even translated *The Upanishads* with Shree Purohit Swami in 1937. Yeats's fascination with the East began long before that translation, dating back to his introduction to the Noh theatre by Pound, and before that to the 1880s, when he was introduced to and became friends with Madame Blavatsky, the author of *Isis Unveiled* (1892).

The semidivine beings of Hinduism reside in the natural world, and the goal of following the yamas and niyamas of the yogic tradition is to make oneself into the image of the divine; if the image of the divine resides in nature, then part of the goal of the dancer figure is to make herself into the personal goddess of her pastoral space. She does not want to rule others, only to exert dominion over herself. Since the feminine space is not a physical but a metaphysical concept, it seems more appropriate that the dancer figure be divine. Although the legend of the Sidhe, in Celtic lore, marks her as a witch, a woman to be feared, Yeats, in these two plays, presents her,

in an ironic variation on Shelley's "The Witch of Atlas," as the life-giving force.

She achieves creative ability not through language, which is too conventional, but through her own unique choreography, which attains a communicative power beyond speech (Ellis 719). Like a god figure, Fand has the power to awaken, through the movement expressing her unbound desire. Stage directions in *The Jealousy of Emer* state:

The Woman of the Sidhe moves round the crouching Ghost of Cuchulain at front of stage in a dance that grows gradually quicker, as he slowly awakes. . . . Her mask and clothes must suggest gold or bronze or brass or silver, so that she seems more an idol than a human being. This suggestion may be repeated in her movements. Her hair, too, must keep the metallic suggestion. (Clark and Clark 325)

There is much irony and sadness in this figure. Even though she can give life, which Yeats, in this play, equates with the truth of life on the brink of death, she herself does not live such truth. Her presence is antithetical. She takes a natural form, but that form is unexpectedly hard, as her costume suggests metallic substances. The hardness of her exterior presentation contradicts her necessarily fluid movement. When asked why she needs Cuchulain, she replies, "Because I long I am not complete" (Clark and Clark 226). She needs Cuchulain's dead body to allow her to live on the edge of death. She is searching for a way to overcome her desire and sink more deeply into the circulation of her drive. She needs to accomplish the rebellion, because desire is always tied to the perceived needs of another and thus limits the desirer's chance for independence. The drive allows a subject access to the free-wheeling, unstoppable pulse of her own libido. Ultimately, the Woman of the Sidhe needs to feed on the love of the great hero, as we learn from her lusty speech: "When your mouth and my mouth meet / All my round shall be complete / Imagining all its circles run; / and there shall be oblivion" (Clark and Clark ln. 262-65). The imagery and rhythm suggest "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning" written by John Donne, whose work Yeats admired. In the original poem, the lover/speaker addresses the beloved on the subject of their impending separation. The lover describes their love as transcending the usual pastoral trappings of love poetry, but aspiring to mimic the grand movement of the Earth and the heavens. For Donne, nature is the only force as great as love. For Yeats, nature alone is able to present conditions as hard as passion is. Woman of the Sidhe wants to use the rounded lips of the

kissing mouth to cement the circulation of her drive, sacrificing her lover in the process.

With Yeats's affinity for Eastern religion and the occult, especially as tied to the cosmos, it seems appropriate here to relate the kissing mouth to Bataille's imagery of the solar anus. Georges Bataille was a teacher and friend of Lacan, but Bataille's influence on Lacan is often ignored, even though Lacan married Bataille's ex-wife. In *Visions of Excess*, Bataille introduces the concept of the pineal eye, which when applied to yogic philosophy is located at approximately the seventh chakra, or the crown of the head, believed to be the energy source. When accessed, the pineal eye leads to a connection with the divine. According to Bataille, the pineal eye exists in the immediate present, with the ability to open and conflate itself simultaneously (82). It is an energy source which gives access to great understanding even as that access destroys the subject. The pineal eye's continual presence locates it in the pastoral space of the Real; its location on the physical body combined with its shape makes it a formulation of the divine drive.

Bataille develops the concept of the pineal eye into that of the solar anus, linking together vision and excrement. The solar anus, literally depicted as the sun, has the ability to link together the verbs "'to be,' as the vehicle of amorous frenzy" (5) and "'to have,' or the means of controlling the frenzy" (5). From this "to be" and "to have" combination, we can trace the roots of Judith Butler's argument in *Gender Trouble*, that being the phallus implies a state of ownership, and having the phallus implies a state of control over the object owned by another person. The combination of "to be" and "to have" also creates a linguistic circle of existence and possession that places the subjects in a continuously rotating circle or formulation of the drive, combining the most essential elements of the cosmos, life and death. Yeats's staged kisses share the qualities of the solar anus, or the ability to push the subject into a sexual dance of life or death.

The dancer, whose body can break societal expectations in presentation and movement, cannot break them in her own desire. She desires the circulation of the drive but cannot experience it because she is too dependent on the conventional love of another male figure. While she allows Cuchulain the truth of his existence, she is denied her own truth because the space of her dance creates a void which only Cuchulain can fill. The dancer figure makes herself into literal feminine space, the vaginal opening, which Freud surmises each hysteric needs to fill with the phallus. The hysteric wants to make the Other aware of her opening while denying him access to it. Yeats's dancer figures do not want to deny access, but want to fill their spaces with the Others on their own terms. The frenzy of wanting it all,



or wanting to fill and control, leads to defeat, as Yeats seems to advise his audience that total adherence to only one drive or demand is best.

As Sylvia Ellis explains:

Fand never achieves the dignity which is naturally Emer's and her dance is staccato and frenzied since she is desperate for a consort. . . . When Fand's influence wanes and she is cheated of her prize through Emer's loyal courage, Cuchulain awakens to the arms of his young mistress, Eithne Inguba, a mortal version of the defeated goddess from the sea, not the selfless love of his wife to which he had just been alluding so insistently and with such remorse. (290)

The dancer has missed her chance for the freedom of the Real because she loses direction or becomes dizzy with the process and forgets the consequences of her actions. She is also the figure of the third, or the necessary outsider, in the trio of women who inhabit this play.

Fand, Emer, and Eithne Inguba are all enraptured with Cuchulain. Only Emer knows how to use the hysteria of the other women to achieve her own goal. Here, Yeats presents women negatively, as being conniving betrayers. Such a portrayal would not be so offensive if any of the women recognized the damning component of her actions, but none does. The female figures, especially Emer, make themselves into Other figures, demanding that the other women in the play do as they are bid. Emer, as the former object of desire, exploits Eithne Inguba's position in the role of *objet a* and doubles it. Eithne Inguba is the *objet a* both for Cuchulain and for Emer, as she relinquishes her desires to both of their demands. Eithne Inguba misses her opportunity to disobey at least one of her masters, and Emer misses the ability she has to undermine the position of the phallus from within.

It seems that Yeats wants to give his dancers the ultimate freedom and power but knows that his society, even that of highly selected drawing-room audiences, is not ready to accept such passionate victory from a woman. The combination of lust and the occult, which compose Fand, is still too dangerous and must be modified through the shift to the triumph of her human counterpart, a woman beyond convention, but a human figure nonetheless.

Emer, unlike Fand, does not dance, but through the vocative drive, or her ability to control sound, she does get her wish. The play begins as Emer, seeing Cuchulain's body hovering between life and death, recruits his mistress, Eithne Inguba, to help call him back to the world of the living. Emer



is willing to concede that her words cannot call Cuchulain back, but she knows that Eithne Inguba's words can and encourages her to speak to him: "Bend over him; / Call out dear secrets till you have touched his heart" (ln. 115–16). Eithne Inguba follows Emer's instructions, but her words are useless because they are not her own. The same ineffectual result occurs when Emer prompts Eithne Inguba to kiss Cuchulain. Eithne Inguba, being young and directionless, cannot understand Emer's true motives, which the Woman of the Sidhe sees completely, saying, "You loved your mastery, when but newly / married / And I love mine for all my withered arm; / You have but to put yourself into that power / And he shall live again" (ln. 168–71). Emer is instructed not only to master her own drive, but to control that of Cuchulain. Emer can never have freedom, though, if she is trying to use her freedom to control another. Again, the Woman of the Sidhe acts as a teacher: "Cry out that you renounce his love; / make haste / And cry that you renounce his love forever" (ln. 286–88). Emer resists at first, but she eventually speaks the words that will free her husband.

Emer must renounce her love, because love and its expression is always flawed. As Lacan points out, love cannot be an equal exchange between two people, but its altruistic conception "is changed inexplicably into a gift of shit" (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 268). Thus, love is a dissolution of the subject into only the abject component which attracts a particular lover. It is not the person who is loved, but only the part of the person identified with the partial object of the lover's drive that is loved. What is "loved" in "love" is not another subject, but the allusion or reflection or part of the lover in the other person. This reduces, or according to Lacan "mutilates," the loved one, combining Freud's ideas of narcissism and the fetish object. The loved one is nothing more than the abject material of the lover that is rejected and cast out, only to be desired again. When Emer renounces Cuchulain's love, she returns both him and herself to wholeness of being, by allowing both to be more than partial objects for each other. Emer uses her voice, her words, to satisfy her drive, to have Cuchulain live, even though it means that her desire will go unsatisfied, since he returns to his mistress. The voice, as we will explore in greater depth with Sondheim's work, begins as an internalized movement or dance, which is then expelled or abjected out of the subject, to gain freedom. The voice allows the words of the Symbolic to be spoken, but uses inflection and intention as means to strip away the façade of denotative meanings.

The Musicians' song ending the play explains what Yeats is trying to accomplish with the figure of Emer. They sing:

When beauty is complete  
 Your own thought will have died  
 And danger not be diminished;  
 Dimmed at three-quarter light,  
 When moon's round is finished  
 The stars are out of sight (ln. 333–38)

Beauty is the element necessary in life to escape the Symbolic. Only when one recognizes true beauty can one abandon thought, the progenitor of word, or the father of the Symbolic order. In this system, reminiscent of Kant's theory of beauty, thought or Symbolic activity halts in the face of both loveliness and the sublime, as *Seminar 7: The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* suggests. Such lack of thought may put the subject at risk of social alienations, since she is no longer processing exterior information in a usual way. That same lack of Symbolic management, however, allows her access to the deepest darkness. In such darkness, the soul experiences its "bitter reward" (ln. 337), as it is not loved or loving, but still not whole.

*Fighting the Waves* tells nearly the same story as *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, even keeping the dancer figure as she who can create a space of truth for others but cannot find it for herself. The first noticeable difference between these two plays, which share the same plot, is Emer's attempt to bring Cuchulain back to life after he wages a mad battle against the sea when he learns he has murdered his own son. Unlike the musical verse of *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, *Fighting the Waves* is written in prose. The only verse elements are the songs with which the musicians open and close the play.

Verse, according to theories of Geoffrey Hartman<sup>2</sup> and Julia Kristeva's concept of echolalia explored in *Desire in Language*, is much closer to the mother tongue and conveys a communicative bond more essential than Symbolic language structures. It would seem to follow, then, that *Fighting the Waves*, in prose, would grant its characters less opportunity to collide with the Real; however, that is not the case. *Fighting the Waves*, despite its prose format, offers more characters the opportunity to dance. The play grants freedom of movement that allows the figures to whirl their way out of convention. As they whirl, their full bodies that participate in the stylized motions of the dances have a semiotic experience, every bit as elementary as, even if in a noticeably different mode from, echolalia.

*Fighting the Waves* opens with the male figure of Cuchulain dancing. Yeats describes: "He dances a dance which represents a man fighting the

2. See *Saving the Text*.

waves. The waves may be represented by other dancers; in his frenzy he supposes the waves to be his enemies; gradually he sinks down as if overcome, then fixes his eyes with a cataleptic stare upon some imaginary distant object" (455). Yeats's stage directions here are more explicit than usual regarding the dance. This dance is designed to mimic action instead of presenting a free-form display of movement. The main dancer is not alone, but can be accompanied by other dancers. By indicating the actions needed to be performed, Yeats removes the dancer figure's potential freedom. To think back to Bennett's distinctions, the problem with this dance is that it makes an effort to represent, instead of creating, form. Still, it is an attempt at the Real, since the main dancer is overcome by madness, and thus is already beyond the law.

Cuchulain's dance stops when he fixates on a distant object. Using Lacanian theory, we could term that point the partial object, or *objet petit a*, which is the object of the drive. The partial object sets the drive in motion, as it allows itself to be chased but never captured. Yeats, however, uses the gaze as the linchpin to temporarily halt the drive in this scene. As Cuchulain stares at the object, his potential subjectivity is lost until he feels he is looked back upon by the object itself.<sup>3</sup> The gaze cast by the partial object initiates a connection that helps to define the gazer as a subject of the Symbolic order. As a Symbolic subject, the subject being gazed upon is prey to her desire, or the desire of the Other, which she takes upon herself. Yeats wants his figures to have sexual energy more primal and freeing than desire, so he finds a way to access the drive.

Just as the kiss in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* was able to embody and then formulate the drive, so too in *Fighting the Waves* does a kiss grant Cuchulain the ability to reactivate his drive. Eithne Inguba is the partial object whose mouth completes Cuchulain's circle and brings him back to life, where he can live in the shadow of his nearly Real truth event.

The most significant difference between *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *Fighting the Waves* is the number of dances that occur. Until this play, all of Yeats's dancer plays contained only one dance. In *Fighting the Waves*, dancers act like bookends, or momentary glimpses of the Real that will contain the Symbolic within them. As the play begins with Cuchulain's dance of death, it ends with Fand's dance, as an attempt to mourn. Yeats describes her dance, which closes the play, as "a dance which expresses her despair for the loss of Cuchulain . . . It is essentially a dance which symbolizes, like water in the fortune-telling books, bitterness" (463). According to

3. See "Of the Gaze as *Objet Petit a*" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*.

Yeats's directions, Fand may dance alone or with the waves, as Cuchulain did. The representation that Yeats refers to here is not the same mimicry as in the first dance. The actress playing Fand is directed toward an emotional state, not a specific portrayal of action. She may achieve and convey that state in any way available to her.

In the dance, though, it is essential that Fand convey her failure to obtain her desire. Her desire misses its target. This dance leaves the audience with a last impression of chaotic despair that, as we will later see, is akin to that of Sondheim's *Company*. This profound melancholia of the dancer is her tragic truth; she will never attain her desire, but that is not a negative position. One's truth, according to Badiou, can be either pleasant or painful. The only essential component is that after the experience, one remains loyal to it. Fand must dance to express her truth; even though it is painful, she dances at the end of the play. By doing that, she is loyal to herself and gives and allows others a means of attaining their truths. She remains with the audience as their final image of the play; they see her devotion to the self and to her lover as a fidelity beyond social expression.

Fand's final dance is also a great sacrifice. By echoing the dance that begins the play, Fand assumes Cuchulain's grief. At the beginning of the play, Cuchulain believes that his truth is defined by infanticide, but Fand shows him that is not his truth. By letting him scorn her, Fand shows Cuchulain that the truth of his life is his passion for the women he loves. By revitalizing his drive for both Emer and Eithne Inguba, Fand shows Cuchulain the way to his truth. Her dance functions as a Real kiss parallel to the actual kiss Eithne Inguba bestows. Once Cuchulain occupies his truth position and abandons the space of grief, Fand can take up that space, as it is her truth alone.

## › MALE DANCERS

### *Trivializing the Feminine*

*Calvary* (1920), the final play in *Plays for Dancers*, stands out as unique in the collection. Each of the first three plays, *At the Hawk's Well*, *The Dreaming of the Bones*, and *The Only Jealousy of Emer*, uses Irish mythology and nationalism as the basis for its plot. In *Calvary*, Yeats turns instead to Christianity as the play is set on Golgotha, with Christ's crucifixion taking place. In "The Tragic Generation" section of Yeats's *Autobiographies*, he recounts Oscar Wilde's composition of "The Greatest Short Story," or the

episodic recounting of Christ's chosen postmiracle believers. None ends well, but according to Yeats, Wilde "spoiled it [the story] with the verbal decoration of his epoch" (224). Yeats instead recognizes the story's "terrible beauty" and seeks to capture that in his play. *Calvary's* setting changes the previous pastoral dynamic of his dancer plays. Instead of a raw, combative world, the audience is now faced with landscape that is nothing but death. Yeats uses remnants of his Christian childhood, making death, the play's setting, a place of new beginnings, not endings. Both Lazarus and Judas are angry with Christ for the same reason: Christ takes away their freedom. When Christ raises Lazarus from the tomb four days after his death, Christ takes away the freedom death grants by thrusting him back into life. Lazarus views death as a gateway to chance and contingency. These elements are necessary for an individual to escape the laws of the patriarchy and to begin the process of abjection. When Christ beckons Lazarus to live, Christ acts as a mediating figure, functioning as a placeholder for the phallus that is God. Because Christ uses words to awaken Lazarus, Lazarus too uses words to reclaim death, this time Christ's death. Lazarus's will is once again thwarted, though, for Christ's death cannot be taken from him.

Lazarus further indicts Christ for not acting of his own accord when he responds to Christ's explanation, "I do my Father's will" (ln. 72) with the snide comment, "And not your own" (ln. 73). Because Christ does not carry out his own drive but brings to fruition his father's desire, his freedom to create his own *sinthome* is compromised.

Judas advances Lazarus's argument against Christ's actions with the simple line, "I have betrayed you / Because you seemed all-powerful" (ln. 108–9). The word "seemed" is key here. The verb "are" would denote an absolute state of being or existence, but "seemed" as a verb suggests to the audience that Christ's phallic power exists solely in relationship to Christ's father's will. It was Judas's original belief in Christ as the phallic power that led him to revolt. Judas explains: "that [Christ's omnipotence] was the very thought that drove me wild / I could not bear to think you had but to whistle / And I must do; but after that I thought, / 'Whatever man betrays him will be free'" (ln. 114–17). Judas does not want to assume Christ's power, but only wants to escape from it. Judas knows that Christ's power is a façade; the power that Judas longs for must come from within the self.

To read the relationships among Lazarus, Judas, and Christ in Badiou's terms, Christ is not a subject, but a subjectified being, carrying out a replicated and diminished version of someone else's truth. Christ's attempts to superimpose the already weakened truth on another person are too much for Lazarus or Judas to bear. Each man would rather face death,

as a gateway to freedom, than live under the desirous love of an Other. Both Lazarus and Judas have their own truths, then—their willingness to defy Christ, or phallic authority. They aspire to the self-directed abandon of Yeats's dancer figures but cannot quite achieve that status. Yeats stages their impossible position through what they do not do; they do not dance.

Instead, Yeats uses the Roman guards as his dancer figures. This, too, is a huge change from Yeats's previous dancer plays, in which the dancer figures were all women. Their dances were always solitary and silent, as they abjected themselves through choreography and danced themselves into their own truth. The soldiers are a tawdrier and more awkwardly practical version of that dancer figure. As Moore comments, the soldier's dance "is a dumb show . . . more ironic by its good natured intent, of the meaninglessness of purpose in a universe governed by chance" (241). The guards, even before they dance, are in possession of that which Christ denied his friends, chance and contingency. The Second Roman Soldier states noncommittally, "Whatever happens is the best, we say, / So that it's unexpected" (ln. 153–54). The dance that follows, as they play craps for Christ's clothes, is not sketched in stage directions, as are the dances in previous dancer plays, but is described by the Second Roman Soldier: "In the dance / We quarrel for a while, but settle it / By throwing dice, and after that, being friends / Join hand to hand and wheel about the cross" (ln. 164–67). For these rogue soldiers who prefigure the vaudevillian nonsense of Beckett's thinker, Lucky, in *Waiting for Godot*, the dance is a game that allows them to revel in the contingent circumstances they welcome into their lives. Each soldier's outcome will be different and beyond his control. The soldiers experience life in the moment of change, unlike Lazarus and Judas, who are denied chance by Christ's miracles and prophecies. While the soldiers' methods are tawdry and their truths, articles of a dying man's wardrobe, are mockeries of truth events, their process does allow them the contingency necessary for freedom. Because the soldiers are deeply flawed human beings, the potential for audience identification with them is greater than with dancer figures of previous plays. When an audience is able to identify more closely with a character who lives on the fringe of society, the audience members are more likely to want to create spaces in their lives for random events of freedom. The opening of such a space allows for the *sinthome* to emerge as the truth event of a subject. Yeats will take his audience that far. To achieve the Real, however, the audience must continue to live that truth or continue to dance with wild abandon. Yeats's dances all come to an end.

In *Calvary*, Yeats misses the opportunity to create a dance that would not end for one of the characters. If Yeats had allowed Lazarus to dance, the effect of the play would have been much different. Instead of being a semimutilation of Christian tradition that denigrates one theory but fails to set forth a corrective one, Yeats could have staged a radically new alternative with Lazarus's dance. This potential male dancer could have whirled himself into a frenzy against God, the most potent yet ironically fallen phallic symbol of modern society. Yeats misses the chance to enact such a revolt and thus limits the transgressive potential of his drama.

In *Calvary*, Yeats is innovative in his handling of language versus movement in his plays. The trend toward the voice having a power similar to movement begins, as we have seen, in *The Only Jealousy of Emer*. In *Calvary*, however, the dance is a word game itself. Again, we see very early intimations of what will become a postmodern catchphrase, "the game." The words the soldiers speak are in the confines of a game. A game, as played, is removed from the constrictions of societal rules. It allows the players to establish a new set of rules upon which only the players must agree. The words which the soldiers speak are part of the game and thus meaningless apart from its rules. They move in unnatural ways, just as the body moves differently in dance than in everyday action.

## › A-RYTHMIA

### *Creating New Steps*

Apart from *Fighting the Waves*, the three other plays in *Wheels and Butterflies* are oddities. They employ the dancer figure, but they do not follow the pattern of the previous dancer plays or establish any new pattern. *Cat in the Moon*, the first play in the collection, is Yeats's weakest dancer work and is rarely discussed. The play is notable primarily for its pre-Beckettian scenario of a blind and a lame beggar helping each other search for St. Coleman's well, which will cure their handicaps. Its tone is nearly post-modern as the audience unwillingly laughs at these two pathetic creatures, so diminished by their hardships that even their capacity to evoke sympathy is gone. When the pair finally reaches the well, each has to choose whether he wants to be cured, and relieved of his burden on Earth, or blessed, and relieved of his burden in heaven. The Lame Man chooses to be blessed and is rewarded by having his lameness cured as well. This miracle, as Yeats terms it, is the impetus for the dance. Yeats directs: "The Lame



Beggar begins to dance, at first clumsily, moving about with his stick, then he throws away the stick and dances more and more quickly" (453). The dance shows exultation and freedom of the physical body, but it is not self-directed. He dances in praise of the miracle granted by an Other. The Lame Beggar dances only because he is instructed to do so by the First Musician. The only truth found here is the truth of the Symbolic order. While Yeats has attained a unity of being, that unity is created only by an Other; to be singular and free, the Beggar would have had to possess the ability to cure himself or dance in some awkward, barely mobile way, despite his infirmity.

In *Words upon the Window Pane*, Yeats's next dancer play, infirmity again plagues the dancer figure. In this play, Yeats abandons both Celtic and Christian mythology to stage what seems to be, at least in presentation, a drawing-room drama. The setting, "A lodging-house room, an armchair, a little table in front of it, chairs on either side. A fireplace and window. A kettle on the hob and some tea-things on a dresser . . ." would be more readily found in Wilde or Ibsen. Its realistic setting does not employ musicians or even involve the choreographed beginning, in which a piece of cloth is folded and unfolded to indicate the opening of the theatrical space; it does not even include a dance. This can be read as a dancer play only when the audience understands that the heart of the dancer plays is not the choreography. Freedom of movement was essential to Yeats's conception of his dances. Yeats frequently left choreography to his actors, such as Michio Ito, who created the dances for and performed the role of the Guardian of the Well, or Ninette de Valois, with whom he created Fand (Ellis 329). It is the freedom the character achieves, mostly easily through dance, which allows a person to escape convention and express an emotional and spiritual power unattainable in daily life. In *Words upon the Window Pane*, the emphasis on the vocative drive present in *The Only Jealousy of Emer* and *Calvary* becomes the only form of the dance.

In the guise of a quaint drawing room, Yeats stages a meeting with occult forces through the medium, Mrs. Henderson. Her role in this play is two-fold: to convince the cynic John Corbet of the validity of the occult and to show how truth can happen to a group, not just an individual. Early in the play, Mrs. Henderson defines her role, as medium or channel through which things can happen for other people, by stating, "We do not call up spirits; we make the right conditions and they come" (Clark and Clark ln. 210–11).

At the end of the play, the audience learns that the first of Mrs. Henderson's two tasks is incomplete; she has not convinced John Corbet of her truth, the truth of the spirit world. Mrs. Henderson's séances are her



means to give witness to the encounters she has with the occult by making them public and allowing others contact with their own truths. Corbet is impressed, but he says, "I prefer to think that you created it all, that you are an accomplished actress and scholar" (Clark and Clark ln. 227–28). His words "I prefer" show that he is making an active choice to resist the truth to which he has been privy. The spirit of Jonathan Swift is the key to Corbet's truth, but Corbet cannot accept it. Instead, he "prefers" to fool himself into thinking that nothing occult occurred, so that he can remain in the patriarchal societal order instead of slipping into the feminine space of the medium's belief. This is not Mrs. Henderson's failure, however; she was loyal to the truth that some are not yet ready to accept.

She is outwardly successful in demonstrating how a truth event can happen to a group. Badiou is careful to point out that truth can be encountered by any number of people, but that each person will give witness to the event differently, so as to remain loyal to her particular experience. Badiou's own words seem to channel Yeats when Badiou writes, in the voice of someone experiencing truth: "I am altogether present there, linking my component elements via that *excess beyond myself* induced by the passing through me of a truth" (49). This passage describes the position of the medium, who allows the excess of the occult to use her as a gateway to achieve contact with those seeking their truths. Although the figure of Jonathan Swift dominates the séance and forbids others present to contact their loved ones, the people in attendance are still satisfied. As Mrs. Mallet explains, "A bad séance is just as exhausting as a good séance and you must be paid" (Clark and Clark ln. 411–12). This statement testifies to the audience's knowledge that the experience of the séance was valuable, even if it did not meet preconceived notions.

The séance to which the audience is privy is also, as Jeffares points out, an instance of what Yeats describes in *A Vision* as "dreaming back" or the tendency of a spirit, when entering the nonspirit world, to relive its most intense moments instead of simply "returning," during which a spirit adheres to the chronology of its life. Corbet believes the medium is discussing Swift in his prime with Vanessa, which would make Swift's physical appearance young and healthy. The medium instead describes Swift as follows: "I saw him clearly just as I woke up. His clothes were dirty, his face covered with boils. Some disease had made one of his eyes swell up, it stood out from his face like a hen's egg" (ln. 445–48). The disparity between scene and appearance that the medium witnesses displays Yeats's principle of "dreaming back," or the ability to recount the most potent moments without continuity. The intensity of actions relived in "dreaming

back” leads the medium and even Corbet to greater emotional reaction to the scene. This pattern of the moment of greatest drama is one under which all of Yeats’s dancer plays operate. The Cuchulain plays highlight the most mythic moments of his life, and *Words upon the Window Pane* recalls the most important moment in Swift’s life to force Corbet into contact with one of his most intense experiences as the potential for spiritual awareness. Corbet’s rejection of his chance to accept the occult shows the growing cynicism that plagued Yeats as he grew older, a tendency displayed in his poetry, beginning with *The Tower*.

Yeats presents dance in a crafty form. Instead of choreography, we are given the steps of ghosts. Yeats’s earlier plays seem to adhere to “the belief in the primacy of and purity of movement over the corruptness and only approximate adequacy of language” (Ellis 247). In Yeats’s system, the essence of movement is that it can convey a more essential and primal system of meaning and emotion than words can. In *Words upon the Window Pane*, Yeats uses the near-unintelligible language of the medium channeling the spirits as a transformation of movement back into language. The only person who truly understands most of Mrs. Henderson’s words is Corbet, to whom they are directed. This is like the dance itself. Dance, in Yeats’s plays, always has a target audience in the play itself, the person(s) whose truth can be encountered through it. Words, mixed up and turned into historical riddles by Mrs. Henderson, are her verbal dance that attempts to lead Corbet to the truth. She is successful in her role; the dancer figure here does carry out faithful witness to the truth. She cannot be blamed if her audience is not yet ready to accept that truth. Corbet, as a representative of the audience, misses his chance to leap off the precipice of his desire for conventional understanding. The dancer figure does her job, but the audience does not appreciate it.

