

CONSIDERING OLD AGE AND THE ABSURD  
IN HAROLD PINTER'S *A SLIGHT ACHE*

**Abstract**

This article seeks to launch an inquiry into the interplay between the philosophical concept of the absurd and different theories of ageing in Harold Pinter's radio play *A Slight Ache*. Due to the privileged position it occupies in the interstice of the two, *A Slight Ache* will be read as a surprisingly complex nexus of reflections on ageing, and some of the play's nuances and half-meanings will thereby be brought more vividly to light. A close reading drawing on theories of ageing will show that old age is a theme of paramount importance in *A Slight Ache*. Furthermore, I will claim that the combination of the absurd with ageing calls for a discussion on intersubjectivity, whose precariousness threatens to doom attempts at meaning-making to failure. Finally, I will briefly discuss resistance as a viable or at least ineluctable reaction to that state of affairs.

**Keywords**

old age; absurd; Pinter; *A Slight Ache*; intersubjectivity

Made weak by time and fate, but strong in will

To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Alfred Tennyson, "Ulysses"

Buried in the "Addenda" of Samuel Beckett's *Watt* is a pithy poem which begins with a simple question: "who may tell the tale / of the old man?" (247). Interestingly, most of his important works after *Watt* have two features in common: they have been read as absurdist by most scholars who are willing to use the term; and feature older characters as protagonists.

This could be a coincidence, one might say. It is not irrelevant to point out, however, that the overwhelming majority of the practitioners of the absurd deemed significant by Martin Esslin and Neil Cornwell – Arthur Adamov, Samuel Beckett, Wolfgang Hildesheimer, Eugène Ionesco, Daniil Kharms, Robert Pinget, Harold Pinter, Flann O'Brien, among others – wrote one or more important works which have at least one older person as a protagonist or otherwise central character. So perhaps we should take a moment to contemplate the possibility that old age – associated as it commonly is with frailty, finitude, and reflections on the meaning of life – is in some way irremediably bound with notions of absurdity.

Indeed, this article posits that it can prove insightful to read literary and dramatic texts in light of the interaction between the theme of old age and the concept of the absurd. After discussing the theoretical assumptions which underpin each of these two terms, I will focus on a single work, Harold Pinter's *A Slight Ache*. A close reading informed by certain theories of ageing, especially those based on the concept of "lived time," will demonstrate that ageing is a key theme in *A Slight Ache*. After that, I will

argue that the two most salient nodes linking together old age and the absurd – the frailness of intersubjectivity and the idea of resistance – play a crucial role in the understanding of this radio play.

## OLD AGE AND THE ABSURD

### **The absurd: defining the indefinable**

The absurd is a notoriously elusive term: it could well be described as that which reason and logic cannot contain, reach or explain, and any attempt at a neat categorisation might seem destined to abject failure and therefore a gratuitous exercise of hermeneutic violence. The idiosyncratic and exceedingly varied nature of its artistic manifestations cause thematic readings to be particularly vulnerable to criticism: for instance, Esslin's "Theatre of the Absurd," a highly contentious but undeniably influential label in literary and dramatic criticism, has often been decried as "reductionist" (most recently in Bennett, *Introduction* 7).

Perhaps for this very reason, recent efforts to elucidate absurdity in literature and drama have been more circumspect, either listing etymological definitions and diachronic analyses of the concept (see Cornwell) or else adopting a more structural approach (Bennett, *Introduction* 3). Still, the fact remains that the similarities between so-called absurdist works are striking, both formally and thematically (Jaccard 49), so it must be worthwhile to try and put together a broad but still useful working definition of the absurd.

What is the main theme or idea that binds together the different expressions of absurdist thought, literature and drama? In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Albert Camus points out two related and crucial aspects: the absurd is not only a relative but also a negative

notion (20); and the absurdist, bereft of proper alternatives (as neither grudging acceptance nor suicide will do), must revolt (52). To the notion of “revolt” (also used by Brustein, though applied to a different corpus) we could add those of “paradox” and “protest” (see Wellwarth), as well as “the irrational” (Cornwell 8) and life-affirming irreverence (Bennett, *Introduction* 17). These concepts can be combined to read absurdist works as an exercise in resistance, which can be epistemological (whereby the absurd is embraced as a wholesome alternative to reason, and absurdist devices are used in the struggle against rationality), political (whereby the absurd is acknowledged as an unsatisfactory state of affairs, and reason is used in the struggle against absurdity), or ambivalent (a paradoxical and usually subtle combination of both epistemological and political resistance).<sup>1</sup>

As we shall see, the general concept of resistance (and indeed the particular kinds of resistance found in absurdist literature and drama) is very much applicable to philosophical considerations and literary depictions of old age.

### **Old age: a fact of life wrapped in a mystery inside a commonplace**

But what exactly should “old age” signify? Here too we must tread lightly: the term “old age” is as fraught with controversy in academic discussions as it is mundane in common parlance. The very idea that there is something that can be easily identifiable as “old age,” or “old person,” is seriously undermined by the sheer (and necessary) heterogeneity of the oldest cohort in any given society (see e.g. Anton 501; Setersten Jr. and Trauten 457). The scholarly consensus seems to be that “there is no universal old person” and that old age does not exist “in any fixed or generalizable form” (Wilson 4). This may lead some to deduce “that it makes little sense to speak of old age as a coherent concept at all” (Cowley 189).

Yet there is little use in denying the very tangible reality of ageing. The fact is that it does occur, and its biological workings, mysterious though they may be (Moody 15), are manifold, all too real, and indeed “normal up to a point” (Hughes 56).<sup>2</sup> Since ageing is, biologically speaking, a potentially universal experience, dismissing old age as a mere sociohistorical construct, or focusing too narrowly on the acclaimed notion of “life course” when dealing with human ageing, may run the risk of causing one to “lose sight of what it is that old people have in common *precisely because* they are old and *despite* their differences,” and what might be “enduring and timeless” about ageing and old age (Setersten Jr. and Trauten 468, original emphasis).

This may help legitimise the many attempts at theorising old age in more universal terms, or at least in ways that transcend individual realities. Theory is finally catching up with reality, and the budding and ongoing debate on the nature, workings and meaning of old age has included contributions from literary and dramatic criticism, a recent and long overdue development (Davis 21).

