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The Theater of the Absurd in Europe and America: Sartre, Beckett, Pinter, Albee and drama criticism

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THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD IN EUROPE AND AMERICA:
SARTRE, BECKETT, PINTER, ALBEE AND DRAMA CRITICISM

BY

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DISSERTATION

Submitted to the University of New Hampshire
in Partial fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

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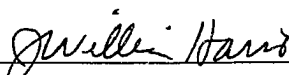
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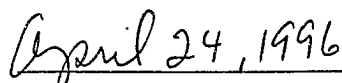
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DEDICATION

To John

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ABSTRACT

THE THEATER OF THE ABSURD IN EUROPE AND AMERICA: SARTRE, BECKETT, PINTER, ALBEE AND DRAMA CRITICISM

by

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University of New Hampshire, May, 1996

This study examines the significance of the post World War II Theater of the Absurd which explored new concepts of ontology and semiology and provided a vehicle for the dissemination of existentialist ideas. As a link between modernist and postmodernist drama, it also served as a catalyst for changes in drama criticism that anticipated some of the controversies of deconstructionism.

The first part of this work places the Theater of the Absurd in historical context by tracing elements of absurdity from the theater of ancient Greece into the twentieth century. Modern absurdism emerged in the 1930's as part of the reaction to Realism. Combining aspects of Symbolism and Surrealism, the absurd was illustrated in the dramatic productions of Dada and the theories of Antonin Artaud. The connection between this theatrical experimentalism and existential philosophy influenced the French theater of the 1940's. Samuel Beckett's groundbreaking drama *Waiting for Godot* (1952) provided a prototype of absurd theater. Two chapters focus upon selected early plays of Harold Pinter—*The Room* (1960), *The Birthday Party* (1959) and *The Caretaker* (1960) and Edward Albee, *The Zoo Story* (1960), *The American Dream* (1961) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). These plays demonstrate the characteristics of the Theater of the Absurd—the devaluation of traditional forms of communication; a stage poetry that uses concrete images to display emotions and relationships; a unique blend of silence and dialogue as well as manifest physicality and psychological suggestiveness. The plays of

same questions of being, human freedom and intersubjectivity that absorbed the existentialist philosophers.

The plays of the Theater of the Absurd invited further inquiries into significant intellectual issues—the purpose of art, the limits of communication, authorial privilege and audience involvement. The concluding chapter examines changes in drama criticism in reaction to the Theater of the Absurd and suggests that such criticism has served to enhance theater's vitality and to raise questions about language and meaning that are at the heart of contemporary intellectual debates.

INTRODUCTION

THE MESSAGE OF THE ABSURD

"Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening, but surely tomorrow,' the boy said in Serbo-Croatian, his voice heavy with embarrassment and regret."¹ At each performance the silence that followed the delivery of this message of hope deferred, was especially profound. In the summer of 1993, in the center of the besieged city of Sarajevo, audiences crowded into the mortar damaged Sarajevo Youth Theater. Samuel Beckett's, *Waiting For Godot*, directed by Susan Sontag, is the story of two hungry and hopeless characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who wait in vain for the arrival of the mysterious Godot. Press reports of the production emphasized the irony of the play's theme of endless waiting, a perennial theme of wartime, and most poignantly felt in a city facing the end of a second summer under siege—waiting, but with little hope, for relief.²

One Sarajevan remembered the theater as "a good-sized auditorium" that "faced a wide, deep proscenium." Now the audience crowded into bleachers on the stage and the players were confined to a "tiny, makeshift playing area."³ Departing from Beckett's terse set description: "A country road. A tree," the stage held a narrow five foot high platform with UN supplied plastic sheeting hung above and behind it, and another piece of translucent sheeting that served as a skirt for the platform. The set's lower level included a

¹ John F. Burns, "To Sarajevo, Writer Brings Good Will and 'Godot'," *New York Times*, 19 August 1993.

² *Ibid.*, Most major newspapers and news magazines echoed this theme.

³ Erika Munk, "Notes from a Trip to Sarajevo," *Theater 24* (Summer-Fall 1993): 19.

cot, a chair, several old supply crates, and two trees made of pipes, one behind the sheeting and one lit with small erratically functioning solar lamps. Without electricity to light the stage, white utility candles were placed on the floor, some behind the sheeting and some center stage near a group of sandbags. The actors carried diminutive flashlights to illuminate the faces of fellow actors. The feeling was cramped and jerry-built—appropriate to the situation. The sounds of mortar fire and armored vehicles passing in the street; an audience that included an actor whose legs had been amputated because of the lack of antibiotics; the free admission for anyone willing to walk to the theater—all these elements embedded the performance in its place and time yet connected it to the earlier era in which it had first appeared.⁴

After sixteen months of war, citizens of Sarajevo had differing opinions on what the war had already cost in human terms. One young student, who thought the war would bring people together, said, "the opposite has happened. Every person has become a closed entity to itself."⁵ In the theater, however, the Sarajevans' experience was different. Not only were barriers between actors and audience diminished, but among the audience members as well. Even before they entered the theater, the nightmare world in which they found themselves everyday had transformed the spectators into a collective of survivors bearing the scars of war. As an audience, they not only shared the memory of life before the war, they shared the ongoing challenge of coping with hunger, scarcity, death, and the reports of atrocities and genocide.

This production of *Godot*, attracted wide attention from the international press which emphasized the courage of the producers and concluded that the cultural life of the city was defiantly continuing. In one interview, Sontag observed that it was an ethical

⁴ Burns, "To Sarajevo, Writer Brings Good Will and 'Godot'"; Munk, "Notes from a Trip to Sarajevo," 26.

⁵ Srđan Vuletic, quoted in Munk, "Notes from a Trip to Sarajevo," 22.

choice to do a play in Sarajevo rather than a film because the play was for the people of the city and would allow her to employ the talented members of that community. Questioned as to why she had chosen this particular play, considered by some too depressing, Sontag replied, "people want something that affirms the depth of their feelings."⁶ Some who saw this *Godot* were reminded of the illustrative story of its 1957 production at San Quentin Prison by the Actors' Workshop of San Francisco under the direction of Herbert Blau. *Waiting for Godot* was the first live theater performance at the state penitentiary since 1913, when Sarah Bernhardt had appeared. *Godot* was chosen mainly because of its lack of female roles, and the audience reaction was surprisingly sympathetic. The actors had feared that this play, which already had a reputation for being overly obscure and pretentious, would be hooted off the stage by the fourteen hundred convicts. Instead, the reception by the prison population was one of grim recognition; the prisoners had no illusions about the plight of those who wait for that which may never come.

For Sarajevans in 1993, an end to their incarceration and dismal waiting seemed equally out of reach, and the play was appreciated not merely as a reflection of their plight but as a way to channel their feelings of fear and rage. Beckett would have understood their rage and applauded their defiance. For Beckett's message was also defiant. *Waiting for Godot* has been called a "post-war, post-Hiroshima, post-Holocaust play".⁷ Beckett assumed his audience was conscious of the historical context of the play and needed no reminders, his purpose was to go beyond lamentations. Beckett's message, aimed at the

⁶ Susan Sontag, "Only the Possible: Interview with Susan Sontag," interview by Erika Munk, *Theater* 24 (Summer-Fall 1993): 31, 34-35.

⁷ Munk, "Notes from a Trip to Sarajevo," 27.

person, like Estragon, who claims, in despair, "I can't go on like this." The imperative is to "go on" in spite of the absurdity of one's situation.⁸

This form of modern rage, understandable in Sarajevo and at San Quentin, is often underestimated in other, more "normal," circumstances. Yet it is connected to the rage and fear and anxiety that human beings feel when confronted with the limitations inherent in existence. This existential consciousness characterized the modern Theater of the Absurd reflected whose productions first appeared in the late 1940's. This theater drew upon concepts and theories of irrationality, randomness, discontinuity, and unpredictability that had been swirling about in science, philosophy, and psychology since the end of the nineteenth century. After 1900 these issued forth into the arts various combinations and with an enormous impact. New modes of expression were invented to reflect these modern ideas in literature, music, and the visual arts. The theater expressed some of these ideas in Dadaism while film captured a part of the dream world of the Surrealists. Only after the Second World War however, did theater find the means and language to articulate more directly the terrors and insecurities individuals faced.⁹

A driving force attending the disruptions of the twentieth century was a dramatic decline in the moral authority of religious belief. The meaning of Nietzsche's pronouncement of the death of God in the 1880's took decades to fully comprehend, and in the meantime, religion was replaced for many by the worship of science, human progress and various political ideologies. Yet this progress seemed to many people to lead to poisonous rationalism. In the aftermath of two devastating world wars, humans struggled for belief. The new European philosophy of existentialism proposed one means of coping by accepting these changes yet partially defying them by dramatizing their impact. Existentialism called for a revitalized awareness of the reality of the human

⁸ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1956), 61.

⁹ Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1961), xii, 291.

condition, a rejection of the apathy and mechanical habits of everyday life, and a search to recover humanity's "lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish."¹⁰

This philosophical mood had already penetrated the arts and literature by the late 1920s but it was in Paris at the end of World War II that playwrights began to integrate these concepts into their dramas. Philosophers of existentialism such as Sartre wrote plays that incorporated these ideas, but used conventional methods of theatrical production to present them to the public. Thus the revolution in theater itself was undertaken by playwrights who transformed existentialist ideas into an entirely new theatrical convention, later referred to as the Theater of the Absurd. The playwrights of the new convention elicited meaning from new kinds of dialogue that included clichés and contradictions but also silences and innuendo. They displayed rather than described intangible emotions; relationships appeared in concrete terms. For example, a proliferation of empty chairs in Ionesco's play by that name represented the oxymoron of an absent audience, and Hamm's despised parents in Beckett's *Endgame* were obliged to live in trashcans. The playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd showed rather than told audiences that their art could communicate some of life's most intricate mysteries.

The theater had always had the potential to accomplish this direct, non verbal communication and in many cases it has done so very well. Over time, however, the ability of playwrights and actors to articulate complex ideas to an audience had been underestimated, and the suspicion that language is a limited instrument was a concept that only gained credulity with the breakdown of certitudes that characterized the nineteenth century. The complexity and confusion of the modern age encouraged the idea of theater as escape. In the wake of the First World War, the horror of which "was much worse than any description of it possible," true communication became painfully doubtful. This hit the

¹⁰ William Barrett, *Irrational Man, A Study In Existential Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 23-41.

theater hard. Eugène Ionesco referred to the modern situation as one in which human beings find themselves in "a crisis of thought, which is manifested certainly by a crisis of language; words no longer meaning anything,"¹¹ The imperative for playwrights was to create characters who substantiated this state of confusion, the disarray that Albert Camus described as "a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions," in which one's "actions become senseless, absurd, useless."¹² The word absurd originally meant "out of harmony" and represented incongruities of life seen most often in comedy. Since the Second World War, the meaning of absurd has been broadened to include the sense used by Camus to describe the incongruity of human existence.

The Theater of the Absurd is an umbrella term given to the work of playwrights who wrote existentialist dramas in Europe and America in the post war years—from about 1945 to 1965. In 1961, the Hungarian born author, critic and BBC director, Martin Esslin, coined the name in his study *The Theatre of the Absurd*. Esslin's well documented and comprehensive book became a standard work for the study of the contemporary stage. Revised and updated in the years since, it has met with surprisingly little negative criticism. The reason for this may be due to the elasticity of Esslin's label combined with the precision of his effort to set it in context. Esslin warned his readers that the playwrights of whom he wrote did not belong to a self-styled group, nor did they propound a particular philosophy, although existentialist thought was certainly a major influence. Esslin wrote as "an attempt to define the convention that has come to be called the Theater of the Absurd; to present the work of some of its major exponents and provide an analysis and elucidation of the meaning and intention of some of their most

¹¹ Paul Fussel, *The Great War And Modern Memory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1975), 174; Eugène Ionesco, "Have I Written Anti-Theatre?" (1961) reprinted in *Tulane Drama Review*, trans. Leonard C. Pronko, 7 (Spring 1963): 158.

¹² Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 5; Eugène Ionesco, quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, xix.

important plays." It was an ambitious undertaking which reflected an immense understanding of the theater as an art form and the way in which change in the theatrical convention reflected larger changes taking place in Western culture. Esslin once called the artists of the Absurd "visionaries" who "speak in a language of overwhelmingly compelling images."¹³ Esslin's definition of the Theater of the Absurd serves as one basis of this study though I will also explore the views of other critics such as Eric Bentley, C.W. E. Bigsby and Ruby Cohn. I will also discuss issues of visual perception, language and meaning and changes in drama criticism that resulted from the changed theatrical practices of the Theater of the Absurd, and draw some conclusions of my own.