A second and even less obvious indication of the role of the dancer can be found in the Swift/Vanessa/Stella love triangle that the medium reveals. As Corbet recounts, “He [Swift] met Vanessa in London at the height of his political power. She followed him to Dublin. She loved him for nine years, perhaps, died of love, but Stella loved him all her life” (ln. 91–94). The triangular structure of the relationship recalls that of Cuchulain, Emer, and Eithne Inguba. Corbet at first believes that Stella is the woman more favored. He describes her love for Swift as lasting her entire life, but as we know from Lacanian theory and its conjunctions with Yeats’s work, love can be damning. Such is the case with Stella, according to Swift, as we learn late in the play: “Then, because you understand that I am afraid of solitude, afraid of outliving my friends—and myself—you comfort me

in that last verse—you over praise my moral nature when you attribute to it a rich mantle, but O how touching those words which describe your love . . . Yes, you will close my eyes, Stella” (ln. 387–96). Stella, like Einthe Inguba, will never achieve her own freedom because her movements are directed by another. She is told by Swift what to do. He choreographs her life.

Unlike his physical relationship with Stella, Swift refuses to touch Vanessa. She protests, misunderstanding the freedom he is granting her, pleading, “Why have you let me spend hours in your company if you did not want me to love you?” (ln. 245–46). Moments later, it is Vanessa who controls the action or movement when she instructs, “Give me your hands. I will put them upon my breast. . . . O it is white—white as the gambler’s dice—white ivory dice” (ln. 314–16). By describing her breasts as dice, Vanessa makes love a gamble, an uncertain contingency or an exchange always teetering on the edge of disaster. This is Vanessa’s dance. She is willing to risk her emotional and physical health to get what she wants. Since what she wants is the touch and love of another, she is not really free, but I believe Yeats intends Vanessa’s actions to be her freedom. She is self-directed here and willing to assume all risk to attain her goal. She, too, proves that for some people, the truth of the Real can be connected to another person’s truth.

In *Resurrection*, his final play for dancers, Yeats further mutates and divides the singular figure of the dancer into three figures or sets of figures: the Dionysian revelers, Christ, and the Syrian. The mass of Dionysian revelers are actually described as dancing. As the Greek points out to the Hebrew, “Though the music has stopped, some men are still dancing and some of the dancers have gashed themselves with knives imagining themselves, I suppose, at once the god and the Titans that murdered him” (ln. 151–54). Dionysian revelers take pleasure in their own blood, or abject material, but abject materials are too close at hand to provide Real freedom. Instead, the sight of their own blood makes them feel omnipotent. They are not content to be god figures for themselves, or even to be one version of a god figure, but want to encompass all manifestations of the divine. Their greed binds them to the Symbolic; they miss the chance to relinquish influence over others to gain control of the self.

The second choice to fill that position is Christ. His appearance at the end of the play is silent; he wears a mask and only moves from the exterior space to the interior room, passing by each of the three main characters (Ellis 300). As Christ passes, he exposes the different beliefs or truths that each has espoused throughout the play.

The differing belief systems represented in the play help to show Yeats's growing ability to maintain minority points of view while still using his work as witness to his own truth. The first figure to examine is the Hebrew, who consistently denies that Christ is the savior, saying, "I am glad that he was not the Messiah; we might all have been deceived to our lives' end, or learnt the truth too late" (Clark and Clark ln. 130–31). The Hebrew is the only one of the three main characters who has no comment at the end of the play, which seems to imply that the Hebrew, upon sight, knows that his prior belief was false and thus cannot give witness to it.

For the Greek, Christ is a representative, a spirit figure meant to inspire human beings, but not to manifest God. Christ, as image, does not have the power and originality of form or structure which the god of the Syrian has. Thus, when the risen Christ passes by the Greek, he witnesses his own truth, saying, "It is the phantom of our master. Why are you afraid? He has been crucified and buried, but only in semblance, and is among us once more. There is nothing here but a phantom, it has no flesh and blood" (Clark and Clark ln. 323–26). The Greek may have his own truth, but it also is not Yeats's truth.

The Syrian is the character whose beliefs most closely follow Yeats's own. The character's faith in Christ derives from his belief that Christ is related to Dionysus, another god born of mortal woman. Like Yeats, the Syrian combines religious traditions into something intensely personal, into his own singular truth. For the Syrian, Christ is the event of truth that supports his rhetorical questioning: "What if there is always something that lies outside knowledge, outside order? What if at the moment when knowledge and order seem complete that something appears? . . . What if the irrational return? What if the circle begins again?"<sup>4</sup> (Clark and Clark ln. 280–83, 285–86). Christ's return, silent, in the mode of expression beyond words, reinforces the truth of both the Syrian and Yeats himself.

It is easy to understand, then, that Christ is the dancer figure of the play, but if the dancer figure is more than one who escapes language and expresses unique physicality, the Syrian could also be considered a dancer figure. It is the Syrian whose beliefs transgress societal expectations. Historically, his belief in the risen Christ would have placed him in the tiny minority. Though he speaks, his message is about escaping language and meaning, "the irrational return." It is also the Syrian who has the privilege

4. Again we hear echoes of Donne's "A Valediction: Forbidding Mourning," but this time the echo is ironic. In Donne's work, the circle is closed, encapsulating and protecting the loving partners. Here, the circle may be pried open to begin a new search.

of seeing the empty tomb. He encounters the void, which is equivalent to feminine space void of all expected materials. He runs to proclaim the truth he has encountered in that journey, and, like a dance, he longs to bring the example of truth to others. While he is not able to convert them, or show them new truths, he does allow them to become subjects by reinforcing their beliefs. Traditional expectations lead the reader to believe that the Syrian is a man, but Yeats gives no indication of gender. In fact, by designating characters with their ethnicities instead of their names, Yeats leaves the genders of all the characters, except Christ, ambiguous. The ambiguity helps to show that in Real truth, even anatomical sexual differences do not matter. The Syrian has encountered feminine things in proper spirit, and in doing so is privy to feminine experiences. The character is able to transgress gender along with societal norms. It is the Syrian who stands as Yeats's last and most successful dancer figure.

Yeats's own words in *Anima Hominus* bring together Badiou's truth and that of the dancer figures. Yeats writes, "The poet finds and makes his mask in disappointment, the hero in defeat. The desire that is satisfied is not a great desire, nor has the shoulder used all its might that an unbreakable gate has never strained" (Kolacatroni 341). Just as truth is a personal event, so are Yeats's creations. His creations, those that "satisfy desire," are not intended to quench the desperate thirst of his audience members, but simply to sate his own longings.

Since most of his dancer figures fail to achieve their own truths, Yeats displays the deep desperation of the Modern condition. Yeats's dancer enacts Aristotelian tragedies. The key to Aristotelian tragedy is the tragic flaw with which the hero figure is born. This flaw is a destiny which the hero cannot escape. Yeats turns the traditional flaw of hubris into self-sacrifice. The dancer figures devote their lives to others, dancing in a frenzy so that those who watch can live by their example, but not allowing themselves enough distance from the others, or their own garbage, to escape their former selves. Their dances are abject *sinthomes*. If we think back to Kristeva's explanation of abjection, it is the process of ridding the body of waste materials, those very things which mark us as human. Kristeva, however, does not indicate what we are to do with those materials once they are expelled. The dancer figures keep them close and thus allow themselves to be contaminated by the stench of their own refuse. The *sinthome* of the dance is then a material representation of the abject process, but Yeats's work does not display the full potential of *sinthome*. Lacan's *sinthome* has the potential outcome of positive creation, while Yeats's exploration of a similar concept ends with abject destruction.

The dancer puts himself or herself at risk to make the space necessary for truth. The space in which the dancer dances is a pastoral landscape, being cleared by the scythe-like movements of each dancer. In pastoral terms, the dancer clears the fields of both good and bad growth, or positive and negative connections to the conventional world; the dancer figure is denuded. The dancer figures litter the natural and formerly clean landscape with their expelled materials. The landscape in which the dancer figures remain is polluted by these excretions and made barren. Their worlds are desolate, while those who watch them are spurred on to new territories. Thus, the pastoral in Yeats's dancer plays is not the Real pastoral of wild self-generation, but a truly wasted land, or graveyard of convention that cannot be revitalized.

Only Yeats's final dancer figure, the Syrian, succeeds in bringing a glimmer of the hope of Modern truth that art can save. The art of the dance that Yeats puts on display is not one that can be copied or imitated. It is passionately personal and even dangerous. The drawing-room audience, in close physical proximity to the actors, can feel the palpable tension and trauma of the dancer figures and see the *jouissance* of the dances themselves. The ecstatic pain of the dancers, when conveyed as potently as Yeats intends, spurs the audience on toward action. The dancer figures sacrifice themselves not only to the other characters, but also to the audience. Yeats's dancer figures remain in the Symbolic, fertilizing its greedy crops with the abject material, still tied to them like uncut umbilical cords, while the audience members sever all ties, hopefully kicking and screaming their ways to the Real. Yeats sacrifices the dancer figures in his plays, forcing them to miss their prospects of freedom so that the audience can see the fate to which this missed opportunity dooms them. The glimmer of Modern hope in a Yeats play is that the audience can capture what the characters miss.

# Beckett

## THE MISSING LINK

Samuel Beckett's dramatic works accelerate the degeneration of the tragic hero and the dissolution of universal symbolism with which Yeats's final dancer plays end. As Gordon S. Armstrong recounts, "In conversation, Beckett acknowledged the importance of W. B. Yeats's later work, in which he simplified dramatic constructions and symbol systems" (32). Beckett, for example, takes the figure of a female dancer, modifies her presentation, limits her movement, dampens her passion, and turns her into the pathetic, rocking wretch in *Rockabye*. While Yeats and Beckett share some interesting association, simple comparison between the two authors is not sufficient analysis. To grasp more fully Beckett's relationship to Yeats and to Modern theatre as a whole, we must apply the same critical framework to his plays as we did to Yeats's work. Little of this has been done, and the recent Lacanian scholarship on Beckett is troublesome, at best.<sup>1</sup>

For example, in *The Imperative of Narration*, Catharina Wulf writes, "On the one hand, the gap between Auditor and Mouth [in *Rockabye*]

1. It is important to mention here that the title of Beckett's . . . *but the clouds* directly references Yeats's "The Tower." This chapter will not, however explore . . . *but the clouds* because the play was written for television. I have chosen not to explore works for TV because the relationship of audience to subject in television is radically different from the relationship of audience to stage. The chapter specifically addresses stage plays, with mention of only one play for radio, because that play, *Cascando*, operates much like a staged work.

evokes the irreversible split of Lacan's subject and the impossibility of desire being sated" (101). Wulf has the opportunity to advance both Beckettian and Lacanian scholarship, but she wrongly interprets the latter's theories. For Lacan, stemming from Freud, as already pointed out in chapter 1 of this book, desire is precisely that which cannot be satisfied; it is the drive which cannot be sated, and it is precisely that insatiable drive that Beckett's work addresses.

Much classic Beckett scholarship focuses on close textual or performance analysis or new biographical details. These works, by much-admired Beckett scholars such as James Knowlson, Ruby Cohn, and Paul Davies, are important and useful texts, but they certainly do not exhaust the wide range of possibilities for Beckett studies.

Alain Badiou's book *On Beckett* stands as a great example of the ways in which Beckett's work and theory can inform each other. Badiou essentially claims that Beckett's work offers a variety of ontological explorations revolving around a tripartite imperative that "bears on *going, being, and saying*" (2). These three verbs are the core actions or states of each of Beckett's dramas. They are not at the center for how they are present, however, but for how each is uniquely absent or missing from the particular work in question.

For an easy example, we can recall *Waiting for Godot*. Gogo and Didi famously wait for Godot for what the audience surmises is and will be an infinite amount of time. The protagonists claim that they will go, but they never do. Thus, the act of "going" is missing. This non-act is not the Modern, universalizable condition of ennui, but it is unique to these two men and their relationship to "Godot," the figure whose being is also missing. It is the intensely personal experience of each character in relation to what that character lacks that defines Beckett's drama. "Godot" is a generic stand-in, or understudy, for the chronic non-presence of the master signifier without the transgressive results that follow from such a position being empty.

Certainly, great theatre theorists, such as Robert Brustein, are correct to classify Beckett as an existential searcher, but the meaning of life for which his characters search is not representable and not replicable. Because of the missing master signifier, Beckett's characters are from the beginning "crazy" and must then search for something like what Lacan terms *le sinthome*. To remind ourselves, the *sinthome* is the subject's basic materiality out of which she defines herself in relief against the conventional world. Such a *sinthome* can be created only in a new space, which Beckett's theatre provides. For that space of laborious creativity, Beckett refashions the traditional pastoral spaces. His characters, however, fail to recognize the



glimmer of newness in the spaces they occupy and thus stay mired in the refuse that dominates the scenes. I use the term “missing” to refer to this compilation of neglected spaces, avoided action, and neglected creativity. The term is a simple one, but it refers most basically to any work of theatre, especially as exemplified by Beckett, that sets forth a void occupied by characters who do not recognize it for the Real value of its emptiness. The missing is then a kind of pastoral mistake, or *eglio*. Samuel Beckett’s drama best exemplifies the missing scene of Modern theatre through its ironic excesses juxtaposed against the lack at its center.

The missing scene of Modern theatre is one of enormous excess, especially in relation to the usage of language and discourse. Lacan’s discourse of the master places the Symbolic master or the Signifier, as the name of the father, in the position of power. That reduction assumes that the master is in possession of both truth and knowledge, but as Lacan explains, “If the master’s discourse can be seen as reduced to a single signifier, this implies that it represents something. Calling it ‘something’ is already saying too much. It represents  $x$ , which is precisely what is there to be clarified in the matter” (*Other Side* 29). The  $x$  in Lacan’s equation of the master’s discourse is a letter devoid of meaning, a material *sinthomatic* letter. It is not Real, though, because those involved in the master’s discourse still believe that the  $x$  has a Symbolic meaning. The meaning is missing and will always be missing, but the master cannot think this way.

The master must believe in the full extent of his knowledge and will to give meaning. According to Lacan, the master believes he has knowledge to fill the void of the missing letter, but he is actually in the position of Hegel’s master, who knows nothing but is in ironic service to his slave, or the actual keeper of knowledge. The work of Hegel’s slave, the master’s discourse, and Beckett’s pastoral explorations all begin at the same place that Lacan defines: “It is with knowledge as a means of *jouissance* that work that has a meaning, an obscure meaning, is produced. This obscure meaning is the meaning of truth” (*Other Side* 51). This position highlights the intense significance of language as that which can both cover and expose the truth as it approaches *jouissance*. The *jouissance* possible through language, however, is not the most extreme version of this moment of simultaneous pleasure and pain. It is, instead, an experience secondary or degenerated from the surplus *jouissance* of the hysteric who is able not to master but to see the falsity of language completely.

As Lacan states, “What hysterics ultimately want one to know is that language runs off the rails concerning the magnitude of what she as woman is capable of revealing concerning *jouissance*. But this is not what matters

to the hysteric. What matters to her is that particular other called a man knows what a precious object she becomes in this context of discourse” (*Other Side* 34). It seems that what Lacan wants to explain about the hysteric is not that she has privileged knowledge or position, but that she knows that the only way she can achieve privilege is by making herself into that object that is missing from the master’s discourse. The hysteric makes herself into her own muse; she cannot really create art for herself to enjoy, but she creates something and relishes in the idea that the Other will enjoy it. It is not freedom, but it is a new version of the slave position of ironic mastery.

For Beckett’s work to expose what Lacan terms the *jouissance* of language, he must indulge in nearly endless repetition of words and entire conversations. This is particularly present in his drama, which itself assumes the position of the hysteric to the Other of the two languages, French and English, between which Beckett vacillated in his writing. The repetition of language is a formal mechanism that halts the character’s ability to engage in it in her own desire for meaning, even while she is following the rhythmic movement of the drive. For formal repetition to delve below the surface and become a new structural composition of the subject, the language repetition must be devoid of meaning for the speaker, and it must be a nearly empty form endowed with the subject’s drive. Although conscious abandonment of the search for meaning is missing in Beckett’s characters, his work insistently performs such formal evacuation and play, as the audience hears and sees the meaninglessness of the words delivered.

Beckett’s dramatic personas cling to the meaning of language because they are too mired in Cartesian philosophy to relinquish their at least superficial belief in primacy of intellect and thought over the visceral reactions of the body. Beckett, whose early academic life, especially while he was a lecturer in Paris, focused on understanding Descartes’ work, aims to show that thought is really nothing but the exposed void of the individual subject.<sup>2</sup> While Descartes believes wholeheartedly in the primacy of the mind to compose and define the human person, Beckett’s work proves that the individual really knows nothing but still exists. Beckett’s characters have a false belief that the human mind can think and that thought has the power to save. Such belief is the tragic position of the Beckettian hero. The “missing” element from each character is the recognition of the uselessness

2. See James Knowlson’s *Damned to Fame* for a history of Beckett’s academic relationship with Descartes’ work.

of knowledge in any traditional sense, for the characters blithely continue to live out their desires for meaning even as their drives undo and expose the falsity of all meaning.

While trying to learn about themselves and each other in frequently comedic ways, Beckett's characters unwittingly enact a simulacrum of the analytic experience. Instead of one character listening to another unburden his soul, both characters attempt to abject their conscious minds simultaneously; no one is listening, and thus no transference can occur. This comedic pretense is always doomed to tragedy. Instead of the beneficial transfer of energy necessary in the analytic experience, Beckett's characters are governed by parapraxis. It is the parapraxis that makes the *sinthome* most evident in Beckett's work and gives his characters their greatest freedom, even while diffusing the little energy produced during the slip-pages or comedic moments. This dispersion attacks the solid, unary focus necessary for *sinthomatic* creation and thus creates the final missing element in Beckett's work.

Beckett's dramatic personas are so mired in the abjection of the words they spew and their creations of Imaginary tragedies that they fail to see and often miss opportunities to manifest their own *sinthomes* that could be created out of the remainders of their meaningless words and actions. Instead, Beckett's dramatic characters become their own transitional objects. Out of desperation, they cling to their original concepts of self produced by their interactions with their surroundings, and they never throw away those conceptualizations in favor of new materiality.

## › THE PASTORAL BECKETT

The inability of Beckett's characters to rid themselves of their old Imaginary ideas is directly related to the conditions and places in which Beckett's characters reside. They adhere to conventional separations of time and space, but, as Andrew Gibson states in his recent book *Beckett and Badiou*, "Time and space are constructed with the help of a continuum conceptually fashioned and already available" (16). In the conventional pastoral world, time and space are distinctly separate entities, with time generally portrayed as the adversarial force that can overtake or damage space. We can recall a number of Renaissance love lyrics, including those of Campion, Marvell, and Shakespeare, to hear lovers use the threat of time as a means of seduction. Badiou's use of mathematics denies such separation, favoring

instead the concept of “actual infinity.” Gibson explains that “potential infinity is never complete and can never be complete. The concept of potential infinity is thus intrinsically linked to a concept of becoming. The potentially infinite is ‘an inescapably temporal notion.’ However, any general concept of becoming is illogical since, if becoming becomes, it must transform itself in becoming, putting itself beyond conceptual reach” (10). Potential infinity is false because it is governed by time as separate from space. Actual infinity is real because it links itself to the merger of time and space as symbiotically linked and never-ending forces. Actual infinity, in this way, is linked to the Real, as it takes parts of previous theories and merges them into one foreign and nearly inexplicable concept. Beckett’s work creates a space and mood that is much like Badiou’s actual infinity. His characters exist in settings where time and space are linked because they are both laughable and damnable conditions of the self.

There are two types of pastoral settings in which Beckett’s plays are set: the expansive exterior of the ruined natural world or the narrow dankness of the barren interior. Exterior spaces in Beckett share similarities with the eclogic pastoral tradition and are the spaces of the abjected Symbolic. The interior landscapes contemporize the Georgic tradition and are the spaces of the wasted Imaginary. In the exterior eclogic space, characters make the mistake of thinking that human beings can still master the natural world. Such mastery derives from the pastoral tradition of song competition codified by Virgil. In the first *Eclogue*, Meliboeus and Thyrsis act as antithetical figures, with easily discernible and often oppositional characteristics. They are able to use their different forms of logical assertions to make arguments about pastoral life and love to each other.

We can now return, in more depth, to Beckett’s most famous pastoral pair, Didi and Gogo of *Waiting for Godot*. The logic and thought of Virgil’s characters is replaced by near-mindless repetition; instead of the differentiation of character along well-drawn lines, we have characters who are near-facsimiles of each other. As Nancy Leidham writes, “Vladimir and Estragon belong to an alternative line that stretches from Meliboeus’s projections of himself as a wandering exile” (252). Gogo and Didi are not modernizations of two classic pastoral types; they are both weakened versions of one figure. As two incomplete representations of one figure, they cannot really compete with each other to produce a typical pastoral eclogue, but instead they provide repetitive and episodic bits of one song. This strategy can also be found, not so comically, in Yeats’s work: “Yeats’s instinct to personify conflict in a single person as two separate characters was sound, and marked his maturation from beginning playwright to experienced man of

the stage. . . . Only in *En Attendant Godot* was Beckett able to split his central vision into two distinct creatures, Vladimir and Estragon” (Armstrong 90). We can easily read Emer and Eithne Inguba as two split sides of the same drive for the heroic Cuchulain. Their plights seem grand, set against the backdrop of a semi-dead hero and a raging sea. Gogo and Didi are both stalled, as their drives are limited by their desires for nothing. Beckett uses this strategy to show that the current state of the pastoral is one in which subjects are too interdependent on each other to gain true freedom or even enough aggressive momentum to propel themselves to action. Beckett’s exterior pastoral is one of autumnal damnation.

The only scenic element mentioned in the play, and one to which Beckett paid enormous attention, is the tree. The tree is first mentioned as a place, not a natural element; it is where they wait, for according to Vladimir, “He said [to wait] by the tree” (*Godot* 8). The characters then muse over what type of tree it may be, first asserting melodramatically that it must be a weeping willow and then turning to sarcasm with Gogo’s comment, “Looks to me more like a bush” (*Godot* 8). The pastoral world is not sacred, not helpful, and commands no respect from these characters. By the end of the act, the tree has assumed a purpose; it is the place from which the characters can hang themselves, but these inert characters never follow through with their intent. The pastoral is robbed of even its most bastardized purpose, yet it lives on. Vladimir comments about the tree, “But yesterday evening it was all black and bare and now it’s covered with leaves” (*Godot* 58). Estragon replies, “It must be the Spring” (*Godot* 58). The promise of overnight restoration lives in nature, even when the characters cannot appreciate or understand it. The pastoral world and the human beings in it have no bonds with each other and thus are destined to make mistakes in and about it.

To read Beckett’s *Happy Days* as a traditional pastoral also requires some creative revisioning of the Modern pastoral space. Just as shepherds till the fields, stripping away the unusable vegetation to get to fertile soil, so Beckett’s exterior works are set in places already stripped bare. These spaces lack the fertility of the traditional pastoral landscape, though. Lindheim explains of Beckett’s pastoral:

[T]he process of stripping away, the finding “what will suffice” beyond mere survival, is crucial in defining the human situation of the twentieth and now into the twenty-first century. The most significant stripping away in this drama [*Godot*—beyond class, occupation, home, family, nation—concerns those ideas that have traditionally lent value to human activity: civilization,

social progress, beauty, art, self-realization, nature. Their absence creates the particular void that is the work's setting. (255)

Although Lindheim is referring to *Godot*, the same ideas are applicable to *Happy Days*. In this later play, the last of Beckett's three staged evening-long events, Winnie is buried up to her waist in a graveyard of trash while the unmediated sun beats down on her. She is like a living corpse trying vainly, and in vain, to halt the encroaching and killing rays of the sun. Winnie speaks to a husband who does not respond, yet she tries to maintain her appearance for him, brushing her hair and applying make-up while she still can. The audience recognizes the absolute futility of her actions, thus stripping them of importance and stripping her of dignity. The little work that she is able to do is meaningless, but only the audience admits this fact. Winnie, as a character immersed in her daily routine, does not recognize her lack and thus cannot embrace its potential for freedom from the actions she performs as homage to a society that no longer exists.

Winnie is trying to engage in competition, but without the acknowledgment of any other character, especially her husband, Willie, her challenge is left untaken. Her entire attempt at eclogue is a mistake of not seeing what is missing in her life and how she could use those missing elements to create a new life without the burden of the desire of the eclogue structure.

Winnie, Gogo, and Didi make the same type of error, thinking that they can still win the competition in which they imagine themselves engaged. Winnie tries to engage her husband, Willie, in conversation or some sort of emotive exchange of language and history, but he refuses, echoing the refusal of the natural world to comply with the pastoral expectations of both character and audience. Not only are Didi and Gogo absorbed by their desire for and resentment of each other, but also their relationship is an echo of that relationship they imagine themselves having with the missing Godot. Beckett does not allow the characters to abandon the artifice of their imagined conflict in favor of recognizing the absence of the character with whom they compete. Beckett's work then provides us with a pastoral landscape that allows for internal conflict, which can ultimately free a character from interpersonal restraint. His characters cannot take advantage of what they are given.

Beckett's interior landscapes operate in a different fashion. The characters inhabiting Beckett's dark interiors, with the notable exception of the overt aggression between Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, are less involved in the competitive nature of the eclogue tradition and more engaged in the work ethic of the Georgic aspects of the pastoral tradition. According to

Anthony Low in his *The Georgic Revolution*, “To be truly georgic, a poem should come face to face with the realistic details of farming life, see them for what they are, yet accept and even glorify them” (Low 87). This conventional interpretation seems hard to locate in Beckett’s work, especially in his interiors, but we need to understand its larger scope, which gives us the georgic as “an informing spirit, and attitude toward life and a set of themes,’ which in practice enlarges the subject from farming to labor, often redemptive labor” (Lindheim 87). Certainly, Beckett’s characters are not farmers; many have no contact or very limited contact with any type of organic material, but still they till the soil of their own minds. The work is arduous, as it is not fertile or generative soil, but it is a location without circulation. The repetition and the revisiting of old memories replicate farming without crop rotation. That which rises from the soil is literally the same old crap, or abject material, which is the only material these characters have to work.

Krapp immediately comes to mind as one such character who can only revisit the refuse of his life, even while trying to make something new. As Armstrong observes, “Yeats’s Old Man [in *At the Hawk’s Well*] turns inward to become a paradigm of subjectivity who progressively denies the world outside his own being” (121). On his sixty-ninth birthday, Krapp follows his yearly ritual of recording the previous year’s events on tape while revisiting his old memories. Krapp chooses to listen to the memory of his missed moment of romantic and erotic fulfillment; this moment, and the relationship that could have accompanied it, are things Krapp sacrificed for his artistic career, which was also a failure, as time proved. Krapp’s work as a writer could not thrive because he made the wrong choice in his psychic life. Instead of connecting with his potential love in erotic eclogue, which could have led to a form of transference reminiscent of the analytic experience, Krapp decided to abandon the relationship in favor of solitude. The resulting loneliness gave Krapp no energy or new material with which to feed his creativity; thus his labors die. Krapp’s work is quite literally a failure setting up a Beckettian Georgic poetic. Instead of the redemptive potential of work, Beckett’s interior pastoral is one of decay. The Georgic pastoral in this play is degenerative, as it shows the results of combining the exterior landscape with the replacement of human contact with posthuman audiotape. Krapp’s isolation and mechanistic replacement for human touch lead him to regret over missed opportunity, not redemption.