### **Old age as a theme**

In his work on the senescent subject in twentieth-century French writing, Oliver Davis identifies two main categories of studies of ageing in literature: “the ‘late style’ approach, which isolates various stylistic features and hypothesises about their relation to the age of the writer,” and “the character-based approach, which examines the representation of elderly or ageing characters” (31). Both of them have their limitations, and that is why “there would be some merit in a study which combined the best features of these two respective approaches: attention to form and to ageing insofar as it is figured in the texts themselves” (Davis 23).

The approach to old age in absurdist literature and drama put forward in this article will not speculate on potentially autobiographical details,<sup>3</sup> although formal considerations will certainly inform my reading of Pinter's play. The character-based approach would seem to deliver better results, since it deals with ageing "as this occurs in the text," though we must beware the temptation to treat characters "as though they were real people" (Davis 23). That is a hazard less likely to be incurred when analysing absurdist literature, since by virtue of its very nature it tends to forgo psychological realism and instead has its characters either engage in whimsical behaviour which is inconsistent with conventional social interactions and language use; or else stand in for some philosophical idea, which often enough amounts to the embodiment of some transparent or ulterior allegorical meaning.

This is also frequently the case in the absurdist works where older characters are present. In them old age is mostly an idea; the stress clearly rests on (rightly or wrongly) widely held symbolical associations with ageing – frailty, powerlessness – rather than observations derived from scientific research or personal experience. Be that as it may, old age often remains a paramount issue in said works. As Theodor Wolpers writes, "a genuinely *literary* theme, that is, one significantly contributing to the general 'meaning' of a work, must be one of the shaping forces and guiding principles of the text, not something the critic adds from outside" (90, original emphasis). And the thesis of this article is precisely that old age can and indeed should be read as "one of the shaping forces and guiding principles" of Pinter's *A Slight Ache*.

### ***A Slight Ache*: synopsis and absurdist credentials**

Given the academic unpopularity of the absurd and the still germinal scholarly standing of ageing as a subject matter, one of the common threads of this article does seem to be

marginality, as *A Slight Ache* is not accorded the same critical attention as Pinter's more acclaimed plays. Written in 1958 as a radio play commissioned by the BBC, and later the subject of stage productions, it wears symbolism on its sleeve (Esslin, *Pinter* 90), a conspicuousness that invites comparison with the British playwright's first play, *The Room*. Subtle in its symbolism it may not be, but what exactly does the symbol stand for? As in many of Pinter's plays, any such query is met with authorial silence.

The symbol in question is the matchseller, "a quiet, harmless old man" (Pinter 16; henceforth *ASA*) who intrudes on the quiet lives of Edward and Flora, a middle-class "elderly married couple" (Cornwell 137) whose relationship shows signs of strain even before the mysterious character is invited in. The opening scene shows a patient Flora teaching a curt Edward the names of the flowers in their garden. Soon after that Edward, first bullishly giving orders to Flora and then egged on by her, traps, blinds and kills a wasp in a marmalade jar, and his self-important triumphant feeling is comically juxtaposed with his opposite initial intention to keep the insect out of the jar.

But the matchseller, who has been standing quietly by the back gate of their house for a long time, obviously unsettles Edward, and his fruitless interrogation of the "harmless old man" (who does not utter a single word throughout the play) does little apart from revealing Edward's own arrogant, pedantic and overbearing personality. Meanwhile, and despite Flora's initial disgust, the matchseller kindles sexual fantasies in her, as Edward, growing weaker over time, sorrowfully reminisces on his past vigour. In the end, Flora is intent on keeping and grooming the matchseller, and places his match tray in the hands of a frail and spent Edward.

This play has many of the most common absurdist trappings, both formally and thematically. Analysed from a structural perspective, *A Slight Ache* (a one-act tragicomedy, like many of the "canonical" absurdist plays) is rich in the understated

wordplay and the “experiments with silence, pauses, and vapid questions” which are rife in Pinter (Bennett, *Introduction* 85), and fulfil all of the formal requisites for absurdist fiction and drama proposed by Michael Bennett (*Introduction* 19).

Thematically, and to approach this matter from only one of the various possible angles, the abovementioned play with language found in *A Slight Ache* is very much in tune with the perennial fixation with the problem of human (mis)communication often seen in absurdist writings in general and in Pinter’s work in particular: “what I try to do in my plays is to get to this recognizable reality of the absurdity of what we do and how we behave and how we speak” (Pinter *apud* Esslin, *Absurd* 198). Thus the “self-evident limitations of language” can be laid bare through “either linguistic disintegration or even a meticulous reproduction of reality (as often found in Pinter)” (Cornwell 8). This is an example of what was described above as epistemological resistance: since “[t]he much-vaunted inadequacy or deception of language” is intimately connected to reason and its shortcomings (Cornwell 27), the play’s abundant use of quasi-non sequiturs, ambiguity and other time-honoured absurdist devices exposes the glitches of language and logic and thereby chips away at the foundations of rationality.

Perhaps one of the most interesting features of *A Slight Ache*, however, is the seamless symbiosis between form and content so characteristic of absurdist theatre (Esslin, *Absurd* 6). “The stage of radio is darkness and silence, the darkness of the listener’s skull” (Gray 49), and so a work like *A Slight Ache* does not need to make any concessions to “physical circumstances” (Gray 61). This is particularly evident in the ethereal (because wordless) nature of the matchseller, whose presence on a physical stage, as many critics have noted, significantly undercuts its dramatic force (see e.g. Esslin, *Pinter* 87–90, Guralnick 101-102). The reality of radio, then, “is never consistent,” and this is why “it is perfectly adapted to the portrayal of an absurd



universe” (Gray 61). This has even led one critic to muse on “the possibly direct influence of certain types of radio drama on the absurdist stage play” (Fink 203).

The curious affinity between radio and the absurd is just as fascinating as that between radio and old age, a correlation that has surprised scholars (Mangan 8). All of these three elements are fused together in *A Slight Ache*,<sup>4</sup> but while it is originally a radio play, and has often been read as an absurdist work, its thematisation of old age is anything but taken for granted: interpretations of this as well as of many other absurdist works, usually neglect it while favouring other (but proximate) subjects, such as the theme of death.

#### READING OLD AGE IN *A SLIGHT ACHE*

##### **The theme of death: more than mortality**

Whereas death has fascinated countless writers, thinkers and readers, old age rarely captures their imagination to an even remotely similar extent; after all, the “slow, familiar process” of ageing stands in stark contrast to the dramatic and inconceivable nature of death (Bavidge 208). Old age thus manages to combine the worst of both worlds and somehow be perceived as both frightening and boring. What most deepens the chasm between the two themes, however, is comparing their ontological significance: whereas it is quite consensual that “finitude, mortality, and death belong irreducibly to the meaning of human life” (Rentsch 362), the ageing process is usually refused the “intrinsic meaning” attributed to death (Davis 11).