My interest in this topic originated in a sense that standard historical treatments of the post World War II period were limited. This period is often seen as one in which political, economic and social concerns such as civil rights and women's rights took center stage while the Cold War escalated. Yet it is obvious that literature and the arts were not merely waiting in the wings. They were very integral to the times, and were occasionally exploited for ideological purposes. In France, there was the public antagonism between Sartre and Camus over Stalinism; in Germany, Brecht's theater was controversial and in America, the Hollywood blacklist was the most salient example of the reach of politics in the McCarthy era. I felt it was important to explore how serious issues gradually enter the public consciousness, and to ask if it was perhaps through the theater? One could see that the mysterious Godot had become synonymous with waiting, that Camus' *The Stranger* struck a chord with alienated youth, and that "thinking" comedians like George Carlin reflected on everyday absurdities. The post war period was vastly more complex than it appeared when cataloguing innovations like TV dinners and quiz shows. However, when the new theater first appeared, it seemed even more foreign than *sputnik*. What could be

¹³ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, xii; Martin Esslin "Walter Kerr and the Absurd," *Tulane Drama Review* 7, no. 3 (Spring 1963): 16.

learned about the internalized debate within society that discusses a marginal activity such as this particular form of drama and absorbs it into the mainstream? Forty years later, the Theater of the Absurd cannot be regarded as a mere aberration or curiosity because it is a dynamic theater that has adapted to changing times making *Waiting For Godot*, *The Caretaker* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* still viable and respected throughout the world.

This dissertation explores the way in which the Theater of the Absurd played a part in this process. To place it within its historical context, the opening chapter traces the threads of absurdism over time and outlines the characteristics of theatrical practice that came together in the Theater of the Absurd. It also explores the Theater of the Absurd's ties to Symbolism, Surrealism and the theories of Antonin Artaud. The subsequent chapter connects the Theater of the Absurd to the philosophy of existentialism and shows that the plays of Jean-Paul Sartre and others were an effective means of disseminating existentialist themes to the public on both sides of the Atlantic. Later chapters look in detail at selected early plays by three absurdists, Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee who represent an amalgam of European and American creativity. It reports on the interconnectedness of their art, which itself reflects the globalization that accelerated in the years after the Second World War. The final chapter examines drama criticism and its relationship with the new convention, tying it to changes that were also taking place in literary criticism.

When the Theater of the Absurd departed from traditional dramatic forms, it was criticized as needlessly iconoclastic. The new playwrights confounded both audiences and critics. Estragon's line, "Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it's awful!" seemed to one critic an apt description of the whole play.¹⁴ The Theater of the Absurd demanded that the critic ask new questions and the divided reaction among critics of the

¹⁴ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 28.

new convention foreshadowed other fundamental changes that would shortly take place in criticism. This study will suggest that the Theater of the Absurd rode in on the crest of the wave of modernism, but that it also contained certain features that became integral to the effort to define the postmodern. The final chapter in particular connects drama criticism to postmodern literary criticism and its concern with the meaning of language and text. The Theater of the Absurd and the drama criticism it spawned proved surprisingly prescient. For instance, suspicion of the critic's purpose and function characterized subsequent debates over authorial intention, the creative act of the reader-spectator and ancillary issues such as the interpretation of the text by directors and actors, and the significance of literary inspiration.

This new theatrical convention while in many ways representative of the post World War II transatlantic world, was also a mere variation on very old, essentially human, themes. Ionesco once wrote that Beckett's play *Endgame* was valuable because "it is closer to *The Book of Job* than it is to the boulevard plays and the *chansonniers*."¹⁵ Was it a sign that predicted a return to religion in the wake of post modernism? As the opening chapter will demonstrate, the theater has always played an essential part in revealing humans to themselves. Long before the Internet, theater provided a "space" to wrestle with the experience of living as individuals, as families, as members of communities and finally of coping with death. The tragi-comic aspects of drama, which became part of the twentieth century Theater of the Absurd, trace their origins to ancient performance traditions. What binds together these sometimes disparate examples of the absurdity of life transmuted to the stage, is what Camus called "that secret complicity that joins the logical and the everyday to the tragic."¹⁶

¹⁵ Eugène Ionesco, "When I Write," (1958) reprinted in *Tulane Drama Review*, trans. Leonard C. Pronko, 7 (Spring 1963): 132.

¹⁶ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 95.

CHAPTER I

THE ROOTS OF THE ABSURD

English historian, J. H. Plumb, once observed that the greatest problem with which historians must contend, "is neither the cataclysm of revolution nor the decay of empire but the process by which ideas become social attitudes."¹ This subtle and gradual process reflects the many layers of human experience. The theater has often served as a forum for this change. Theater in its broadest sense is a public activity which human beings have used from earliest times for the exchange of ideas through discourse and behavior. This forum can assist in the absorption of new ideas and social attitudes. For example, with the rise of the market economy and secular values and power in Europe, the theater broke from its religious traditions and "became the space for the circulation of new values."² By the seventeenth century, according to Professor Jean-Marie Apostolidès, "the theater offered a space for simulation where new behaviors were subjected to imaginary testing, by trial and error." Thus the theater served as a venue "for the confrontation of old ideologies stemming from Christianity, and the new ones, rooted in the absolute monarchy."³

This aspect of theater appeals to cultural historians who study plays as experiments

¹ J. H. Plumb, quoted in Warren Susman, "'Personality' and the Making of Twentieth Century Culture," in *New Directions in American History*, ed. John Higham and Paul Conkin (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), 212.

² Jean-Marie Apostolidès, "Moliere and the Sociology of Exchange," trans. by Alice Musick McLean, *Critical Inquiry* 14 (Spring 1988): 477.

³ Apostolidès, "Moliere and the Sociology of Exchange," 477.

in human behavior, often giving clues as to when and how new ideas permeate society. To stage a play then is to experiment with what is and what is not acceptable to the audience as entertainment or enlightenment. Though more ephemeral than a book or film, the performance of a play is, however, usually more memorable than a lecture or casual conversation. "It speaks in the present tense," says C.W. E. Bigsby, "and the sense of shared experience which derives from this makes it a sensitive instrument for plotting change in cultural pressure, for responding to changing ideological, social and aesthetic moods."⁴ Dramatic art reveals the signs of cultural and social change, both positive and negative that color a period and assists the historian in understanding points of tension. This study will analyze plays and criticism of the Theater of the Absurd, connecting them to the intellectual history of the second half of the twentieth century.

Recognized as a genre of avant-garde theater peculiar to the 1950's and 1960's, the Theater of the Absurd did not generate spontaneously. Because it appeared and even yet appears to be a very strange creature, it requires some introduction and exegesis. Martin Esslin's classic study, *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) pointed both backward to the rich tradition from which the genre sprang, and forward to a promising future. Likewise our investigation of the Theater of the Absurd requires a glance backward. This chapter will examine antecedent root systems, beginning with an analysis of a particular kind of Greek comedy that was revived in the work of Shakespeare and Molière and, after a period of quiescence, reintroduced in the late nineteenth century in reaction to the realistic drama of Ibsen and Shaw.

Primitive man, "an accomplished mimic and creature of play," produced the earliest drama. Aristotle viewed plays as the result of humanity's natural proclivity to imitation.

⁴ C.W.E. Bigsby, "Drama As Cultural Sign: American Dramatic Criticism, 1945-1978," *American Quarterly* (1978): 331.

Tragedy derived from early songs of divine praise and comedy derived from fertility rites celebrating the fruitfulness of the soil, and the generative powers of animals and humans. From these early celebrations developed myths and stories of gods and heroes as well as stories of birth and death and rebirth, as for example in the *Abydos Passion Play* of Egypt, which celebrated the struggles of the god-king Osiris. Early rituals were practiced throughout the ancient world from Crete to Babylon and reflected fear of the unknown, the terror of living in awe of powerful natural forces whose furies were translated into arbitrary and incomprehensible gods. The Greeks were among the first to create a pantheon of transcendent beings who were conceived in the image of humans themselves, who offered humans a means of coping with their fears.⁵

The Greeks also explored the incongruities of human existence. Poets and playwrights often used fantastic, ridiculous, and absurd images borrowed from mythology to describe the human condition. For instance, Aeschylus, in his Promethian cycle, introduced the image of the maiden *Io* who was transformed into a white bull by the jealous goddess Hera. As Edith Hamilton reminds us, however, Greek myths were not evidence of a society that preferred the irrational. Quite the contrary, "even the most nonsensical [stories] take place in a world which is essentially rational and matter-of-fact." It is this juxtaposition of the familiar with the unfamiliar which gives these images their absurd character. The fantastic notion of *Pegasus*, a winged horse, who flies through the air by day, seems even more absurd when grounded in the reality of his nightly return "to a comfortable stable in Corinth."⁶

Greek drama then was born as part of a broad and gradual change which saw rituals and processions give way to pantomimes that included music and dance choruses.

⁵ John Gassner, *Masters of the Drama* (New York: Dover, 1954), 3.

⁶ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 34.; Edith Hamilton, *Mythology*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1942), 10.

It grew out of the rite, or *dithyramb*, devoted to Dionysius, the god of wine and rebirth. Drama emerged when the *dithyramb* was expanded to include Greek poetry and characters who were thoroughly human. Thespis, a chorus master credited with introducing dialogue and the role of the individual actor, is venerated as the founder of Greek drama. Though many ancient Greek plays were lost, the surviving theater forms the taproot of all Western drama, especially the plays drawn from the fifth century B.C.E., the Age of Pericles. In the *Poetics*, Aristotle defined tragic drama as "the imitation of an action that is serious . . . with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its catharsis of such emotions." Kenneth Reckford has suggested that this cleansing effect applies equally to comedy, especially to the comedies of Aristophanes. Reckford contends that Aristophanes' comedies not only provoke laughter, but through a process of relaxation, recovery and recognition, the playwright brings the audience "to see the world through a clearer lens."⁷

Often Aristophanes produces this image by demonstrating the vagaries of life through the manipulation of images in a manner we term absurd. A classic example of this may be found in Aristophanes' *Clouds*, a play which Reckford has called the "first extant comedy of ideas." *Clouds* commented caustically on the decline of Athenian culture. Aristophanes, an aristocratic conservative, idealized the democracy of an earlier age, the period of Aeschylus, who was both a playwright and survivor of the battle of Marathon. Aristophanes saw his own society as suffering from the corruption of democracy by the artful politicians Cleon and Hyperbolus. He decried the imperialism that had led Athens to undertake the Peloponnesian War, and warned against the war's prolongation which kept the leaders in power and promoted mob intolerance behind a facade of democratic

⁷ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 13; Aristotle, *De Poetica* (Poetics), trans. Ingram Bywater in *Introduction to Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: The Modern Library, Random House, 1947), 631; Kenneth Reckford, *Aristophanes' Old and New Comedy*, vol. 1 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1987), 11.

principles. For Aristophanes one of the most damaging features of this imperial democracy was its corruption of the educational system.⁸

Clouds, a social satire, targeted the "new learning." The play features two memorable characters, Strepsiades and his profligate son, Pheidippides. The clouds of the title were played by the chorus. The plot is quite simple; the father, besieged by creditors because of his son's spendthrift ways, resolves to take action and enrolls himself in the new *Phrontisterion*, or Thinking Shop, run by the famed philosopher, Socrates. Initially, Strepsiades is convinced that he will learn the latest practical methods of disputation and analysis and thus be able to deal with litigious creditors. However, Strepsiades is overwhelmed when he encounters Socrates "swung aloft in a basket in order to be closer to the ether from which all his thought springs." Confused by such loftiness, Strepsiades forces his son to take his place at the school. He immediately regrets his decision when Pheidippides quickly demonstrates that he has absorbed the new learning well enough to argue successfully that he has the right to beat his father. Outraged at the disloyalty fostered by Socratic casuistry, Strepsiades sets fire to the impostor's Thinking Shop.⁹

Aristophanes reinforces the farcical and tragic conclusion by using clouds or chorus to ridicule Socrates' dreamy impracticality and denounce not just his popularity but his philosophic method. A success at the time, Aristophanes' extravagant satire gave the play a certain notoriety in later years because the charge that Socrates filled his students' heads with idle speculation proved seriously damning. In fact, *Clouds* has been widely considered to have contributed to the execution of Socrates who was convicted of corrupting the youth of Athens with his new learning. Plato, Socrates's most famous student, blamed Aristophanes for the public's negative image of the philosopher. Plato's *Apology*, his famous defense of Socrates, took revenge on the playwright by having

⁸ Reckford, *Aristophanes' Comedy*, 394; Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 84-85.

⁹ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 89-90.