The pastoral spaces of Beckett’s drama, whether exterior or interior, are presented to the audience as leveled, barren wastelands, an image familiar to any twentieth-century audience. Beckett wants to expose the mistake of



the wasteland itself. The mistake of the wasteland is that of the double error. First, the characters fail to see their surroundings as wasted, and then they fail to react to that wasteland in any kind of creative way. In *Endgame*, Clov is confronted by the literalization of the wasted figure; Nagg and Nell live in trash bins, actual waste receptacles, but Clov does not acknowledge that which he sees before him. Clov and Hamm both act as if there is nothing absurd about two human beings living in trash cans. The wasted nature of the elderly figures inhabiting the trash simply layers on ironic symbolism for the audience that Clov misses. In not confronting the human trash in his home, he is failing to see the interior wasteland. By failing to see, he is willfully choosing not to react and is thus missing his own chance to correct the mistake of the wasted pastoral with which he lives.

## › BECKETT'S NO-GITO/COGITO

Clov is an example of the doubled pastoral failure that results from the dramatic characters' insistent and useless clinging to the myth of the cogito. Beckett uses his characters to set up and then debunk Descartes' famous dictum "cogito ergo sum." Beckett needs to knock down the primacy of thought so that, in Lacanian terms, he can deflate the engorged supremacy of the phallic position or the master signifier. Thinking is related to the analysis of any supposed objective or scientific knowledge. It is always commanded by an Other, so the thinker is in the position of the signified (S2) or the servant. The thought becomes the *objet a*, or fetish object. The meaning of the thought is secondary to the act of superficial presentation of that thought. Beckett shows this through his emphasis on comedic presentation.

As Beckett presents it, thought is always a joke. In Freud's *Jokes and the Relation to the Unconscious*, jokes are the gateways to expose unconscious desires or wishes. The utterance of the joke, which makes no sense in the Symbolic realm, is a way for the jokester to fulfill his antisocial wish. When the jokester is embarrassed by an accidental joke or slip of the tongue, it is because he is ashamed of his unusual wish. When the comedian is delighted by the laughter accompanying the telling of his joke, it is because he is attempting to co-opt the fringe desires of his audience, so that they can collectively address and then shoo away the uncouth desire.

In Beckett's work, the characters onstage either are not aware of the audience laughing at them or take themselves and each other too seriously



to laugh on stage. Beckett forces his characters to “miss the joke” so that he can show the audience the danger of too much seriousness or too much “thought.”

This is the case of Lucky’s famous monologue prompted by Pozzo’s command “Think, pig!” (35) in *Waiting for Godot*. Lucky, Pozzo’s donkey-like servant, is ordered to “think” for nearly seventy uninterrupted lines to entertain and amaze Gogo and Didi. The thought process can occur only when Lucky dons his hat, playing with the visual icon of the dunce cap. Beckett plays with language here, in a Joycean homage, presenting the anthropological theories of men such as “Fartov and Beltcher” and repeatedly lamenting the “light of labors lost” (*Godot* 37). The monologue addresses the Georgic pastoral tradition in its repeated emphasis on work that has been left incomplete, giving a type of ironic hope to the inert pastoral setting of the play. The prompting of the monologue, Pozzo’s famous command, “Think, pig!” is also reminiscent of Eliot’s “The Wasteland.” In the poem’s second section, “A Game of Chess,” the female speaker, in lines that O’Neill will echo in *A Long Day’s Journey into Night*, laments exhaustively, “I never know what you are thinking. Think” (ln. 114). Underlying the speaker’s command is the confidence that her lover can “think” in a way amenable to conventional expectation. Furthermore, there is a notion on the part of both the speaker and the author that some thought is still salvageable and able to save. The reader knows this from the speaker’s next accusing questions, “Are you alive, or not? Is there nothing in your head?” (ln. 125). The connection of these two questions implies that life and thought are inextricably mixed; Eliot has confidence in the cogito. Beckett’s characters do too, but the play’s tone mocks this in a way that Eliot’s high Modernist tone does not. The utter absurdity of Lucky’s monologue leaves both the characters and audience in awe, but for opposing reasons.

The characters are so overwhelmed by the thoughts Lucky spews that their only reaction is to angrily stop him by stomping on his hat. The audience can assume that there are feelings of jealousy or inadequacy that motivate Didi’s stomping, but the audience feels no such incompetence. The audience is able to see that what is missing in Lucky’s thought is any semblance of meaning or academic training. His word salads are like those of the hysteric in the throes of utter mania. The audience knows this and sides with Lucky for his ability to use his own servile position to make a mockery of his master and the master’s acquaintances. The audience sees the value of that which is missing, but the characters do not see that and thus miss the opportunity to escape language by claiming to see the universal truths it is supposed to impart.

The audience does not miss out on the comedic aspects of Beckett's dramas. For the audience, the appreciation of the comedy onstage allows for a glance inward at the comedic nature of the self, which in turn brings the self-reflective audience member closer to a Real moment. Beckett's comic figures think themselves to be rogues, or they want to fashion themselves into rogues and fail. We should remember that the rogue figure of comedy is "a 'cheat' at the banquet of life. . . . If he or she can get something for nothing—or for the small effort that it takes to be adopted by the rich man, or to pretend a deathbed agony and bilk the would-be heirs—then neither the intelligent nor the foolish is immune from victimization" (Storey 171). In *Waiting for Godot*, Gogo and Didi believe themselves to be rogues, exerting the minimal effort of waiting for the master figure who will grant them something they desire. They do not consciously realize the enormous strain of their waiting; they believe themselves to be doing the easy thing that will produce the greatest results. The audience sees disconnect between the characters' self-awareness and the audience's interpretation of them and is able to laugh at the so-called rogue figures as they would laugh at fools.

In the comedic tradition, "the fool lacks *mastery*—a mastery measured not only by its defense against roguery but also by the norms of the fictive world with which his or her behavior is incongruent" (Storey 169). It is difficult to determine what is incongruous in Beckett's dramatic worlds, as we cannot use our daily lives as the norm against which to judge. The norm must be found within the play's presentation of its history. We can turn to *Endgame* as an example. Hamm recounts the story of how he came to be Clov's guardian. The scene of Clov's earlier life, as described, is one that is familiar to us through legend. Clov's father is a poor farmer who is willing to trade services for bread to feed his son, and who ultimately leaves his son, under the promise of a better life than the one he can offer. Here is a traditional narrative of the past, but the current world in which Clov lives is totally foreign in presentation to the audience's scope.

In this new, wasted world are Clov and Hamm in their decaying symbiotic relationship. Clov lives in a world of death, yet he is unable to perform an act of killing, choosing to let the bug and the rat live. He does not want to follow the norms of death that his world sets up. We, in the audience, laugh at the futility or foolishness of trying to contradict the world, yet we also cheer a little for any character willing to act out of the norms. Beckett makes his audience feel both for and against the fool, so that the audience can see the hardship and even uselessness of trying to reverse or interrupt an existing pattern, while still wishing, just a little, that it will

work. The audience knows Clov is a fool for staying with Hamm, and Gogo and Didi are fools for waiting for Godot. We want them to move on, but since the audience also knows the enormity of the pain involved in moving on, it simultaneously wants them to stay. Most subjects understand intuitively that they must move on, but they are stymied in their own habitually myopic patterns. The nearsighted stasis is like desire, in which we long for only a portion of the thing that actually drives us. The gravity of the drive is not only what can pull us out of desire but also what can force us to collapse under its shear force, and so we are caught. Beckett's plays present this conundrum.

If comedy and all of its repercussions allow the audience to see thought as farce, then Descartes' cogito is denuded. In place of his supposed truth is an empty space. To replace thought, Beckett gives the audience nothing. He does not give an alternative to thought because he does not want to turn his audience into fools. Beckett's drama shows a deep understanding of the necessity of the void, and he does not want to stop that emptiness from making contact with his audience. In *Ethics*, Alain Badiou explains "that at the heart of every situation, as the foundation of its being, there is a 'situated' void around which is organized the plenitude (or the stable multiples) of the situation in question" (68). The space left when thought as truth or the foundation of being is abjected is this void or emptiness, which carries with it the promise of new and multiple foundations.

Badiou goes on to explain that "to believe that an event convokes not the void of the earlier situation, but its plenitude, is Evil in the sense of *simulacrum*, or *terror*" (*Ethics* 71). Terror, for Badiou, is the idea that for a subject to exist, nothing must exist (*Ethics* 77). That statement implies that existence is always dependent on an Other, or a master signifier. For Badiou, the master's discourse is the discourse of terror. Beckett's characters are not terrified or terrorized because they are not defined by that Other. They are defined by what is missing from their lives that may or may not extract from them the desire to make contact with an Other. It is not the Other itself but contact with the Other that drives the Beckettian subject. This drive is outside the parameters of thought or logical evaluation, so the void in the center remains intact.

Such are the positions of Gogo, Didi, and Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*. Very early in the play Gogo asks, "We've lost our rights?" to which Didi responds, "We got rid of them" (*Godot* 13). To have lost one's rights would mean that there was a master controlling the rights. To have "gotten rid" of them means to have cast off the supposed freedom that one has. It is the latter position in which Beckett places his bedraggled pair. Gogo and

Didi have agency; they make the choice to submit themselves to inertia and ennui. Their reasons for submission are intentionally not clear, thus leaving the void of their being open. What is missing from their lives and our comprehension of them is logical understanding. They give no sign of having thought about relinquishing their rights; they just have. In forgoing thought, or worse, its simulacrum, Beckett eschews the expectation of causality or understanding that underlies Descartes' *cogito*. Thus, at their core, Gogo and Didi are empty. They are not submitting to Godot as a master, but to their own lack of initiative not to wait for him. Their choice does not make sense, but it is a choice nonetheless, and thus, they have enacted a way of living that is anti-Cartesian.

Beckett's next evening-long work for theatre, *Endgame*, addresses the author's anti-Cartesian stance more directly than *Waiting for Godot*. In *Endgame*, the audience is presented with Hamm and Clov, an adoptive father/son duo. Hamm can be interpreted as the debunked or abjected myth of the name-of-the-father, who, like his namesake, Hamlet, is likely to question life and not choose to act. The ability to question seems, at first glance, to lend itself to support of the cogito, as the questioning and subsequent answers lead to self-definition. Hamm's questions and questioning, though, are logically futile. They lead to no new knowledge or discovery about the self, and they lack grandiose subject matter. Instead of "To be or not to be," Hamm asks questions such as "What time is it?" (94) and "Are there still fleas?" (115). The mundane nature of the questions portrays Hamm as a simple, even simple-minded, character. If these are the types of questions that produce the definition of human nature, then Beckett seems to be saying that humanity is rather dull.

That is not, however, what Beckett is trying to convey. True Beckettian nature is found in comments Hamm makes. In conversation with Clov, Hamm says, "Imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn't he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough?" (115). Hamm implies here that humanity is no longer rational but is worthy of study. Still, even in his cynicism, Hamm clings to the extinct rational view when he continues, "And without going so far as that, we ourselves . . . we ourselves . . . at certain moments . . . To think perhaps it [life] won't all have been for nothing!" (115). Hamm is not saying that life will have meaning, but that we can "think" that it has meaning. Hamm is fully aware that thought is deception.

Truth, in *Endgame*, lies in the language patterns of questioning that mimic the circular repetition of the drive. When Clov, in typical childlike fashion, asks to be retold the story of how he came to live with Hamm,

Hamm responds, “Ah the old questions, the old answers, there’s nothing like them!” (118), implying that there is a pattern of question and answer that sustains daily living but neither adds nor subtracts wisdom or insight. Nothing changes in this interrogative pattern; the pattern itself is enough. The repetitive inquiry mimics the circulation of the drive; questioning is the circuitous route that bypasses desire.

It also replicates Freud’s fort/da game, in which the toddler uses a spool or toy in a hide-and-seek-like game to master his feelings of abandonment when his mother leaves the room. In the game, the spool is a stand-in for the parent; for Clov, the story Hamm tells is like the toy. Clov, via Hamm’s telling, is able to call the story back at will and thus can gain some false sense of control over his past, and over Hamm as the story’s teller. When Clov asks that the story be told, he asks a specific question whose answer, he hopes, will lead to fulfillment. The answer, in the form of the story, never completely does.

Descartes’ questions may not have definitive answers and may lead to more questions, but underlying them is the concept of a final answer that will quell the desire to continue questioning. Beckett’s questions have no such ending answer. Beckett’s subjects can continue to flourish in relation to their drives and can have access to some level of *jouissance*. That does not imply that the world at the end of the play is one of generative potential. It is still a deadened pastoral space, where sexual beings are condemned as “[a]ccursed fornicator[s]” (98). In a parody of Joyce’s ending to *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Hamm says of himself, “Old stauncher! . . . You . . . remain” (154). Unlike Stephen Dedalus, seeking to create the underpinning of all of humanity, Hamm will make nothing new. He will simply stay. Without Clov, he cannot create a *sinthome* for himself because he has nothing against which he can place himself in relief; Beckett’s anti-Cartesian presentation ends with the innovative idea that for a self-creation to occur, the creator must have a specular image present which he can recognize and reject as a stand-in for both the Symbolic and the Imaginary. That image must be experienced and rejected before the Real moment can occur.

## › BECKETT’S MISSING MASTER

Beckett’s work is open to a Real moment because, in addition to missing pastoral and logical expectation, it is also missing a master signifier. The

missing master exposes flaws in the master's discourse, thus negating its supremacy. It is important to recall that the primary position of the master's discourse is the S1 or the Big Other. This Other, according to Lacan, is not alone but is supported at the level of knowledge by the

S2, which is the one I call the other signifier. This other signifier is not alone. The stomach of the Other, the big Other, is full of them. This stomach is like some monstrous Trojan horse that provides the foundations for the fantasy of the totality-knowledge [*savoir-totalité*]. It is, however, clear that its function entails that something comes and strikes it from without, otherwise, nothing will ever emerge from it. And Troy will never be taken. (*Other Side* 33)

The representation of this other Other, the S2, has a different function in many of Beckett's works. It is a partial object that is not separate from but part of the master signifier, meaning that the Trojan conflict which Lacan references in his explanation is an internal war. The S1 and S2 are part of the same character, or subject. Because the S1 and S2 are not separate entities but parts of one being, a truth about the master itself is revealed. For Beckett, the master's discourse and the position of the master create an internalized struggle, leaving the psyche as the stage of a bloody pastoral battle.

Beckett complicates the matter of purely internalized psychological drama by using projections of the self, via either recordings or disembodied voices, to dramatize the conflict between the two signifiers. Tape recorders are major players in both *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Cascando*. In *Krapp's Last Tape* there are actually three moments or three signifiers who speak. The sixty-nine-year-old Krapp exists in the position of the master signifier, or S1. It is he who controls the events, he who chooses what tape will be heard, and he who comments on that tape. The present Krapp is not a typical master, though; he is described as "White face. Purple nose. Disordered grey hair. Unshaven. Very near-sighted (but unspectacled). Hard of hearing. Cracked voice. Distinctive intonation. Laborious walk" (Krapp 221). Krapp is a decaying old man, one whose life is governed by the number of bananas he consumes in relation to the amount he is able to defecate. This is not the expected image of phallic power. Even as Krapp consumes his bananas, in a scene that seems as if it should be wrought with classic Freudian interpretations, Beckett defies the expectations. Krapp's banana eating does not fulfill some longed-for homosexual desire. Instead, it is a constipating effort, one that allows him, literally, to retain his crap. Krapp's

eating habits then follow the same motive as making the tapes. He is a supposed master signifier who fears losing his knowledge, so he hoards it.

The figure of the S2 is the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp on the tape. This should be the figure who holds the knowledge and supports the master signifier, but even though this S2 may have “*strong voice, rather pompous*” (*Krapp* 223), he lacks knowledge. Three times, Krapp plays the same, now famous, passage, “I lay down across her with my face in her breasts and my hand on her. We lay there without moving. But under us all moved, and moved us, gently up and down, and from side to side” (*Krapp* 237). The thirty-nine-year-old Krapp remembers the greatest chance of his life, the chance to consummate the relationship with a woman he loves. He does not make love to her, but the lack of consummation is not a choice. Krapp is impotent. It does not matter whether the inability to consummate is physical, psychological, or both. What matters is that without that phallic power, the S2 figure, underlying the S1, robs the S1 of any chance to be the master. For the present-day Krapp to be the master signifier, the thirty-nine-year-old Krapp would have had to consummate the relationship to achieve the sexual knowledge needed to pass on to the master. The couple would have had to act creatively in the pastoral space, but Krapp and his partner did not till their pastoral land as they should have. They could not procreate or create, and they leave the work of generation to nature itself, which had to exhaust itself to rock them in their womblike boat.

The thirty-nine-year-old Krapp is provoked to record this event after he says, “Just been listening to an old year, passages at random. I did not check the book, but it must have been at least ten or twelve years ago. At that time I think I was still living on and off with Bianca in Kedar Street. Well out of that, Jesus yes! Hopeless business!” (*Krapp* 224). We learn that the Krapp of his mid-twenties was also ineffectual with women, also lacking phallic power and the ability to create. The tier of Krapp’s phallic power is a teetering mess of missed opportunities to assert his drive and follow through with his passion thanks to the lack of knowledge of his younger selves. If the younger voices, or S2 and S3, of the play had been able to perform their duties and sustain or gather transferable knowledge, the present Krapp may have had a chance at being a true S1, but the earlier manifestations know nothing. The result is the sixty-nine-year-old failed writer, who can only sell seventeen copies of his last book.

*Cascando* is another, much shorter, Beckett piece for radio that involves three voices or signifiers, one of which is a failed artist. The play casts an Opener, who controls the music; the Voice, who loosely narrates the drama; and the Music itself, which both underscores the Voice and speaks



alone. Because this is a play for radio, the visual aspect has been denied to the listener, making the entire presentation dependent on language to translate meaning, which is a doomed effort from its inception because language is nontransferable and always governed by *méconnaissance*. The play upholds this assertion, as nothing is created within its boundaries, yet the discourse hovers around or circles the moment of creation. Lacan's statement that "knowledge is what brings life to a halt at a certain limit on the path to *jouissance*" (*Other Side* 18) makes this evident. The voice, or the S2, in the position of the slave with the ability to transmit knowledge is aware that the creative effort is halted. The voice repeatedly says, in various arrangements, "story . . . if you could finish . . . you could rest . . . sleep . . . and before . . . oh I know . . . the ones I've finished . . . thousands and one . . . all I ever did . . . in my life . . . with my life . . . saying to myself . . . finish this one . . . it's the right one . . . then rest . . . sleep . . . no more stories . . . no more words" (*Cascando* 343). The "oh I know" is the key to this passage, as the voice admits that it has knowledge. That knowledge inhibits the finishing of the story, the "right" story or creative output that would allow the Opener to experience *jouissance*, but in this presentation, *jouissance* is characterized as an ending of creativity, or an ending of the circulation of the drive. Since the drive only ends with death, the Voice cannot finish, because its moment of greatest pleasure will be not only its simultaneous moment of greatest pain, but also its demise.

Beckett uses the Music as the function which forestalls the ending of the fictional story being discussed in the piece. Music, as an S2, is able to delve below the level of knowledge to pure essence or visceral experience. Music and Voice never merge without the Opener's control. The Opener, in the S1 position, is aware that neither Voice nor Music can singularly provide the information or experience that it seeks. The Opener, as the master signifier, is missing the combined forms of knowledge that its slaves can provide. Only when it has them operate simultaneously can things be, as its last word states, "Good" (*Cascando* 351). "Good," though, is not an utterance of satisfaction, but one of continuing struggle, as the Voice, underscored by Music, begs, "—this time . . . its the right one . . . finish . . . no more stories . . . sleep . . . we're there . . . nearly . . . just a few more . . . don't let go . . . Woburn . . . he clings . . . on . . . come on . . . come on—" (*Cascando* 351). The pleading desperation with which the play ends is necessary to bring together its missing elements and prove that the master signifier, or Opener, cannot command the ending it desires, because the drives of the S2 and S3 "know" more than it does.

Several of Beckett's famous female characters also help to illuminate the



ways in which the master signifier is missing in Beckett's work. Beckett's female characters, especially Winnie in *Happy Days* and the rocking figure in *Rockabye*, welcome, even ask for, the pain that their master signifiers, Willie and the Voice, respectively, induce. This pain creates an anxiety in the female characters that encourages these characters to continue their physical journeys or actions, but the characters do not follow their paths of anxiety. Beckett's scenarios give the women the potential to move on, but they don't use that potential because there is no alternative space within the dramas to which they can go. Beckett voids the worlds in which they live, making them blistering or sinister, but he gives them no other space. The voiding of the master signifier removes the possibility of belief or existence in any kind of conventional pastoral, but the works do not provide the chance for the female characters to create or move into any new position.

In *Happy Days*, the obscenely cheerful Winnie is buried first up to her waist and then up to her neck in the cracking Earth while being burned by the sun and facing the aging process as a miniature version of what has happened to the pastoral world. The world is dry and cracked, caked and tamped down by years of what seems to be the final result of global warming.<sup>3</sup> Winnie is described as the opposite of this image; she is "about fifty, well preserved, blond for preference, plump, arms and shoulders bare, low bodice, big bosom, pearl necklet" (*Happy Days* 275). The image described is both ironic and perfectly symmetrical to the landscape presented. Winnie seems to be attractive, with all the attributes of Western female sexuality: blond, voluptuous, bejeweled but not clothed. She is, however, fifty—beyond childbearing age, which makes her sexually useless, as barren as the mound in which she lives. Even if she were able to procreate, access to her genitalia is not available. She is literally cut off from her sexual functioning, yet throughout the play, she flirts with her husband and tries to stay attractive for him by brushing her teeth and applying her make-up. Winnie actively and knowingly participates in the masquerade of womanhood to control her place in it.

She is quite conscious that the world around her is fleeting and she is falling into its abyss: "Words fail, there are times when even they fail. Is not that so, Willie, that even words fail, at times? What is one to do then, until they come again? Brush and comb the hair, if it has not been done,

3. Remember that Beckett would not have been thinking of global warming as a factor or an image in creating this landscape, but the analogy is an effective one for the contemporary audiences of this book.

or if there is some doubt, trim the nails if they are in need of trimming, these things tide one over" (*Happy Days* 284). Her actions seem to reflect almost perfectly Lacan's comments on the hysteric: "What hysterics ultimately want one to know is that language runs off the rails concerning the magnitude of what she as woman is capable of revealing concerning *jouissance*. But this is not what matters to the hysteric. What matters to her is that that other called a man know what a precious object she becomes in this context of discourse" (*Other Side* 14). The hysteric understands the limits of discourse and her position as helping to establish that limit, but her power in demolishing the master signifier is not of ultimate concern to her. What she really wants is for the master to recognize and credit her for the ability to bring him to his knees.

Winnie reveals, "What I dream sometimes, Willie. That you'll come round this side where I could see you. I'd be a different woman. Unrecognizable. Or just now and then come around this side and let me feast on you. But you can't, I know" (*Happy Days* 296). Winnie knows that Willie is stuck in his position in his mound of dead Earth. She knows that because he is stuck, she is not subject to him, but she still wants him to see her. His recognition of her, according to her, has a sinister underside. Winnie wants to "feast on" him, which implies both spiritual and sexual consumption. In the conversation which follows, Winnie asks Willie to define "hog" for her, and he obliges. Winnie, the hysteric, longing to feed on her master, is also still willing to succumb to him and his supposed knowledge. By asking that final definition for clarification, Winnie forecloses on her ability to define a word for herself, or create her own meaning and space.

In *Rockabye*, the rocking motion of the Woman, subjecting herself to the Voice, is the potential creative force of the hysteric's position. In this play, the Woman, or rocking figure, barely speaks, only asking for "More" on her own, juxtaposed against her seemingly contradictory echo of "time she stopped." The request for "More" puts the Voice clearly in the position of the hysteric begging to be objectified, as a traditional *objet a*, while knowing the potential harm of this position. The hysteric borders on masochism, but in terms of potential *jouissance*, masochism is positive, because it allows the subject to experience pleasure from pain or to dominate the pain she is receiving. The Woman in *Rockabye*, however, limits her pain threshold with "time she stops" or the final halting of her rocking motion. When she stops rocking, she halts the repetition she had been enacting. Thus, she stops the drive to *jouissance*, which pushes her back into the traditional master's discourse. The Woman was in the process of creating a new space, one of constant motion or orbit around her own pain, but she

chooses to end that. Although the choice is of her own free will, Beckett does not want his audience to think that this character has attained something freeing. Her ending position is still, frozen, nearly dead.

## › BECKETT'S REPETITIVE OPENINGS

The Woman's catatonic state at the end of *Rockabye* is likely a result of her inability to speak for herself. Her silence has ended the repetitious language cycle that she was part of during the drama. Ruby Cohn's seminal work on Beckett, *Just Play*, devotes an entire chapter to Beckett's usage of repetitive language, entitled "The Churn of Stale Words: Repetitions." While the chapter is a testament to the value of close reading, it does not create a theory as to the reason for the repetitions or their cumulative effect on interpretations of Beckett's work. The closest Cohn gets to theoretic interpretation or performative suggestion is a statement about *Happy Days*. Cohn writes, "Repetition is a stabilizer for Winnie in her resolution to pass happy days and avoid a 'wilderness' of lonely silence. Repetition marks Mouth's [*Not I*] cumulative consternation; she doesn't know who her protagonist is, what she is saying, and yet she and 'she' find themselves saying again and again. Frenzied repetition belies her denial of suffering" (131). The reader wonders why and how such repetition exposes suffering and to what and where that suffering might lead.

The answer lies in Lacan's connection of the use of repetition with the *jouissance* of language. Lacan asserts that "knowledge is what brings life to a halt at a certain limit on the path to *jouissance*. For the path toward death—this is what is at issue, it's a discourse about masochism—the path toward death is nothing other than what is called *jouissance*" (*Other Side* 18). When we think we know something or can control something, as in the Woman in *Rockabye*'s false sense that "time she stopped" is a literal occurrence, we end the quest or the cycle of searching for the truth. For Lacan, truth and knowledge are oppositional forces, with the former being on the side of *jouissance* and the latter being opposed to it. When a Beckett character, to use Cohn's phrase, "belies her denial of suffering" through repetition, she is acquiescing to her drive and unknowingly illustrating Lacan's point that "what necessitates repetition is *jouissance*, a term specifically referred to. It is because there is a search for *jouissance* as repetition that the following is produced, which is in play at this stage of the Freudian

breakthrough—what interests us, *qua* repetition, and which is registered with a dialectic of *jouissance*, is properly speaking what goes against life. It is at the level of repetition that Freud sees himself constrained, in some way, by virtue of the very structure of discourse to spell out the death instinct” (*Other Side* 45). What is important in this passage is the connection between death, or ending, and discourse. As long as discourse continues, there is a battle being waged against death, and the drive for *jouissance* goes on because in our contemporary culture we use discourse as self-definition and protection against deadening silence. It is almost as if we can replace the cogito with a new dictum, “I speak, therefore I am.”

Although Scott McMillan’s comments in *The Musical as Drama* directly reference repetition in song structure and lyric, they are useful for illuminating repetition in any drama. He writes, “A sign must signify something other than itself to be a sign, but the close call is exciting. . . . The repeated line threatens to abandon semiosis by standing for itself, and by actually standing for itself-in-repetition” (McMillan 111). Beckett’s repeated words are void themselves and allow the speaker the ability to void herself, or create the space of abjection that results from the friction of the sign and the signified. Meaning in the speech is optional, even discouraged, if the speaking being is a hysteric approaching a Real moment.

Gibson reminds the reader of the glimmer of such a Real moment in *Rockabye*, “where the words, ‘fuck life’ abruptly explode into the play’s hypnotic rhythms” (243). Since the word “fuck” has a connotation of passionate, if not violent, even perverse, sexual acts, to “fuck life” would be to master it by a means that would produce *jouissance* for the doer, if not for the recipient. For the woman in *Rockabye*, it would mean breaking the cycle that enacts the control the Other figure in the play has over her. She does not, however, follow through or act. Instead, she only speaks the words, so the break in repetition of language does little to break the more potent underlying pattern of silent acquiescence.

In Beckett’s texts, language, because it is a product often highlighted in staging, is a repetition of words or sounds that link to a fixation of the oral desire. This fixation, though, because it is so narrowly focused, turns the speaker into an *objet a* for the master figures also present on stage. *Not I*, *Rockabye*, and *Krapp’s Last Tape* all exemplify this pattern.