This may help explain why so often considerations of death eclipse those of old age or the process of ageing, even when the latter could actually be more fruitful than the former. Pinter’s *A Slight Ache* illustrates this in a particularly flagrant way. Esslin

points to its themes of “sexual inadequacy and death” (*Pinter* 88), which are certainly valid and one might even say unavoidable. However, to declare that the mysterious figure “is simply Edward’s death” (Esslin, *Pinter* 90) is a grating oversimplification.

But the fact that the matchseller “is not meant as a realistic character is clear enough” (Esslin, *Pinter* 90), and this has given rise to a number of readings, almost none of which take due stock of the plentiful references to old age and ageing in the play. Besides from having been read as a “herald of Death,” Cornwell reports how the matchseller has been seen as a symbol of, among other things, the Great Depression, the “Other,” meaninglessness, “or simply Edward’s Nemesis” (137). The threat is not always interpreted as being extraneous, however: for Bernard Dukore, for example, “the menace is an external manifestation of internal, psychological disturbance” (44), as a result of which Edward “deteriorates to the point of helplessness” (43). This deterioration in particular has been interpreted as akin to the process of ageing, as when Esslin mentions how at one point Edward, led into the garden by Flora, “seems weakened; the slight ache from which he suffered initially has grown into a general loss of vitality, the start of the descent into the decay of old age” (*Pinter* 89). But, as we have seen, Esslin’s focus lies elsewhere, and in his reading ageing is a mere stepping stone towards death (the passage on old age quoted above appears, tellingly, in parentheses).

Thus old age is rarely seen as an important aspect of *A Slight Ache*. It is either ignored, briefly alluded to as a mere transitory stage towards death, or dismissively brought up as part of a joke, as when the plot of the radio play is boiled down to “a geriatric sex-game” (Cornwell 138).<sup>5</sup> This is not just a pity – it also seems to disregard a great deal of textual evidence. For one thing, one must reckon with the staggering number of references to the matchseller’s advanced years. Flora consistently describes

him as “an old man” (ASA 21), combining that sobriquet with an impressive diversity of compassionate if condescending attributives: “a very nice old man” (15), “a quiet, harmless old man” (16), “a poor old man” (18), “a poor, harmless old man” (18), “very old” (21), and so on.

Moreover, seeing the matchseller as symbolising old age would help make sense of the fact that he appears standing near the back gate, on a small lane that leads to the monastery (as opposed to the front gate, which is on the main road that leads to the village), and that “he’s always there” (ASA 15–16). Granted that what this evokes (an ever-present spectre; a covert and inexorable process quietly working out of sight) could just as well apply to death, but the couple’s insistence on the benignity of the matchseller – the word “harmless” is often appended to him, on one occasion appearing as many as than five times in just two lines (ASA 16) – is harder to square with the idea of annihilation.

Another, much more cogent argument can be made in relation to another fascinating detail, which is rarely mentioned and then only in passing: as Edward grows feebler, the once “very old” matchseller begins to look “younger,” indeed “extraordinarily... youthful” (ASA 39); “the match-seller is presented as growing younger while Edward grows older” (Rodger 112; see also Carpenter 209). The switching of places between Edward and the matchseller as part of the play’s dramatic twist, and the power shift that is implied therein, does not therefore happen “abruptly” or “suddenly,” as it has been claimed (Coppa 50), but rather more like ageing, which “is not a race to the death. It is slow and gradual” (Fry 513). Hints of this are sprinkled towards the end of the text, mostly in the form of stage directions: Edward grunts twice, when stooping to pick up the matchseller’s tray and when getting back up (ASA 26); he asks Flora to take him into the garden “*with great weariness*” (ASA 28); his reveries are

nostalgic (ASA 35); and in the closing moments, as he becomes “*weaker*,” his speech becomes breathless and little short of aphasic, and he situates his broken narrative in a bygone time, “when a stripling ... like yourself” [i.e., the matchseller] (ASA 39).

Needless to say, this reversal of fortunes, complete with the matchseller’s newfound youth thrown into sharp relief by an aged Edward himself, is entirely at odds with the theory that the enigmatic character “is simply Edward’s death.” This is probably why the ending of *A Slight Ache* has perplexed many critics, who have deemed it “contingent, absurd” (Dukore 44), or else a failed gimmick that “is straining too hard to contrive a neat pattern” (Hayman 31). An approach focused on ageing handles this denouement (or perhaps more accurately said *nouement*) in a much more satisfactory manner.

Given the massive gravitational pull of the idea of demise, “rejecting the characterisation of old age as the mere ante-room to death” (Scarre 7) may be perceived as a vital step to allow old age to make its own unique contribution to our never-ending quest for the meaning of life. For Christopher Cowley, however, we look unflinchingly at death as *sine qua non* of any discussion of the meaning of old age: “Old age is not just another stage of life, it is the last stage. It is not just a stage characterised by loss of capacities, loss of parents or loss of employment, but, ultimately, by the loss of the whole world” (203).

While this may be true, placing too much emphasis on this aspect of ageing would also reinforce what Margaret Gullette has called the “master narrative of decline,” “which encourages men and women to experience and articulate growing older in terms of loss, isolation, and diminished physical mental and material resources” (Mangan 8). It is difficult yet imperative to find equilibrium: it requires not only the intellectual honesty to acknowledge all the pernicious changes that ageing might entail

but also the presence of mind to see beyond them. Death may well be unavoidable (both as a matter of fact and as a leitmotif when discussing old age); nevertheless, again according to Cowley, it should not dominate our ruminations about ageing – and not least because “old age, understood as limited and partly defined by death, is more interesting,” philosophically, than death (203).

This is a point of view that the present article hopes to corroborate. As the remainder of this discussion will show, we can plausibly read the theme of old age in *A Slight Ache* in a variety of different ways, but, naturally, some lines of inquiry are more suitable than others.