Socrates say at his trial, "That is the nature of the accusation, and that is what you have seen yourselves in the comedy of Aristophanes, who has introduced a man whom he calls Socrates, going about and saying that he can walk in the air, and talking a deal of nonsense."¹⁰

Even before this unfortunate connection, however, *Clouds* suffered the indignity of gaining only third place in the drama festival of Dionysius (423 B.C.E), a prize which Aristophanes considered an insult. Traditional interpretations suggest that it was too sophisticated for its audience—evidence of a growing split within comedy between the old low, coarse humor and the newer forms. Reckford agrees with this interpretation but adds that this relegation to third place would also "have shaken Aristophanes' confidence in his comedy's cathartic power, as in the shared understanding on which it is based." Moreover, Reckford contends that *Clouds* was more than a specific satire of the new educational methods. Rather, the play dealt with the larger social dislocations inherent in cultural and generational change. More to the point of this study, Reckford draws a parallel between the dread evoked by the ancient poet-playwright who saw Athens in decline and the reflections of twentieth century neo-orthodox theologian, Paul Tillich. The uneasy juxtapositions of the humorous and the serious are a universal means of coming to grips with common human anxieties associated with illness, old age, accidents and death. Playwrights often adopt strange juxtapositions to represent the anxiety of living in the shadow of these fears. Tillich observed that the multiple anxieties plaguing modern humans are timeless and that terror and dread should not be defined as neurotic ills but rather existential fears requiring confrontation. In *The Courage To Be* (1952), Tillich extrapolated the private anxieties of the average human to society at large, worrying that the ramifications of social and cultural change could prove fatal to the entire

¹⁰ Plato, *Apology in Republic and Other Works*, trans. B. Jowett, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1973), 449.

human community. While such worries may signal the breakdown of traditions and the loss of shared beliefs, it may be only those mediators of culture like artists, poets and playwrights who can observe the early cataclysmic signs of such change.¹¹

For Aristophanes, the disturbing trend of his day appeared to be the loss of traditions that accompanied the rising affluence of imperial Athens. A crucial symptom of these culture-threatening changes were innovations in the way knowledge was handed down from generation to generation through the education of the young. Consequently, the focus of the playwright on education was as appropriate as his focus on other public concerns, such as the neglect of manners or corruption in politics. This conflict could be seen also in the cultural corruptions of Nazi Germany or even in the "generation gap" of the 1960's. The death of Socrates was tragic for his followers as was Nazism for Tillich and the execution of Dietrich Bonhöffer. For historians, the issue remains to show how a society copes with fundamental change. Aristophanes' private despair over the decline of Athenian society provoked his most creative work as an antidote to anxiety though relief came at a human cost. Laughter became a weapon and his comedies provided the audiences with the sense of relief that carried Athens through its first crisis of self-discovery.¹²

Aristotle defined this ability to help the audience adapt to change as a critical part of drama. In this connection, Aristotle emphasized the fundamental difference between history and drama. The historian deals with the idea or event that is time-specific while the poet-dramatist deals with "a kind of thing that might happen." Although Greek tragedy was often based on historical incidents and characters familiar from the past, Aristotle declared that universality distinguishes both comedy and tragedy from history which is based on particular events. In taking on the "graver import" of poetry, the

¹¹ Reckford, *Aristophanes' Comedy*, 393, 401.

¹² *Ibid.*, 440-401.

dramatist is free to speculate on the possible or probable results of an event or relationship where history remains tied to specific occurrences. In dealing with universals, the poet, like the ancient philosopher, quests for the timeless and changeless. Aristophanes and his fellow poet-playwrights used the concept of suspended time to help their audiences cope with the dread one encounters in the face of extraordinary change. This technique allowed drama, especially comic satire, to be playful with its subjects and to exaggerate reality, creating strange distortions that could give bite to the satire but earn laughter from the audience. This laughter is cathartic and comes in recognition of a shared humanity. It is also a laughter that comes from a sense of relief that one is not the butt of the joke, no matter how closely one may resemble the victim being parodied. Obviously this device requires a certain amount of blindness, if not outright self-delusion by the audience.¹³

Aristophanes illustrates this situation well in his play, *Archarnians*, an anti-war comedy. The principal character is Dicaeopolis, a down-to-earth farmer. An archtypical Clown, he is described as "wonderfully indecent . . . shameless and uninhibited." He sits in the Assembly day after day, bored at the government's inability to put an end to the war with Sparta. Dicaeopolis exhibits ordinary human traits like rudeness and crudeness, and yet because he has no sense of shame, he is able to unmask the political manipulators and frauds who cheat the public. The audience laughs in part out of their sense of social superiority; they believe his antisocial behavior to be inferior to their own. Yet, his utter shamelessness enables him to ask rude questions and expose the liars. Ultimately, Dicaeopolis negotiates and signs a private peace treaty with Sparta and enjoys the fruits of peace while his fellow Athenians suffer continuation of the war.¹⁴

The traditions of Greek theater were followed by Roman playwrights. However, the works of Plautus, Terence, Seneca and Horace were pale imitations of the classical

¹³ Aristotle, *De Poetica* (Poetics), 635-636; Reckford, *Aristophanes' Comedy*, 401.

¹⁴ Reckford, *Aristophanes' Comedy*, 66; Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 85-86.

Greek plays, and none produced the equal of Aristophanes' scathing satire. Roman theater devolved into the ostentatious parades, circuses and spectacles that satisfied both the lower classes and patricians. These linger in public memory as evidence of the empire's collapse from within. One type of Roman entertainment that links to the modern Theater of the Absurd was the popular *mimus* or pantomimes performed by itinerant players who were jugglers, acrobats and comics in rustic folk theater.¹⁵

During the reign of the emperor Constantine in the fourth century, debates raged over the value of drama. Many Christians were convinced that theater was the seedbed of evil especially when entertainers poked fun at Christian beliefs. Moreover, the older forms of drama were still linked to pagan festivals such as *Saturnalia* thereby serving as painful reminders of the years of persecution suffered by the faithful. Literary drama was abandoned during the period of invasion by northern tribes, but the tradition of the *ludi* or public games went on and the mimes continued to provide a crude form of entertainment especially at nature festivals.

As Christianity spread across Europe, the Church found it expedient to develop connections between the commemorative feasts of the Church and the agricultural cycle. As a result, many festivals took on both a religious and an economic significance. Manuscripts from the seventh and eighth centuries indicate that throughout the early medieval period, there were troupes of mime players who traveled about giving performances, often on feast days. The evidence for their existence, is found in directives issued by the hierarchy requiring officials to ban plays or revels, or to dissuade players from visiting monasteries.¹⁶

By the twelfth century, theater as a public institution began to revive. The Roman

¹⁵ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 97, 103.

¹⁶ Glynn Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1974), 22; William Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 27.

Church, having established itself as the central religious authority, developed a close working relationship with drama that would last until the Reformation. It is now generally accepted by historians that the medieval "theatre of worship" grew out of "certain musical and literary developments within the services for Easter Day."¹⁷ These dramas had their origin, the *Quem quaeritis* trope, in a simple sung dialogue in the Mass of Easter which was later transferred to the first Canonical Office or Matins, where it was expanded and embellished. Though these tableau were still conceived of as liturgy rather than entertainment, in time the repetition of the combined elements of music, text and rubrics created the genre called Mystery plays performed as part of the liturgy for specific feast days. By the twelfth century the Church recognized that these ceremonies had expanded to combine worship with entertainment.

Simple representations of the lives of the saints also developed into plays, and Christmas music-dramas in the churches revolved around particular characters such as the Boy Bishop, Saint Nicholas or the story of Balaam and the Ass. These scenarios frequently portrayed a world turned upside down where children reigned as kings and the fool or a member of the peasant class gave orders to the nobility. This role-reversal provided a ridiculous comic alternative to the narrowly constructed and hierarchical social order, and the Feast of Fools provided a respite from the routine of the liturgical year.¹⁸

The roots of this social inversion may be traced back to the Roman festival of *Saturnalia* held in December to celebrate the waning of daylight at the winter solstice. Playing on natural polarities such as darkness and light, youth and old age, scarcity and plenty, the feast was absorbed by Christianity and transformed into the Christmas holydays. The comic absurdity of social inversion was one aspect of the old pagan feast

¹⁷ Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, 30; Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 144. Tydeman cites numerous sources that accept this interpretation but also introduces evidence of earlier dramatic pieces inspired by the Good Friday ceremony known as the Adoration of the Cross.

¹⁸ Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 41-43.

that remained intact. These early medieval dramas had three characteristics that differentiated them from the later Gothic dramas of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. First, they reenacted biblical events. Second, they were confined to themes of praise and thanksgiving. Finally, they were performed only in Latin plain-chant. The latter stipulation required that the adult participation be confined to intellectual elites, namely the clergy.¹⁹

The dramas of the late thirteenth century, unlike their less complicated ancestors were meant to be didactic rather than ritualistic—a reflection of the Church's eagerness to inform the faithful of new dogmas. For example, the dogma of "transubstantiation" prompted Pope Urban IV to found the new feast day of Corpus Christi in 1264, and new dramas were invented to celebrate it.²⁰ No longer did drama constitute an *officium* or liturgy. It was now considered a *ludus* or entertainment, spoken in the vernacular, not chanted, and performed by the laity. Plays became more elaborate, outgrowing the churches, and finding their audiences on stages in churchyards, squares and streets. The most important of these were the Mystery play cycles, huge productions done by craft guilds over several days. These plays reflected a community involvement nearly unknown to modern audiences except for the most famous survivor of the genre, the Passion Play of Oberammergau in Bavaria.²¹

Community religious pageants evolved quickly from dramas of repentance to dramas of direct moral instruction. Morality plays or the shorter Moral Interludes were generally heavy-handed and boring homilies that used allegory to drive home the benefits

¹⁹ Reckford, *Aristophanes' Comedy*, 493; Tydeman, *The Theatre in the Middle Ages*, 9-21; Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 41-46, 53.

²⁰ The dogma of "transubstantiation" declared that the bread and wine was miraculously changed into the body and blood of Christ at the Consecration of the Mass. It was promulgated at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 C.E..

²¹ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 144; Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 62-63.

of virtue over vice. A revealing exception to this tendency was the anonymous late fifteenth century drama, *Everyman*, a fable portraying a representative individual abandoned on his journey toward death. Satire and absurdity revert to stark pathos as the human attributes of *Fellowship, Strength, Beauty, Knowledge* and so forth refuse to accompany him, citing very human but unconscionably thin excuses. Only *Good Deeds* agrees to accompany *Everyman* and plead his case before God. As death hovers in the shadows, *Everyman's* state of dread marks this play as both a late medieval masterpiece and a link to modern existentialist thought and absurdist vision.²²

Drama continued to move into the public sphere. Because morality plays were not tied to particular feasts, they were easily transportable and adopted by bands of roving players. These groups often consisted of university students who "eked out a precarious living as minstrels and entertainers to support themselves in their studies." In Tudor England, the moralities were used by scholars to disseminate the new humanism and to provoke controversy that on occasion landed them in jail. During the Reformation, moralities became weapons of sectarian propaganda and were quickly supplanted by the secular theater.²³

The secular theater developed out of the early folk revels associated with the seasons of the year, and as religious plays declined, new forms, variously called Disguisings, Masques or Interludes became the familiar court dramas of Shakespeare's day.²⁴ These were founded on the rituals of war, courtship and civic ceremony.

²² Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 155; V. A. Kolve "Everyman and the Parable of the Talents" in *The Medieval Drama*, ed. Sandro Sticca (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1972), 69-98.

²³ Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 108; Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 156.

²⁴ Natalie Zemon Davis discusses the ritual games of rural France in which youths organized themselves into Kingdoms of Youth or Abbeys of Misrule and held court over their peers or presided over revels or *charivaris*. See "The Reasons of Misrule," chap. in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1975).

Masquerades of New Year's and Shrovetide produced the English tradition of Mumming. The participants hid their identities behind masks, thus allowing an individual not only to feel released from inhibitions but to act outrageously and even illegally. C. L. Barber has described the importance of festive play and ritual celebration, such as the celebration of Midsummer's Eve, in the comedies of Shakespeare. Barber links these plays to the *saturnalian* because social roles are exchanged. The best example of the social inversions allowed at carnival are found in *Henry IV, Parts I and II* where Falstaff acts as "Lord of Misrule" and presides over the lower class world of Cheapside while the nobility mount a rebellion against King Henry. Falstaff's demise parallels the end of the festive period when the temporary king must be banished.²⁵

While the Reformation stirred political chaos in northern Europe, and the theater was alternatively exploited for propaganda or banned outright, Italy enjoyed a period of unprecedented prosperity. Attending this expansion of wealth, came the cultivation of two distinct types of theater, the *commedia erudita* and the *commedia dell' arte*. The former was characterized by a neo-classical style preferred by the nobility, a precursor of the "comedy of manners" of the seventeenth century.²⁶ The unrefined *commedia dell' arte* reasserted the popular taste for fantasy, exaggeration and irony and thus served as a link from Aristophanic comedy to the modern absurdist genre. These broad farces included some element of intrigue and used both stock and "realistic" characters whose performances were based on a mere outline rather than a script. Some scholars believe that this form of comedy directly descended from the *mimus* of ancient Rome and the even

²⁵ Reckford, *Aristophanes' Comedy*, 495-496; Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre* 179; C. L. Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1963), 32-34.