In *Not I* the audience witnesses one of Beckett’s most unusual visual presentations: “Stage in darkness but for Mouth, upstage audience right, about 8 feet above stage level, faintly lit from close-up and below, rest of face in shadow. Invisible microphone. Auditor downstage audience left, tall standing figure, sex undeterminable, enveloped from head to foot in loose

black djellaba, with hood fully faintly lit standing on an invisible podium about 4 feet high" (405). The two figures involved are both partial objects. The Mouth speaks in an unending torrent of words but cannot move, while the auditor can move, albeit limitedly, but cannot speak.

It is important to address the question of gender in regard to these two figures first. Many critics, including Ruby Cohn, refer to the Mouth, at least, using the feminine pronoun "she." I would like to assert that gender is irrelevant to these figures. The figure of the hysteric, according to Lacan and his followers, the figure most able to access *jouissance*, is most frequently also referred to as feminine, but Lacan points out that "in saying 'she,' we are making the hysteric a woman, but this is not her privilege alone. Many men get themselves analyzed who, by this fact alone, are obliged to pass through the hysteric's discourse, since this is the law, the rule of the game" (*Other Side* 33). What Lacan wants us to understand is that the position of the analysand trumps the limits of gender. If we take Beckett's play to somewhat produce, or reproduce, the process and outcomes of analysis, then unless he specifies, gender is unimportant.

## › BECKETT'S WORDY REVERBERATIONS

The Mouth and the Auditor of *Not I* are two partial objects of the same missing master signifier. The belatedness of the Mouth, as it says, "out . . . into this world . . . tiny little thing . . . before its time" (*Not I* 405), proves that the master is missing by highlighting time as a value or judgment. The "tiny little thing . . . before its time" has been born before the master signifier was ready to accept it, and so it is left to float, like a broken piece of asteroid, out of orbit. The Auditor is able to display the "helpless compassion" of movement that Beckett requires because the Auditor is in the same psychic position as the Mouth; whereas the Mouth can only repeat the narrative it knows in a style that assembles itself like a mosaic of words, the Auditor can only move its arms like the wings of a dying bird. Both figures are slowly running out of momentum as their repetition of the past and their reactions to it continue.

In *Rockabye*, the Voice and the Woman dramatize a pattern similar to that of the Mouth and the Auditor in *Not I*. In this play, unlike *Not I*, gender is specified, at least for the Woman, and is hugely important. The play's stage directions reveal its treatment of womanhood. Beckett separates out and describes eyes, costume, attitude, chair, and rock, all in rela-

tion to the Woman. The delineation of parts that Beckett defines marks the Woman in the various manifestations of her status as partial object. She is not conceived of as a whole, and thus Beckett not only translates the concept of Modern episodic writing into character development but also makes this female subject only a fragment or series of fragments of herself. It seems that Beckett is taking a typical misogynistic view of womanhood by objectifying parts, but we find in his stage descriptions his most gentle and sentimental lines. The chair is described as having “rounded curving inward arms to suggest embrace” (462). The chair is a part of the Woman, though, making the image one of part embracing part, or an attempt at creating wholeness or unity.

The attempt at unity is repeated throughout the words and actions of the play. The most obvious example is the simultaneous and repeated utterance of “time she stopped.” Time is an agent of fragmentation as it separates life into arbitrarily constructed units that humanity accepts as belonging to the governing mastery of the Big Other. The repeated and combined effort to stop the dictatorship of time is an effort to end the domination of the Symbolic. The Woman figure, however, is not ultimately successful in her control of time. Instead of co-opting time and using it to her advantage, she stops it completely, ending the repetitive motion of the drive represented by the incessant rocking motion. It does not matter whether or not she controlled the rocking during the play, as she does control its ending. Thus, repetition, in *Rockabye*, like the Woman figure herself, is partially successful in bringing that character toward a Real moment.

In both *Not I* and *Rockabye*, the characters focus on repetition related to language. The plays both demonstrate that repetition, because they still follow a prescribed circuit, even if related to the drive, and confine the locus of *jouissance*. The only kind of *jouissance* possible for these characters is *jouissance* of language. To experience fully a Real moment, the subject must live surplus *jouissance*, which is hidden from the subject under the loss of any other form of *jouissance*.<sup>4</sup> The secondary forms of *jouissance* that are experienced through the Woman’s rocking and the Mouth’s verbal abjection serve to prevent these subjects from their penultimate experiences.

The repetition of language in *Waiting for Godot* and *Happy Days* varies slightly in form from that of *Not I* and *Rockabye*. The language repetition in the longer plays relies on verbal echoes, which create a circuit or orbit

4. See Lacan’s “The Castrated Master” in *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* for further explanation.

in which the subject resides. Despite that locus of repetition being deemed “home” for the subject, the subject lacks understanding of self, or truth. The characters, Gogo, Didi, and Winnie, put themselves in the orbit and willingly inhabit the edges of it. What these characters do not recognize is the emptiness in the center around which the subject is circulating. The subjects are blind to the positive aspects of the lack at the center of their lives. They either cannot see, for Gogo and Didi, or cannot face, for Winnie, the barrenness of their landscapes. Until the subject is willing to embrace the starkness of the death at their center, she continues to long for generation that will keep her tethered to the outside orbit of her drive instead of plunging into the swirling vortex of her center.

In *Waiting for Godot*, the question of generation and its relationship to death arises early in the first act:

ESTRAGON: What about hanging ourselves?

VLADIMIR: Hmm. It'd give us an erection.

ESTRAGON: [*highly excited*] An erection!

VLADIMIR: With all that follows. Where it falls mandrakes grow. That's why they shriek when you pull them up. Did you know that?

(*Waiting for Godot* 11)

Estragon, the more childlike, or Hegelian slave, of the pair, instinctually wants to die and thrills at the idea of sexual arousal that is not dependent on orgasm. Gogo explains that the result of the “little death,” combined with the actual death, is the generation of a mythic creature personified as a shrieking evil root. Sexual release is damning to the pastoral landscape, infecting it with unnatural beings.

The sexual innuendo continues throughout the play with repetition of the erection joke, in relation to the carrot that Estragon begs for and is then disgusted by, saying of the phallic snack he craved, “Funny, the more you eat the worse it gets” (*Waiting for Godot* 15). The repetitive motion of sucking on the carrot is not satisfying but revolting, which makes both eating and sex unfulfilling acts in this play. The circle of the drive is not halted by the desire for the completion of either of these typical acts.

The drive is also, and most famously, kept in motion by the repeated endings of Act One and Act Two. Both end with Estragon asking, “Well, shall we go?” and Vladimir replying, “Yes, let's go,” followed by the stage direction “*They do not move*” (*Waiting for Godot* 47). The words close both acts because, as the play's action or nonaction proves, words are meaningless. The characters know this, too. What they are saying does not matter;



their words are merely part of the orbits of the drives, parts of the meaningless centers around which they circulate. Beckett does not want them to move, because moving would force them into an unnatural act. They would acquiesce to what the audience wants—resolution—which they refuse. They also, however, do not seem to acknowledge their choice, and in that, they miss their opportunity to push themselves wholeheartedly into the void.

Winnie, too, avoids the void through her repetitive language. Each of Winnie's monologues features several words that get deployed and repeated with slight variation, but that reveal the psychic drive of the character at that moment in the action of the play. For example, Winnie's first monologue is governed by the words "begin," "poor," and "what," which are each said at least three times. Taken out of context, the words can be assembled by any reader into a myriad of different narratives. None would be true to Winnie's usage, but we must question if that really matters. Winnie questions rhetorically, "Is not that so, Willie, that even words fail, at times?" (*Happy Days* 284). If words fail, their meanings are voided; the repetition of words has that effect on the ear. When Winnie and her audience, Willie and the theatre patrons, hear her monologues of repetition, the individual words begin to lose their relationship to their definitions, and the listeners start to appreciate them for the familiarity of the sound they produce. Instead of "poor," the listener hears the individual letters, especially, in the case of this word, the heavy double "O" sounds of the middle, lulling the hearers out of thought.

Beckett uses this technique as a riff on his emphasis on the word "spool" in *Krapp's Last Tape*, which was written in 1958, two years before *Happy Days*. In *Krapp*, the word "spool" is the title character's link to the past; he casts out the word like a slinky and brings it back to him with refuse that it picks up on the return journey, like a sophisticated version of Freud's fort/da game. Winnie's usage of repetitive language is different from Krapp's, as it is that which allows for destabilization; whereas Krapp's repetition of the word "spool" brings him security, Winnie's repetition forces her deeper into hysteria. Winnie's repetition reminds us of Lacan's claim, "Through the instrument of language a number of stable relationships are established, inside which something that is much larger and goes much further than actual utterances, can of course, be inscribed" (*Other Side* 13). Winnie's repetition displays the undercurrent of language that Lacan describes. Her repetition yanks word from meaning, like the mandrake being pulled from the Earth, exposing void at the heart of every subject.

The play ends with Winnie commanding herself, "Pray your old prayer,



Winnie" (*Happy Days* 297). She is trying to force herself into a sense of stability with the words of her prayer, the way Krapp does with his repetition of the word "spool." The difference is that the audience hears each of Krapp's repetitions, but it does not hear Winnie say her prayer. The audience is left in the void of meaningless banter, just as Winnie is, and from there she and the audience might be able to vocalize an entirely meaningless sound, or vocative *sinthome*.

## › BECKETT'S CLUMSY CHARACTERS

The lack of shared meaning produced by individual words in a Beckett play constitutes a portion of the definition of his work as "missing." Another missing element of his plays is centered in the misstep of the analytic experience that is dramatized in his work. One of Freud's most basic principles, and one that is still accepted to a lesser degree in psychology today, is that of transference and countertransference. The analyst and the patient must be able to become each other's objects of desire; for the patient, the experience of desire can become one which the patient controls instead of one in which the patient is controlled.

In Lacanian terms, the analyst must become the *objet a* for the hysterical patient, and the patient must become the analyst's *objet a*. This destabilizes the energy cathexis of the *objet a* because the former master, embodied by the analyst, is the new partial object of desire. The false assumption that the master is whole or unified is exposed, so the hysteric is able to see that the subject-supposed-to-know really knows no more than she does. Ultimately, this explains the mysterious Lacanian claim that anxiety does, in fact, have an object.<sup>5</sup> We usually characterize anxiety as a free-floating, surplus affect that does not have a trajectory. Anxiety is the opposite of desire and related closely to, perhaps even the motivation of, the drive. Anxiety can, however, both be related to the drive and have an object if we reconsider what its object might be. If the hysteric is able to work in analysis, because she understands the analyst to be the *objet a*, then the position of the master, just like the primacy of the cogito, is debunked. The anxiety of the hysteric does have an object, but that object is atypical because the object itself is destabilized or knocked off its pedestal in the position of

5. See both *The Other Side of Psychoanalysis* and *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* for reference to this claim.

the master, which would allow the hysteric to control her own anxiety and turn its affect into a *sinthome*.

In Beckett, the subject's final process of making a partial object into a *sinthome* is precluded by the missing transference and countertransference. The two subjects do not desire each other and choose not to desire anything or anyone in the present moment. Instead, Beckett's subjects only desire objects in their pasts. The present moment, or the convergence of time and space with radical desire, is missing; to return to Gibson's explanation of Badiou's use of mathematics, actual infinity is missing.

*Not I* and *Play* are two of Beckett's works that stage this missing present. In *Play*, two female characters and one male character tell the story of their previously interconnected lives while confined in urns. Only their heads are visible; the actors are totally denied the use of their bodies; only their faces can move. As Beckett describes it, "From each [urn] a head protrudes, the neck held fast in the urn's mouth" (*Play* 355). The urn and the body of the subject are melded into one post-human being, with, as Beckett points out, "toneless voices" to further inhibit the actors' means of expression. Without body and inflection, the story must be told exclusively through words and facial expressions. Each of the three characters speaks out into the darkness without any attempt to communicate with each other; therefore, none of the characters can serve in the position of analyst for any of the other characters. Instead, the position of the analyst is, at best, placed in the audience. Since the convention of the fourth wall is solidly in place in all of Beckett's work, he does not intend for the audience and characters to interact. That means that the character, or analysand, cannot complete the transference and turn the analyst into object because the analyst is missing. W1 expresses this when she states, "I can do nothing . . . for anybody . . . any more . . . thank God. So it must be something I have to say. How the mind words still!" (*Play* 362). W1's attempts to "say" something show that she is part of the analytic experience, but she is not in conversation, nor is anyone listening. Her analysis is missing because there is no one in her environment who hears her.

The choral round-robin that begins *Play* is its greatest demonstration of the missing present. In this round, each of the three characters speaks in an orbitlike fashion around certain key words, much like Winnie does in her monologues. W1 focuses on "strange" and "darkness"; W2 repeats "shade" and "right," while M uses "peace" and "one assumed." Only one of the repeated words, "assumed," is a verb, and it is in the past tense. The verbs in the chorus are all either past or future tense. None is in the present,

so audience/analyst cannot respond to them as a proper *objet a* should because they are not reaching that object in the same time.

The belatedness that governs *Not I* also places its action out of the present. The Mouth, taking the place of the analysand, is located upstage, whereas the Auditor or analyst is downstage. This stage position reverses the typical visual depiction of the analytic situation, in which the analysand is either downstage or across from the analyst. In *Not I* the analysand takes the physical position of power, but the position is meaningless as no transference can occur. The Mouth is depicted as a partial object from the beginning of the play, but the description of the Auditor, totally robed in black, makes the Auditor seem not only untouchable, but also so unified in blackness as to be unbreakable. If there is nowhere to breach the master, then that position cannot be partialized. The Auditor does, however, want to reach out for some type of countertransference, as its movements are described as “a gesture of helpless compassion” (*Not I* 405). The Auditor or analyst is powerless and thus could be broken apart, but the Mouth fails to recognize this potential because the Mouth is not engaging in desire in the present moment; the Mouth is so totally absorbed in the past, again revealed through the consistent usage of past-tense verbs, that it cannot see any freedom in the present.

When the verbs switch to present tense in the last fifty lines of the play, the actions described are still things that have happened; the Mouth employs the present tense to try to relive the past in the present. We hear the desperation in lines such as “darkness . . . now this . . . this . . . quicker and quicker . . . words . . . the brain . . . flickering away like mad . . . quick grab and on . . . nothing there . . . on somewhere else . . . try somewhere else . . . all the time something begging it all to stop . . . unanswered” (*Not I* 412). What is leaving is the Mouth’s connection to the past that it does not want to lose, even though it causes much angst. The Mouth intuitively feels that only angst makes it live, but here the pain is not present, but past. Life is not happening now but has happened already. The present is a mere facsimile. The Auditor hears the pleas of the past and knows that the Mouth cannot be helped; hence the Auditor can only move its entire body sympathetically, instead of breaking itself apart in empathy.

Because Beckett’s characters believe in the present moment, all energy in the plays is dead in the past or only expected from the future. If there is no cathexis, the audience is left to wonder what force allows the characters to exist in a present moment that can be observed. The cathexis, or energy transfer of the analytic experience, is replaced by parapraxis. Beckett makes energy into a joke. The hole left by the missing energy of the present

is filled by laughter. Laughter is more productive than silence because in silence, language is not in play, but in comedy, language is manipulated to the subject's desire, so there is a chance of laughter. That laughter is indicative of the possibility of a Real moment. However, Beckett's characters fail to recognize their own absurdity and stay stuck in their starting spaces instead of moving to new positions.

## › BECKETT'S FUNNY FACES

Beckett's usage of vaudevillian techniques is widely recognized as characteristic of his work. Ruby Cohn's description of the comedic elements in Beckett points out the heart of its necessity. She writes, "His wide appeal, however, rests uneasily upon his humor. Even scholars, embarrassed at professional gravity, have guffawed at the vaudeville gags of *Godot*—unbuttoned flies, insistent blows, speaking while chewing, juggling hats, manifest odors, and suicide feints. Underlying most of these *lazzi* are the recalcitrance of objects to mere human manipulation" (11–12). Cohn implies that the objects being used for comedic effects are in fact comedic because they represent parts of the self that are unassimilable to the Symbolic order or master's discourse. The parapractic action is the result of the exposition of the realization that the subject has parts of himself that cannot be mastered. This reminds readers of Yeats's "The Dialogue of Self and Soul" in which the two parts of the human subject, the logical and the spiritual, can never actually discuss anything; their conversations will always miss each other because part of the spirit or psyche must always be unreachable so as to allow for the creation of the *sinthome*.

Cohn speaks indirectly to this *méconnaissance* when she discusses *Godot's* vaudeville antics as masking the essential question of salvation or damnation of the characters within the play (58). Cohn's comments assume the traditional interpretation that Godot is a god figure, but what if that is not true? What happens if Godot is the void or lacks any type of interpretation, including the need for guesses at his Symbolic content? The audience is left with a center that is meaningless. The jokes do not mask the existential question that Cohn identifies, but they show the misstep of the logic of believing that Godot has to have a meaning. Comedy proves to the audience that meaning is unnecessary, even when the characters believe it is. Early in the play, Gogo and Didi try to determine a way to accomplish their suicide. Estragon commands, "Use your intelligence, can't you?" and

Vladimir responds, "I remain in the dark" (*Godot* 11). Between the two bits of dialogue, Beckett provides the stage direction: "*Vladimir uses his intelligence*" (11). The actor must convey the failure of that attempt, and it is from the expression which conveys that failure that the audience is able to laugh. The audience snickers because it, too, is in a position of denial. The audience wants to believe that it would not have the same foolish inabilities, but secretly, each audience member knows that she does have those flaws. The energy created by the character's misstep on stage transfers to the audience, so that the audience is able to laugh at its substitutes and be comforted knowing that illogical and ridiculous behaviors are more universal than logical maneuvers.

Badiou explains the appeal of Beckett's humor brilliantly when he writes, "Beckett must be played with the most intense humor, taking advantage of the enduring variety of inherited theatrical types. It is only then that the true destination of the comical emerges: neither a symbol nor a metaphysics in disguise, and even less a derision, but rather a powerful love for human obstinacy, for tireless desire, for humanity reduced to its stubbornness and malice" (*On Beckett* 75). One of the most common vaudevillian types is the tramp. Certainly, Godo and Didi are tramps, but so are other Beckett characters: Krapp, the Women of *Come and Go*, and the figures of *Cascando* are all tramping about their pasts trying to recapture some deluded aesthetic memory clouded by nostalgia. Tramps such as these exist also in Yeats's plays as the guards in *The Resurrection* and the Dionysian revelers in *Calvary*. Each of these tramp pairs or groups possesses the "tireless desire" about which Badiou writes. Such endless longing is the motion of the drive. For Badiou, what makes Beckett's comedy fascinating is that it belies all categorization into one type or one partial object and encompasses bits of all types or merges a variety of partial objects into one new form that is endurance itself. Comedy arises out of the ironic persistence of character faced with the impossibility of the goal being pursued, unless the very goal is the act of persistence. Certainly, Beckett's characters believe they have tangible outcomes: Godot will arrive, Krapp will eat his banana and finish his tape, Clov will leave, Winnie will pray. These ends do not happen, though.

Beckett's characters do not fulfill their goals because action, typically conceived as the change in status from point *a* to point *b*, does not happen in these plays. Instead, Eric Gans explains, Beckett's characters act through not acting:

[T]he action such as it takes place in an interval of waiting for something else. The primary dramatic action is thus the waiting itself. The primary

action may be said to “fail” in a peculiarly Beckettian way. This is not because Godot never shows up; indeed his absence is the *sine qua non* of successful waiting, since as soon as he arrived the waiting would be over . . . the very choice of “waiting” as dramatic action condemns the writer of failure, but this is failure that can be perfectly well expressed in its own right, since everything that happens, or can possibly happen, expresses it. (Bloom 97)

Waiting as action is Beckett’s way of displaying the importance of pursuing one’s passion, to remind us of Badiou’s usage of the term *love*, or residing in the space of the drive. Comedy is the means through which the energy of the drive is felt via the parapraxis that leads the characters to believe their action will occur in the future and is not yet happening. It is through this ultimate mistake that Beckett forces his characters to miss their chances at the Real.

Waiting as a form of comedic action is most obvious in, but not exclusive to, *Waiting for Godot*. We can see it in each of Beckett’s evening-length works. In *Endgame*, each of the four characters is waiting for something different, which serves to particularize their drives more than the nearly identical wants of Gogo and Didi. The question of time arises very early in *Endgame* when Hamm asks, “What time is it?” and Clov replies, “The same as usual” (94). Time is portrayed as a persistent and unchangeable force that both limits and stabilizes these rickety personalities. The answer to the question is basically comic, though, as it does not provide what is expected, a unit of time, either measuring day versus night or giving the hour of day. We laugh at the sarcasm embedded in the answer and are thankful that the veiled anger is not directed at us in the audience.

The discussion of time also introduces the theme of waiting into the play. Whenever a character is concerned about time, waiting is an underlying theme, as time indicates how long the characters have until the next plot development. Time is, then, a measure of anxiety, with the next plot development as its object. Its presence in the play begins with what Gibson calls history. He writes, “The beginning of history is a theme in *Endgame* on two specific occasions: the panic over the flea, where it is treated with riotously ironical wit, and the appearance of the small boy, where the irony is less assured” (241). The flea and the boy represent the term later used in the play, “accursed fornicator,” and indicate simultaneous hope for and fear of the potential future, or potential infinity. In *Endgame*, we can also identify four interconnected and anticipated actions that indicate actual infinity, or that endless waiting leftover from *Godot*: Clov is waiting to leave, Hamm is waiting for Clov to leave, Nell is waiting to die, and Nagg

is waiting for sustenance to continue living. The anticipated actions are all basic daily events made epic through Beckett's emphasis on them. In the world created, the "*bare interior*" (91), as Beckett indicates in the stage directions, the most mundane or expected events are highlighted because there is nothing else on which to dwell. The audience wants to laugh at the supposed "patheticness" of these lives, devoid of excitement, but something holds the audience back at the beginning of the play. The laughter comes, though, as the characters wait absurdly long for basic things, which lose their relevance as they persist.

Nell gets closest to the truth of the play's state when she asks, "Why this face, day after day?" (101); the audience expects a profound or comforting answer but only hears Nagg say, "I've lost my tooth" (*Endgame* 101). The parapraxis that occurs between the metaphysical question and the base and irrelevant answer makes the audience laugh. Tone also contributes to the humor of the exchange. When Nell asks when the tooth was lost, Nagg responds, "[*elegiac*] Ah, yesterday!" (*Endgame* 101). Nagg almost seems a poetaster at the moment, but he is not even that. He is not aware of the humor his lament creates, and that lack of self-ironization hinders the freeing power of the humor of his situation.

The same pattern is true of Hamm and Clov. Hamm's pathetic question, "You won't come and kiss me goodbye?" is followed by Clov's reply, "Oh I shouldn't think so" (*Endgame* 123–24). Hamm then calmly taunts, "But you might merely be dead in your kitchen" (*Endgame* 124). Of course, no dead body could come and kiss anyone goodnight, but the line reveals the sadness driving the humor. Even more poignant is the idea that a grown man needs the infantile reassurance of being kissed goodnight. The request is not sexual in nature at all, but it is perverse. To carry it out would require a reversal of the family dynamic. Clov, the son, is being asked to take on the parental role, which he does, partially, throughout the entire play. The kiss, though, would make the reversal complete, and that must be refused in the world of the play because it would destroy the symbiotic relationship which fuels the dramatic aggression. We laugh at the prospect, though, so that we literally can hear the sound of the request, or make our anxiety over it audible. The laughter is like Whitman's "barbaric yawp" which helps to bring us into being as we audibly manifest our contact with the edge of the Real.

*Krapp's Last Tape* is another Beckett play which allows the audience's laughter to be heard. Using tradition, even tired stunts such as slipping on a banana peel, Beckett orients the reader to the insular, solipsistic world of the protagonist, through these familiar jests that have been seen in other



places. Humor becomes the common ground or fertilizer, helping to cultivate the wild pastoral space of the stage for the seemingly more refined audience.

The banana peel gag, though, a physical Freudian slip which Krapp forces to happen with his careless behavior, is only the first level of humor in the play. The stage directions with which the play begins, again in relation to the banana, are also comedic in a traditional way. Beckett indicates that Krapp “*stoops, unlocks the first drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a reel of tape, peers at it, puts it back, unlocks second drawer, peers into it, feels about inside it, takes out a large banana, peers at it, locks the drawer, puts the keys back in his pocket*” (*Krapp’s Last Tape* 222). We laugh at the repetitiveness of the action because it indicates some inadequacy in the protagonist. The scene also reveals that the banana and the tapes are somehow linked, as Krapp behaves the same way toward both. Both objects, the audience will learn, are harmful to Krapp because they literally and psychologically constipate him. The tapes hold back Krapp and lock him into the past, so that he can recognize his missed opportunities but cannot do anything to change their outcome. This connection is not fully established until the play is finished. The laughter of the opening action comes from Krapp’s “peering” at both the banana and the tapes as if he cannot understand their meaning or function. Krapp’s parapraxis is that moment of missed recognition. That moment, though, is a glimmer of freedom for Krapp that he will not be trapped by their usual effects on him, but he is, in the end, trapped.

In Lacanian terms, Krapp cannot abject the refuse of his memories and becomes psychically constipated by them. The fourth-grade humor of his name does create giggles in the audience, though, despite its ability to define the character’s interiority. The audience is tempted to laugh at this bathroom humor, because it gives us a sanctioned space in which we can express the base and physical nature of being human. Essentially, Krapp’s name belies the cogito as it calls attention not to thought but to excretion as the basic means of self-definition. The space between what we want to define the self, our thought, versus what we know actually defines us, the crap, is a parapraxis that we laugh at because we realize it is true. As Lacan reminds us, “The truth flies off the very moment you no longer wanted to grab it” (*Other Side* 57). Truth is the abject because it is recognizable as such only when we give up on it. That is, truth is true only when it is crap. We laugh at what we give up, and in Beckett’s play, we can see an entire character who embodies the truth that he cast off. Such is the meaning of the scene Krapp revisits three times, the memory of his inability to con-



summate the relationship with the only woman he loved. Intercourse is then also crap, as it, too, eludes us when we want it most.

Instead of action, Krapp is left with a word, “spool,” which he repeats nearly ten times in the first two pages of the play. Krapp does not just say the word “spool,” though; he elongates the middle “oo” sound to pronounce it “spooooooooooooool.” Krapp is like a child playing with language in an attempt to co-opt its meaning. The audience laughs because it sees Krapp’s attempts at reassigning new meaning or usage to old words as useless, but hidden in that laughter is a little bit of envy. The audience would like to be able to define its own terms of communication, but it cannot, so it chooses to mock him who can. The laughter hides the pain of the audience’s position.

Pain is both real and anticipated, not just for the audience but for the protagonist of *Happy Days*. Winnie says of her own condition, “slight headache sometimes” (*Happy Days* 277) and imagines “the happy day to come when flesh melts at so many degrees and the night of the noon has so many hundred hours” (*Happy Days* 281). Winnie’s pain is minimal in the present, but she knows it will reach an unbearable state as the little flesh not buried in the Earth will be charred off of her by the unrelenting sun. The pastoral is obviously a combatant that has already defeated the heroine. It seems conventionally wrong to laugh at Winnie’s pain, but the audience does because she is in a state of utter self-deception. Even as she is faced with a most agonizing approaching death, she brushes her hair and puts on her lipstick to maintain her appearance for her husband, Willie. At first the audience laughs because it thinks it can see its superiority to this frivolously vain woman, but soon the audience realizes that perhaps it is not so different from Winnie.

Winnie says, “Ah Earth, you old extinguisher. I presume this has occurred before, though I cannot recall it” (*Happy Days* 291). Beckett implies in this statement that the total dissolution of the Earth is part of some cosmic drive. If so, the Earth’s occupants must also be in a cycle of self-destruction which can occur through abjection. Winnie’s abjection is nearly complete as she says, “I used to perspire freely. Now hardly at all” (*Happy Days* 290). She has nothing left to in her body to abject. The audience, however, does, and the process through which it begins to abject itself in the theatre is laughter at Winnie’s absurdity. Our laughter at her ridiculousness is the conduit which allows the audience to abject itself by laughing at her.