### **Disengagement theory**

Many theories of ageing have been devised by gerontologists which associate chronometric measurements of time “with stories or metaphors that are not only implicitly accepted as meaningful but also as universal and grounded in immutable rhythms of nature” (Baars 72). One of them was disengagement theory. Created in the beginning of the second half of the twentieth century to explain “the engagements of adulthood and the ultimate mutual disengagement of society and old people” (Fry 512), its short-lived heyday coincided with the conception of *A Slight Ache* (and indeed with the coinage of the term “Theatre of the Absurd”). It grew out of the Kansas City Study of Adult Life, which showed that “with advancing age, there is, in fact, a trend toward greater *interiority*, meaning increased attention to the inner psychological world” (Moody 9, original emphasis); one may become “more detached,” and the “disengagement” could be interpreted in a narrower sense as the development of “an inner attitude towards life” (Moody 9).

That sense of disengagement can be found in *A Slight Ache*. As the play begins, Edward is outside, having tea with his wife, but not wholly at ease. He is not properly engaging in conversation with Flora, but rather trying to read the newspaper. Also, he does not seem to know the plants and flowers of his garden by name, and neither does he show much interest in changing that state of affairs.

He was not always this detached from his surroundings, if we are to believe his recollections: later in the play, when Edward wistfully reminisces about his prowess as a young man, there is much talk of “my excursions to the cliff,” climbing the hill to “survey my landscape” (ASA 35–36). This outwardness began to be thwarted by the appearance of the matchseller (or whatever he may stand for) in his life. As he describes how he would contemplate the matchseller, he mentions that sometimes he would “take shelter” – there he would still be in touch with “the blades of grass, the earthflowers,” “all the great foliage,” but he would mainly “rest,” and there he “no longer heard the wind or saw the sun. Nothing entered, nothing left my nook” (ASA 38).

So it is quite natural that Edward, livid from having seen the matchseller, his “oldest acquaintance” (ASA 36), standing right outside his gate, retires to the darkness of the scullery, to Flora’s surprise (ASA 16–18). In the revelations that follow, this creeping inwardness manifests itself in other ways: he “used to be in business, now he regards himself as something of an intellectual” (Esslin, *Pinter* 87). A writer and thinker, his has become a life of reflection. And even in his writing we find a progressive disengagement with the outer, physical world: Flora tells us he was writing about “the Belgian Congo,” a subject that is both concrete and perfectly defined historically and geographically, but Edward claims that he is now writing an “essay on space and time” instead (ASA 17), which makes for a much more abstract and philosophical topic – not to mention eminently related to ageing.

So disengagement theory, like other theories of ageing based on measured time, may be used in illuminating ways to discuss ageing in *A Slight Ache*. However, and bearing in mind the stated aims of this article, theoretical perspectives that relinquish considerations of chronometric time altogether are much more likely to lead to helpful insights.

### **The *réveil mortel***

Given “the intrinsic openness of the human organism” (Baars 76), and consequently the uniqueness of each person’s development (biological as well as psychological and social), and given the idiosyncratic, inward-looking character of *A Slight Ache*, it may be more appropriate to focus on the concept of “lived time,” which has a strong affinity with phenomenology (Arp 141) and existentialist thought (Baars 83, 81).

This matters because the awareness of one’s own finitude afforded by the existentialist perspective is strikingly adequate for a discussion of old age in absurdist literature. And when Cowley invites us to think about ageing by focusing “less on chronology” (190), one of his proposals is existentialist to a fault: the contention that “old age could be launched by the crucial experience of the *réveil mortel*. This is the idea of my waking up with the simple but terrifying certainty that I will die” (191). The *réveil mortel* may occur earlier or later in life; the crux of the matter is not the passing of time but the crossing of the line “between knowledge and certainty” (Cowley 191): “there is a difference between accepting the abstract proposition that all men are mortal and reaching the existential realisation that I myself am mortal” (Scarre 5).

In Pinter’s play, Edward’s *réveil mortel* could be the moment when he first sees the matchseller – or rather, the first time Edward claims to have seen him, which led to his progressive and inexorable disengagement with society and the outer reality in

general. Otherwise, his *réveil mortel* could also be argued to have been elicited by the wasp incident. Initially, Edward is elated, for the first and last time in the play; after he kills the offending creature, the perceived virility of the deed seems to positively invigorate him: “I feel it in my bones. In my muscles. I think I’ll stretch my legs in a minute” (ASA 14). However, the argument could be made that the matchseller does not simply happen to wander into Edward’s line of sight in that exact moment – as a matter of fact, Flora claims that he had been lurking there for quite a while (ASA 15). Instead, the killing may have served as a wake-up call to the idea of his own mortality – that is to say, his *réveil mortel*. Here the parallel between Edward’s “slight ache” in his eye (ASA 12) and the blinding of the wasp before its demise (ASA 14) would acquire a very specific meaning and at the same time attest to the hypothesis that the matchseller appears to Edward not only when but most importantly *because* he makes that association.

We have established, then, that Edward’s ageing process is not only dramatised but also acknowledged by Edward himself, however unconsciously or reluctantly. Predictably, of course, his manifest reaction is one of almost visceral denial. But, as I will argue later, that very tension, brought about by the combination of “lived time” with quintessentially existentialist tropes such as preoccupations with the self, the Other, and the concept of authenticity, can yield thought-provoking readings concerning a particular aspect present in *A Slight Ache* and common to both the theme of old age and philosophical concept of the absurd: the idea of resistance.

### **Ageing, othering, resisting**

As we have seen earlier, the pitfalls of the “character-based approach” are twofold: failing to pay heed to form; and mistaking characters for actual persons (Davis 23).



Bearing that in mind, the present article, besides having at its base a keen awareness of the specificity of the medium (an elaboration of which nonetheless lies outside its purview), advocates an approach that treats literary and dramatic characters (in Pinter's play in particular, and in absurdist works in general) less as biographical subjects and more as thinly disguised placeholders for ambient social constructs, prototypical attitudes and preconceived notions which are neither given authorial legitimacy nor dismissed, but simply brought up and problematised.

This idea of raising thorny questions and leaving the tensions they create "unresolved" is also the *modus operandi* of Simone de Beauvoir in *La Vieillesse*, where the French philosopher argues that "ageing is about becoming this Other even as we fail to recognize ourselves in it" (Davis 40); Beauvoir's account of ageing in *La Vieillesse* is essentially one in which the subject is alienated, split in schizoid fashion between its sense of inner self-sameness and the reality of becoming old: ageing is *othering*" (Davis 145, original emphasis).