²⁶ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 174-175; Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 207-208. Macchiavelli's play *The Mandrake* was a typical example of *commedia erudita* with a plot that exposed the rapacious lifestyle of the Florentine bourgeoisie.

earlier Atellan farces. Others believe that it was merely an elaboration upon the *commedia erudita* that aimed to win wider appeal.²⁷

The companies of roving players of the *commedia dell' arte* were known by the names of their actor-managers. A charismatic leader who avoided embroilment in local politics, the actor-manager could negotiate the religious and social waters of rural Italy with finesse. In the early days, members of *commedia dell' arte* troupes often set up open air stages at any crossroad that might both draw a crowd and afford an easy getaway. The plot outlines of *commedia dell' arte* were often taken directly from Roman plays, contemporary novellas and the *commedia erudita*, but left plenty of room for improvised exaggeration and reinterpretation. Typical plots focused upon a pair of young lovers whose plans to marry were thwarted by their elders but aided by family servants. The plays were performed in three acts which was itself a departure from the classical five act structure. Though there was no script, little was left to chance. The scenarios posted backstage gave specific guidelines for the activity on stage and the company was directed by a leader or *capocomico* who oriented the players to each scene. Dialogue was improvised but the longer speeches were often versions polished through their continuous repetition and clever elaboration.²⁸

These plays prospered by featuring standard characters, such as the young lovers, with whom the audience could easily sympathize. For this study, however, it is important to note a defining mark of *commedia dell' arte*—the cast of stock characters who wore representative costumes and half-masks that exaggerated their personalities and assisted

²⁷ Philip A. Wadsworth, *Moliere and the Italian Theatrical Tradition* (New York: The French Literature Publication Company, 1977), 14-15. Early twentieth century scholars, F. M. Cornford and Hermann Reich both saw in the *commedia dell' arte* a direct descendent of the ancients. Although much of their evidence for a direct link was weak and has been discredited, the obvious similarity of style between the ancient *mimus* and *commedia dell' arte* makes a persuasive case for their connection.

²⁸ Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*, 210-211; Wadsworth, *Moliere and the Italian Theatrical Tradition*, 4-5, 14-17, 19.

the audience in identifying them. The character known as Pantalone, for example, always wore red breeches, a red jacket, black cape and hat and always appeared with a mask that included a hooked nose and pointy beard. Without a detailed script, the audience became accomplices in the play and were relied upon to react appropriately to the character—to hiss at the villain or laugh at the clown. There were at least half a dozen stylized roles at which the actors became specialists. Some of these had ancient forbears. For example, in Greek drama, the transformation of the Old Year into the New Year was symbolized as a rustic hero who has all the unsavory impairments of old age but who was transformed in the course of the play into a radiant young bridegroom. In the *commedia dell' arte* this character is separated into two characters. However, the important "theme of antagonist-impostor" found in other characters used by Aristophanes remained intact. Thus the familiar "learned doctor, ancestor of every comic pedant, is the characterization of Socrates in the *Clouds*."²⁹

The *commedia dell' arte* marked a return to the physical and anti-literary forms of folk theater. Because of the necessity to improvise, Italian companies relied on the inventiveness of talented actors as well as on the combined ability of the troupe. Frequently, individual actors achieved huge success with their interpretation of one particular role. Just as celebrities in our own time have been identified with a popular character, like Charlie Chaplin's Little Tramp or Peter Falk's Columbo, the reputation of an actor of the *commedia dell' arte* was often based on a single character. Many actors became the favorite player of noblemen and kings, entire troupes were often supported by royalty. One former amateur actor, who fondly recalled his own interpretation of the role of the long winded Doctor, was Pope Benedict XIV.³⁰

²⁹ Francis L. Lawrence, *Molière: The Comedy of Unreason, Tulane Studies in Romance Languages and Literature*, no.2 (New Orleans: Tulane University, 1968), 15.

³⁰ Geoffrey Brereton, *French Comic Drama, From the Sixteenth Century to the Eighteenth Century* (London: Methuen, 1977), 8-9.

On stage, the stock characters of the *commedia dell'arte* behaved in playful ways, exaggerating their gestures, performing pirouettes, indulging in sight gags and grandiose grimacing for an appreciative audience.³¹ The physical comedy of the *commedia dell'arte* which had much in common with the tradition of clowning, has come down to us in the slapstick comedy of the music hall and vaudeville theater, remembered today in the films of Laurel and Hardy. Geoffrey Brereton, in a study of the *commedia dell'arte*'s influence on French comic theater, commented, "The farce, rude in both senses, depended on physical effects combined with absurd situations and words."³² The absurd situations often involved the confused schemes of a simpleton, but at the same time the spoken words in this sort of comedy required a more cerebral clown. For example, the king's clown or court jester, whose very purpose was to amuse, paradoxically was encouraged to speak irreverently yet had to be clever enough to do so without offending. This tradition of clowning played a large part in the drama of sixteenth and seventeenth century Europe, especially in the plays of Shakespeare and Molière.

As both actor and writer Shakespeare was well acquainted with the *commedia dell'arte* for, by the late sixteenth century, many troupes were already popular in England. The influence of *commedia dell'arte* is evident in his plays, populated with characters who exaggerate familiar human foibles. In *Love's Labour's Lost*, for example, the braggart soldier Don Adriano de Armando and the pedant scholar Holofernes epitomize the stock characters, the soldier-captain (*Capitano*) and the long-winded doctor (*Dottore*).

³¹ Scholars have noted the obvious similarities between the extravagant and carnivalesque in the early theater and the writing of François Rabelais in the sixteenth century. See the discussion of the various theories of play in Davis, "The Reasons of Misrule" chap. in *Society and Culture in Early Modern France*, 97-123. Davis agrees with the functional interpretations of the carnivalesque form as proposed by anthropologist Victor Turner and linguist Mikhail Bakhtin who defined it as an inherent part of every culture. This explanation contrasts with the literary interpretation that saw the elements of carnival as the historical inheritance of outmoded customs. Based on evidence from rural France in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Davis agrees "that the structure of the carnival form can evolve so that it can act both to reinforce order and to suggest alternatives to the existing order."(123)

³² Brereton, *French Comic Drama*, 256.

Shakespeare's plots also borrowed from the Italian form. Beginning with *The Comedy of Errors* Shakespeare used reliable plot devices such as mistaken identities, and disguises that allowed females to pass as males until the moment of unmasking. The stories themselves—*The Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado About Nothing*—were borrowed from neo-classical Italian writers. As C. L. Barber's study affirms, the comedy reflects Elizabethan holiday making and creates a topsy-turvy world in which appearance and reality are blurred and master–servant roles inverted. The temporary nature of this alteration of reality is brought home particularly when, at the end of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Puck suggests to the audience that if they have been offended, they may tell themselves that the play was only an illusion, a product of their slumber.³³

Another inheritance from the folk humor of *commedia dell' arte* was Shakespeare's use of different types of clowns: jesters, simpletons and country bumpkins. These colorful characters are too numerous to detail, but Dogberry the constable of *Much Ado About Nothing* may serve as an example. Rustic and well meaning, Dogberry startles the audience and strains logic through his malapropisms. He is so oblivious to his errors that he pronounces the wrong words grandiloquently, but just when the audience doubts his ability to do anything correctly, he and his fellow watchmen apprehend the villains.

Similar examples of false syllogism, illogical reasoning, foolishness and buffoonery abound in Shakespeare. These are not confined to the Comedies but are found in the Histories and Tragedies as well. In *Macbeth*, for example, the impairment of reason is ascribed to madness in its various shades. The humor of Shakespeare's clowns and mad persons not only echoes the folk tradition, but along with Molière's adaptation of the *commedia dell' arte*, anticipates the humor of Beckett, Pinter and Albee and the Theater of the Absurd.

³³ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 230; David Bevington, ed., "Introduction," *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* (New York: Bantam Books, 1988), 2: 418-433; Barber, *Shakespeare's Festive Comedy*, 32-34.

Born more than fifty years after Shakespeare, Jean Baptiste Poquelin (Molière) developed a theater that approximated even more closely the Italian model. An artisan's son with a gift for mimicry, Molière trained in the provinces with *commedia dell' arte* players, and later appeared with his own company in Paris. Molière, himself an actor-manager in the *commedia dell' arte* tradition, continued to perform favorite roles until his death in 1673. During an early visit to Paris, Molière's troupe shared a theater with a *commedia dell' arte* company. Parisian audiences were sophisticated, and familiar with Italian broad farces, as well as the polished and formulaic dramas of Corneille. Molière's genius lay in his ability to produce plays which were a hybrid of high comedy and broad farce. His keen mind and shrewd observations of French society produced topical satires that more than once caused consternation in the court of Louis XIV. Molière's career showed careful effort to maintain the delicate balance required to avoid censure, closure of his theater, or worse, imprisonment. Lamponing the social ills of his time—social pretentiousness, avarice, religious hypocrisy, vanity and promiscuity—his audiences delighted in his exuberant exposure of frauds and villains, while seldom seeing themselves reflected.³⁴

Like Shakespeare, Molière employed the physical playfulness of the broad farce and the hyperbole of the stock characters whose antics revolved around ridiculous situations, such as badly hidden servants attempting to spy, or characters employing outrageous disguises which tested audience credulity. Frequently, plot development required the audience to join with the actors and embrace the fantastic and illogical. One critic has observed that "Unlikely devices which would bring sneers in a tragedy are perfectly acceptable in a comedy." This was true of Molière's theater where the resolution of *Les Misanthrope* hinged on the unlikely discovery of lost love letters or, in *Tartuffe*, by

³⁴ René Bray, "The Actor," chap. in *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Jacques Guicharnaud (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1964), 14-19; Ramon Fernandez, *Molière*, trans. Wilson Follett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1958), 1-45; Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 267-273.

the even less plausible intervention of the king. Francis Lawrence's study of Molière found that "Unreason is present as a basis of Molière's comic vision in the recurrent triumph of the absurd over the most determined and ingenious efforts of reasoned thought and action."³⁵

Shakespeare and Molière provided a strain of theater so fertile that it formed the basis of popular drama over the next two centuries. However, the literary and absurdist aspects of their work developed in two different directions. The absurdist features were carried on in nonliterary forms of entertainment, such as the pantomimes and harlequinades of the streets, that continued in nineteenth century music halls and in early cinema. The influence of film was later confirmed by Eugène Ionesco who recalled that the Marx Brothers were his greatest influence.³⁶ In contrast, literary drama evolved into the "comedies of manners" by such English Restoration wits as Congreve and Wycherly and the French playwright Pierre Marivaux. In the eighteenth century, Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan refined this genre and produced less ribald yet equally witty plays reflecting upper class social mores. In the revolutionary era, French playwright Pierre-Augustin Beaumarchais wrote satires that reflected the social leveling taking place in Europe and America and encouraged the growth of the widely popular melodrama.³⁷

Melodrama utilized the power of music to aid in the arousal of emotion. While it often entailed extravagant plots and incredible feats of daring, it has little in common with the modern Theater of the Absurd. Rather, melodrama reflects the period of nineteenth century Romanticism when poets celebrated nature's ability to inspire human passions. With few exceptions, melodramas were mediocre plays, involving revenge and violence, both contrived and sentimental. Nevertheless, in the period of industrialization and

³⁵ Francis L. Lawrence, *Molière: The Comedy of Unreason*, 10, 22.

³⁶ Ionesco, *Time*, 12 December 1960, 63.