*Come and Go*, a less-discussed Beckett short-work, provides another example of a play which allows the audience to use laughter at its characters as a means of abjection. The play’s title can be interpreted as a refer-

ence to the famous refrain of T. S. Eliot's "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock": "the women come and go / talking of Michelangelo." The frivolity and inanity of the women in Eliot's poem, mindlessly discussing art they neither care about nor understand, is magnified in Beckett's dramaticule. The three female characters, Flo, Vi, and Ru, are terribly vain and catty. They are amplified versions of Winnie, as they center on the appearance of each other instead of on themselves.

The women are costumed in what seem to be washed-out versions of their former glory. Beckett describes, "*Costume*: Full-length coats, but-toned high, dull violet (Ru), dull red (Vi), dull yellow (Flo). Drab nondescript hats with enough brim to shade faces. Apart from color differentiation three figures as alike as possible. Light shoes with rubber soles. Hands made up to be as visible as possible. No rings apparent" (*Come and Go* 387). The faded glory of the women is evident, as they wear colors drained of vibrancy. Against their bland dresses fall their hands "made up to be as visible as possible," so that the hand-holding essential to the plot can be seen.

Beckett states that the women are of "indeterminate age," but it is clear they have reached at least the mid-point of their lives, as they are meeting again after not seeing each other for a long time. When Vi asks, "When did we three last meet?" Ru responds, "Let us not speak" (*Come and Go* 385), as if the number of years is too much to bear. The dialogue of the play centers on the lines repeated for each character. The first example is in reference to Vi: "Flo asks, 'What do you think of Vi?' and Ru responds, 'I see little change. [*Flo moves to center seat, whispers in Ru's ear. Appalled.*] Oh! [*They look at each other. Flo puts her finger to her lips.*] Does she not realize?" (*Come and Go* 385). Flo's final comment in the exchange is "God grant not" (*Come and Go* 385). The women, acting very much like petty schoolgirls, are obviously mocking some negative physical change or attribute; instead of being true friends and confronting their friend about the change, they giggle and hide it. The audience, too, laughs, longing to be part of the "in crowd" of the two mockers while simultaneously feeling superior to the women on stage, who act less maturely than the audience assumes they would.

As the cycle of the play progresses, with each pair of women criticizing the left-out third, it becomes obvious that their criticisms are really mirroring what they recognize as problems in themselves but are too ashamed, too vain, to admit. The characters lack the ability to laugh at themselves and deny their own chances at abjection. The audience moves from laughing at the characters to laughing at its own vanity and insecurity.

The women in *Come and Go* try to return to childhood and agree to Vi's question, "Shall we hold hands in the old way?" (386) which references the playground games of their girlhood. What follows is an intricately patterned square-dance-like switching of hands, which ends in Flo's statement, "I can feel the rings" (*Come and Go* 386). The rings, according to Beckett's stage directions, are not worn by any of the women but represent some bond of their past. The games of childhood allow the rings to manifest themselves, at least in the psyches of the characters. Instead of laughter, these women have their combined past experience. Through their movement and their hand holding, they are able to eschew that which they want to forget in the present and redefine themselves through their past. Instead of laughter, the women use regression as a means of attaining the void. The silence that ends the play leaves the audience feeling ambivalent about the women and their choice.

Ambivalence is the key to Beckett, though, even according to his own terminology. He calls *Waiting for Godot* a "tragicomedy" in two acts. Beckett purposefully straddles two genres, and although doing so makes his theatre unique, it also ties him to not one but two sets of expectations. When participating in a Beckett play, the actor and audience must recall the cathartic, peripatetic expectations of tragedy and bring to life the roguish merriment of comedic history. Beckett uses the two sets of overlapping rules to varying degrees in his work. The effort, though, of having to use two sets of standards is ironically limiting. Beckett misses the opportunity to make something totally new, as he must concern himself with rejecting the old. This is not to discredit Beckett's work, as his plays are amazing works of theatrical genius; they are not, however, Real.

# Stephen Sondheim's "Many Possibilities"

THEATRE OF THE MANIFEST

The title of this chapter comes from the last line of Sondheim's 1984 Pulitzer Prize-winning musical, *Sunday in the Park with George*. For purposes of theatre of the Real, the quotation indicates what marks Sondheim's work, even more than Yeats's or Beckett's, as the quintessential example of theatre of the Real. The "many possibilities" referenced are the themes and variations that occur when a *sinthome* is created through the combined efforts of two or more people engaged in a creative endeavor. Musical theatre relies on ensemble work and thus lends itself to the simultaneous creations of *sinthomes* more than drama does. McMillan writes, "There is a drive for ensemble performance in the musical that sets this form of drama apart from realistic prose drama and its focus on the psychology of individualism" (75). Ensemble work replaces causality with the illogical presentation of lyric time, allowing the characters involved to escape the Symbolic. Sondheim's work manifests the *sinthome* and allows the characters to experience a Real moment on the stage. The audience is witness to this manifestation and, in some cases, is able to embody the play and experience its own Real moments, too. The audience members at a Sondheim show can make the play a manifest part of their own lives.

The manifestation of theatre of the Real is a careful, pivotal balance which stages the constant flux of a subject's excess and lack. It is the experience of surplus *jouissance*, which, according to Lacan in *The Other Side*

of *Psychoanalysis*, is the remainder after the master has experienced his own *jouissance* (107). In Sondheim's work, he is the master, especially as he writes both music and lyrics. His *jouissance* comes from aesthetic creation, leaving his characters and his audience with the ability to experience the leftover. If surplus *jouissance* is, to take a popular term, "sloppy seconds," then it is intimately linked to the abject and thus has greater innate ability than the master's *jouissance* to free the subject. It is usually the hysteric who is able to experience surplus *jouissance*, as she is in the position to help the master achieve his own *jouissance* and then take what is left as her victory. In theatre, both the visual and the audio components of the play are in the position of the hysteric.

The key to manifesting the Real is doing the work with another person or group of people. This is radically different from Lacan's original formulation, but Lacan does not consider the theatre in his formulation. His concerns with art, even with *Antigone*, address the relationship between the work of art and the appreciation of that work by one person. The purpose of the Real is to use the individual contact with it to make life in the Symbolic more manageable. Since both theatre and the Symbolic rely on collaboration, they, at first, seem irreconcilable with the Real. In fact, what Sondheim's theatre proves is that group efforts can also help to manifest the Real, or make that moment tangible for character and audience alike.

Throughout his career, Sondheim has had several important collaborative partners: Harold Prince, George Furth, Burt Shevelove, John Weidman, and James Lapine. Not every creative project involved each man, because the projects each required a different set of talents drawn from the psychic needs of the collaborators. Some efforts reflect the movement of the drive in one direction, but as the artists involved change in their own lives, their drives also shifted, propelling them personally in new directions. Traditionally, we think of the drive as a continuous motion focused on one thing. That, however, is too much like desire to be correct. Instead, I propose that the drive itself is a state, like that of tension or anxiety, that circles around the vortex of the Real. That which it circles can change as the subject reaches various stages of abjection. Thus, the drive can run in reverse, if that is what is needed to maintain the integrity of the work of the drive. When the drive changes directions, collaborative partners must also change. As Lacan states in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*, "the *aim* is not what he brings back, but the itinerary he must take; the *aim* is the way taken" (179). Sondheim's partners are akin to Lacan's *aim*, or the paths through which, or with which, the subject of the drive must travel. It seems both Sondheim and his partners intuitively understood

and allowed Sondheim the freedom to work with a number of people on an almost rotating basis. Each of Sondheim's works is thus fresh and new, while it still explores the same basic theme of the impossible necessity of interpersonal relationships, both romantic and parental, as templates for how some characters achieve a moment in the Real, from which they can return better prepared for daily life.

Up to this point, we have considered the theatres of Yeats and Beckett as approaching an ideal theatre of the Real. The ideal theatre of the Real would develop a new form to incorporate the Real experiences of both creator and actor, so that the Real would not be mimicked, but exposed for its painful value. This event would have to occur on a new stage or in a new pastoral space that is able to present sensory experiences of the natural world that give witness to the throbbing thrill of its generative power without all the trappings of conventional pastoral images.

In Yeats's work, the audience finds the figure of the dancer, who is set into the continuous motion of the drive, whirling herself into abjection, but her abjection is for the Other, not for the self. Because she is not totally free, what could be *sinthomatic* action for herself becomes only her symptom, but her action does become *sinthomatic* for her Other, who is so motivated by her movement that he is able to access the rhythm of his drive and pursue his own Real. The audience, as witness to such events, can use the example of the dancer figure to set itself into motion as well, with the understanding that the dance, which the audience members begin, must be done for themselves, and not for any partners they might have. Yeats's theatre is not quite Real because it is missing the elements of nondependent partnership and action for oneself instead of for another.

Beckett's theatre does not present moments of the Real, either, but instead it presents characters who recount their missing attempts with the Real. Beckett's characters are so enmeshed in the Symbolic, so concerned with their relationships to the master, that they do not have a chance to manifest their Real moments. Beckett's characters are too mired in abjection to move past the wasted materials.

Sondheim's innovations in musical theatre are able to combine the *sinthomatic* movements of Yeats's dancer figures with Beckett's abject humor to create a new form, or theatre of the Real, which allows author, character, and audience to bear witness to painfully triumphant moments of the Real. These moments have the power, when acted upon, to create new non-Symbolic, visceral understanding and to change life in the Symbolic for the better, making the Symbolic more easily manipulated by the subject and thus more bearable.

## › "CHILDREN AND ART"<sup>1</sup>

### *The Sondheim Primer*

Sondheim's theatre of the Real developed through his young adulthood and early experiences working on Broadway. Since Sondheim's life is not as familiar to many of us as are the lives of Yeats or Beckett, it is important to gloss some of his formative experiences. Meryle Secrest, Sondheim's biographer, depicts his childhood as one of wealthy emptiness. Sondheim himself recalls, "My father and mother used to take me out of bed at cocktail time if they had clients, they'd drag me out in my pajamas to play 'The Flight of the Bumblebee.' I took lessons for about two years. It is really a lump, very difficult to make work except of *oompah, oompah*" (Secrest 20). Sondheim's parents had active business and social lives, leaving him very much alone.<sup>2</sup> Again, he tells Secrest, "I don't remember my mother at all during those years [age 5–10]. . . . I don't think she was around. I don't think she cared. I think my father wanted to share things with me; I think my mother did not. I have no memory of my mother doing anything with me" (Secrest 21). He was raised primarily by nurses and cousins until the age of ten, when his parents divorced and his father remarried. Sondheim maintained an amiable relationship with his biological father, but he was able to choose his own father figures, or the men who would mold and shape his tastes and career.

Sondheim must have been a confident young man, despite his mousy looks, because he had little fear in befriending Oscar Hammerstein, who would become his teacher and his pseudofather. Sondheim's mother, Foxy Sondheim, knew Hammerstein through his wife; both women were part of the same social circuit. Foxy, a social climber, decided to buy a summer house in the then fashionably rural Doylestown, PA, only several miles from the Hammersteins' farm. The social connection, combined with Sondheim's emerging friendship with the Hammersteins' son, Jamie, led Sondheim to spend most of his adolescent summers with the Hammerstein family. It seems Sondheim's musical destiny was set, not by drive for his art but by determination to get away from his mother and be in a friendly household. Still, during those summers, Sondheim learned much about music from the great lyricist and mentor.

Because Sondheim was not serious about the study of music for the

1. The musical number "Children and Art," *Sunday in the Park with George*.
2. Sondheim's parents were both in fashion design and retail sales.



purposes of a career until his second year at Williams College, he was also able to formulate his own musical tastes without the pressures of having to like “the greats,” such as Bach, Beethoven, or Mozart, none of whom he claims as essential influences. As Steve Swayne writes, “Sondheim’s emergence as an aficionado of classical music was in no way assured. His love of music certainly goes back to his early years—at least to the age of five—and was driven by his love of innovation and technology” (5). It seems natural that Milton Babbitt, the great modern composer, was destined to become his teacher.

Even the decision to work with Babbitt was Sondheim’s own. He continually was able to choose the men who would formulate his body of knowledge and style. By choosing for himself, Sondheim retained a great amount of control over his destiny. His father figures, or teachers, were not imposing or imposed figures of the Symbolic patriarchy, but they were more like those described by Kristeva’s concept of the Imaginary father, who fosters aesthetic endeavors.<sup>3</sup> These early learning experiences were not oppressive, but collaborative, so that Sondheim could experience the pleasure of working with other great minds.

Despite the positive experience of collaboration, Sondheim knew, from early childhood, that interpersonal relationships could be devastatingly hard to manage. Not much is written about Sondheim’s romantic life, as his biographers respect his desire for privacy in that area, but some themes emerge from Meryle Secrest’s *Sondheim: A Life*. Though Sondheim is homosexual, he has not had many openly gay affairs. During Sondheim’s early life, he appeared to have approximations of heterosexual love affairs with several women, including Mary Rogers and Lee Remick, but those couplings were really just intense and inspiring friendships, without a sexual component. His longest intimate relationship was with his house-man, Louis Vargas. As Sondheim said, “He was the equivalent of a wife. In the traditional sense. [T]heir harmonious relationship lasted until Louis’s death of AIDS in 1993” (Secrest 344). Secrest makes no mention of romantic feelings between the two men, but they are certainly not impossible to rule out.

Peter Jones, as young composer and lyricist, came to Sondheim in 1990 looking for a mentor. “A few weeks or months later, Sondheim was telling his friends that he was in love, really in love, for the first time in his life” (Secrest 375). Sondheim was sixty years old. In 1994, after some difficult times, the two exchanged wedding rings. “Sometime afterwards, one of Sondheim’s anniversary gifts to P.J. [Peter Jones] was the title page of *Pas-*

3. See *Tales of Love* for an expanded explanation of this theory.



sion, reprinted and framed, with a dedication to him. Life, it seemed, was now imitating art" (Secret 381).

Although *Passion*, his most recent show to appear on Broadway, is a total manifestation of theatre of the Real, many plays throughout his career have embodied Real moments and characteristics. This chapter will explore moments and themes of Sondheim's most Real theatrical endeavors: *Company*, *Follies*, *A Little Night Music*, *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion*. Not all of these plays embody pure theatre of the Real, as *Passion* does, but each manifests at least one of the major recurrent themes or practices that make Sondheim's theatre of the Real.

*Company*, Sondheim's earliest manifestation of theatre of the Real, is the story of five married couples, and three lovers, each in a relationship with Bobby, a bachelor, whose ambivalence about marriage causes conflict among his friends. The show ends not in traditional comedic form with Bobby's marriage, but with his realization that some type of commitment to another person is necessary to live.

*Follies* presents the simultaneous decay of life and American musical theatre, as aged Broadway chorus girls and their husbands gather for a nightmarish trip through their pasts and their unconscious longings at a party before their old theatre is demolished. As the next day breaks and the party ends, the Real has come and gone, leaving the characters a bit broken, but a bit wiser.

In *A Little Night Music*, Sondheim presents a modern variation of a Jonsonian masque with the characters doubling as both the nobility and the satyrs. Courtly intrigue and romance become farce<sup>4</sup> as the characters must realize that their affairs are not as grand as they want to believe. These characters, just as those in *Follies*, find themselves faced with images they do not like and with chances to change themselves into what they want to be.

*Pacific Overtures* marks a big departure for Sondheim, as it is the first overtly political piece of his career. The play makes use of Perry's "invasion" of Japan to show how the Symbolic can push out an Imaginary that has been sequestered for too long. The play goes on to imply that only a Real moment could save the situation from ruin, but that Real moment never comes.

*Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street* presents the title character as a man living in the Real, or in psychosis. His murderous actions

4. Deidre, the female protagonist, even asks her former love, "Don't you love farce? / My fault, I fear," in the often taken-out-of-context ballad, "Send in the Clowns."

incite traditionally cathartic feelings in the audience and expose the anguish of the Real.

*Sunday in the Park with George* links aesthetic creation to the Real through an exploration of the life of Georges Seurat and his fictional grandson George. Both men risk happiness to pursue art, and in the final scene, they show the audience that aesthetic pursuit produces *jouissance* for the creator and perhaps, given the effectiveness of the production, for the audience as well.

In *Into the Woods*, Sondheim substitutes the wish for the aesthetic creation and presents fairytale characters on quests for their desires. When they achieve their goals, the characters are still miserable, proving that the drive is unquenchable. To think the drive can be sated is to fool oneself. The drive must be allowed to go on, in a Real rhythm, to keep the subject moving, as movement is the only way to achieve the Real.

Finally, in *Passion*, Sondheim gives us the bizarre love triangle of dashing soldier, his beautiful mistress, and a hideous other woman. When the hideous other woman and the dashing soldier become entwined in an inexplicable love affair, doomed to end in death and abandonment, all theatre convention is abandoned, and the Real is laid bare on the stage.

## ➤ “WHITE—A BLANK PAGE OR CANVAS”<sup>5</sup>

### *Sondheim’s Sinthomes*

Sondheim creates and produces theatrical works that put forth a development of the Lacanian Real, which can be attained only while endeavoring with another person, or people, who are also on a quest. This is not to imply that the *sinthomes*, or even the quests, are the same. To be truly Real, the material letter of the *sinthome* and its creation must still be radically unique; however, what Sondheim’s work reveals is that extreme individuality can be cultivated only in relief against others engaged in similar processes. The *sinthomes* are created both within and as a result of Sondheim’s work. They cannot be visualized as unlifted pen strokes, but are mosaics of perspectives, trials, and opinions. For the *sinthome* to manifest itself, it must have proximity to another entity trying to achieve a similar position. The theatrical *sinthome* cannot work alone; it must be part of an ensemble of *sinthomes*. Beckett’s dictatorial direction and Yeats’s insular drawing-

5. From “Sunday,” *Sunday in the Park with George*.

room antitheatrics prevent their theatres' necessary collaborations.

For Sondheim, the *sinthome* is created out of the abject material put forth by the characters during the performance. It is not some outlandish or overtly theatrical creation, but it is the kernel of realization that the ideal of the Imaginary must be replaced by a variation of a commonplace object or occurrence from the subject's daily life. That *sinthome* can then be a bridge from the Imaginary, or Symbolic, to the Real, and back again. We can find justification for this formulation in Lacan's *Le Sinthome*. He writes:

And I make the real the support of what I term ex-sistence, in this sense: in its ex-sistence outside of the imaginary and the symbolic, it knocks against them, its play is something precisely in the order of limitation; the two others, from the moment when it is tied into a borromean knot with them, offer it resistance. In other words, the real only has ex-sistence—in rather an astonishing formulation of mine—in its encounter with the limits of the symbolic and the imaginary. (*Le Sinthome* 14)

What Lacan depicts here is the *sinthome* as a visitor, knocking against the fourth wall of the Real. In the theatre, the *sinthome* is what knocks on, and then knocks down, the barrier between stage and house, making the action and reaction continuous. The action on the stage, and the reactions of the audience, are literalizations of that knocking-down process. Once the audience is not just captivated by, but empathizing with, the action of the play, that play is Real and the audience, too, can have a Real experience.

If the subject, either actor or audience member, takes the experience in the theatre and internalizes it, then the body becomes the fourth wall into and out of which abject material must pass. The ways in which those materials pass are everyday occurrences: urination, defecation, perspiration. They are as commonplace as Stevens's "Complacencies of the peignoir."<sup>6</sup> To allow the Real to be a breakthrough and life-changing moment, its catalyst and materiality must be part of daily life. That is why, even when delving into the realm of fairytales or the lives of artists, his characters are intensely human, and thus flawed.

For Lacan, as well as for Sondheim, "The writing of little letters, little mathematical letters, is what supports the real" (*Le Sinthome* 20). In this view, we have to have a completely mundane Symbolic that has enough

6. See Wallace Stevens's poem "Sunday Morning" from either *Harmonium* or his *Collected Works*.

weight, through repetitive acts, to support the hole of the Real in its center. Repetition is like the caloric intake of the psyche. When we habitualize something, we give it an importance that it did not have as a one-time Symbolic event. At the same time it is given weight, however, it is drained of significance. The rote process of the habit fails to stimulate the subject. Without the weight of habit, the subject has nothing substantial enough to collapse in order to create the hole from which the Real can spring.

To explain how Sondheim is able to reach such an innovative approach to the Real, we must first explore the ways in which he works, with a team of artists, to bring a musical to the Broadway stage. For Sondheim, the rings of the Borromean knot—or the interlocking circles of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real—are the intersecting book, lyrics, and score, which are all held together in the performance, which binds the component parts together with the *sinthomatic* weaving of collaborative efforts.

Musical theatre is a naturally collaborative art because of its enormous artistic scope. As Steve Swayne points out in *How Sondheim Found His Sound*, many musicians and lyricists understand dramatic form, but most playwrights do not know much about music theory. This adage underscores the need for at least two people to conceptualize the original story for a musical. Those two people are quickly augmented, out of necessity, to include producers, directors, choreographers, scenic and costume designers, and orchestrators.

With so many people working in what constitutes musical theatre's own, albeit artistic, version of the Symbolic, it is a difficult task to make the experience Real. Sondheim is able to make that Real emerge on the stage because he is able to catch the most essential elements of each collaborator's drives in the vortex of his circulating need for creation. Thus, with Sondheim and his collaborators, the work on stage is the result of the collision and incorporation of many individual drives into one passion, so potent that when presented, it has the ability to change not only the genre of musical theatre, but the lives of all who are part of its presentation. The actors involved add another hysterical dimension, making the dramatic text live and sing. Prior to performance, drama can only be Imaginary; the Real can break through only when it is lived. Because drama does live, in actual time and space, it has more potential than other literary work to achieve any kind of Real.

The Real that Sondheim creates and presents to his audience takes place in the theatre as the new pastoral space. We must remember that the conventional pastoral, derived from the ancient eclogue form and transformed into the idylls of Medieval Romance, is a Symbolic world. The powers

of nature are limited to those that adhere to society's moral and political structures. The Real pastoral, however, is much truer to the workings of the actual natural world than the conventional pastoral is. It is a wild, unpredictable, yet beautiful place that awakens the mind and body by producing both ecstatic and terrorizing emotions in the intruding subject. While Sondheim's theatre is designed for theatre's most commercial medium, Broadway,<sup>7</sup> the houses in which Sondheim works are transformed through what is presented onstage.

The Real pastoral does not have to be part of the natural world but can be part of human nature, and thus can be located anywhere a subject resides. Sondheim's theatres are Real pastoral spaces because they present characters whose experiences of raw emotion, without sentimentality, jar both themselves and the audience watching into a new experience.

The key to making this pastoral space is the nature of Sondheim's work, which can be rather glibly described as sentiment without sentimentality. This dictum, which could also easily be applied to nearly all modern literature, highlights the importance of human emotion without explanation, apology, or emphasis. When emotions are hyperbolized, as they are in Yeats, or numbed, as in Beckett, they can lose their potency. Yeats's drawing-room dancer plays and Beckett's dramaticules have coterie audiences, partially because of their awkward relationships to the emotional expectations of general audiences. Sondheim, at least in most of his major productions, *Merrily We Roll Along* and *Follies* excluded, was able to entice Broadway audiences with productions of unadulterated feeling and honest emotion without embracing nostalgia or sentimentality.

The ways in which Sondheim deals with emotional material on the stage are at the heart of his categorization as a modern playwright. Little, if any, work has been done to explore this classification, but some scholars have hinted at it. Steve Swayne notes that while Sondheim was most profoundly influenced by Ravel (10) and Rachmaninoff (22), both Romantic composers, his most important teachers were Oscar Hammerstein and Milton Babbitt. Sondheim was not Hammerstein's official student. Because of the friendship between the Hammersteins and Sondheim's mother, Foxy, and the close proximities of their summer houses in Doylestown, Sondheim was able to spend much time with Hammerstein, absorbing all the great teacher and father figure had to offer.

7. Sondheim's shows have all been written for Broadway theatres, with the exception of *Sunday in the Park with George*, which was written for an off-Broadway stage. Sondheim's latest musical, *Bounce*, has not yet had a Broadway debut.

Sondheim studied music with Babbitt, one of America's greatest Modern composers, while at Williams College, which, incidentally, he entered as an English major (Secret 85). According to Babbitt, Sondheim was such a disheveled young man that "Sylvia [Babbitt] and I became almost his second parents" (Secret 86). This statement reveals that like most Modernists, Sondheim felt a great lack at the core of his being, one that in Lacanian terms allowed the Real to glimmer through. The ironic heart of Modernism is not a red valentine, or even a bloody, pulpy thing, but an empty space, where those images used to reside. With the hole of the Real already carved out, it is easier for Modernists like Sondheim than for some other artists to explore the Real. Babbitt's depiction of the young Sondheim makes this reading evident.

Babbitt also taught Sondheim the art of "long-line" compositions, which allow a composer to sustain a musical idea for the duration of a piece, regardless of its length (Secret 86). By exploiting this idea of musical unity, Sondheim, the Lacanian Modernist, is able to play with one idea and a multitude of variations, keeping the audience focused on a singular point that becomes the production's *sinthome*. Such "long-line composition" can be likened to the use of images in Modern literature that appear to connect disparate moments and characters.<sup>8</sup> The incongruent experiences act like Žižek's "parallax" moments, explained in *The Parallax View*, to be the oppositional elements or sides of the same object.

Joanne Gordon, in *Art Isn't Easy: The Theatre of Steven Sondheim*, also makes overtures toward the consideration of Sondheim as a Modernist. Quoting a number of critics responding to *Follies*, she states:

It is interesting to note how many of the critics, in attempting to explain the meaning of *Follies*, have compared it with great literary masterpieces. Doris Hering, the reviewer for *Dance Magazine*, quotes extensively from Eliot's *Four Quartets* in her critique of *Follies*; Brendan Gill of the *New Yorker* makes reference to Yeats's *A Dialogue of Self and Soul*; Jack Kroll of *Newsweek* finds "Fitzgeraldian overtones"; and T. E. Kalem of *Time* sees the work as "Proustian." (Secret 81)

The connection here between Sondheim and Modern writers, especially Yeats, cannot be overlooked. What these critics recognize is that at the heart of each of these artists is a gap, a longing—personal, political, or

8. Consider the plane in *Mrs. Dalloway* as the quintessential embodiment of this literary technique.

both—that leaves a fissure in their conception of self. That vortex is created by the centrifugal force of the drive, which leaves open a space for creation. The artistic outputs are the materializations, or letters, of the holes made by the drives.

For Yeats, in "A Dialogue of Self and Soul," the hole is the split between the external presentation and internal composition of one subject. The soul admits, "For the intellect no longer knows / *Is* from the *Ought*, or *Knower* from the *Known*" ("Self and Soul" ln. 36–37). The soul has reached a Real existence, where differences are extinguished by the *sinthome*. Still, the Self of the poem, who dominates its structure, claiming more than two-thirds of the verses, has not caught up to the Soul, but is still in the Symbolic, questing for the Real: "I am content to follow to its source / Every event in action or in thought; Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot! / When such as I cast out remorse / So great a sweetness flows into the breast / We must laugh and we must sing" ("Self and Soul" ln. 65–70). The Self wants to reach the Real, and when it does, it proposes music and dancing, as if the Soul were already part of a musical's cast that the Self would like to join. This nearly joyful way of interpreting the Real is one not often asserted, and joy is certainly not a tenet of Modern literature, but here, in both Yeats and Sondheim, we find joy amidst the pain and collapse of the world. In Sondheim's Modernism, as in Yeats's and even Eliot's, it is the music which helps to manifest the space of the Real, making the body, either of the actor or of the audience, the ultimate Real pastoral.

Sondheim, according to Joanne Gordon, also makes interesting use of Modernist literary devices, such as stream-of-consciousness. When analyzing *Sunday in the Park with George*, she writes, "As the staccato notes that mirror George's brush strokes resume, the painter is given an extraordinary soliloquy of sound. Like something out of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, the soliloquy possesses a free-form structure that barely contains a flood of words linked not grammatically or logically but emotionally" (Gordon 273). The concept of access to a character's interior monologue is an old one in theatre. Any student of Shakespeare can recognize that device. Sondheim's innovation removes self-consciousness from the presentation. Just as Bloom, in *Ulysses*, is not speaking to the reader or trying to give her comprehensible access to his thoughts, so too George, in *Sunday*, is not aware of his revelations to the audience. He is completely immersed in his drive at that moment, and his words, coming out in tangentially related patterns, are his form of abjection, spitting out any semblance of the Symbolic, to allow greater connection with his art.