Ageing as "othering" is a perfect angle from which to approach *A Slight Ache*. It has often been remarked that in that radio play, as in Pinter's previous efforts, "the theme is the threat of the intruder from outside" (Hayman 28). Others have refined this reading to suggest that in those plays "menace lurks outside, but it also has psychological roots" (Dukore 24). We can avoid the complications wrought by the use of a loaded term like "psychological" and still safely infer the dual, or perhaps more accurately put ambiguous, nature of the threat: depending on how we look at it, it may come from within or from without. In the wasp episode, there is a premonition which "is the play in microcosm": Edward "has trapped the wasp in the marmalade jar when his voiced intention was to shoo it away; he has locked in the thing he wanted to expel" (Coppa 50).

That is what happens to Edward in the end: old age catches up with him, despite his vehement efforts to distance himself from it. He repeatedly denies that he is “frightened” of the matchseller, and is on the defensive throughout. This attitude is nowhere more obvious than in the following passage, where Flora tries to assuage Edward’s fears:

FLORA [*going over to him*]: I don’t know why you’re getting so excited about it. He’s a quiet, harmless old man, going about his business. He’s quite harmless.

EDWARD: I didn’t say he wasn’t harmless. Of course he’s harmless. How could he be other than harmless? (ASA 16)

He elaborates on this later on: “He can’t see straight. I think as a matter of fact he wears a glass eye. He’s almost stone deaf ... almost ... not quite. He’s very nearly dead on his feet. Why should he frighten me?” (ASA 29). If we read the matchseller as standing for death alone, Edward’s sharp reply must be seen as evidence of out-and-out denial, and that is certainly a vital part of it. But it can also be a frank admission of the very root of his anxiety: the old man *is* harmless, and Edward – proud, domineering, surveyor of *his* landscape, his “grasp firm,” his “command established” (ASA 35) – fears nothing more than to become just that.

Thus when he is exasperated with the matchseller’s listlessness as a monk passes by (ASA 19), he is not only dismayed by the old man’s lack of tenacity – he is afraid that that means he too will lose his own. The commonly experienced “shock of looking in the mirror and seeing a strange face reflected there” (Arp 135) finds its parallel in the moments when Edward accuses the matchseller of being an “impostor,” which he does

more than once (ASA 19, 29). All the while, however, there is more than a hint of the kind of panic that is triggered by self-recognition.

This crisis is not only of an inner nature: it is further heightened by its social dimension, which is inextricably bound up with the sexual politics of the play, an important and recurring issue in Pinter which has been widely commented on. Davis notes that, in *La Vieillesse*, Simone de Beauvoir “demonstrates that men too are destined, with age, to corporeal alienation” (53), and the elaboration of this line of thought is worth quoting at length due to its pertinence to the analysis of *A Slight Ache*: “old age shakes men out of their quiet self-satisfaction, their presumed social and corporeal superiority, shattering the supposedly seamless unity of the male lifespan. The male adult rejects the old man he will become: ‘Il hait dans le vieillard sa future condition’” (Davis 53).

This helps explain the otherwise rather baffling denouement, when Flora happily takes the matchseller in and expels Edward. By the end of the play, Edward’s youth has become his Other, and along with youth goes his virility. Just like Edward as a young man had taken the place of the village’s squire, who was himself a “[n]ice old man” (ASA 22), Edward finds himself superseded, spent, no longer the supple surveyor of his landscape of yore, and left to his own devices; the process has taken its course, and the upshot is the one Edward had feared from the start.

## OLD AGE, THE ABSURD AND FAILED INTERSUBJECTIVITY

### Meaning as intersubjective

Discussing the social aspects of ageing brings a number of important and related issues to the fore. Let us begin with a simple question: Does one's ageing depend on others? Our everyday idea of ageing as a matter of time elapsing would suggest that it does not. But scratch beneath the surface and the opposite is true. The fact that in English there is "no equivalent of sex and gender to distinguish between biological and social ageing [...] makes it very easy to think of biological and social ageing as the same thing" (Wilson 7), yet there is some academic consensus around the notion that "being elderly is mainly a product of social and material conditions" (Overall 21). Though "the essential individuality of the experience of old age" is undisputed, "our sense of individuation, of being conscious of a separate identity from the other people around us, is expressed in relational terms" (Hepworth 4, 13-14). Even advocates of "authentic ageing," whose focus on subjective, individual experience might otherwise suggest a certain inwardness, urge us to "move beyond the idea of the self within and see ourselves as situated or embedded in the world" (Hughes 62, 65). To answer our question, then, one's ageing does depend on others, as meaning is "always social, because it would not exist in its fullness without communicative interactions and shared language" (Johnson 266).

This emphatic stance would seem to preclude provocative but apparently inane follow-up questions such as: But who are those "others"? Must they be other people? Again, the affirmative reply rolls off the tongue; after all, how could the "others" be anything other than other people? When ageing is actually dramatised, however, often enough the answer can only be affirmative if we consider our *former* selves to be *other*

selves. One particularly striking example of what I mean is Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape*, where the protagonist's aged status is clearly established not only by the author's stage directions but also by his deliberate evocation of his former selves. Krapp, being the only character of the play, is presented to the audience without any term of comparison other than himself, and yet, just like no critic that I am aware of has failed to describe him as "old" or "very old," no discerning spectator will fail to recognise the thematisation of ageing.

This rather solipsistic sort of intersubjectivity poses an interesting conundrum, one which I believe is representative of many absurdist writers' dealings with the complex issues surrounding old age. Before we delve into it, let us consider its philosophical origins.

### **The remarkable survivability of the Cartesian mind/body split**

The scepticism towards "classical rationalist discourse" in general (and the Cartesian method in particular) that was widespread among European avant-garde artists in the twentieth century (Fotiade 1) may invite interpretations of their works grounded on phenomenological, existentialist or even mystical perspectives. However, remnants of Cartesian dualism and its corollary notions – namely the rife "dualistic view of mind versus body", the mind being the "higher" self because it is "rational" and the body the "lower" one due to its association with baser functions and desires (Johnson 2, 4) – crop up all too often and with unexpected vigour.