³⁷ Brereton, *French Comic Drama*, 85-89; Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 291.

economic uncertainty, melodrama offered uncomplex characters and the security of a moral ending. It proved a popular form of entertainment, accessible to even the most economically deprived individual.³⁸

In the late nineteenth century, playwrights haltingly began to introduce changes that would make drama reflect modern realities more accurately. Actors displayed a more natural acting style, departing from the tradition of declamation and using a more understated and conversational style. Playwrights followed the cue of the novelists Gustave Flaubert and Emile Zola who decried the artificiality and intrigues of the melodrama and called for dramas that were a *lambeau d'existence*, a "fragment of real life." Zola himself turned to the stage, adapting his novel *Thérèse Raquin* in 1873. Even though the actors were hissed from the stage for what was considered its repulsive realism, Zola managed to establish "the fundamentals of extreme realism or naturalism."³⁹ This challenge to the theatrical status quo was furthered by the plays of Henri Becque in France and Henrik Ibsen in Scandinavia as well as the acting theories and stagecraft of Andre Antoine in France, Otto Brahm in Germany, and Constantin Stanislavsky in Russia.

Among the new playwrights, Ibsen remains one of the giants of the modern period, a genuine innovator. Regularly referred to as the father of modern drama, Ibsen is credited with revolutionizing its form. Before his day, all serious plays were written in verse; Ibsen introduced tragedies written in prose. He also advanced the importance of the individual by writing characters who were more complex than the flat stereotypes preferred by critics and audiences. Ibsen's plays were ultimately successful worldwide, but, at first, he had many detractors among critics and public alike. Ibsen "preached the revolt of the individual against the *ancien regime* of inhibitions and prejudices which held

³⁸ David Grimstead, *Melodrama Unveiled, American Theater and Culture 1800-1850* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1968), 46-49; John Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 342.

³⁹ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 400.

sway in every small town, indeed in every family."⁴⁰ Ibsen's motivation, however, sprang more from his questioning and honest nature than a political ideology. In a century noted for intellectual endeavor in all fields Ibsen's influence in the theater remains undisputed.

Ibsen was an unusual man. Born in obscurity in Norway in 1828, he was nearly as famous for his eccentricities and antisocial behavior as for his drama. His contemporaries did not consider him a revolutionary ideologue and yet he was passionately concerned about the great questions of his time. A very disciplined and prolific writer, his dramatic characters are memorable for their complexity and realism. Biographer Michael Meyer has suggested that Ibsen's own submerged rage and intolerant disposition compelled him to write plays that addressed the problems of individual freedom. Ibsen's young disciple, George Bernard Shaw first encountered Ibsen's plays in that hallowed hall of nineteenth century intellectualism, the Reading Room of the British Museum. Ibsen's chief English advocate and translator, William Archer, occupied a nearby desk and after making Shaw's acquaintance often translated the plays "off the cuff" for him. Shaw presciently recognized "that this, [the drama] not the novel or the pamphlet, was the medium through which a thinker might most effectively spread his gospel."⁴¹

Ibsen began his career as a poet, but achieved fame with his first two verse plays, *Brand* (1866) and *Peer Gynt* (1867). Both were highly critical of the materialism of the age, appealing to the individual conscience to take a stand against society's norms. Ibsen's eagerly questioning mind attacked the high minded institutional idealism of the times. Georg Brandes, a contemporary critic who closely followed Ibsen's career, once wrote that Ibsen's power lay in his ability to see through social conventions, and to create characters who opposed duplicity. Ibsen's social criticism has often been assumed to

⁴⁰ Paul Johnson, *Intellectuals* (New York: Harper, 1988), 82.

⁴¹ Michael Meyer, "Ibsen: A Biographical Approach," in *Ibsen and the Theatre*, ed. Errol Durbach (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 23.

represent a radical attitude and a political agenda, but in truth he was skeptical of most political "solutions." Rather, Ibsen's great gifts were a scorching distrust of the superficial, a firm grasp of human psychology and a poetic vision that gave his work a timeless quality.⁴²

Following the limited success of *Brand* and *Peer Gynt*, Ibsen entered a second phase of playwriting. In *Pillars of Society* (1877), *A Doll's House* (1879), *Ghosts* (1881) and *An Enemy Of The People* (1882), Ibsen gave up verse and adopted prose in order to create a more realistic effect. He said, "Prose is for ideas, verse for visions. The joys and sorrows of the soul, grief that snows upon my head, indignation's lightning bolt—these I endow most fully with life, and express most freely, in the bonds of verse." The success of these four plays established Ibsen's international reputation. Published in the early 1880's, they appeared at a juncture in which the values of Victorian bourgeois society were showing signs of wear and standards of conventional behavior were starting to be challenged. The fundamental issues of these dramas were the social questions of the day—marital loyalty, the importance of money, even the taboo subjects of venereal disease and incest. These plays "discussed in dramatic form, the kind of topic about which people argued in the newspapers and debating societies and on street corners." They dramatized the issue of personal liberation; Ibsen was convinced that such freedom was the prerequisite for a society's liberation. Such plays offered no bromides to the public, but attracted attention by asking timely questions and forcing audiences to ponder. Georg Brandes, observed that Ibsen seemed to be "in a mysterious correspondence with the fermenting, germinating ideas of the day. . . . [and] new ideas, which were on the point of

⁴² Michael Meyer, *Ibsen, A Biography* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1971), 349-350, 813-815.

manifesting themselves publicly, but were not yet perceived by others, had been occupying and as it were tormenting him."⁴³

Ibsen's third and final phase of playwriting confirmed this characterization as he turned from social criticism to the more complex issues of the human mind and what one scholar has called the "containing structure of inter-latticed relationships, this plexus of blood ties and family ties."⁴⁴ *Hedda Gabler* (1890), *The Master Builder* (1892) and *John Gabriel Borkman* (1896) deal with interconnected relationships, the obligations and priorities they entail and the heartaches they produce. Before Freud introduced the world to the subconscious, Ibsen was busy developing scenes suggestive of that unquiet realm with its hidden demands for power. *Hedda Gabler*, considered deep and disturbing at the time and even today, remains an established classic of the modern repertoire because of its appeal to audiences of vastly different experiences.

The theater of Realism opened up possibilities not contemplated by the classical tradition. Ibsen's theater aimed at reproducing life in as vivid and plausible a form as possible and abandoned the so-called "well-made play," which relied upon "graduated intrigue and obvious plotting."⁴⁵ Instead, his realism "gave the illusion of undistorted reality enabling the playgoer to observe the characters and ponder the ideas or implications of a drama instead of watching the gyrations of the plot." The essence of the theater of Realism was captured in the idea of the "fourth wall" in which the audience supposedly

⁴³ Henrik Ibsen, quoted in Michael Meyer, *Ibsen, A Biography*, 340; Meyer, "Ibsen: A Biographical Approach," 23; Georg Brandes, *Henrik Ibsen, A Critical Study*. trans. Jessie Muir, revised William Archer (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1964), 58-59.

⁴⁴ James McFarlane, "The Structured World of Ibsen's Late Dramas," in *Ibsen and the Theatre*, Errol Durbach, ed. (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 133.

⁴⁵ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 355-356; The nineteenth century French playwrights Eugène Scribe and his successor Victorien Sardou were prolific playwrights who courted public taste and produced plays that were well constructed, that is, respected the conventions of playwriting but contained superficial plots and characterizations. This kind of play became known as the *pièce-bien-faite* or well-made play. It often reflected the fashionable topics of society and was commercially successful but possessed little depth or insight. (348-350)

shared the drama taking place on the stage as though viewing the action through an invisible wall. This format demanded that the drama taking place on stage suggest the outside world as closely as possible though the replication occurred in an admittedly artificial environment.⁴⁶

What has Ibsen to do with the Theater of the Absurd? There are several connections. First, he conceived drama as an intellectual exercise. His plays, like absurdist drama, have often been criticized for being too cerebral for the average theatergoer. In fact, critics of his time saw Ibsen as a fraud, declaring that his dramas were made purposely obscure either to hide superficiality of thought or, arrogantly, to mystify audiences. Though it is sometimes claimed that Ibsen was the inventor of the "drama of ideas," such a view ignores the works of the Classical Greeks, Shakespeare, Molière and Goethe. It would be more accurate to say that Ibsen was the major innovator of the modern drama of ideas. Much of his influence results from his contemporization of timeless human dilemmas facing modern society—the moral costs of human frailty. His characters often chose to deal with moral problems by openly defying the social conventions of bourgeois society. In several European countries, the admirers of Ibsen also composed a radical political faction espousing democratic socialism, women's rights and a new openness in sexual morality. Once again we are reminded that the theater, while in many ways conservative and slow to change itself, provides an excellent forum for experimentation that helps society to rehearse the adjustments that are to come. The modern Theater of the Absurd also confronts social questions though in a less didactic way. As we will see in the following chapters, the plays of Beckett, Pinter and Albee, are thought provoking, include controversial subject matter, and criticize the insufficiency of

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 356, 420. Gassner notes that the stage itself had to reflect this new dramaturgy through scenery that consisted of sturdier walls and real doors, with handles that worked, realistic stage painting and authentic props. These were meant to reinforce the audience's understanding and empathy with the actors. The famous Parisian director, André Antoine, carried this property realism to a new level when he introduced the use of actual meat in a butcher shop scene in an 1888 production.

facile solutions. Plays that cause such uneasiness and debate are difficult to ignore. In dealing with the topical issues of his day, Ibsen set a new standard for the possibilities of performance art. Unlike nineteenth century melodramatic entertainment, this new drama was less diverting but more stimulating and useful. As Martin Esslin wrote of Ibsen's drama, "the very fact that a playwright's work could be seen as having played a vital part in bringing about a change in public opinion and social attitudes had an immense effect on the status of the drama as a medium of expression, and its status as an experimental laboratory for social thought and social change."⁴⁷

In addition, Ibsen's proclamation of dramatic realism laid the foundation for the Theater of the Absurd. This second connection between the genres is fundamental. When Ibsen departed from staid classical conventions and the hollow artifices of melodrama, he turned the conventions of playwriting upside down by introducing a truly subversive element, the complex human personality. Until Ibsen, the stage had been a place on which characters moved and spoke with a kind of predictability. Through the use of masks, and later through devices such as the use of *raisonneurs* or commentators, soliloquies and asides, the audience was kept informed of each plot twist. Every major character was categorized and the audience was kept abreast of each character's motivations whether these be secretive or obvious. With modern drama, such sharing with the audience came to an end. Ibsen invented characters whose motives were not disclosed to the audience in a direct way. Rather, the audience was required to deduce the plot from shards of dialogue and body language. Coincidentally, the new science of psychology suggested that there were hidden depths to the human psyche, and that individuals themselves were often unaware of their own reasons for speaking and behaving. This new frame of understanding complicated the audience's problems of interpretation. One senses the

⁴⁷ Martin Esslin, "Ibsen and Modern Drama," in *Ibsen and the Theatre*, ed. Errol Durbach (New York: New York University Press, 1980), 72-73.

frustration in comments of contemporary critics who complained of Ibsen's "absence of motive." His scenes appeared to have "no connection with what goes before or after" or are "scarcely comprehensible."⁴⁸ Martin Esslin called this "principle of uncertainty" the real essence of Ibsen's revolution, an innovation more permanently significant than his social criticism. As the twentieth century wore on, ambiguity of meaning in dramatic dialogue became a standard that enhanced rather than diminished the meaning found within the plays. Young James Joyce, who learned Norwegian in order to read Ibsen's plays in the original, even wrote *Exiles* (1915), a play that made the "principle of uncertainty of motives its main theme."⁴⁹ This play, rarely seen, was adapted and directed by Harold Pinter in the 1970's; he noted that it bears eloquent witness to Joyce's debt to Ibsen.

Another, more subtle link between Ibsen and the Theater of the Absurd may be attributed to a shared Kierkegaardian perspective. For, underlying Ibsen's turn toward realism and his social criticism, the influence of the Danish theologian and philosopher Soren Kierkegaard can be detected. Though unfamiliar to the English speaking world before the late nineteenth century, Kierkegaard exerted a major influence upon the intellectual world of northern Europe. In more recent times, he has been considered a principal intellectual progenitor of twentieth century existentialism, the philosophical substructure of the Theater of the Absurd. Eleven years after Kierkegaard's untimely death, when Ibsen's play *Brand* (1866) was creating a sensation, the prevailing theory held that the lead character, an earnest young minister with strong spiritual convictions, was based on Kierkegaard himself. In reply to a question about this assumption, Ibsen wrote that he had "read little of Kierkegaard and understood less."⁵⁰ However, Ibsen's friend

⁴⁸ Brandes, *Henrik Ibsen, A Critical Study*, 25, 35.

⁴⁹ Esslin, "Ibsen and the Modern Drama," 74.