It is too simplistic to claim that George, in *Sunday*, is a semi-autobiographical portrayal of Sondheim himself, but George, as a character, can be used as a segue into Sondheim as a creator. When George paints, he is essentially alone in the world he is creating, blocking out all other characters, to their distress. When Sondheim works, despite the intensity of his collaborative efforts, his songwriting occurs while he is alone, with only his piano, under the pressure of creating a song for a specific character during rehearsals.

To understand why Sondheim's collaborative process creates theatre of the Real, it is important to learn how he works alone. As a composer and lyricist, Sondheim actually works less in collaboration with other people than many other creators of Broadway shows who write only words or music. For his first two musicals, *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*, Sondheim wrote only the lyrics and went to his mentor, Hammerstein, for advice. Out of that conversation, Sondheim learned:

Instead of writing Madame Rose you write for Madame Rose as played by Ethel Merman. It turned out to be very useful, because when I wrote Joanne in *Company* I wrote for Joanne as played by Elaine Stritch. I wrote Mrs. Lovett as played by Angela Lansbury, and Sweeney Todd as played by Len Cariou, too. It's not so much that you tailor the material, but you hear the voice in your head whether you want to or not. (Secrest 134)

This statement proves that Sondheim's songwriting, whether he is collaborating with a composer or not, is still a collaborative process, as he takes the singer into consideration. The singer becomes his partner, and the song is tailored to that singer's personality, making a final artistic outcome that is unique to, almost *sinthomatic* of, that particular creative process.

Just as Sondheim imagines his singers and takes their characteristics into account when composing, he also envisions an Imaginary, or ideal, audience who will be filling the theatre's seats. He genuinely cares that his lyrics will receive the hearing they deserve and writes to make them both Symbolically and emotionally available. He believes "that lyrics exist in *time*. An audience cannot ask a performer to slow down or repeat, for 'the music is a relentless engine and keeps the lyrics going'" (Gordon 12). Music is an embodiment of the drive, and lyrics are needed to act as a conduit between an audience in the Symbolic and a creation in the Real. Sondheim emphasizes that lyrics are secondary to music: "Lyrics go with music, and music is very rich, in my opinion the richest form of art. It's also abstract and does very strange things to your emotions. . . . Lyrics therefore have



to be underwritten. They have to be very simple in essence” (Gordon 13). The idea that words are in service to music subjugates the Symbolic to the Real, making it a necessary gateway, but one that can be discarded. Sondheim himself uses syllabic nonsense in many songs to merge music and voice, giving hearing to two versions of the auditory drive. Examples can be found in “You Could Drive a Person Crazy” from *Company*, and “Color and Light” from *Sunday in the Park with George*.

Musically, for Sondheim, “content dictates form” (Gordon 14), which shows a privileging of essence over presentation. Content, which is theme, or the emotional component of a Sondheim musical, is linked to the drama, or movement, which is always probing in the direction of the Real. The form created then is an entirely new substance, a theatrical revolution in Bennett’s terms. That form is *sinthomatic* of the production and is reducible to a singular point.

## › “I THOUGHT THAT YOU’D WANT WHAT I WANT”<sup>9</sup>

### *Sondheim’s Real Couples*

When writing music and lyrics, Sondheim makes sure that the final presentation is a cohesive whole replicating, in art, the unary trait of the drive. When working with his greatest collaborators—George Furth, Hal Prince, and James Lapine—Sondheim also tries to meld his ideas with theirs to maintain that unary output.

*Company* is Sondheim’s first Broadway hit and what many critics consider the first “concept musical.” The “concept musical” is “essentially non-narrative, or at least non-linear in its narrative approach, and that often takes some aspects of a revue” (Knapp 294). The “concept” approach allows Sondheim to achieve his first unary presentation, which ironically begins as a series of disparate one-act plays, exploring various aspects of committed, romantic relationships, written by George Furth. It was neither Furth nor Sondheim who conceived of the idea as a musical; it was Hal Prince (Secrest 190). The script presented a great challenge to Sondheim, who claimed it was “antithetical to singing. Every time I tried to develop a song out of dialogue it didn’t work. Which is why all the songs in *Company*

9. From “Send in the Clowns,” *A Little Night Music*.

are either self-encapsulating entities or Brechtian comments on what is happening” (Secrest 192). In a play that is about the radical disconnection between people supposedly intimately involved with each other, it seems that the songs and dialogue should reproduce that disconnect, which is exactly what happens in *Company*.

“Sorry-Grateful” comments on the preceding scene, during which husband Harry and wife Sarah furtively take sips of bourbon and bites of brownie, while trying to outdo each other with karate moves. The scene reveals the adversarial nature of marriage, and the song underscores that with poignant commentary: “You’re always sorry, / You’re always grateful, / You hold her thinking, ‘I’m not alone.’ / You’re still alone” (*Company* 33). In the dramatic scene, Harry and Sarah share a space in which they are still intensely alone. The song reinforces that message, unifying the presentation. It also reveals a bit of Sondheim’s innovative Real. The characters can bear their loneliness only with the other nearby. Sondheim’s Real requires another to be present and in the same state, so that *jouissance* does not collapse into mourning or explode into melancholy.

Working with Sondheim not only on *Company*, but on *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*, *A Little Night Music*, *Merrily We Roll Along*, *Follies*, *Pacific Overtures*, and *Sweeney Todd*, Harold Prince is the producer/director with whom Sondheim has shared the greatest number of successes. Their work styles, though, as Sondheim himself notes, are radically different. While discussing the process of creating *Follies*, Sondheim said, “The trouble there . . . was that Hal’s a day person and I’m a night one. He starts off the day on high and drops off after a few hours. It takes me a few hours just to wake up. But there’s a minute or two as we pass each other when ideas flow” (Secrest 207). What Sondheim describes is the near impossibility of creative collaboration; like clichéd ships passing in the night, artists catch only a few starry-eyed moments with each other and from those moments develop an idea. The process described here is also one of completion. What one party lacks the other has, but the collaborators do not fill each other’s lacks.

The Sondheim/Prince partnership also demonstrates how a Real relationship need not end in drama and pain. Sometimes, it can just peter out, as both parties see the need to explore new ways of creation or make new *sinthomes* for the self, when the old ones have ceased to work. Such was the case with Sondheim and Prince after the disastrously short run of *Merrily We Roll Along*. Secrest writes about the decision to use totally inexperienced actors for the show’s leading roles, “In retrospect, Prince and Sondheim agreed that it had been a catastrophically bad idea to imagine that

a cast of starry eyed adolescents would be equal to the task of portraying dissipation and disillusion" (311).

Since *Merrily We Roll Along* tries to return to the ideal at its end, the audience knows that ideal is doomed, and the *sinthome* no longer works. After a run of terrible reviews, "Prince told Sondheim he thought their partnership had 'run out of steam,' Sondheim said. And that was that. Sondheim had lost the most important collaborator of his life" (Secret 320).

One can argue, however, that Prince is not his most important collaborator, because the dissolution of the partnership with Prince made way for the great work he did and still may do with James Lapine. With Lapine, Sondheim created *Sunday in the Park with George*, *Into the Woods*, and *Passion*, the three shows in which he manifests potent experiences of theatre of the Real. It is important to figure out what about this partnership differs from Sondheim's other collaborative efforts. Like Prince and Sondheim, Lapine and Sondheim have very different working styles; Lapine works quickly, whereas Sondheim is methodical (Secret 329), allowing them to complete, or complement, each other.

It is the introduction of the interior monologue into the creative process, however, that makes their enterprises unique:

Writing with Sondheim involved the usual requirement that the playwright contribute lengthy monologues that would never be used, but which would help the composer further define a character that had sprung to life in the mind of its originator. Sondheim said, "For 'Color and Light' . . . and even the title song, James wrote interior monologues never to be spoken.<sup>10</sup> They were [a] sort of stream-of-consciousness that I could take from." (Secret 329)

Sondheim uses interior monologues that will never be presented on stage to generate ideas about characters that will feed his compositions. This process works exceptionally well with Lapine, as Sondheim's additional praise of Lapine's verbal style proves. He calls Lapine's prose "extremely delicate fabric" (Secret 329) and retains many of his lines of dialogue to preserve the integrity of Lapine's intent. That intent, though, also serves Sondheim's needs as a composer. Both men aim at nuance and subtlety of emotion, interested more in shadow than in light. The exploration of the interior of the character, and the ability of Sondheim, the older, more seasoned writer, to follow the lead of the younger artist, prove that to keep the itself alive,

10. This calls to mind Joanne Gordon's point that *Sunday* is a musical with Joycean uses of language and narration.

the drive must sometimes shift direction. Here, the drive runs in reverse to maintain the integrity of the work being created by it. Work with Prince was no longer driving Sondheim, and he felt that dissatisfaction. Work with Lapine revitalized him, allowing him to go from *Merrily We Roll Along*, a flop, to *Sunday in the Park with George*, which won the Pulitzer Prize. The reason is perhaps that Lapine could see the value in *Merrily* and make it a success in La Jolla in 1985, when Prince deemed it a failure (Secret 320). Lapine's vision, or *sinthome*, overlapped with Sondheim's, even before they began collaborating. Perhaps the greatest and most surprising benefit to Sondheim's collaborative experiences, especially given his close relationship with Broadway great Oscar Hammerstein, is Sondheim's lack of what Harold Bloom called "the anxiety of influence." As Steve Swayne points out, though, "Sondheim feels no such anxiety" (4).

Without the anxiety of living up to his predecessors' formulas, Sondheim is able to write *Passion*, his most Real statement on romantic love, but certainly not his first. A theme of the impossible necessity of romantic connection runs throughout Sondheim's career, beginning with the first musical on which he worked, *West Side Story*. Sondheim was only the lyricist for the show, taking a back seat to the difficult Leonard Bernstein, the composer. The show, a contemporary retelling of *Romeo and Juliet*, fuels the family feud with racial tension. Tony is white; Maria is Hispanic. Neither culture approves of the other, and thus a Symbolic fence is erected. The conflict, centering on ethnicity, which is really another form of identity imposed by the Symbolic order, ends with Tony's murder, but unlike Shakespeare's Juliet, Maria remains alive. Their passion, their drive, is strong enough to incite others to kill, but it does not tempt them to suicide. Maria is more passionately attached to the dead Tony than she was to the live one, as the curtain closes on her waving a gun to keep her family and his friends at bay. The relationship may have been Symbolic, but the passion was Real.

Sondheim was able to propel the characters close to the Real, as he learned the importance of merging song and action. This was Sondheim's first show, and he was not adept at envisioning the directorial choices to which his songs would lead. Faced with a version of "Maria" that required the actor simply to sing to the audience, with no accompanying action, choreographer Jerome Robbins exclaimed, "You stage it" (Secret 123). Sondheim learned that his lyrics and later his music must be contiguous with the action.

Ironically, since Sondheim openly admits he does not like Brecht's work,

Sondheim's shows have Brechtian overtones. Sondheim and choreographer Jerome Robbins had a volatile working relationship, but Sondheim still tried to support Robbins's interests and learn from them. Robbins was fascinated by Brecht's *Lehrstück* plays, which aim at teaching the audience the importance of learning a lesson, regardless of what that lesson may be. Robbins first suggested that Sondheim tackle a musical version of *The Measure Taken*, and when Sondheim rejected that, he recommended *The Exception and the Rule*: "Sondheim did not admire the play and disliked most of Brecht's work" (Secret 188), so that project never developed, but Brecht must have affected some of Sondheim's sensibility because Sondheim's next major work after that was *Company*, a show that makes use of Brechtian alienation.

The opening of *Company*, with music/lyrics by Sondheim and book by George Furth, highlights alienation in its usual sense of subjects separated from each other. Bobby, the single friend of several married couples, is never available to spend time with his friends. The opening song is a series of answering machine messages being left for Bobby on his birthday. The friends circle inward as the messages come to an end. The stage direction says, "They [the married friends] look out front and speak tonelessly" (*Company* 4). Sondheim and Furth indicate that the dialogue that follows should be intoned, not spoken or sung. The confrontational stances of the couples, combined with the intonation, functions similarly to Brechtian alienation, forcing the audience out of its comfort zone and expectations of musical theatre. This ritual action recalls Yeats's usage of similar effects by the musicians in his dancer plays.

In a song about the oxymoronic state of marriage, the husbands sing, "You're sorry-grateful, / Regretful-happy, / Why look for answers where none occur? / You'll always be what you always were/ Which has nothing to do with, all to do with her" (*Company* 34). Sondheim must create new compound words, *ee cummingsesque* phrases, to describe the emotional state of marriage, because no single word used in the Symbolic order is adequate to capture the range of emotions.

In the scene that follows "Sorry-Grateful," Bobby starts to pull away from his own identity in the Symbolic, using a version of a Brechtian rehearsal technique. Brecht advised his actors to speak the words "he said" or "she said" before each line of dialogue, in rehearsal, to enhance actor/character alienation. Bobby separates himself from his social persona when he states, "You two are—he said with envy—just beautiful together" (*Company* 35), as if the Real Bobby is not the speaking Bobby.

It is Bobby's position within the desires and drives of the married couples that is most interesting about *Company*. Amy, a soon-to-be wife, points out the problem with love: "A person can't stand all that sweetness, Paul. Nobody human can stand all that everlasting sweetness" (*Company* 65). The human being, or the subject of the Real, cannot endure the phoniness of Symbolic emotion, yet the desire of the couple, as a social construct, is to maintain that sweet façade. The couples all share in a desire to have Bobby get married, become part of a couple. That desire is really a veiled form of aggression. In the play, the sexual drive of the individuals in each couple becomes sublimated and turns into a universal aggressive drive. In wishing for Bobby the misery that the couples share, the couples are actually doing Bobby a favor. They are trying to position him in a place of discomfort, which, unbeknownst to them, could lead him to a Real experience.

By the end of the play, Sondheim's poignant lyrics summarize what Bobby has learned, that the examples of couples he has seen are not enough, but that a partner is needed to be alive, or Real. McMillan explains that Bobby remains outside of the ensemble composed of the rest of the cast (97), which I believe he does because he now knows how to be Real, even if he cannot achieve that position. He sings, "Make me confused, / Mock me with praise, / Let me be used, / Vary my days, / But alone is alone, not alive" (*Company* 116). To live, or to be Real, one must have a partner who excites both the sexual and aggressive components of the drive. Bobby's last line, repeated three times, is the title phrase, "Being Alive." He has not found that partner yet, but at least he knows what he needs. Knapp points out that "whether the conclusion represented by this song [*Being Alive*] is the 'truth' about Bobby may be contested, but it is a conclusion well grounded in the show based as it is on the need for Bobby to experience firsthand what the others have known all along; the comfort of resolution absorbs and heals the pain of actually needing it in the first place" (302). I disagree with the last portion of Knapp's analysis; Bobby's final words are not resolution, but they are realization. In them, he acknowledges that he must take on sexuality and romance himself, instead of just commenting on others' experiences.

Romance is found in *Sunday in the Park with George*, but the two characters who compose the couple are thwarted by art or painting, which is the third party in their relationship. George sings fairly early in Act 1, "There's only color and light" (*Sunday* 596). He is not just speaking about the painting he is making, but summarizing his worldview: "While he is sketching his work, Seurat is prone to sing for his characters, give voice to

them as he sketches them" (McMillan 162). George interprets everything in life through his particularly *sinthomatic* way of seeing. In Act 2, George describes Seurat's artistic technique: "Having studied scientific findings on color, he developed a new style of painting. He found by painting tiny particles, color next to color, that at a certain distance the eye would fuse the specks optically, giving them greater intensity than any mixed pigments" (*Sunday* 669). Like Beckett's Krapp, before giving in to his multifaceted impotence, George is on a quest to find a new way of presenting a vision to the world. That vision, and the process of presenting it, is the *sinthome*, but for George, that process is, at first, not *sinthomatic* enough. By locking himself into the solipsistic world of his own creation, he destroys his relationship with Dot, his muse. George's *sinthome* relies too much on the tendencies of the fetish to allow him to be Real. The fetish reduces the object to a component part that defines that object for the fetishist, but that component part is not the object's unary trait. The fetishist, through fetishizing, denies the object the right to self-nomination. George reduces Dot to her artistic usefulness, denying the fullness of her identity. It is not painting Dot, but the act of painting itself, which becomes George's *sinthome*. Throughout the play, George comes to see the range of emotions and expressions that his relationship with painting can have. It is his true *sinthome* because it does not enslave but catalyzes George as a subject.

Dot, disgusted that George sees her only as he wants to see her, and not as she wants to be seen, leaves for America with another man, although she is pregnant with George's child. That child, Marie, makes the connection between the baby and the painting, equally creative endeavors in "Children and Art." For Marie, the painting is their "family tree." There is no difference between creating a life and creating a work of art; both actions are sublimations of the same drive.

George of Act 2 cannot understand Marie's words and is left searching for his creative drive in the final scene, on "la grande jatte." Pondering his place as an artist, George is confronted by Dot's ghost, who mistakes him for Seurat. She reminds him:

Look at what you've done,  
 Then at what you want,  
 Not at where you are,  
 What you'll be,  
 Look at all the things  
 You gave to me.



Let me give to you  
 Something in return.  
 I would be so pleased . . .  
 ("Move On," *Sunday* 704)

Dot here, as much the muse as any of Yeats's dancer figures, is not content to remain an inspiration for the Real without being allowed to have access to that Real herself. Dot knows that she too can be Real if she is allowed to reciprocate the immortalizing and loving gestures with which George immortalized her. Dot, of course, cannot give back to Seurat, but she can give to his great-grandson the words of aesthetic creation, "Design, composition, tension, balance, light" (*Sunday* 706). They are words belonging to the Symbolic order, but George cannot read the last word; Dot must say it, thus calling forth the vocative drive, or rhythm of poetic discourse, linked to the Real. When Dot says, "Harmony," a line immortalized by the impossible warmth of Bernadette Peters's voice, she gives George and herself the key to a Real coupling. The parties cannot be the same, but they must be harmonious. In other words, their *sinthomes* must work together to form something that gives *jouissance* to both involved. To last, that *jouissance* cannot be a static thing but must be one that offers, as the last line of the play, "So many possibilities" (*Sunday* 708).

The ending of *Sunday in the Park with George* also depicts what happens when art moves from the Real to the Imaginary and then back. Dot, as a ghost, can be understood by the audience to be uncanny, a figment of the Imaginary register. When she demands of George, "Give us more to see" (*Sunday* 705), the Imaginary is making a demand on the Real, but that demand is not for a product of the Symbolic; it demands that the Real give abject material. In this case, the abject material is aesthetically pleasing, so that it can use that process of giving as a model to become Real. In essence, what Dot requires of George is the exact demand an audience makes on a production. The audience requires that the actors put forth something that can be used by them as an example of how they can become Real. The audience and the actors are other versions of the impossible couplings Sondheim presents.

Perhaps the most Real-ly successful couple that Sondheim gives his audience is that of Giorgio and Fosca in *Passion*. Giorgio is a handsome soldier, romantically involved with Clara, a beautiful, married woman. When transferred, he meets the sister of his Colonel, who is plagued by physical and mental illness, which result in her physical disfigurement. Fosca becomes obsessed with Giorgio, who rebuffs her at first but is later



pulled into her obsession and sacrifices his Symbolic love with Clara for one night of indescribable passion with Fosca. The work runs for an hour and half with no intermission, locking the audience into Fosca's tension and anxiety. The show was praised by critics, even such previously harsh ones as Robert Brustein, who "found himself 'sobbing uncontrollably'" (Secret 390). This through-composed musical did not, however, receive many accolades from its audiences, perhaps because it reverses Symbolic expectations. The play's epistolary structure is unexpected, as it creates a nearly episodic presentation. The letters, presented as songs, also reverse expectations, as they are not always sung by the writer, but frequently by the receiver. Having the recipient sing the words of the writer helps to mesh the psychologies of the characters, which can be disconcerting for a musical theatre audience that is accustomed to clearly drawn characters. *Passion* also reverses conventional musical theatre's comedic ending. Instead of the pretty girl winning the heart of the dashing young man, the pretty girl is thrown aside for the ugly duckling, who never grows into a swan. This is no fairy tale.

Lyrics to the play's opening song, sung by the first set of lovers while they are naked in bed, show that in terms of the Real, the relationship of Clara and Giorgio is doomed from its start. Clara claims their meeting was a "—Happening by chance in a park" (*Passion* 4), but Giorgio corrects, "Not by chance, / By necessity—" (*Passion* 4). Contingency is key to the Real, as anything resembling plan or order is governed by the Symbolic. If Clara and Giorgio met according to some design, or necessity, their relationship could not be Real:

Some say happiness  
Comes and goes,  
Then this happiness  
Is a kind of happiness  
No one really knows  
("Happiness," *Passion* 5)

This passage implies that theirs is a permanent happiness. Nothing can be permanent in the Real, so their happiness is actually something many in the Symbolic know.

No one in the Symbolic can truly understand the connection between Giorgio and Fosca, even Doctor Tambourri, who tries to bring them together. As Giorgio's drive begins to tangle with Fosca's, he sings, "Everywhere I turn, / There you are. / This is not love, / But some kind of

obsession” (*Passion* 91). It is necessarily unclear whose obsession is being described, though, Fosca’s or Giorgio’s.

When Giorgio and the Colonel quarrel about Giorgio’s relationship with Fosca, Giorgio asserts, “Signora Fosca is as responsible for her actions as am I for mine” (*Passion* 119), which sets up both partners as being free enough to make their own choices to enter the Real. Their love defies all expectation of both character and audience, yet it is so potent that it must draw the viewer into its passionate tension. As the audience is able to relate to these characters, it is able to see the worth of the Real.

Sondheim makes love the transferable agent of abject power, which anyone, character or audience, can experience. Both Giorgio and Clara sing separately, at the end of the play, the same line, “Your love will live in me” (*Passion* 131). Love, usually a Symbolic emotion, in this play reaches its Real potential while still retaining a familiar quality to all involved. The familiarity of the term marks love as a *sinthome* that is more than material letter, but an entire word whose letters themselves are meaningless but whose newly defined terms can mark any number of Real couplings.

Relationships that approach the Real are found not only between lovers, but also between parents and their children. It is almost too easy to say that the theme of discontent between parents and their children stems from Sondheim’s own questionable relationships with his parents, but the Sondheim family romance is one certainly hard to forget. Sondheim recalls about his early to middle childhood:

I don’t remember my mother at all during those years. . . . I don’t think she was around. I don’t think she cared. I think my father wanted to share things with me; I think my mother did not. I have no memory of my mother doing anything with me. And my father, it was only on occasional Sundays that we would go to ball games. Otherwise, I was what they call an institutionalized child, meaning one who had no contact with any kind of family. You’re in and though it’s luxurious, you’re in an environment that supplies you with everything but human contact. (Secret 21)

The feeling of alienation that Sondheim expresses in regard to his early years differs greatly from the stifling and angst-filled relationship he had with his mother after his parents’ divorce when he was ten years old. He recalls the following disturbing post-divorce memories: “She would hold my hand in theatres. . . . I remember going to a play with her and she not only held my hand, but looked at me during the entire play. It was really upsetting. . . . Well, she would sit across from me with her legs aspread.

She would lower her blouse and that sort of stuff” (Secret 30). Though Sondheim doesn't say it, it seems obvious that his mother, Foxy, was trying to make her son into a substitute for her husband. When that didn't work, their relationship turned tendentious, and Sondheim chose not even to attend his mother's funeral.

Throughout her life, though, Foxy remained proud of her son's accomplishments. Secret writes, “Foxy Sondheim went to all of his musicals, boasted about him constantly,” and although their friends knew the relationship was strained, “She had his picture by her bed and would always say he had just been there” (220). This portrait posits her as a prime model for Madame Rose, in *Gypsy*, Sondheim's second major Broadway musical, for which he wrote lyrics alone. The play is really the story of Madame Rose and her obsessive need to live out her own dreams of fame through the lives of her children, forcing them into the dying world of vaudeville. In collaborative efforts, it is often difficult to give credit for one idea to one or two members of the team, but “there is no doubt that Laurents [the book writer] and Sondheim, working in such close rapport, shaped *Gypsy* between them and that Styne [the composer] was the malleable third man” (Secret 135). Thus, it is not too much of a stretch to see that Madame Rose is a version of Foxy Sondheim.

If true, then *Gypsy* Rose Lee, who takes revenge on her mother through her appalling success as a burlesque performer, is a stand-in for Sondheim, whose own work, while not obscene, did buck musical theatre convention and put material on musical theatre stage that had never before been exposed. It is the concept of exposure here that is most important. True, by today's standards, *Gypsy*'s act is mild, almost appropriate for network TV, but it was shocking when first performed. The character must shed the costumes and pretense put onto her by her mother so as to establish her own identity. She abjects herself in front of an audience so that it can be witness to her truth, that she is becoming her own person instead of clinging to the identity chosen for her by her mother. Thus, the child is a triumph of the movement to the Real, despite the Symbolic mother's lack of approval.

*Sunday in the Park with George* gives another example of a mother disappointed with a son, and a son willing to publicly abject himself to gain freedom from her. George's mother is a figure in his painting, and he seeks her approval during Act 1. He sees beauty in a world where she sees only decay. The abjection of the Industrial Revolution changing the banks of the Seine is disturbing to her Symbolic comfort, but George is excited by the changes because he can make them into anything he wants. What she sees

as abject and dirty is, for George, the fodder for his *sinthomatic* art. While he tries to please her with the lyric, “You watch / While I revise the world” (*Sunday* 636), she whispers, “Oh, Georgie, how I long for the old view” (*Sunday* 637). The mother figure, as the older generation enmeshed in the Symbolic, is not pleased with the changes the younger generation wants to make to it, but that impetus to change would never occur without the oppression of the older generation.

There is a fine line between oppression and wisdom in Sondheim’s greatest work about parent/child relationships, *Into the Woods*. This play combines the tales of Jack and the Beanstalk, Little Red Riding Hood, Cinderella, and Rapunzel with the addition of several new characters, a childless baker and his wife. The intertwining of the tales, as Raymond Knapp points out, has an incestuous nature, as the tales share and nurture each other. This perversion of the tales themselves leads to a puzzle-like atmosphere,<sup>11</sup> which seems deceptively easy to solve but is, of course, much more difficult to sort out than it appears. The end of Act 1 sees the characters’ wishes granted, but Act 2 exposes the problems that result when dreams come true. Sondheim and Lapine make Rapunzel’s mother, a witch, played stunningly by Bernadette Peters in the original production, a central figure. She had locked her daughter away in a tower to keep her safe, and, of course, Rapunzel resents her for that entrapment. In a pivotal scene, after Rapunzel has escaped to run off with her prince, she confronts her mother in the woods. The witch laments that she could not make her daughter happy and cries, “Ah, but I am old, I am ugly I embarrass you. You are ashamed of me; you are ashamed. You do not understand” (*Into the Woods* 60), which segues into “Children Will Listen.” The Witch’s lines recall themes familiar to many audience members: parental guilt, generational difference, lack of understanding. These are all Symbolic tags for what can make parent/child relationships Real. If both the parent and the child are able to recognize the barriers to communication, they can start to find ways to relate to each other that are not Symbolic. In other words, they can begin to return to the echolalia of the Imaginary, but with the knowledge that such infantile communication is also a construct, they can instead form a conjoined *sinthome*.

The Witch is never able to do this with Rapunzel because Rapunzel is trampled by the giant first. She screams, “Children can only grow from something you love, to something you lose” (*Into the Woods* 106). Instead

11. The plot puzzles that often appear in Sondheim’s work are appropriate to his own love of puzzles and board games.

of actual death, the metaphoric loss of a child or a parent can be positive. The relationship between the baker and the mysterious man proves this. As the baker journeys through the woods, he repeatedly encounters the Mysterious Man, who assaults him with riddles, fraying his nerves but forcing him to act instead of mindlessly searching. In Act 2, the Mysterious Man confesses that he is the Baker's father. The Mysterious Man defends his absence and comforts the Baker on the loss of his wife by chanting, "They disappoint, they disappear, they die but they don't" (*Into the Woods* 122), conveying to the Baker that the ones we love must fail us, so that we can turn that failure into success. Instead of always depending on the other, the subject can learn to depend on herself. That self-reliance allows the subject to create a *sinthome*, or particular method of survival. To create a *sinthome*, a tangible object or relationship in the Symbolic must be sacrificed, so that a new corporeal reality may manifest itself.