As we have seen above, *A Slight Ache* illustrates this common worldview through Edward, whose hiding in the scullery is a retreat from the world and his own senses, who stubbornly (and vainly) seeks to distance himself from his failing body, smothering its signals with copious words, seeking respite from it in mangled

memories, essentially wishing it away – as though its changes, and the changing reality they herald, could ever possibly be dissociated from *himself*, the “true” Edward, the rational mind, the ageless self. This schizoid manner of thinking, which lies behind so many other instances of “ageing as othering,” is eminently Cartesian; according to Sally Gadow, the rationalist (as opposed to existentialist) perspective holds that “the essential is the pure, the enduring, while the contingent is the corruptible, the decaying,” and for this reason the “experience of frailty” – a “testimony to finitude, imperfection, and eventual death” – comes to be seen as nothing less than “the body thwart[ing] the projects of the self” (144). Thus “the self repudiates the body to escape being contaminated by its deterioration. The body becomes a mere shell, a disguise” (Gadow 145).

Thinking in such dualistic terms is problematic, and not just for the more immediately apparent reasons, such as the notion that bodily frailty is an “unalterable given in human existence” (Gadow 144) and the even starker fact that “[*t*]he person you are cannot survive the death of your body” (Johnson 208, original emphasis). When we unwind the rationalist ball of yarn, we find that meaning is taken to be “something that belongs first and foremost to words (Johnson 7-8) and “exclusively conceptual and propositional in nature” (Johnson 8) – as opposed to arising “through embodied organism-environment interactions” (Johnson 273).

The troublesome implications of this should be plain to anyone acquainted with absurdist literature. If we are thus to “focus almost exclusively on language (i.e., spoken and written words and sentences) as the bearer of meaning” (Johnson 20), what are we to make of the tendency “toward a radical devaluation of language” (Esslin 7) deemed so characteristic of the absurd, and of the “authentic feeling of gratuitousness” of

absurdist speech created “amid either linguistic disintegration or even a meticulous reproduction of reality (as often found in Pinter)” (Cornwell 8)?

What we are to make of that is that the deliberate thematisation of the “much-vaunted inadequacy or deception of language” (Cornwell 27) alongside the presentation of rationalist modes of thought and behaviour is part of a problematisation of our commonsensical view of ourselves as split between the mind as our “true self” and the body as a mere vessel. Obviously, nowhere in this article do I suggest that Cartesian dualism was actually *embraced* by the practitioners of the absurd themselves. To name but one illustrious example, the “enduring debt” owed by Beckett to Descartes did not lead to the Irish writer’s acceptance of “all, if indeed any, of the Cartesian premises and conclusions” (Ackerley and Gorantki 132); instead, a more accurate appraisal of the extent of Descartes’s influence would be to claim that Beckett’s “major novels are based clearly and distinctly on a Cartesian entelechy, however qualified by irony. They are Cartesian in their premises, but ironic in their method” (Ackerley and Gorantki 135).

The fact remains, however, that the mind/body dualism is “deeply embedded in our philosophical and religious traditions,” and we may be reinforcing it in practice if not necessarily in theory often in spite of ourselves: “We buy into the notion of thinking as a pure, conceptual, body-transcending activity, even if we realize that no thinking occurs without a brain” (Johnson 2). Moreover, it becomes a particularly appealing narrative in old age, as Simone de Beauvoir, famously very much of the existentialist persuasion, attests: “Even though Beauvoir is no Cartesian, she suggests that the desire to disown the body – the Cartesian temptation – becomes increasingly strong with age” (Davis 46).

### **The dangers of failed intersubjectivity in old age**

The same kind of cognitive dissonance may affect our thoughts on intersubjectivity in general and meaning-making in old age in particular. If “human beings live in a symbolic world of shared meaning” (Moody 109), and if “meaning is a matter of relations and connections” (Johnson 265), then it follows that the search for meaning in old age (as in any other life phase) will necessarily have an intersubjective element. Yet for all our right-thinking certainty in the existence of “a symbolic world of shared meaning” and in the fact that all meaning is the net result “of our humanity-interacting-with-our-world” (Johnson 282), in old age we may find ourselves preoccupied first and foremost with memory, which, though vital for the “epistemology of the self” (Lipscomb 24), tends to lead to greater introspection and inwardness.

The friction between such self-centred perspective and the notion that meaning-making must be intersubjective is evident. Just like the axiomatic breakdown of communication in absurdist literature and drama invites – at least at first glance – a pessimist outlook on the possibility of meaningful interaction with others, the “mental and physical infirmity” that old age may portend is likely to exacerbate problems in the negotiation of “a satisfactory identity” and thus of adequate personal meanings, especially if we theorise identity as “a social accomplishment based on interaction” (Vincent, Phillipson and Downs 108).

Hepworth sums up these considerations when he notes that “the individual sense of selfhood can be seriously threatened” if “the processes of interpersonal communication break down,” and he mentions that such “outcome has been dealt with imaginatively in a number of stories of ageing” (Hepworth 16). One example could be Beckett’s *Rockaby*, which has been read as a cautionary tale of “how old age and frailty endanger personhood” (Groninger and Childress 269) – another could be *A Slight Ache*



itself. Thus loneliness, or what Linda Wood “the individual experience of *failed intersubjectivity*” (*apud* Hepworth 65, original emphasis), is yet another theme that binds absurdist concerns together with the problematisation of old age.

### **False intersubjectivity: the peculiar case of absurdist radio drama**

Loneliness, the breakdown of meaningful communication between people, the introspection associated with one’s “search for lost time” – all of these considerations bring us back to the impasse alluded to earlier: what kind of meaning can arise from a frankly solipsist kind of intersubjectivity, if it can be called intersubjectivity at all? For in many absurdist works, particularly those depleted of *dramatis personæ*, intersubjectivity, when at all present, is either make-believe or under siege – and as a consequence meaning-making is at risk as well.

Here the original (and therefore optimal) choice of medium for *A Slight Ache* indubitably plays a noteworthy role. Commenting on radio’s famous propensity for the perpetration of hoaxes on a mass scale, Tim Crook observes that it cannot be reduced solely to social and historical circumstances, because it is also attributable to the medium’s very essence; being “a more psychological medium”, it is very apt to “weaken the dividing line between illusion and reality” (105, 139). This feature of radio is rarely lost on commentators, and it should inform our readings of radio plays written specifically for the medium, as was the case of Pinter’s piece analysed here. Indeed, according to Guralnick, in *A Slight Ache* radio drama is “treated as a mind in action” (191).