⁵⁰ Ibsen, quoted in Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen, A Biography*, 176. Unfortunately there is little

Christopher Due recalled that they had read both Kierkegaard's *Either-Or* and *Acts of Love* and discussed those works with their classmates. Given the importance of the philosopher at the time in Scandinavia, Ibsen's statement may have been meant to publicly distance himself from Kierkegaard's work lest he be called upon to act as apologist or interpreter. Furthermore, as Brian Downs argues in *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background*, the playwright was a man of his time and milieu. While it seems likely that Ibsen was more attracted to Kierkegaard's psychological works than his more complex philosophical writings, it would have been difficult for any Scandinavian of the period to elude Kierkegaard's ubiquitous spirit.⁵¹

The issue is not whether Ibsen was influenced by Kierkegaard but rather the particular shape of the influence. Scholars have observed a remarkable similarity of phraseology. For example, Kierkegaard wrote "Truth is in the minority" and Ibsen's character Dr. Stockmann says, "The minority is always right." Kierkegaard's strongest advice was "to be oneself, and of that every human being is capable if only he wills it," Ibsen has Brand declare, "To be wholly oneself! But how, with the weight of one's inheritance of sin? . . . It is man's will that acquits or condemns him."⁵² Such examples argue that the significant ideas passed directly or indirectly from philosopher to

confirmation from Ibsen himself that he was directly influenced by Kierkegaard, but there is a consensus among those scholars who have studied the work of both authors that the young playwright had been influenced by the philosopher-cleric.

⁵¹ Brian W Downs, *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background* (New York: Octagon Books, 1969), 79 & 80. Ibsen's understanding of Kierkegaard would have been deepened through his friendship with the young priest Christopher Arndt Bruun, an ardent follower of Kierkegaard, a more likely model for Brand. Ibsen would also have had the benefit of second-hand information from his siblings who were under the influence of the Rev. G. A. Lammers, a Kierkegaardian revivalist cleric posted briefly to Ibsen's hometown of Skien. Although Ibsen rarely visited there, he was in correspondence with his family during this period. Likewise, Ibsen's education in Kierkegaardian principles would also have been amplified through conversation found in the fashionable literary circle of his future mother-in-law Magdalene Thoresen. Magdalene was herself a Danish writer who had emigrated to Norway and was also an enthusiastic disciple of Kierkegaard.

⁵² Ibsen and Kierkegaard, quoted in Meyer, *Henrik Ibsen, A Biography*, 176.

playwright. It is also clear that Kierkegaard's extreme idealism, seemingly so attractive to the youthful Ibsen, faced challenges in the later plays, as Ibsen's dramatic rendering of serious dilemmas caused Kierkegaard's tenets to be "discarded as a rule of life."⁵³ Even so, the remnants of Kierkegaardian thought that prevailed throughout Ibsen's work connect to modern absurdist drama with its roots in existentialism.

What were the exact Kierkegaardian ideas which figure most prominently in Ibsen's plays? Kierkegaard, born in 1813, was a Danish cleric whose life's work was the investigation of what it means to be a Christian in the modern world. He questioned if it was even possible for humans to follow Christianity. His writings were the product of his own intellectual agony that stemmed from his struggle against spiritual despair. Through his writing Kierkegaard reflected the anxiety of his fellow humans wishing to accept the "proofs" of modern science while confronted by the uncertainty of life and the inherent dread and fear that accompany consciousness of the human condition.⁵⁴

Shortly before his death at age 42, Kierkegaard published an essay called, *The Present Age*, which contained insights and criticisms of modern society. In the essay Kierkegaard argued that historical change was moving "toward mass society, which means the death of the individual as life becomes ever more collectivized and externalized."⁵⁵ This social criticism, echoed by later existentialists, was important in establishing Kierkegaard as a definer of that movement, but it was not his only link to the future. More significant was Kierkegaard's preoccupation with the larger question of what it means "to be" or "to exist" and the concept of "self" and what it means to be an individual

⁵³ Downs, *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background*, 92.

⁵⁴ Downs notes that while Kierkegaard's own struggle with doubt and fear was precipitated by a personal crisis, a tragic love affair, his philosophical writing struck a common chord with contemporaries. (92-93)

⁵⁵ William Barrett, *Irrational Man, A Study In Existential Philosophy* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1962), 173.

"self". To put this discussion in perspective, it is necessary to explore briefly Kierkegaard's thinking.

In the nineteenth century, though scientific and technological change was ongoing, most people continued to be preoccupied with survival within their own immediate environment. The educated elite devised new ways of considering the natural world, scientific investigation and society. Theories of political organization, social responsibility, history and nature were often systematized and categorized into "isms": Rationalism, Hegelianism, Utilitarianism, Marxism, Evolutionism, and Pragmatism, to name but a few. Beneath these convenient labels, however, a major rivalry developed among philosophers. Immanuel Kant and Georg Hegel articulated and expanded the philosophical tradition by stressing rationalism though adding the authority of psychology. Kierkegaard, like the poets of German Romanticism, such as Fichte, Schiller and Goethe, argued on behalf of the intuitive over the rational; indeed Kierkegaard felt compelled to do "battle against the imperialism of intelligence."⁵⁶ Philosopher William Barrett described the crossroads in modern philosophy occurring at the juncture where Kant's doctrine "that existence cannot be represented in a concept" produced two reactions. Rationalists accepted Kant's dictum and renounced the practice of intellectualizing about existence; "metaphysics" was a speculative dead end. Kierkegaard and his followers took the opposite view. Kierkegaard saw existence as a compelling fact that could not be fully conceptualized but rather had to be experienced. By introducing the subjective nature of the experience of self, Kierkegaard was able to show "that the religious and moral dimensions of selfhood require (in addition to thought) courage, resolution, and faith."⁵⁷ Indeed, the whole person, not merely one's reason, became involved in the encounter with the reality of self. Rather than an exercise of mind alone in reflection, this active encounter engaged will and soul.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 152

⁵⁷ John E. Smith, "The Revolt of Existence," *Yale Review* 43 (March 54):364.

Kierkegaard postulated that the recognition of one's own existence takes place "in the Either/Or of choice" of which all humans are capable.⁵⁸ An individual faced with a difficult decision gains the tormenting opportunity to glimpse the inner being we call the self. Although one's first reaction is to turn to a universal set of moral guidelines or to "the experts" for advice, in many cases the rules don't apply or they don't help and there is no escape through distraction. The only possibility then is to face up to the struggle and make the decision alone. In the crisis the individual recognizes vulnerability and suffers from the sense of awe inherent in the religious experience. This active encounter with the self leads to an encounter with the infinite. For Kierkegaard, this confrontation was best expressed in the Biblical story of the dilemma facing Abraham when asked by God to sacrifice his son, Isaac. God's demand opened questions to which there was no clear answer: any human answer would cause great pain. For modern humans also, questions that cause an interior crisis are seldom clear. Our decisions often call for choice to be made between relative goods rather than between good and evil.⁵⁹

Kierkegaard was particularly interested in restoring the importance of the individual whose innate beauty and freedom he saw jeopardized by the pressures of the modern secularized world. Kierkegaard rejected Hegelian Idealism because it subsumed and subordinated the individual to the group. Hegel said that the individual became aware of self by passively reflecting back on the polarities of the world spirit. Kierkegaard differed: "An existing individual is constantly in process of becoming To be a particular individual is world-historically absolutely nothing, infinitely nothing—and yet,

⁵⁸ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 162.

⁵⁹ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 149-176; Downs, *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background*, 84-85; Maurice Friedman, ed., *The Worlds of Existentialism* (New York: Random House, 1964), 111-117.

this is the only true and highest significance of a human being, so much higher as to make every other significance illusory."⁶⁰

Kierkegaard's emphasis on the value of the individual and the process of becoming, was reiterated by later existentialist philosophy, but reflected in Ibsen's plays almost immediately. Ibsen created singular and very complex characters who sought to discover their mission in life and to resist the pressures of society which could "prevent that realized self from doing what the mission imposes on them." There are also elements in Ibsen's plays of Kierkegaard's criticism—his call for each individual to act consistently within one of life's three distinct moral spheres; the aesthetic, the ethical or the religious and to do so without compromise. This ideal is transposed to Ibsen's drama through the behavior of characters. For instance, the young cleric Brand demonstrates bizarre strength of will exemplifying the human who dwells solely in the ethical state. This state imposes on Brand a strict sense of duty and a code of behavior which leads tragically to the deaths of his beloved young wife and infant son.⁶¹

Kierkegaard's criticism of society included a harsh denunciation of the hypocrisy of modern Christianity. Trained as a Lutheran theologian, Kierkegaard's primary focus was on the relationship between God and man. His standards were demanding. He was harshly contemptuous of the modern clergy whom he saw as mere civil servants. Ibsen's play, *Peer Gynt*, similarly offers a "satirical treatment of religion."⁶² Elements of anti-

⁶⁰ Kierkegaard, quoted in Friedman, ed., *The Worlds of Existentialism*, 115.

⁶¹ Downs, *Ibsen: The Intellectual Background*, 79-90, 93; Downs discusses Peer Gynt, who, in Kierkegaardian fashion represents the individual trapped in the aesthetic state. He is an irresponsible creature living for his own pleasure unable to make the choice that would allow him to move into the ethical state, even when given the opportunity to do so. Thus he contributes to his own demise, and though it is questionable just how far Ibsen would go in his condemnation of Peer Gynt (since the ending remains ambivalent), it is generally assumed that Kierkegaard would have rigorously condemned Gynt's inability to exert his will. In his later years, Meyer tells us that Ibsen became more more outspoken in his conviction that the exertion of the human will was essential to one's contentment. *Henrik Ibsen, A Biography*, 633.

⁶² Downs, *The Intellectual Background*, 89.

clericalism prevail in Ibsen's work, most pointedly in Ibsen's portrait of the earthy, self-satisfied Pastor Straamand in *Love's Comedy* (1862). While it seems clear that Ibsen did not overtly preach Kierkegaard's philosophy, it is obvious that he assisted greatly in disseminating Kierkegaard's ideas to a wider audience.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Ibsen was revered as a major artist throughout Europe and North America. This popularity was due in part to the zeal of admirers like critic William Archer whose English translations encouraged a wide readership. Writers such as G. B. Shaw proselytized on his behalf and even his most severe critics (especially in Norway) eventually came to regard him as the greatest living dramatist of the time. Actors of different nationalities longed to play his roles. In France, the brilliant young player Charles Dullin mesmerized his sister with scenes from *Peer Gynt* and claimed a deep and natural empathy with the character.⁶³

Inspired by Ibsen, André Antoine, an amateur actor who worked by day as a clerk of the Paris Gas Company, set about to establish a new dramatic company. Like the Meiningen group in Germany, Antoine organized the *Theatre libre*, financed partly with his own funds and committed to performing only modern plays in a naturalistic style.⁶⁴ From its first production in May of 1887, Antoine's troupe had the support of Emile Zola and soon other critical support followed. Despite constant financial problems, the *Theatre libre* led the vanguard in the performance of modernist drama. In its short life span, it introduced the people of Paris to the plays of Ibsen, Tolstoy, and the young German playwright Gerhardt Hauptmann (1862-1946). It also gave young French writers like

⁶³ Frederick Brown, *Theater and Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1989), 146.

⁶⁴ In Germany the Duke of Meiningen's acting company (1874-1890) "anticipated the basic ideal of realism—namely, the creation of perfect illusion" through the use of authentic looking costumes, settings, crowd scenes and ensemble acting. Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 447.

Eugene Brieux, Maurice Donnay and Henri Bataille precious exposure in Paris where theater was still dominated by the Comédie Française.

For many playwrights realism continued to express strong truths because it sought to raise the public consciousness to the social inequalities and physical degradation that industrialism had caused in Europe and North America. In Russia, where industrialization came late and serfdom was not abolished until mid-century, Leo Tolstoy wrote for the theater in the realist mode of his novels in order to suit his increasingly political and social agenda. His plays dramatized the lives of both the wealthy and the impoverished serfs whose labor created the wealth. In so doing, he alienated many members of the upper class, but considered this a necessary result of his increasingly activist Christianity. He was followed in this work by the younger disciples of Russian Realism, Anton Chekov and the angry young man of Soviet theater, Maxim Gorky.

Checkov represents a transitional figure. He is seldom grouped with the avant-garde playwrights, yet he cannot be simply termed a Realist. His theatrical writing has been described as impressionistic, showing much of the commonness and despair of everyday life and yet also suggesting the ineffable hopes and dreams of a society in flux. His importance lay in his genius for dialogue. As previously noted, the conventions of Ibsen's dialogue offered few clues to character motivation. Checkov took dialogue a step further to introduce the texture of everyday speech, with its circuitousness and silences. Esslin suggests that Checkov "evolved the concept of the sub-text hidden beneath the explicit language of the dialogue."⁶⁵ He thus foreshadowed the development of a kind of dialogue that would produce paradoxically an abundance of meaning through language reduced to bare essentials. Checkov's legacy to modern drama is apparent in the pregnant

⁶⁵ Esslin, "Ibsen and Modern Drama," 74; James W. Flannery, *W. B. Yeats and the Idea of a Theatre, The Early Abbey Theatre in Theory and Practice* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 113-115, 127.

pauses, the sighs and silences—the ineffable sadness in the dialogue of Beckett, Pinter and Albee.