The Baker is not ready to accept that responsibility and replies, "No more questions please, no more jests, no more curses you can't undo / left by fathers you never knew / no more quests" (*Into the Woods* 123). The Baker is tired and wants to return to the Symbolic, but the woods and his father will not let him. He is even ready to give up on parenthood, until the play's end when the ghost of his wife returns. She tells him, "Just calm the child." To calm is to initiate someone into the Symbolic. Before a person can be Real, she must be part of the Symbolic or else she can never reject it. The parent's job is to give the child access to all the registers; the child's job is to reject the parent as an Imaginary or Symbolic representation, so that the parent, too, is free to enter the Real.

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### *Sondheim's Real Cacophony*

In several of his shows, Sondheim presents the actual moments at which the Real can be entered. These appear as nearly cacophonous musical moments, which underscore the representation of group madness or individual psychotic break. The tamest of these moments occurs in *Merrily We Roll Along*, one of Sondheim's most underappreciated plays, which tells the story, in reverse, of three high school friends working their way to prominent positions as a composer, a lyricist, and a journalist while trying to either retain or shed their innocence. Charley, the lyricist, or master of the Symbolic, clings ironically to the Imaginary world, in which

he and Frank would be able to write music without the business pressures that accompany it. During a television interview, Charley is asked how he and Frank write together. The song “Franklin Shephard Inc.” details how they work, full of interruptions by secretaries and lawyers, which Charley cannot accept as part of the artistic process. He begins to use the words “Mutter,” and “Buzz,” and “Hum” as onomatopoeic moments, in which this process ceases to make sense. The artistic process, which at one time, not dramatized in the play, might have been Real no longer exists, with the intrusion of the Symbolic business world. Charley is devastated by this change. Forgetting that he is still in the confines of a television studio, giving an interview, Charley explores his disappointment aloud, until he slowly looks around, remembers where he is, and mocks himself openly for being so publicly Real. He does not apologize for his behavior, though, which is significant. By backing away from his moment of sheer anxiety, he is not faithful to his truth, but at least he does not speak about it regretfully. Charley is a character who, because of a failed partnership, cannot stay in the Real and whose breakdown represents where he was, not where he is going.

George, in *Sunday in the Park with George*, is also a character going on a quest. The Act 1 finale of *Sunday in the Park with George* shows George as the consummate artist, bringing together all the fragments of abject material that litter the landscape of his painting into a coherent whole, or *sinthome*, which in the play only he witnesses. As George is about to finish the painting, his characters speak loudly across the stage to each other. Their conversations are trivial and prickly. They are merely conventional snippets of daily life. George has rid himself of all such connections and must call the figures together into harmonious union, which will create the material letter that is the Real George. An arpeggiated chord, one in which each note is played separately, begins the song during which George quiets and arranges the figures. By the end of the song, whose mellow harmonies mix voices from across the stage with each other, as George mixes dots of color on the canvas, the figures are ready to speak the same, now meaningless, word “Sunday,” which is repeated three times. The triple repetition calls to mind each of the registers through which George has had to pass.

He begins the play already rid of the Symbolic, but his painting and his relationship with Dot waver between the Imaginary and the Real. The noisy, needling figures at the beginning of the finale expose the underside of the placid Imaginary which George thought he was creating. By seeing that breakdown and fixing it to his, and only his, standards, George is able to create his own *sinthome* and enter the Real for a brief moment.

Ben, in *Follies*, is the character who has the most significant and sustained psychotic break of Sondheim's characters, but *Follies*, as a whole, is a show about the crumbling of the Symbolic and the Imaginary into the gap forced open by the Real. It is the story of aged "follies" girls, returning to their former theatre for one last party before it is torn down. Borris Aronson describes his scenic design as being metaphoric of the show's themes: "I wanted it to be more than just a music hall' . . . Aronson designed a fan-shaped and lacy collage reminiscent of a Victorian Valentine, 'a flash of color amidst the doom'" (Secret 207), while the rest of the stage resembled a crumbling statue.

As the party progresses, the characters relive their glory days, perform their old numbers, and try to recapture their pasts, knowing all the while that their attempts are futile. Many have mini-breakdowns leading up to Ben's grand psychotic break. Stella's number, "Who's That Woman," known as the "mirror number," outlines the horror one woman faces when her Symbolic and Imaginary collide in reflection. At this point, Stella's song is no longer a replicated number from her past, but a psychic realization. When she looks in the mirror, she cannot immediately recognize herself. She criticizes the reflection for its attention to the physical demands of the Symbolic, mocking the reflection's beauty rituals. The song ends as Stella realizes that she is the image. Stella's Imaginary is singing and gradually becomes aware of her Symbolic self and is disgusted by it. This reverses the infant's initiation into the Symbolic that Lacan outlines in *Écrits*.

Phyllis's "The Story of Lucy and Jessie" again portrays the split subject with Lucy as the younger version of one's Symbolic self, and Jessie as the older version. Neither version is happy with itself and longs to be the other. At the end of the song, Phyllis insists, "If Lucy and Jessie would only combine / I could tell you someone / Who would finally feel just fine" (*Follies* 80). Phyllis is in the position of the hysteric but wants to heal herself by unifying her shattered self-conception. This unity, though, would be Symbolic, as "feeling fine" is a measurement of one's adherence to conventional expectations. Phyllis refuses the Real, whereas her husband Ben reaches it in a moment which makes the audience very uncomfortable.

Faced with the crumbling façade of his own Imaginary, depicted by his realization that his marriage is a lie and his business acumen is a front for a deeper lack of meaning, Ben tries to force his jaunty Symbolic motto onto himself and the audience in "Live, Laugh, Love." As Ben listens to the absurdity of his own lyrics, he starts to lose and then forget them, abjecting his words and leaving a Symbolic trail of refuse on the stage. After going blank, "[t]hen he sings, shouting desperately" (*Follies* 84), and, as the stage



directions indicate, “A flash of light and deafening sound as everything breaks apart and disassembles insanely. Bits and pieces of other songs shatter through. The chorus line, although broken up, is still dancing, as if in a nightmare. The noise reaches a peak of madness before slowly starting to recede” (*Follies* 85). Not only is Ben abject, but his abjection is an example to the others, who also begin the process. It cannot last, however, and Ben finally screams out “Phyllis,” his wife’s name. She comes to him and the music resolves itself, or ends its cacophonous experiment.

Phyllis, as a name, is no longer Symbolically invested. The characters are all still abject; instead, Ben is calling out for his partner in the Real. Although they are returned to their previously Imaginary and Symbolic worlds, the characters carry with them the experience of the Real. They see the parade of chorus girls now for what it truly is, an Image that cannot exist. They see the Symbolic as nothing but an externally imposed dictum. They know they must live with it, but they will no longer live in it.

The effect on the audience is profound. Being witness to a breakdown is terrorizing. It awakens the audience and calls them to question their own Symbolic lives, before they suffer any longer.

## > “THERE OUGHT TO BE CLOWNS”<sup>12</sup>

### *Sondheim’s Rogues*

So far, the suffering we have been dealing with in Sondheim’s work is personal in nature, but there are also social and political conditions presented in some of his plays, which, like Yeats’s mythologically driven plays, convey the suffering of a group. This happens most obviously in *Pacific Overtures*, *Sweeney Todd*, and *Assassins*, each of which posits a rogue figure as the agent of change. The rogue figure is the comedic figure with whom the audience is both eager and afraid to identify. She is able to shift alliances and adjust the world to her own liking without compromise, and thus she disrupts the Symbolic order. Audiences react to her with distasteful envy, as the rogue is in control even over them, but that control gains their respect. The not fully developed rogue figure in *Pacific Overtures* is the Reciter, a traditional character in Kabuki theatre, from which the show derives many of its techniques. As we have already noted, Sondheim was not a fan of Brecht, yet *Pacific Overtures*, the story of Commodore Perry’s forced opening of Japa-

12. From “Send in the Clowns,” *A Little Night Music*.



nese ports to Western trade, is “essentially a Brechtian polemic about what happens when capitalism and industrialism invade an ancient and poetic culture” (Secrest 279). John Wiedman, who wrote the book, even had in mind that this would be an Epic experiment (Secrest 280). Sondheim was not instantly convinced he wanted to be involved, but after research into Japanese music, he got excited about the endeavor.

The play is based on Japanese Kabuki, which differs greatly from Yeats’s uses of the Japanese Noh: “Unlike the more religious orientation and very formal, aristocratic Noh, Kabuki is an eclectic theatre of the common people. In its popularity, its emphasis on pure entertainment, its elaborate costumes, large stage, choreography and music, it clearly has much in common with its American counterpart” (Gordon 178). To blend the traditional aspects of the Kabuki and make it metaphorically accessible to all, a recent production staged by Terry Nolan at the Arden Theater in Philadelphia used only male actors and performed the play as theatre-in-the-round. The powerful merging of old expectations and new staging techniques made for an assault on the audience’s preconceived ideas.

The figure of the Reciter also plays with ideas of a play’s narrator, as he fluidly enters and exits the action of the play while commenting on the action. The Reciter sings:

The farmer plants the rice,  
The priest exalts the rice.  
The Lord collects the rice.

The merchant buys the rice.  
The craftsman makes the sword  
And sells it to the lord  
And buys at twice the former price  
What he counts on his lord to protect with his sword:

*All:* The Rice!  
 (“The Advantages of Floating in the Middle of the Sea,”  
*Pacific Overtures* 13)

The play’s lesson, implied throughout, is revealed at the play’s end when “the Emperor gradually sheds his outer garments and immobile masks, and it is the Reciter who emerges. The authority figure of the theater-piece becomes the political power. Implicit control becomes explicit” (Gordon 201). This is a negative moment in the play, though. Perry’s wishes are

coming true; Japan, once Real in its ability to remain self-contained and self-defined, is no longer so. Instead, it is open to trade and able to be defined by the Other. The Reciter is the master rogue figure, not Real, but able to manipulate the Symbolic to carry out his wishes.

In *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*, Mrs. Lovett is the rogue figure able to reconfigure negative social conditions to get what she desires. The world of *Sweeney Todd* is one “in which brutality has reached apocalyptic proportions . . . Sweeney’s theatrical extravagance is intended to reawaken an audience’s awareness of its own insensitivity and inurnment to aggression” (Gordon 209). By exposing the audience to itself, Sondheim is trying to get the audience to be aware of its behavior, in much the same way as Brecht’s Epic Theatre impels the audience to act. Sondheim, like Brecht, does not demand that his audience members act in a certain way, but only that they examine what they are doing. He puts the audience in the place of the Greek-like chorus who sing throughout the show, commenting on the action in a journalistic, not personally invested manner.<sup>13</sup> The chorus repeatedly warns the audience, “Behold the tale of Sweeney Todd,” making Todd into a troublingly dark fairy tale figure whose terror must be examined. Todd is a Nietzschean figure, “a superhuman creature determined upon a course of indiscriminate bloody purgation” (Gordon 233) by the end of the play. Todd’s drive is to kill the men who destroyed his life, the Judge and the Beadle. When that does not work, drive expands its dimensions to include all people as representative of the Symbolic order, which could produce and preserve figures, such as the Judge, who rape and kidnap at will. Still, Todd’s actions are motivated by his drive, regardless of how violent or extreme the audience deems it. He has our sympathy.

Mrs. Lovett is also a character driven by the need for love in her lonely life. She implicitly understands that she needs to be part of a couple to be Real, and she sees her counterpart in Todd, but she does not have the audience’s sympathy. From her first entrance, Mrs. Lovett is a comic figure as distasteful as her pies, which she freely admits are terrible. In “Not While I’m Around,” she patronizes the simple-minded Tobias as he expresses genuine affection for her as a mother figure. She is a rogue because she only uses Tobias’s affection to her advantage.

The audience sees her as a fully developed rogue figure during the climax of the play, when she is forced to admit that she has known since the beginning that Todd’s wife is the beggar woman roaming about town, while he was seeking revenge for her death. Because she is the keeper of

13. Sondheim first uses this technique with the Lieder singers in *A Little Night Music*.

knowledge, she represents the master's discourse and must be destroyed in a blaze of glory when thrown into her own oven. As the play ends, the chorus reprises "The Ballad of Sweeney Todd": "They emphasize that this has been a parable not a series of Real events" (Gordon 249). *Sweeney Todd* makes use of the rogue figure and allows the audience to witness what happens when a would-be Real character, like Mrs. Lovett, becomes prey to the allure of power in the Symbolic.

*Assassins* also makes use of the would-be Real character, who falls to the Symbolic. *Assassins*, written with John Weidman, presents the lives of the assassins and would-be assassins of United States presidents. The play is partially narrated by the Balladeer, "who can attain omniscience from time to time, as when he narrates the assassination of McKinley" (McMillan 154). Omniscience implies the phallic power of the Other, so the presence of such a character indicates that this is a play in which many of the figures will struggle with and against their Symbolic natures. The assassins are presented as pathetic figures, but rogues nonetheless, who believe that assassinations are gateways to their own versions of the American dream. In a bastardization of a Fitzgeraldian theme of the American dream, the assassins "are as much a product of that culture as the famous leaders they attempted to kill" (Gordon 318). The refrain, "Everybody's Got a Right to Be Happy," recurs like an insult, exposing the dirty ways in which "everybody" has to act to build the Symbolic façade of happiness.

The assassins begin as rogue figures, on the fringes of society, but eventually, as the Booth lyrics attest, they become Antigone-like figures of the Real. John Wilkes Booth sings after he shoots Lincoln:

... Damn my soul if you must  
 Let my body turn to dust  
 Let it mingle with the ashes of the country  
 Let them curse me to hell,  
 Leave it to history to tell:  
 What I did, I did well,  
 And I did it for my country.  
 (Gordon 326)

Just as Antigone buries her brother, thus condemning herself to death, so that she and her country could be free of the oppression of government, Booth tries to eliminate the government that he sees as stifling. The problem is that Booth and the other assassins do not realize they are eliminating only symbols of the Symbolic. They carry out *sinthomatic* actions

but cannot have a Real moment because the truth which they think those actions will bring is exposed as a lie. The assassins believe that their murderous plots will somehow free them and their country, but once the murders are committed, they see that their visions were myopic. Ironically, the dead presidents function as rogues, then, able to manipulate the Symbolic, even in death.

## › “THE WAY IS CLEAR”<sup>14</sup>

### *Sondheim’s Pastoral*

To experience the Real, a subject needs to inhabit a specific space, a Real pastoral, which breaks all the conventional pastoral expectations and provides a harrowing assault of natural forces that both spur and reflect the subject’s psychic experience. Three of Sondheim’s plays, *Follies*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *Into the Woods*, present different variations on the idea of the Real pastoral.

In *Follies*, the stage itself is the location of the Real pastoral. Boris Aronson’s set, as already briefly described, suggests the dereliction and decay of the characters’ psyches. Aronson said about his set, “If you see a statue and a hand is missing or a nose is broken, it leaves so much more to the imagination than if it were complete” (Secret 207). That missing piece defines Aronson’s set. The “missing hand” is the representation of Lacan’s *objet petit a*, removed because the subjects interacting in that space are no longer concerned with objects of desire, but with the drive itself. The stage is void of all representations of life; there are no trees, no flowers or wheat fields; there is only the decay itself, pulling in the characters. While the space may look comparatively dead, and we usually associate only the living with the pastoral, the deadness of the stage is, in fact, pastoral. Death, as a space of the new pastoral, can be traced back to Yeats’s mytho-Christian dancer plays, while pastoral decay is Beckett’s visual legacy. Death is a life process and, as such, is part of the drive. In *Follies*, the characters enter the dead interior landscape as decaying, stilted souls, but “[a]t the end, on a sunny morning, the characters take their leave of the empty theatre, beyond which, for the first time, one can glimpse the street scene outside” (Secret 207). The street is not the natural world, but it is life, in a raw,

14. From “Into the Woods,” *Into the Woods*.

bustling state. After a night of Real experiences and breakdowns already analyzed, the characters are able to see the value of that street scene.

*Follies* also comments on the nature of theatre itself. Sondheim implies that if the theatre, as an institution, continues without innovation or embraces the innovative turns some practitioners want to take, it will merely crumble. Theatre needs to become more Real to survive as an art.

In *Sunday in the Park with George*, Sondheim follows up on the connections among the pastoral, art, and the Real. In the play, as in his real life, Seurat implements new discoveries in optics to build a world on his canvas. Instead of using the wide, luminous brushstrokes of the Impressionists, Seurat painted with tiny dots of color juxtaposed against each other, so that color variation is formed by the human eye, instead of by mixing paint on the pallet. This makes the very process of viewing Seurat's paintings an active experience for the senses. During Act 1, the audience follows Seurat as he creates his huge canvas, *Sunday Afternoon on the Isle of La Grande Jatte*. The audience meets the figures in the painting and witnesses George's transformations of them. The painting, which is a populated landscape of a small island in the Seine, looks like a conventional pastoral at first glance. Closer examination shows the smokestacks of impending industrialization in the distance. Monkeys and dogs are not roaming free, but are on leashes. This pastoral is being tamed by humanity while George is taming his own life by fixing figures into the painting. He is not, however, trying to gain control in the Symbolic, as he has no desire to rule over these characters' actual lives. Even when Dot begs, "Tell me not to go" (*Sunday* 632), George refuses to tell her what to do. Instead, he turns to the painting and fixes her there, in his Imaginary world.

Sondheim's great statement on the nature of aesthetic creation, "Finishing the Hat," explains how a painting, produced by George's Imaginary, becomes Real. The hat of the title is the one Dot wears in the painting. He becomes fixated on it, as a fetish object in the Symbolic, but as he creates it on the canvas, it transforms from fetish into *sinthome*. The hat is his world, as he sings:

Coming from the hat,  
 Studying that hat,  
 Entering the world of the hat,  
 Reaching through the world of the hat  
 Like a window,  
 Back to this one from that. . . .

Finishing a hat . . .  
 Starting on a hat . . .  
 Finishing a hat . . .  
 Look, I made a hat . . .  
 Where there never was a hat . . .  
 (“Finishing the Hat,” *Sunday* 624–25)<sup>15</sup>

George makes the hat into his *sinthome* and allows himself to enter the world of the Real, which, for him, is literally set in paint. The painting is akin to the act of listening, which Lacan describes as a process in analysis during which “we teach the analysand to splice together his symptom and the parasitic real of jouissance. . . . To render jouissance possible is the same thing as . . . to hear a meaning” (*Le Sinthome* 20). Instead of “hearing” that meaning, George paints it.

For a moment he and the audience believe that the world of the painting can peacefully embrace the Real, but as Act 2 opens, all learn that the Real painting is anything but comfortable. At the opening of the act, “It’s Hot Up Here” makes clear the point that the Real is oppressive, especially for those caught in someone else’s Real. In this song, the figures of the painting once again spring to life and complain about their positions as objects of art:

It’s hot up here  
 A lot up here  
 It’s hot up here  
 Forever . . .

It’s not my fault  
 I got up here.  
 I’ll rot up here,  
 I am so hot up here.  
 (“It’s Hot Up Here,” *Sunday* 658)

While the aesthetic pastoral that George creates for himself is his own Real, it is not Real for the others involved. In this way, Sondheim’s work exposes a problem with the Real. Unless carefully undertaken, it can infringe on

15. The vibrato or “spin” with which Mandy Patinkin in the original cast recording sings the word “Look” embodies all the anxiety the character is experiencing during the creative process.

others' freedoms and impede their abilities to reach their own moments of Reality.

The Real pastoral of *Into the Woods* is one in which the characters first enter without thought and subsequently choose to enter, making the space one of the Real and showing them the problems of creating a Real without injuring someone else. *Into the Woods* is a play about wishes and their outcomes. The first act sends the characters on their journeys:

Into the Woods  
 Without delay  
 Be careful not  
 To lose the way  
 Into the woods  
 Who knows what may  
 Be lurking on the journey.  
 ("Prologue: Into the Woods," *Into the Woods* 21)

The characters embark on their quests, wary of the pastoral, but not of the wishes themselves. By the end of the act, the characters have all had their wishes granted: Cinderella and Rapunzel have their princes, the baker and his wife have their child, Little Red Riding Hood has slain the wolf and saved Granny, Jack has found the goose that lays the golden egg. All is well. The pastoral woods have been momentarily scary, but all have come out better than they entered, so they believe.

But all is not well. Even as the opening song portends, "Be careful though," the characters are careless. They do not think about the results of their wishes and are subsequently disappointed when they come true. The wishes of Act 1 all belong to the realm of desire. They have objects which will fulfill them: the prince, the child, the goose. In Act 2, the wishes remain, but this time they have no object. Now, the characters understand that they are going back to the woods

To find  
 to fix  
 to hide  
 to move  
 to battle  
 to see what the trouble is.  
 ("Ever After," *Into the Woods* 94–95)

Instead of the object, which composes the first set of wishes, the second set is composed of actions. The woods, as the pastoral, now are not a place to find things with Symbolic meanings and attachments, but are a place of action. They are also a place of death. By the end of Act 2, only four main characters remain alive. The pastoral, inhabited by giants, has killed the rest. The murderous female giant is an interesting representation of the figure of the master or Big Other, who is usually depicted as male. Given Sondheim's overbearing mother, though, it is not hard to imagine why his creative impulses would change the gender of the master to female. In Kristevian terms, the female giant is the phallic mother, more dangerous and demanding than even the Big Other is, as she has the ability to create and destroy in one stroke. As the characters weave their ways through the woods, avoiding the footsteps of the angry giant, who is out to seek revenge for her husband's death at Jack's hand, they come closer to their own moments of the Real as they abject themselves of all Symbolic ties. As the Baker's Wife realizes before she dies:

There are vows, there are ties  
 There are needs, there are standards  
 There are shouldn'ts and shoulds . . .

Let the moment go  
 Don't forget it for a moment though.  
 Just remembering you've had an "and"  
 When you're back to "or"  
 Makes the "or" mean more  
 Than it did before  
 Now I understand—  
 And it's time to leave the woods.  
 ("Any Moment," *Into the Woods* 112–13)

Options outside of the norm, contingency and multiplicity are possible only in the Real. The woods are the space for change, and while they momentarily may sate desire, as does the Baker's Wife's encounter with Cinderella's prince, that moment cannot last. What can last is a remnant of that brief encounter with the Real that a subject can take out of that space and into daily life. However, *Into the Woods* shows the audience how disorienting the Real can be. The Baker's Wife attempted a Real experience. She and her husband began the play as threats to the expected outcomes of the already familiar fairy tales by intruding into their formerly discrete



plots (Knapp 153–54). From the beginning, they occupied a tenuous space in the plot, which, by the middle of Act 2, the wife is ready to accept. After her affair, she is so disoriented that she stumbles and falls prey to the giant. Her death proves how damning the Real can be, if not handled with caution.

The journeys into and out of the woods mimic the circulation of the drive itself and are thus reminiscent of the movements of Yeats's dancer figures. The quests into the pastoral realm act as cataclysmic events, but unlike Yeats's dancers, who dance to be *sinthomatic* for others, not for themselves, the circular movements into and out of the woods firmly root the travelers into their own *sinthomatic* patterns. The pastoral acts as the track on which the drive toward the Real can circulate. The movement shows the audience that they, too, should take up their own quests. By encouraging the audience toward movement of its own, Sondheim's usage of the pastoral suggests to the audience that action be taken, in whatever form the audience members deem necessary.

## › "CAREFUL THE THINGS YOU SAY"<sup>16</sup>

### *Sondheim's Audience*

Sondheim's particular awareness of his audience is what both connects him to and sets him apart from Yeats and Beckett. It is also what makes his theatre more Real than any of their attempts. Sondheim uses catharsis, as does Yeats, to appeal to the emotions of his audience members, but he does so without Yeats's mythic grandeur. Instead, his link to catharsis is an appeal that highlights emotion without sentimentality. Joanne Gordon claims that "the experience of catharsis is not generally associated with the American musical theatre, although one happily applies the term to Wagnerian opera. Sondheim has shown, however, that a gut-wrenching theatrical experience of music and words does not always have to be presented in a language other than English" (5). Although I would argue that Rodgers and Hammerstein certainly prepare audiences for cathartic experiences with musicals such as *Oklahoma* and *Carousel*, Gordon's point is valuable. Sondheim's seamless use of music and lyrics produces a doubling effect on the audience, making the emotional content more intense as it is presented in numerous forms at once. In this way, as subtly hinted at by Gordon, perhaps unknowingly,

16. From "Children Will Listen," *Into the Woods*.

Sondheim creates theatre that is unified in the presentation of all its elements.

Gordon uses “concept” to define Sondheim’s creations. The word “concept” implies that all elements of plot, music, lyric, design, and presentation are integrated to convey one dominant mood or idea (7). Sondheim says about this tendency, “Then I like the book writer to write at least one scene, so that I can get into the characters as seen through his eyes and ears, especially as regards their diction. I like to subsume my collaborators and have them subsume me. That always makes for an integrated piece. That is something I was brought up to do by Oscar Hammerstein. What satisfies me the most in the musical theater is the sense of one piece” (Swayne 123). The Real partnership that Sondheim here describes is what makes it possible for the resulting work to be conceptually unified, and for the audience’s reaction to be intensified by that unification.

According to Secrest, it is “emotional impact that would be characteristic of his [Sondheim’s] best work” (89). Sondheim would learn to do that using what Hammerstein taught him; Hammerstein believed that “his [Sondheim’s] main consideration should be how to relate the work to the audience’s experience. Without exactly saying so, he was trying to convey that fact that if the sympathies of the audience were not engaged, it did not matter how brilliant the work” (Secrest 90).

One way for the audience to have sympathy or empathy for a character is to expose the tension of that character and let the audience relate the character’s anxiety to its own angst. Analyzing *Into the Woods*, which achieved huge critical and commercial success, Secrest writes, “In making their [the characters’] themes explicit, something of value had been lost in Sondheim’s work. Frank Rich thought, ‘The tension between his meaning and his expression of that meaning is what gives a Sondheim musical its theatricality’” (355). While it is unfair to say that *Into the Woods* is too explicit in its presentation of theme, Rich’s point is well taken. Sondheim’s music and lyrics shine when they reveal tension, not resolution. By expressing that tension, Sondheim’s music is able to create a gap into which the audience can fall, seeking first to understand the character presented, and then the audience member’s own reaction to that character. Such is the case of *Sweeney Todd: The Demon Barber of Fleet Street*.

*Sweeney Todd* builds catharsis in a rather traditional fashion, appealing to the audience’s senses of both pity for and fear of the title character. Sweeney has withstood unlawful imprisonment at the hands of an evil judge who raped Sweeney’s wife and left her to wander the streets insane, while raising Sweeney’s daughter as his own. At the play’s opening, the judge is planning

to marry that girl, Johanna. Sweeney returns to England, bent on revenge, and meets the shifty yet charismatic Mrs. Lovett, who never tells Sweeney his wife is still alive, to feed her own desire for a thriving business and a revitalized love life. Together, Sweeney and Mrs. Lovett act like demonic Robin Hoods, killing off the neighborhood scum to feed the masses, but these masses pay for their food. As Mrs. Lovett forestalls Sweeney from killing the Judge and encourages him to kill others, turning them into meat pies to sell for profit, the audience sees Sweeney's growing agitation and pities him; he is consistently prey to the women in his life: his wife's beauty, his daughter's innocence, and Mrs. Lovett's trickery. Still, Sweeney is an everyman, a barber who once had a promising career and a beautiful wife and daughter. He could be anyone in the audience, but isn't quite. The audience can pity him without getting too close.

Yet the audience does get nearly too close, as they fear him also. In a 2005 staging at the Arden Theatre in Philadelphia, Terry Nolan's superb direction had Sweeney running through the audience, with his knife in hand. The audience, so enmeshed in the action, literally feared for themselves. It was not just the potential physical harm that frightened the Sweeney audience; it was the fear that under the wrong circumstances, any person in the audience could become Sweeney.