Interestingly, this sets up yet another unresolved tension – which is, after all, part and parcel, if not even the *raison d’être*, of absurdist drama and fiction.<sup>6</sup> For all their potential for introspection and psychological depth, absurdist radio plays (just like

absurdist literature in general) afford precious little in the way of realistic insights into the workings of a human psyche. Esslin holds that in what he termed the “Theatre of the Absurd” the characters are dehumanised, as the inscrutability of their motives renders them alien to the audience (Esslin, *Absurd* 347). If we were to accept that each of those plays “is an answer to the questions ‘How does this individual feel when confronted with the human situation? What is the basic mood in which he faces the world? What does it feel like to be he?’” (Esslin, *Absurd* 342), we should be ready to admit that the opaqueness of “the motivation and background of the characters” that leads to the “problem of verification” found in many of Pinter’s plays (Esslin, *Absurd* 198, 199) will seriously undercut any attempt to make sense of such answers.<sup>7</sup>

### **Intersubjectivity (or lack thereof) in *A Slight Ache***

Because *A Slight Ache* conjoins the philosophical concept of the absurd, the theme of old age and the medium of radio in a convenient little package, it makes sense that it should illustrate the paradoxes alluded to above. The extent to which intersubjectivity in *A Slight Ache* is not only more or less inevitably present in some way or another – since we are dealing with a work of radio drama that has two characters engaging in (something that vaguely resembles) a dialogue – but also actively thematised was even more obvious in the work’s original title, *Something in Common* (Carpenter 209).

This begs the question: something in common *with whom*? Someone only acquainted with the basic plot of the radio play may very well instinctively assume that the terms of comparison are Edward and Flora, who are immediately identified (or at least identifiable) as a couple. Also, pinpointing ageing as a crucial theme in *A Slight Ache* could yield the same answer, since Edward and Flora seem to be in the same age range and would thus theoretically be similarly prone to begin musing on old age and its

meaning. Moreover, some fruitful in-depth analyses have been scaffolded upon the premise that they have equal weight as characters. Guralnick, for instance, reads Edward and Flora as polar opposites (112-113) whose “disparate impressions” of the matchseller “cannot both be right, since they are mutually exclusive” (101). Seeing both Edward and Flora as imbued with “personalities” which “prove to be equally matched” (Guralnick 101) entails a reading of the play as primarily a power struggle between the two, one which Flora actually wins in the end.

No one familiar with Pinter’s *oeuvre* would be reckless enough to dismiss the thematic importance of power struggle outright, and neither is that my intention. However, I have to take issue with the idea that Edward and Flora are two equal protagonists – and, judging from what has been written on *A Slight Ache* in the past decades, I am far from being alone. There is more than one way of defending this claim, but I will do so within the narrower confines of this article by arguing that only Edward’s old age is dramatised, not Flora’s. The *réveil mortel* strikes Edward, not Flora; and an emphasis on lived time (as opposed to chronological time) invites us to pay more attention to the radio play’s outcome (Edward switches places with the matchseller, who begins by being perceived as “very old” and by the end as “extraordinarily youthful,” whereas Flora undergoes no such change, and indeed merrily leaves holding hands with her “Barnabas”) than to Edward’s and Flora’s similarity of circumstances (including age cohort) at the outset.

The focus, then, is chiefly on Edward, who towards the end of the radio play makes it abundantly clear that if he has “something in common” with anyone it is with the matchseller: “My oldest acquaintance. My nearest and dearest. My kith and kin” (ASA 36). This becomes increasingly apparent as the radio play draws to a close, even in the most unexpected moments, such as the farcical bit when Edward, commanding the

matchseller to blow his nose and pull himself together, immediately proceeds to sneeze and blow his own nose (ASA 38). These declamations of kinship and instances of mirroring foreshadow the final scene, where Edward in a way *becomes* the matchseller.

Let us take a step back now. Why should it matter who has something in common with whom? It matters a great deal, because it shows just how bleak the prospects are as far as meaning-making potential goes. Notice that, unless we interpret the radio play in a literal and naïve way, the matchseller is a figment of the characters' imagination or the embodiment (or even symbol) of something that happens to Edward (according to my thesis, his ageing process). Either way, that would signify that Edward has "something in common" not with other people, but instead with (im)possible or future selves.

This is what I mean when I claim that in *A Slight Ache* intersubjectivity is under siege: its dialogue is more a proxy for domination and imposition of one's will than a tool for establishing meaningful connections, and the monologues remind one less of "world-repair" than of unabashed fabrication of convenient realities. And the consequences of this solipsism are shattering: Edward's deeply antagonistic behaviour and worldview prevents him from deriving any basic form of ontological security from social interactions (which only seem to undermine it, especially as the radio play progresses), let alone anything as far up in Maslow's pyramid as "meaning."

Does all this suggest that intersubjectivity is impossible, that all attempts at meaning-making are therefore in vain, and that old age is simply to be regarded as the time of our lives when these forlorn truths are forced upon our consciousness with such violence as to ease the sting of death itself? Not at all; *A Slight Ache*, like other Pinter plays and indeed most absurdist works, does not have a "Message;" it does not *state* anything. It does remorselessly show, however, that true intersubjectivity does not arise

automatically from social interactions, and that the perils of *mauvaise foi* and of a lack of self-awareness in general cannot be understated.

Not all is paradox and inconclusiveness, then: a close reading of *A Slight Ache* is likely to show that certain outlooks on absurdity, old age and life in general are thematised to the detriment of other possible ones. The notion of resistance – something that, together with a preoccupation with whether intersubjective meaning-making is in fact possible, truly brings together ageing and the absurd – is of particular importance. My closing remarks will thus highlight how Pinter’s work questions the possibility of ever accepting, resigning oneself to, or coming to terms with a reality that may be as unpalatable to some as it is inescapable to all.

### **Final thoughts: on the absence of alternatives to resistance**

The ending of *A Slight Ache* is, at least with hindsight, infused with a feeling of inevitability. So should we conclude that Edward’s resistance to the harsh new reality ushered in by the matchseller’s appearance is futile? That is perhaps not the right question; after all, when is stubborn denial ever the appropriate course of action? Instead, we ought to consider whether the text gives us any reason to believe that there is a viable alternative at all.

There may be some more unconventional elements in *A Slight Ache*, yet the reaction to the prospect of ageing depicted there (and in many other absurdist works which feature older protagonists) is anything but. Indeed, when old age is widely perceived as having more shortcomings than benefits, it should come as no surprise that for many “*defying aging is the primary way to go about aging*” (Setersten Jr. and Trauten 464, original emphasis).