Just as Realism supplanted Romanticism in the literature of the mid-nineteenth century and melodrama gave way to Realism on stage, in the theater there was inevitably a reaction to Realism. After espousing Realism wholeheartedly, playwrights came to grapple with its inadequacies. Inherently a world of artifice, the theater could not allow the pendulum to swing too far from the poetic and symbolic. The retrograde movement, called Symbolism or Neo-Romanticism, represented a synthesis derived of Realism and Romanticism. It was a style of drama that emphasized the impossibility of portraying reality with exactitude. Influenced by the Symbolist poets, especially Verlaine and Mallarmé, the new playwrights expressed themselves by using symbols and incidents to show that human emotions cannot be rendered with scientific precision. Ibsen, remembered mainly as a Realist, had manifested vestiges of Romanticism in his early career. Indicative of both the length of his career and the increased velocity of change at the end of the century, Ibsen himself embraced some of the characteristics of Symbolism in his final works. To put it more accurately, Ibsen rediscovered some of the Romanticism that his poetic nature had always embraced. Symbolism shares with the Theater of the Absurd a sense of the poet's aspirations to seek a closer approximation to reality through indirect speech and action and was therefore an important development.⁶⁶

Elsewhere in Europe, particularly in the bohemian backstreets of Paris, Symbolism exerted great force. Writers who adhered to this new style were following the promptings of visual artists who saw Impressionism as inadequate to the struggle to create from within. *Fin de siècle* Paris introduced Cezanne, Seurat and Gauguin who challenged the representational nature of art, explored the relationships between shapes, and introduced

⁶⁶ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 411-412.

unorthodox combinations of colors and textures.⁶⁷ Initially inspired by Richard Wagner, Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Verlaine sought to create a world of poetic experience that transcended reality. According to Wagner, rationalism had bequeathed to the world a sense of reality in which the emotional components of thought were subverted. To restore the equipoise of subjective and objective reality, he advocated an art that was inspired by the purportedly deepest aspects of the soul—language and customs, which together defined the spirit of the *Volk* or German people. In seeking to elicit an emotional response from the audience Wagner's chosen medium was, of course, the opera.⁶⁸

The French Symbolists too dreamed of a world in which external reality was absorbed through the senses and then communicated to the public through allusive verse. In time they adopted a theory for the drama in which they accepted Wagner's idea of a coalition of the arts or "total art," and incorporated from his music the *leitmotif* or repeated phrase to enhance meaning. They took issue with the greater weight given music over the spoken word in Wagnerian drama. For Mallarmé and others "language—and language alone—was sufficient to express all that a dramatist might want to say." They were so convinced of the sacredness of language that it was not unusual for Symbolist playwrights to prefer that their plays be read rather than performed. In Germany, the Symbolist poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and the novels of Thomas Mann inspired the drama of Frank Wedekind who wrote anarchistic dramas based upon symbols both erotic and destructive. In Ireland, William Butler Yeats and John Millington Synge made use of ancient Celtic myths to weave dramas that combined the heroic and the mystical, emphasizing the anti-rational over the rational.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Bruce Cole and Adelheid Gealt, *Art of the Western World* (New York: Summit Books, 1989) 261-268.

⁶⁸ Flannery, *Idea of a Theatre*, 112.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

Besides Verlaine and Mallarmé, whose plays were performed but unpublished, the most important Symbolist playwright was Maurice Maeterlinck. Born in Ghent, Belgium, Maeterlinck arrived in Paris in 1886 and became an avid disciple of Stéphane Mallarmé. Like many of his fashionable contemporaries, Maeterlinck was a self-proclaimed mystic. He wrote volumes of poetry and developed theories regarding drama in a series of essays. Maeterlinck claimed that real tragedy sprang from mundane occurrences more often than from melodramatic, extraordinary events like murder or brutality. He argued that real tragedy is contained within the individual and often does not manifest itself in external motion. In fact, Maeterlinck's first plays strain to achieve an almost motionless drama with silences suggesting the terror of the unknown. For instance, in *The Intruder* (1891) the audience observes the reactions of a family whose mother is dying in an adjoining room. The family members sit around a table waiting for the intruder (death) to arrive. A feeling of gloomy fatalism pervades the play. In his most interesting work, *The Blind* (1891), a group of blind people out for a walk are left on their own when their priest and guide drops dead. Seen as an allegory for the pathetic state of confusion of a world without belief, this highly suggestive drama relied heavily on foreboding atmospherics. The novelty of Maeterlinck's work caused even his fellow Symbolist playwright, W. B. Yeats to voice grave reservations. In a review article Yeats found Maeterlinck's "static dramas" filled with characters who "meet their fate with terrified whimpers that can only evoke a sentimental pity." As time went by, Maeterlinck adopted a more conventional dramaturgy, but his early experimentation with stasis broke ground that would later be worked by the playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd. The use of inaction as a stage technique was daring in Maeterlinck's time and continues to be problematic for audiences conditioned by melodrama to expect recurrent activity. As they did also with silence to

dialogue, the Absurdist used stasis as an effective counterpoint to emphasize the stage action.⁷⁰

Further evidence of the significance of symbolist drama may be seen in *Ubu Roi* (1896) by the young bohemian, Alfred Jarry. The premiere of *Ubu Roi* in Paris at the experimental *Theatre de l'Oeuvre*, the successor company to Antoine's *Theatre libre*, was tumultuous. Originally written as a schoolboy prank skewering a former teacher, Jarry's play was first performed for his classmates. Eight years later it was transformed into a graphic indictment of the decadence and cruelty of the French bourgeoisie. King Ubu and his fellow actors were costumed to look like wooden puppets, thus embodying the Symbolist idea that puppets or marionettes should displace actors whose personalities might impede the playwright's intentions.⁷¹ At the play's premiere, an aura of the grotesque made the audience restive and when they understood that the play was meant to be insulting, a riot ensued. Yeats attended the opening performance along with literary celebrities such as Stephane Mallarmè, Arthur Symons and Jules Renard. The Irish poet expressed dismay that Jarry's vulgar, exaggerated use of symbols seemed poised to overtake the subtly nuanced use of symbols then prevalent. In fact, this performance is widely recognized as the beginning of the end of Symbolism's influence in French theater. Still, others saw in the caricature a valuable method for theater to adopt because of its immediacy. Seventeen year old Jacques Copeau, later one of the most important figures in twentieth century French theater, attended the premiere and saw in *Ubu Roi* a drama that

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 123; Maeterlinck is remembered today mainly as the author of *The Bluebird*, an allegorical fantasy that promoted clichés about the value of memory. Highly popular when introduced in 1908, it was revived for the cinema in the 1980's. Although Maeterlinck later virtually disavowed his early dramatic theories, his daring experiments in Symbolism continued to echo in the scenes of Absurdist playwrights.

⁷¹ Gassner, *Masters of the Drama*, 422-23. This idea recurred often in the twentieth century as when scenic designer Gordon Craig dreamed of actors eliminated from the drama because of their unreliability. Similar opinions were expressed by Samuel Beckett. See 145 below.

expanded the horizons of theater. For Copeau, the play's air of unreality achieved the essence of reality precisely through its symbolic treatment.⁷²

The first decade of the twentieth century saw the artist quarters of Vienna, Munich and Dresden alive with the early Expressionism of Edvard Munch, Wassily Kandinsky and Gustav Klimt. In Paris, in 1905 an important exhibition at the *Salon d' Automne* created a sensation when the group known as *Les Fauves* (The Beasts) introduced their paintings. Foremost among these artists was Henri Matisse whose eccentric use of vivid color and seeming disregard for the importance of the human form shocked Paris. Only two years after this exhibition, Pablo Picasso's Cubist "Self-Portrait" went even further, exploding the conventions of figure and space that had connected the art world from the Renaissance to the late nineteenth century.⁷³

In other genres, artists following in the wake of Picasso found it impossible to ignore his influence. In 1903, Guillaume Apollinaire, a young art critic and friend of Picasso's wrote *Tiresias's Breasts*. Not actually produced until 1917, the play was described by its author as a "*drame surrealiste*," thus coining the term surrealism. Like *Ubu Roi*, *Tiresias's Breasts* is a fantastical tale. It is about a woman who wishes to have the privileges of a man and magically changes sex. Apollinaire, aware of the burden of inventing a word, made an effort to define surrealism in his preface to the text. Apollinaire's definition of surrealism differed from the meaning later attached to it by André Breton's Surrealist movement of the 1920's. Apollinaire's definition was in part negative—surrealism was not to be defined as a mere synonym for the word symbolic, nor did it express reality in the way visual reality can be captured by the photograph. As he asserted, "when man wanted to imitate the action of walking, he created the wheel, which

⁷² Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 254-259; Flannery, *Idea of a Theatre*, 126-127; William Butler Yeats, *The Autobiography of William Butler Yeats* (New York: Collier Books, 1965), 233-234.

⁷³ Cole and Gealt, *Art of the Western World*, 261-268.

does not resemble a leg. He has thus used Surrealism without knowing it."⁷⁴ Apollinaire meant surreal to describe an artistic means of getting at the essence of reality. In his own personal effort to renew the theater, he was willing to shock his audience with bizarre images in order to get them to peer at the underlying meanings of that which is commonly called reality. Apollinaire sought a theater freed from the strictures of realism—expressing freedom through voluptuousness and joyous experimentation, just as the visual artists were attempting in their rebellion against conventional form. This quest was taken up by playwrights like Jacques Copeau whose Theatre du Vieux Colombier, founded in 1913, was closely allied to André Gide's circle that stressed cooperative ventures among the avant-garde. For example, the 1917 the ballet *Parade* was written by Jean Cocteau, music by Eric Satie, design by Picasso and choreography by Massine.⁷⁵

The late dream plays of August Strindberg forged another link between surrealism and the Theater of the Absurd. After a successful early career writing taut psychological dramas, Strindberg's plays changed drastically. In the 1890's after two difficult divorces, Strindberg recklessly experimented with drugs and suffered a mental breakdown. Yeats remembered him as a "tortured self-torturing man who offered himself to his own soul as Buddha offered himself to the famished tiger."⁷⁶ Following his recovery, Strindberg's plays were of two different kinds. He wrote lucid if somewhat lifeless histories of famous Swedish leaders, including Queen Christina. His other, more critically acclaimed works were surrealist combining a heightened realism with ephemeral characters and plots. The titles of these plays speak for themselves: *To Damascus* (1901), *A Dream Play* (1902) *The Ghost Sonata* (1907). These strange experimental plays, certainly the product of a

⁷⁴ Guillaume Apollinaire quoted in Eric Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1967), 190-191; also quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 260.

⁷⁵ Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker*, 191-192. Apollinaire's creative quest ended tragically when he contracted influenza in the pandemic of 1918 and died on the very day of the armistice in 1918.

⁷⁶ Yeats, *The Autobiography*, 363-364.

mentally distressed genius, also reveal Strindberg's late discovery of concern for his fellow humans.

Strindberg also espoused Swedenborgian mysticism and investigated Buddhism and the early work of Freud. These later plays, employing symbols, music and subjective experience, took the form of Freudian dreams, rather than the traditional idealized form of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. Strindberg turned theater inside out by staging the action not in the external world of surface realities but by exposing the inner world of the subconscious. Indeed his characters are surrounded by figures who represent not only their antagonists but also the repressed aspects of their own psyches. Strindberg's dream plays are said to mark "the watershed between the traditional and the modern, the representational and the Expressionistic projection of mental realities."⁷⁷ Strindberg's world decidedly lacked the *joi d`vivre* that characterized Apollinaire's goal of banishing pessimism. As Western society reacted to the slaughter of the First World War, it became increasingly difficult to recommend the program of optimism. Strindberg thus appears to have been the more prescient in anticipating the mood of the later twentieth century. In 1945 critic Eric Bentley wrote, "A living seismograph, Strindberg can feel the twentieth century coming, can feel a gathering in the air of all the hate and ferocity of renewed barbarism."⁷⁸

Some of this tension can also be seen in the even more ominous stirrings of the Futurists in Italy. In a manifesto written in 1909, playwright F. T. Marinetti called for a total renunciation of the past, and its values and an endorsement of "Destructive Incendiary Violence."⁷⁹ This repudiation of conventional behavior and traditional art was

⁷⁷ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 251.

⁷⁸ Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker*, 179; Fussel, *The Great War and Living Memory*, 23-29.