The play ends when the Company and Sweeney sing:

TODD AND COMPANY: Attend the tale of Sweeney Todd!

He served a dark and hungry god!

TODD: To seek revenge may lead to hell,

MRS. LOVETT: But everyone does it, and seldom as well

TODD AND MRS. LOVETT: As Sweeney,

COMPANY: As Sweeney Todd,

The Demon Barber of Fleet . . .

Street!

*(The company exits. Todd and Mrs. Lovett are the last to leave. They look at each other, then exit in opposite directions, Mrs. Lovett into the wings, Todd upstage. He glares at us malevolently for a moment, then slams the iron door in our faces. Blackout.)*

*(Sweeney Todd 538)*

The company sings directly to the audience, giving instruction. It has witnessed the ravages of the Real and wants to caution against it, but the audience, so engrossed and overpowered by the play, leaves, warned but enamored with the danger it has witnessed. The play shows that revenge

will bring downfall by immersing us in the Symbolic realm of justice and revolt against its ironic misuse. Still, we are all prey to its appeal; there is no escape from the inevitability of human nature, categorized here by the negative connection to the desire for revenge. Revenge, though, has an object. In Lacanian terms, what the audience fears is not the murderous rage and subsequent action that Sweeney takes, but the possibility, as in Sweeney's case, that the actions will be bungled and the Real opportunity missed.

Sondheim creates characters, like Sweeney Todd, who are unexpected on the Broadway stage or whose presentations differ from conventional expectations. Audiences confront this alienation from character, especially in *Into the Woods* and *Passion*. American audiences, raised on fairy-tale stereotypes, expect Little Red Riding Hood to be a sweet, unassuming child, with a good, compassionate heart, whose only goal is to help her sick grandmother. Instead, Sondheim presents a selfish, violent child, whose bossy, precocious nature leads her into danger.

As Little Red is preparing for her journey to visit her grandmother, she stops at the Baker's house, asking for "Just a loaf of bread . . . and perhaps a sticky bun, or four" (*Into the Woods* 7). As staged, Little Red loads up her basket with goodies for which she cannot pay, while the Baker's wife removes them as quickly as possible, so as not to lose too much profit. Still, Little Red leaves with a nice bounty of sweets.

After she is eaten by, and then saved from, the Wolf, Little Red is proud to wear his pelt as a cape. She puts on the power of the patriarchy to convey, in Symbolic terms, the authority she, as a female figure, has over traditional male figures.<sup>17</sup> To further this image, Little Red wields a knife, which in one recent production<sup>18</sup> was kept between the actress's breasts, implying that the male phallus can be contained by the woman, not in the expected place of the vagina, but between the breasts, symbols of sustenance and nourishment, to remind the audience that women are needed to sustain the façade of patriarchal authority, but that, at any time, they can use that patriarchal authority to castrate. Broadway audiences, used to Curly saving Laurey from Jud,<sup>19</sup> are surprised that it is a girl, not even a grown woman, who is in the position of the weapon-wielding hero, ready to slay giants. When the other characters

17. Little Red is able to do what Yeats's Leda in his famous poem "Leda and the Swan" cannot accomplish. That is, Little Red conquers the patriarchy by assuming its costume; Leda tries to own the branding she has received, but cannot make her scar her own *sinthome*.

18. The production about which I write is all the more intriguing, as it was staged at St. Hubert Catholic High School for Girls in Philadelphia. The actress playing Little Red, Vanessa Turchi, was only 15 during the performance.

19. The characters mentioned here are the leading roles in Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma*.

force her to mind the Baker's Son with Cinderella, instead of killing the giant with the Baker and Jack, the audience is both appalled and appeased. The audience has come to admire her spunk, but many are not ready to accept that pugnacity for more than a few minutes; the break in the Symbolic order that Little Red represents must be repaired, and that, in terms of character, is what I would see as a flaw in the drive toward the Real of this piece.

The Witch of *Into the Woods* is another character whose initial presentation adheres to stereotypes, but whose transformation jostles the audience, thus alienating them from their expectations. The Witch begins the play costumed as a haggard old woman with a crooked nose and a finger always pointing with accusation. She can cast spells and lift curses, yet she is unhappy. Her ulterior motive for sending the Baker and his Wife into the woods to find "The cow as white as milk / The cape as red as blood / The hair as yellow as corn / The slipper as pure as gold" (*Into the Woods* 18) is to have the curse, placed on her by her mother, reversed. The witch wishes to be beautiful.

Not only does she wish for beauty, but at the end of Act 1, she, like every other character, gets her wish. She is as beautiful as any Broadway heroine, but her beauty, which is usually a powerful asset to a Broadway heroine, is her downfall. Just as Yeats uses masks to universalize the identity of his dancer figures, the witch's ugliness acts as her mask. It allows her to represent a type, instead of an individual, dulling and conventionalizing the audience's reaction to her. When she appears as a beautiful woman, she again risks being stereotyped as merely a pretty face, but Sondheim avoids that by combining her acquisition of beauty with the loss of her magical powers.

The witch glories in her beauty at the end of Act 1, but she quickly laments the loss of her magic when in the beginning of Act 2 she learns she is powerless. Sondheim shows the audience that the Real power of a woman is found in her ability to lead without magic. When the characters have to find a way to appease the murderous giant running amok in the woods, her advice is correct; the only thing practical thing to do to appease the murderous giant is to sacrifice Jack to her, since Jack is the one who killed the giant's husband. No one will listen to a beautiful woman, though, only to an ugly witch. She sings, spitting at the others in the woods, "I'm not good / I'm not nice, I'm just right / I'm the witch / You're the world" (*Into the Woods* 121). The choppy sentences indicate the snippy, disgusted tone of a character who realizes that the Symbolic cannot accept a woman who is both smart and pretty.

In a grand move, totally disillusioned with the Symbolic and the Imaginary, the witch totally objects herself by disappearing completely. She

attacks the other characters with words, agents of the Symbolic and still the only thing they understand, insisting:

It's the last midnight  
 It's the last verse  
 Now before it's past midnight  
 I'm leaving my last curse  
 I'm leaving alone. You can tend the garden it's yours.  
 Separate and alone  
 ("The Last Midnight," *Into the Woods* 122)

To be "separate and alone" is to deny these characters the chance to find a partner in the Real, one who can experience a moment of *jouissance* with the subject and help that subject back to reality while standing as a reminder of the Real moment. The witch, the most beautiful woman on stage, cannot be that partner. The partners must be two people alike in spirit, not in body.

The coordination of spirit, despite physical deformity, is the heart of Sondheim's most Real play, *Passion*, which also thwarts ideas of conventional beauty. Clara, the traditionally beautiful woman, is Giorgio's lover at the beginning of the play. The two are happy and approaching *jouissance* at the play's opening, proclaiming to each other:

Some say happiness  
 Comes and goes  
 Then this happiness  
 Is a kind of happiness  
 No one really knows  
 ("Happiness," *Passion* 5)

Happiness that exists without knowledge or understanding is not happiness of the Symbolic. It can be Real or Imaginary, and for Giorgio and Clara, it is only Imaginary. The further away Giorgio moves from her, first in body and then in spirit, the more Clara lets the audience realize that the couple's love is fading. Clara tries to re-create it with words, making an Imaginary love out of a Symbolic agent:

I close my eyes,  
 Imagining that you are there,  
 Imagining your fingers touching mine,

Imagining our room,  
 The bed,  
 The secrecy,  
 The world outside,  
 Your mouth on mine—  
 ("Fourth Letter," *Passion* 20)

Sondheim's lyrics draw the listeners more deeply into the intensely private world of Clara's love affair. The beautiful woman has no actual lover, but she creates one out of bits and pieces of memory. She builds an uncanny image of her once lover, but the uncanny is a fearful thing. It can freeze the observing subject, and not allow for movement.

With Clara gradually locking herself in an Imaginary world, Fosca, the ugly, sickly, anxiety-ridden sister of Giorgio's commanding officer, breaks out of her Imaginary. Her unbridled need for love and companionship inexplicably links to Giorgio's own drive. His desire for Clara has subsided and is replaced by his drive, which first takes the form of Fosca's own drive, as he tells her, "Tonight it [his heart] loves you as you wish" (*Passion* 58). At first, Fosca can encircle only a part of Giorgio in her drive, but, by the end of the play, her drive merges completely with his.

She explains, in Scene 10, "Loving you / Is not a choice, / It's who I am" (*Passion* 100); by the end of the play, Giorgio also does not have a choice:

Love without reason, love without mercy,  
 Love without pride or shame.  
 Love unconcerned  
 With being returned—  
 No wisdom, no judgment,  
 No caution, no blame.

No one has ever known me  
 As clearly as you.  
 No one has ever shown me  
 What love could be like until now:  
 Not pretty or safe or easy,  
 But more than I ever knew.  
 Love within reason—that isn't love  
 And I've learned that from you.  
 ("No One Has Ever Loved Me," *Passion* 122)

This is the love for which Bobby longs in “Being Alive,” which ends *Company*. It took Sondheim more than twenty years to express Bobby’s drive, but he does so in *Giorgio*. It took bravery to let a Broadway hero lust after and love a woman so damaged in mind and body that she could only catalyze an experience of the Real.

Giorgio has that moment at the end of the play, when “suddenly, Giorgio lets out a high-pitched howl—a cry that is clearly reminiscent of Fosca’s—as lights fade to black” (*Passion* 125). The vocative drives of the two lovers have reached the same fevered pitch. Uttering the sound of the Real makes that moment manifest for the characters and binds them to each other through a guttural howl that gives voice to their shared *sinthome*. Badiou’s theory of the truth event can explain this moment. The characters do not witness the same event, but they share in the same relationship that acts as their truth event. While they react to that event with different facets of fidelity, they utter that fidelity using the same sound. Fosca’s ugliness and Giorgio’s inexplicable love for her are not easily apprehended by the audience. The audience is distanced enough from the characters to consider how and why they are feeling, instead of indulging in pure emotion.

Several of Sondheim’s plots also operate using a technique akin to Brecht’s alienation effect, which separates the audience from any emotional impulse it might have in relationship to the characters. Intellectualization replaces emotion in Epic Theatre, which is designed to highlight the alienation effect. The plot of *Passion*, in which the ugly girl finds *jouissance* and the pretty girl loses her love, is virtually unheard of on the Broadway stage. Usually, musical theatre is designed to make the audience feel along with its pretty heroine. To thwart that expectation is to alienate the audience. Elements of the plots of *Company* and *Merrily We Roll Along* also work with the alienation effect to disconcert the audience’s expectations and prepare them for their own Real experiences.

In *Company*, the hero, Robert, probably a latent homosexual, is encouraged by his married friends, especially the women, to settle down and get married. He resists throughout the play, dating a series of women, each of whom he claims to be excited by, and about, but none of whom he marries. At the end of the play, Robert understands what Real love is, something that pricks and nudges until one is forced to feel one’s own body and emotions, not just those socially prescribed, but he remains unwed. Against a tradition that includes weddings, sometimes multiple weddings, as in *Guys and Dolls* or *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*, *Company*’s ending is a shock. The shock is derived from the audience’s realization that alternatives to the Symbolic exist, and they can be both freeing and terrifying, as they are for Robert, but they



should be explored. That exploration should not simply be the intellectual response that Brecht encourages, but rather an active, visceral experience.

Sondheim also makes bold innovations with plot in *Merrily We Roll Along*, which is told backwards, beginning with middle-aged, disillusioned characters, and ending with them at their high school graduation. The younger the characters get, the less they are immersed in the Symbolic order, and the more they believe in their Imaginary constructs. The audience first meets them as Franklin Shepard, the protagonist, returns to his alma mater to give the commencement address. He intimates that he will tell the graduates the story of how to survive in life, essentially how to master the Symbolic order, but the story Sondheim tells is how the Symbolic masters him. By having the characters devolve, Sondheim shows the value of the Imaginary as a key state in which one can build one's *sinthome*. Each of the three lead characters is an artist, so their Imaginaries are sublimated versions of their drives. They have chances, when young, to build their *sinthomes*, but they do not take those chances.

The play failed miserably on Broadway, closing after only sixteen performances (Secret 319) because of what some critics claim was the inability of the audience to like the characters, who "were introduced at their worst—jaded by success, embittered by rejection" (Secret 310). That is not the actual nature of the failure, though. The play does not fail because it alienates its audience; it fails because it does not alienate them. In the disillusioned characters, the audience sees reflections of itself, and it does not like those presentations. The audience's own Imaginary images are shattered when they confront themselves on stage, and thus, for the many audience members who are not willing to leave the Symbolic and the Imaginary and enter the Real, they choose to leave the theatre instead.

## › "LET OTHERS MAKE THAT DECISION"<sup>20</sup>

### *Sondheim's Music*

Sondheim's music, although alienated from his predecessors', entices audiences to return. According to Steve Swayne's *How Sondheim Found His Sound*, a Sondheim musical is unique because it blends classical influence and style with American musical history to create a sound that is seductive without being sweet, lush without being cloying. Swayne analyzes Sond-

20. From "Move On," *Sunday in the Park with George*.

heim's comparative relationship to Jerome Kern in the following manner: "Chief among those similarities between Kern and Sondheim is their propensity toward frugality of musical means. 'All of [Kern's] best songs,' wrote Sondheim, 'have that economy indigenous to the best art: the maximum development of the minimum of material'" (53). Just as Sondheim does with emotional content, the musical idea is stripped bare and then molded and shaped throughout the composition. It is as if Sondheim's original musical motive is a line, which he knots, unties, and reties in melodic and harmonic shapes that mimic what the human psyche does with the circulating registers of the Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real. Each Sondheim song represents the function of the *sinthome*, able to suture the disparate elements of the psyche represented by the discrete musical notations.

Sondheim songs are also *sinthomatic* links to the characters who sing them. Unlike much of the music of Broadway greats, such as Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, and Irving Berlin, whose songs, for the most part, can live outside of their theatrical settings, only two or three Sondheim songs have had life outside of the plays in which they are set. "Send in the Clowns" has garnered the greatest out-of-show attention, but there are many others, better songs whose meanings are totally lost without the contexts of the plays to which they belong. The primary reason is that the songs are vehicles for character development and not simply mediations on emotions already expressed in dialogue. When Nellie Forbush in *South Pacific* sings "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair," the audience already knows she is trying to get over her love for Emile, but when Cinderella sings "On the Steps of the Palace," the audience has no idea that she is uncertain about her future with the prince until she begins to sing.

Swayne uses the example of "Not While I'm Around" from *Sweeney Todd* to show how music and characters are inextricable from each other. He writes about the song:

To begin with, it refutes the idea that Sondheim could not write a hummable melody; this song is achingly beautiful and quite memorable. Coupled to the relative simplicity of the melody is its uncomplicated "abab" formal structure (which together forms the first part—A—of a larger ternary structure). All of this is in keeping with the character who introduces the song, Tobias (Toby), a sweet-hearted but dim-witted fellow who knows no guile. His song, in other words, is as straight-forward as he is. But in the central part of the song (B), which contrasts sharply with the opening section, Toby's agitation and inability to order his thoughts are reflected in a change of melody, vocal range, harmony and form. (Swayne 42)

Character and musical form are built together, making their presentation unified, even when what is presented is a conflicted character. Swayne summarizes this configuration in the quick argument, "Structure is dictated by the drama; content dictates form" (197). The structure of the plot arises from the action; the specific substance that is abjected as the action occurs is then used to make the musical forms that suture together the disparate characters, and even those characters' disparate reactions. Sometimes, the division which is brought together by musical form expands beyond character into theme, allowing the suturing process to stand as an example to the audience of how it, too, can use a material substance, even one as fleetingly intangible as song, to restitch itself.

Sondheim gives an example of thematic suturing through music in *Sunday in the Park with George*. Swayne points out what the listener intuitively about "The Day Off" of Act 1 and the "Putting It Together" of Act 2. He explains, "The chief element that links these two songs is their multisection construction put to the service of multiple character development. It is a structural parallel, not an inherently dramatic one" (226–27). I would like to modify Swayne's point here; yes, the structural parallel is most prominent, but the dramatic one is present, too. The connection between the two scenes proves that the hardships of the artists cross time and space and arise from similar jealousies and misunderstandings. Just as Seurat tries to assemble his painting, George in Act 2 tries to construct his artistic vision through his "cromolumes." Both must endure intolerance and misunderstanding, and both ultimately survive. Sondheim's musical parallel links the two men, to show how different people can use the same basic material as fodder for their varying Reals.

The necessity of variation in both Sondheim's world and the psychic world of the Real is underscored by Sondheim's comments on the reprise. Sondheim states, "I find the notion that the same lyric can apply in the first act and the second act *very* suspect. . . . I have found places [in my work] where the music could be reprised, but I've never found one where the lyric could be reprised" (Swayne 228).<sup>21</sup> The lyric cannot be reprised because it provides the Symbolic content of the work. As Sondheim's characters move through his plays, they slough off the Symbolic as they move toward the Real; thus, words that had meaning in the first act are meaningless to them in the second. To simply reprise would be to deny the character potential movement toward the Real. To put this idea in Yeatsian terms, the character

21. Swayne does not believe that Sondheim here exaggerates as he did reprise lyrics in *Forum* and *Night Music* and uses a reprise technique for the song commentaries that recur in *Sweeney Todd*, *Merrily*, *Into the Woods*, and *Assassins*.

would stop spinning; to use Beckettian imagery, the characters would be mired in their own pastoral wastelands.

The final element of the Real, which Sondheim presents in his dramas, is the impetus to act. Just as Yeats wants his figures to whirl their ways into the Real, or Beckett shows why his characters could not move toward theirs, so, too, does Sondheim push his audiences in new directions. He does this overtly at the end of both *Into the Woods* and *Sunday in the Park with George*.

*Into the Woods* ends with Cinderella's "I wish," extending out over the audience, asking them not only to wonder what her wish is, but also forcing them to think about their own wishes and how those wishes may or may not be fulfilled. Of course, the audience has already witnessed that wishes, like drives, are unending. Once one is fulfilled, another arises. The wish, then, is the partial object of desire, but the act of wishing belongs to the drive. Sondheim ends the work, then, subtly asking his audience to stay in the motion of the drive.

*Sunday in the Park with George*, although its composition precedes *Into the Woods*, ends with the gap that the continuing swirl of wishes opens. George's last words are "So many possibilities," a phrase that resolves musically into a glimmering final note. The innumerable options, presented to the audience on the white canvas, the last show's last visual image, are the possibilities left after abjection has been completed. The white backdrop represents the empty subject, who now can formulate her own *sinthome* out of any one or any combination of those possibilities.

Sondheim presents in lyrics and music the key to the Real that Lacan theorized. Unlike Yeats, whose work showed how one person could act as a driving force for another person, and unlike Beckett, whose characters acted as linchpins for their own drives, Sondheim encourages his characters, and his audiences as well, to experience the Real. No other theatre practitioner still writing is able to present, in such seamless yet raw form, characters who show the audience the ultimate *jouissance* of a Real encounter. Swayne reminds us that Sondheim said specifically about the writing of *Company*, "it's more important than ever before to make personal contact" (147). That personal contact is not only interpersonal but intrapersonal as well. To make contact with oneself is the only way to manifest the Real.



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- abjection, 28, 46–47, 49, 53, 110, 115.  
*See also* Kristeva, Julia
- anxiety, 28, 103
- Assassins* (Sondheim), 142, 145
- Arden Theater, 38–39, 143, 153
- Aristotle, 13, 75. *See also* *On Poetics*
- Artaud, Antonin, 4, 6, 11, 14, 15. *See also* Theatre of Cruelty
- At the Hawk's Well* (Yeats), 2, 33–34, 43, 45–46, 51, 56, 57–59, 66, 75
- Babbitt, Milton, 118, 124
- Badiou, Alain, 51, 51, 58, 67, 71, 75, 78–81, 89, 103, 107–8
- Bataille, George, 20, 61
- Beckett, Samuel, 22–23, 32–33, 35, 39, 116, 146, 151, 162
- Belsey, Catherine, 19, 30
- Bennett, Benjamin, 9–10, 65, 127
- Bentley, Toni, 50–51
- Brecht, Bertolt, 6, 10, 131, 158–59
- Brook, Peter, 11–12
- Brustein, Robert, 7, 9–10, 78, 135
- Butler, Judith, 61
- Calvary* (Yeats), 34, 48–50, 66–69
- Carousel* (Rodgers and Hammerstein), 38, 151
- Cascando* (Beckett), 92–94
- Cat in the Moon* (Yeats), 69
- Coleridge, Samuel T., 20–21
- Come and Go* (Beckett), 107, 111–12
- Company* (Sondheim), 38, 66, 119, 127–28, 131–32, 158
- Craig, Edward Gordon, 45–47, 51
- Death of a Salesman* (Miller), 9
- Descartes, 26, 80, 90–91
- Desire under the Elms* (O'Neil), 6
- The Dreaming of the Bones* (Yeats), 66
- Dream Play* (Strindberg), 7
- Duncan, Isadora, 50
- eclogue, 12, 18, 21–22, 82
- Endgame* (Beckett), 36, 84, 86, 88–91, 108–9
- Empson, William, 19–20
- Epic Theatre, 4, 6, 10–11. *See also* Brecht, Bertolt
- expressionism, 4, 6
- Farfan, Peggy, 31, 50
- Fighting the Waves* (Yeats), 64–66, 68
- Follies* (Sondheim), 38, 119, 123–24, 128, 141–42, 146–47
- four discourses, 24–25, 32, 41, 99, 145
- Freud, Sigmund: dreams, 19, 26; fetish, 63; hysteric, 61; jokes, 16, 86; Oedipal complex, 23; repression, 19; sexuality, 21; transference, 103
- A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* (Sondheim), 128
- Furth, George, 127, 131
- Goldman, Michael, 13–14
- Grotowski, Jerzy, 6

- Guy-Bray, Stephen, 20  
*Gypsy* (Sondheim), 126, 137
- Happy Days* (Beckett), 36, 83–84, 95–97, 100, 102, 111
- Hammerstein, Oscar, 37, 117, 123, 151–52
- Hulla Jurrakko* (Woulijoki), 9
- Ibsen, Henrik, 5, 8
- Imaginary, 1, 37, 155–56, 157, 160; definition, 23; and drive, 35; and echolalia, 138; in *Merrily We Roll Along*, 139–40; and Real, 121; in *Sunday in the Park with George*, 147
- Into the Woods* (Sondheim), 38, 119–20, 138–39, 149–52, 154–56, 161
- Jones, Peter, 118
- jouissance*: 31, 35, 38, 79, 94, 98; in Beckett, 35, 96; definition, 22, 25, 114–15; feminine, 53; of the hysteric, 33, 79, 96, 99; and knowledge, 97–98; of language, 79–80, 100; of the Other, 32; in Sondheim, 2, 152, 156; in Yeats, 76
- Joyce, James, 29, 91, 121
- Just Play* (Beckett), 97
- Kermode, Frank, 54
- Krapp's Last Tape* (Beckett), 34, 85, 92–92, 98, 100, 102–3, 109–11
- Kristeva, Julia, 26, 46, 47, 64, 118, 150
- Lacan, Jacques: auditory drive, Bataille's influence, 61; 37; defining the Real, 1, 22, 26; desire, 19, 78; drive, 55, 65; four discourses, 24, 32, 41, 79; imago, 23; *jouissance*, 114–15; language, 102; *object a*, 103; *sinthome*, 78, 121; Symbolic, 18; topology, 28
- Lapine, James, 115, 127, 129–30
- A Little Night Music* (Sondheim), 119, 128
- manifest, 32, 39, 114
- McMillan, Scott, 12–13, 98, 132
- méconnaissance, 24, 94
- Merrily We Roll Along* (Sondheim), 37, 119, 122–23, 128–30, 139–40, 158–59
- “Michael Robartes and the Dancer” (Yeats), 52
- mimesis, 5, 14
- missed, 12
- missing, 32, 77, 79–80
- Miss Julie* (Strindberg), 5, 8
- naturalism, 4
- Nietzsche, Friedrich, 4, 6, 144
- Noh theatre, 56, 143
- Not I* (Beckett), 98–100, 104–5
- objet petit a*, 24, 62, 65, 86, 100, 103–4, 146
- Odets, Clifford, 8
- The Only Jealousy of Emer* (Yeats), 48, 50–52, 59, 60–66, 68, 70
- On Poetics* (Aristotle), 13, 42
- Other, 6, 26, 32, 48, 50, 65, 67, 80, 92, 100, 150
- Pacific Overtures* (Sondheim), 39, 119, 128, 142–44
- Passion* (Sondheim), 1–2, 33, 119–20, 130, 134–36, 154, 156–58
- pastoral, 17–19, 36, 38, 48, 55, 56, 59, 76, 82–85, 91, 93, 122–23, 125, 146–48, 151
- Play* (Beckett), 104
- Plays for Dancers* (Yeats), 40, 66
- Poor Theatre, 4, 6. *See also* Grotowski, Jerzy
- Prince, Harold, 115, 127–29
- Purgatory* (Yeats), 33
- Real: access to, 130; in Beckett, 36–37, 91, 98, 106, 116; definition, 1, 22–23, 25, 27–28, 29–30, 122; in Expressionism, 6; infinity, 82; in pastoral, 21, 47, 151; *sinthome*, 43, 121; in Sondheim, 2, 37–39, 114, 117, 128, 134–35, 140–41, 144–45, 147–50, 153, 155–56, 159–62; in theatre, 1, 2, 16, 18, 22–23, 31–33, 56, 68, 114,

- 115–16, 12; in Yeats, 33–35, 40, 116
- Realism, 4, 6, 9, 34
- Renaissance, 18, 81
- Resurrection* (Yeats), 33, 775, 107
- Robbins, Elizabeth, 9
- Robbins, Jerome, 120–31
- Rockabye* (Beckett), 35, 77, 95–100
- rogue, 16–17, 88, 144–45
- Romanticism, 20
- Scribe, Edmund, 4
- Shevelove, Burt, 115
- signifier, 93, 95
- sinthome*: in Beckett, 32, 91, 103–4; creative collaboration, 122, 126–27, 162; definition, 2, 29, 43, 44, 46, 78–79; formation, 25–26, 104–6; as love, 136, 138; in Sondheim, 33, 116, 121, 130, 133, 140, 145–46, 148, 159; in theatre, 51, 68, 114; in Yeats, 32, 67, 40, 48, 75, 116, 125
- Six Characters in Search of an Author* (Pirandello), 22
- Sondheim, Stephen, 1, 3, 17, 22–23, 33, 37
- Storey, Robert, 14–16
- Strange Interlude* (O’Neil), 7
- Strindberg, August, 5
- Sunday in the Park with George* (Sondheim), 38, 116, 119–20, 125–27, 130, 132–34, 137–38
- Sweeney Todd* (Sondheim), 37, 39, 119, 128, 142, 144–45, 152–54, 160
- Symbolic, 11, 23, 25, 27, 35, 64, 73, 116, 121, 159, 160, 161; anti-Symbolic, 57; convention, 1; drive, 35; as habit, 122; musical theatre, 126–27; Other, 6; pastoral conventions, 17–18, 21, 123, 150; relation to Real, 139; in Sondheim, 130, 134, 140, 141–42, 145, 147, 155–56, 159; well-made play, 5
- Symbolist, 5, 7
- Theatre of Cruelty, 4, 6–7, 11, 14. *See also* Artaud, Antonin
- Votes for Women* (Robbins), 9
- Waiting for Godot* (Beckett), 36, 68, 68, 83–84, 87–89, 100, 106–8, 113
- Weidman, John, 115, 143
- well-made play, 6–7, 45
- West Side Story* (Sondheim), 126, 130
- Wheels and Butterflies* (Yeats), 40, 59, 68
- Wilde, Oscar, 54
- Words upon the Window Pane* (Yeats), 43, 70, 72
- Wouljoki, Hella, 9
- Yeats, W. B., 22–23, 32–34, 39–40, 116, 124, 124, 134, 146, 151, 154–55, 161–62
- Žižek, Slavoj, 27–28, 30, 124