Yet Cowley warns that “[i]t’s all very well to rage, rage against the dying of the light, but sooner or later you realise it’s not worth the effort” (194). Like so many before him, Cowley proposes the celebrated notion of “coming to terms” with ageing as a (or the only) viable alternative to blind resistance. But how exactly is that to be achieved? For example, can one ever truly *accept* ageing? Not when old age is understood, as it frequently is, as “schizoid splitting” (Davis 48) between the ageing body and the ageless mind: “If old age is a matter of grudging acceptance, ... insofar as I continue to see my state as degraded in comparison with my earlier, more authentic self (‘I am a shadow of my former self’), then I have *not* come to terms” (195, original emphasis).

Mere resignation – ultimately a deferential bow to external pressures – will not do; in order to properly come to terms, there must be “voluntary renunciation, ... [a]s an act of will” (Cowley 196). Renunciation, or what an ageing Goethe called *Entsagung*, may not be free of “disillusionment, but may ultimately bring about a calm view, without deception”; it “is not a pitiful renouncement, but is rather the highest form of existential sovereignty and human self-assertion” (Rentsch 358). In short, to renounce means to acknowledge that “I have to come to terms with it, to get used to it, to accept it, and there is nothing more to say” (Cowley 194).

This is a clear-eyed, pragmatic stance – but to what extent is it suitable to Pinter’s *A Slight Ache*? For instance, Beauvoir, whose thoughts on this matter I deem to be congruous with the overall tone of absurdist works, would likely find such talk of renunciation as tantamount to self-deception: “There is no such thing, she suggests, as calm acceptance of growing old: calm is not acceptance but denial” (Davis 48). In absurdist literary and dramatic works that can be said to broach on the theme of old age, denial is clearly plentiful (that is what moves most characters, or more accurately put,

what most characters *represent*), but what about resignation and renunciation? For example, what can be said to describe better the way Edward trades places with the matchseller? Certainly not renunciation, but neither is there really resignation. His final words, whispered with a “great, final effort,” “Who are you?” (ASA 39), are representative of his behaviour throughout: he may have changed in the end, but he did so in spite of himself; he fought to the bitter end.

When Rentsch discusses, in the context of the philosophy of ageing, “the meaning of human life,” he argues that it is inescapably bound up with finitude in particular, and with limits in general: “Limits are constitutive for us, when it comes to meaning: limits of the world, limits of life, limits of reason, and limits of language” (362). He goes on to add that “these limits precisely open up the ground of meaning of our life-world” (Rentsch 362). Similarly, the meaning-making impulse of absurdist writers springs from both their awareness of the limitations of reason and of language and their unwillingness to meekly accept them, or even “come to terms” with them. For the practitioners of the absurd, especially those, like Pinter, whose resistance is what I termed ambivalent (those who use both the absurd to fight extreme rationality and reason to fight absurdity), the idea of “coming to terms” is a pipe dream, or indeed perhaps not desirable at all – but at any rate an impossibility. Their motto is struggle, not acquiescence; paradox, not syllogism; tension, not resolution; resistance, not resignation – let alone renunciation. And it is in those terms that they choose to “tell the tale of the old man.”

## NOTES

1. For an elaboration of this definition, see Querido.
2. See Hughes 54–56 for a thorough catalogue of many of the – mostly detrimental – changes typical of old age.
3. If anything, it is interesting to point out that, by the time of writing of Ionesco’s *Les Chaises*, Pinter’s *A Slight Ache*, Hildesheimer’s *Landschaft mit Figuren* and *Die Uhren*, Kharm’s *The Old Woman*, Adamov’s *Le Ping-Pong*, O’Brien’s *The Third Policeman*, Pinget’s *La manivelle* and *Lettre morte*, and many of Beckett’s works with older protagonists from the 1950s and 1960s, their respective authors were all relatively young.
4. As a matter of fact, a conceptual triangle comprising the absurd, the theme of old age and the medium of radio would bring together the likes of Pinter’s *A Slight Ache*, Beckett’s *All That Fall* and Pinget’s *La Manivelle*, Unfortunately, an enquiry into this connection in general, and into the relationship between ageing and the radio drama form in particular, lies outside the limited scope of this article, but it surely deserves careful inspection.
5. This critical oversight or disregard is perhaps nowhere more eloquently evident than in Elissa Guralnick’s *Sight Unseen*. Guralnick’s admirably thorough close reading of *A Slight Ache* is slightly marred by how she downplays the textual evidence pointing to Edward’s deterioration and the matchseller’s inverse ageing (see e.g. Guralnick 122). The decision to sidestep the theme of old age in *A Slight Ache* is particularly startling when one considers that Guralnick’s reading of Pinter’s work is explicitly paired with Arthur Kopit’s *Wings*, another radio play in which the protagonist’s advancing years play a decisive role.
6. In fact, paradox and ambiguity represent one of the great cornerstones of the “conceptual triangle” referred to in endnote 4. According to Cornwell, paradox



“clearly emerges as an important element in connection with the absurd” (31, endnote 35); it is key both to Camus’s treatise on the absurd (39) and to much of the existentialist thought he railed against (see e.g. Fotiade 39, 212). In artistic endeavours too is the “clatter of different viewpoints” that leads to a “paradox with no conclusion” often seen as a quintessentially absurdist feature (Bennett, *Reassessment* 18, 19). As for old age, it is often accompanied by a of “sense of openness or uncertainty” (Moody 116), so it is natural that “the representations of ageing and old age is marked by ambiguity” (Davis 185). Finally, radio presents itself as a fine vehicle for texts rife with paradox and uncertainty: in Guralnick’s opinion, radio plays like *A Slight Ache* “expertly exploit . . . radio’s aptitude for creating indeterminacy,” adding that “their power to generate skepticism . . . is central to their meaning” (101).

7. In her study on the linguistic and stylistic features of absurdist fiction, Joanna Gavins examines how the reader is often unable to establish an empathetic connection with the protagonists (see e.g. Gavins 42, 45). This happens partly due to the fact that we as readers tend to “understand and respond to the characters of literary texts in the same way we understand and respond to real people”; reality and fiction are commonly interpreted through “the same cognitive and psychological processes,” namely what is called the “theory of mind” (Gavins 67). What is particularly interesting for the purposes of this article is the boggy terrain upon which the foundations of the “theory of mind” are built: the mind/body dualism. The use of the theory of mind in literary studies is contested precisely because it grew “out of a Cartesian dualism which the majority of cognitively framed cultural studies has sought to disprove over the last thirty years or so” (Gavins

71). This is further evidence of the role played by that persistent dualism in our failed attempts at intersubjectivity.

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