⁷⁹ F. T. Marinetti, quoted in Glynn Wickham, *A History of the Theatre*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 223. This quote is taken from the "First Futurist Manifesto," by Marinetti originally printed in *Le Figaro*, 1909.

taken up by proto-fascist groups who glorified youth, often taking their inspiration from Nietzsche's renunciation of culture and religion twenty years earlier. The destruction which Nietzsche forecast, however, was meant to lead to a sort of catharsis and the dawn of a new age of superior humans. As the war made clear, however, violence merely issued more violence and confirmed human expendability beyond anyone's imagination to predict it.

In neutral Zurich at the height of the First World War, artists and writers gathered at the Cafe Voltaire, adopted the name Dada or "hobbyhorse" to describe their reaction to the crisis. The Dadaists included refugees from various belligerent countries, France, Germany, Austro-Hungary, Romania, some fleeing army service and some escaping the war itself. Representative of all the arts, their common cause was a renunciation of the Western culture that, they believed, had led to the war. Poet Tristan Tzara, sculptor Hans Arp and painter Marcel Janco and their fellow artists produced cabaret programs meant to repudiate bourgeois standards of art. Dadaists held repressive social and cultural priorities responsible for the war and its barbarity. Their first publication, issued in June 1916, included contributions from Picasso, Modigliani, and Apollinaire. There were also evening performances of poems by the painter Kandinsky and music by Debussy. Their first play, written by Austrian painter Oskar Kokoschka, combined visible direction with improvisation and the special effect of huge masks lit from within. Their theater, like much of their art, was exciting, experimental and defiantly nihilistic.⁸⁰

Futurism and Dada contributed very little of lasting value to the drama but were important as manifestations of artistic rebellion and experimentation that would eventually find dramatic expression. When World War I ended, the creative momentum that had nourished Dada seemed to dissipate. Many artists adjourned to the cafes of Paris where

⁸⁰ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 261-264; Wickham, *A History of the Theatre*, 223.

Dada attempted to unite its nihilistic message with the widespread postwar pessimism. There André Breton, a psychologist and poet, joined other artists like Francis Picabia and Marcel Duchamp in various Dadaist manifestations in which their poems and plays were presented to the public. Dada consensus held that everything in art ought to be questioned especially the limits of "good taste" or even whether the concept of an aesthetic taste had any inherent meaning.

In the early twenties, Dadaist Tristan Tzara wrote the *Vaseline Symphony*, a performance piece of cacophonous sounds and *A Gas Heart*, a play in which the cast members were meant to represent disconnected parts of the body. Similar plays were produced by fellow Dadaists, two by Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes uncannily predicted the eruption of violence that marked the Second World War. Apart from the obvious shock value of their techniques and the encouragement of spontaneity on stage, however, the main theatrical legacy of the Dadaists to the Absurdists was the use of dialogue made up like a collage of nonsense and polite clichés, a technique that would later be employed by Eugene Ionesco.⁸¹

Dadaists were ridiculed for their illogical discourse, contradictory pronouncements, public excommunications of each other, and for their exasperating disruptions of social events. One of the most portentous of the latter was the fist-fight which broke out during a revival performance of *A Gas Heart* in 1923 when André Breton and Paul Eluard jumped onto the stage and were subsequently ejected from the theater. Apparently Dadaism was too self-destructive to survive its own goals. The most convincing evidence comes from long time proponent of Dadaism, Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes who admitted in his memoirs that, "Dada consisted of opposing, incompatible, explosive tendencies. To destroy a world so as to put another in its place *in which*

⁸¹ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 270-271.

nothing more exists, that was, in fact, the watchword of Dada."⁸² While such a philosophy of revolt can be energizing in practice, particularly among the young, it eventually sapped the strength and good will of many members of the movement.

Some adherents of Dada returned to Germany especially Munich and Berlin where their radicalism became enmeshed with Expressionism, a movement that gathered strength in the revolutionary atmosphere of defeated Germany. Following the lead of painters who wished to express an inner reality, expressionist playwrights such as Ernst Toller and Karel Capek presented dramas featuring glimpses of characters' inner turmoils which were exaggerated to emphasize their subjectivity. At the same time outer reality would be displayed in a distorted but recognizable way as if viewed through an inner eye. Expressionist theater was notorious for its intense feelings of post-war anger and cynicism; scenes of violence often exceeded the boundaries of good taste. Particularly notable was poet, Yvan Goll, whose several plays were unremarkable, but whose theories about drama uncannily predicted the Theater of the Absurd. Goll called for a return to the use of the stage as a "magnifying glass" to enlarge, frighten and distort reality in order to see the reality behind it. The early plays of Goll's contemporary, Bertold Brecht displayed this need to unmask reality and reveal grotesque and unfamiliar inner worlds. Anticipating Samuel Beckett, Brecht's plays stressed physical comedy and a deliberate ambiguity of character motivation. Like Ionesco, he used objects, such as shattering furniture to express intangible realities—family turmoil and corruption. Conflict over positions of power and the ability to transform the self, other Brechtian themes—anticipated the Theater of the Absurd. When he embraced Marxism in 1930 Brecht repudiated his plays of the 1920's and adopted a rationalist political theater.⁸³

⁸² Georges Ribemont-Dessaignes quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 264; Harry T. Moore, *Twentieth Century French Literature To World War II* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1966), 170.

⁸³ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 267-274.

Throughout Western Europe, Dada was absorbed and superseded by the Surrealist movement. In Italy the surrealist drama of Luigi Pirandello created an illusory world in ways that would also influence Absurdism. Late in life, Pirandello wrote innovative plays—*Right You Are (if you think you are!)* (1917), *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921) and *Tonight We Improvise* (1930)—to supplement his income as a teacher with a large family. These productions return over and over to the question of whether human beings can know reality, either the reality they experience or the reality of other people's lives. Influenced by the disparity between the conscious and the subconscious mind, Pirandello's characters seek certainty but find only relative truth. According to Eric Bentley, "Pirandello took from the *teatro del grottesco* or from his own fiction the antithesis of mask and face, the mask being the outward form, the face being the suffering creature. At its crudest this is the theme of the clown with a tender heart."⁸⁴ Uninterested in drama that supplied answers, rather Pirandello wrote drama that left solutions concealed behind images, behind language, or encapsulated within other versions of the truth.⁸⁵

In Paris intermittent squabbles among the Dadaists resulted in a major division when Breton issued his *Manifeste du surrealisme* in October, 1924. This gave the Surrealist movement its credo, awarding Breton and his followers significant influence. André Breton questioned the use of "the arbitrary" in the creation of art, a practice of Dada poets. Tzara, still nominal leader of the Dadaists, rejected the establishment of any relationship among the words of a poem. He hailed the deliberate obstruction of meaning. Breton concurred in the desirability of arbitrariness, but saw a different, more organic result from the random linking of words. Even in seemingly unintelligible verse there were

⁸⁴ Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker*, 150.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 149-151.

images to be recognized and meanings to be found. Reflecting interest in Freud, Breton called for the elimination of constraints on the subconscious, a move that would lead to an enhanced creativity. Breton's work emphasized the study of dreams (oneirism) and automatic writing which became hallmarks of early Surrealism.

The Surrealist movement attracted a wide following among the artists and writers of post World War I Paris. These included poets and writers such as Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon, Georges Batailles, Robert Desnos, and Phillippe Soupault and the visual artists Max Ernst, Marcel Duchamp, Jean Miro, Salvador Dali, and Francis Picabia. Some artists worked in more than one media—for example, Leonora Carrington, a painter and short story writer and Man Ray, an American born, painter and photographer.

Surrealists adopted a positive program, thereby avoiding the nihilism of Dada. They continued to agitate against tradition, order, and bourgeoisie aesthetic values but their most important goal was to advocate the unleashing of the subconscious. Their "method" stressed the primacy of dreams and automatism, the tapping of latent abilities, that had been overlooked and undervalued by previous generations, with the exceptions of the poet Nerval and poet Rimbaud. By these methods the Surrealists envisioned that they would harness the healing power of the imagination to gain insight into the problems of modern life. Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron observes:

Surrealism claims to mingle desire with human speech, and eros with human life—not just to tell, or to describe, desire and eros. It claims to abolish the notion of incongruity or obscenity, to let the subconscious speak, and to simulate different pathologies of language. It claims to overturn the quest for the probable in art by making an astounding bet on the imagination, presented as the central power of the human mind, from which emerges a whole life-in-poetry.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Jacqueline Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, trans. Vivian Folkenflik (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 2.

While these claims may appear overly ambitious, Surrealism remained a significant force in Western culture for over forty years and is still regarded as worthy of close study and criticism.

The question for this study, however, revolves around Surrealism's influence upon the Theater of the Absurd. As noted earlier, the shocking juxtapositions found in Dada reverberate in later Absurdist plays, but true Surrealist elements are less in evidence. According to Breton, the ideal Surrealist play would be produced through a creative trance or automatic writing and would be a work of art in that it liberated the subconscious, no matter how disjointed or absurd the result might appear to the audience. In the early days of Surrealism, Louis Aragon wrote two plays which were less than this ideal as they combined conventional plots with brief dreamlike interludes, a technique still popular in contemporary film. A few years later, Aragon and Breton co-wrote a play which was never reprinted because Aragon broke with Breton and the Surrealists over issues of Marxist politics in the early thirties.⁸⁷ In later theoretical writing Breton actively discouraged playwrights by a sweeping condemnation of literary speculation as false. He insisted that writers have no business creating what he called "pseudo-human beings" in speculating on the psychology of invented characters. He also claimed that acting was impossible because he denied that actors could really double themselves to portray a character.⁸⁸

Despite Breton's pronouncements, the Surrealists had an identifiable theatrical style and its most influential practitioners were Roger Vitrac and Antonin Artaud. To Artaud and Vitrac, theater art required more discipline and planning than a pure reliance on automatism would allow. In late 1926, they were expelled from Breton's circle for daring

⁸⁷ Esslin remarks that this play, *Le Tresor des Jésuites* forecast the outbreak of World War II ten years before it occurred and seemed to corroborate the Surrealist theory that automatic writing is often clairvoyant.

⁸⁸ Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, 169-171; Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 274-275.

to write Surrealist drama. They remained on the periphery of the Surrealist movement, and produced plays that interwove the images of the subconscious with images of reality in a way that anticipated the Theater of the Absurd. For example, Vitrac's sets used Surrealist artwork which scrambled the specificity of place allowing a railway station to double as a shop as well as a town square. Vitrac also treated time as relative (as in dreams) and nightmare visions introduced celebrities to anonymous strangers, and mixed ritual activities with casual murder. Vitrac's later work became more conventional but always retained a hint of his Surrealist past. This was especially true of *The Were-wolf* a comedy that takes place in a private mental ward. Surrealism was intrigued from the first with Freudian psychology. Breton had been disappointed in Freud's preoccupation with pathologies, but his followers were fascinated by such mental pathologies. Salvador Dali, for instance, was particularly drawn to the study of paranoia and obsessional fixations, both of which are reflected in the double images in his paintings. These were multifaceted figures that could be understood to represent different images, as in *Invisible Sleeping Woman, Horse, Lion, Etc.*, (1930).⁸⁹ Similarly, Vitrac's ability to invent dialogue that precisely captured the mania of the asylum was in keeping with the surrealist affinity for psychological authenticity, but also anticipated the dialogue of Ionesco and Beckett.

Antonin Artaud, born in 1913, was a poet, a stage and film actor, a playwright, and director. Artaud propounded the Theater of Cruelty, collaborating with Vitrac on a short-lived theater project called the Theater Alfred Jarry. There he directed a variety of plays—Strindberg's *Dream Play*, works by Paul Claudel, Vitrac and a sketch he had written. He also produced two novels and a journal recounting his visit to Mexico in 1936 where he lived for a time among the Tarahumara Indians. Suffering from long bouts of mental illness, he was confined for nine years to various French asylums; he was released

⁸⁹ Dawn Ades, "Paintings 1920-29: a short commentary", Exhibition brochure, *Dali: The Early Years*, Hayward Gallery, London, 1994.; Chenieux-Gendron, 178-181, 195.

in 1946 only two years before his death at the age of fifty-two. Like Vitrac's, Artaud's connection to Surrealism proper was brief but the attraction lingered. In his most significant work, a series of critical essays on the theater collected in 1938 under the title *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud created a reputation for inciting revolution.⁹⁰

Artaud's manifesto was rooted in his sense that modernity suffered "a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation" Artaud issued a call to resist the primacy of the written word and a reliance instead on the equality of language found in gesture, dance, lights, sound, visual art, voice and silences. Artaud called for a restoration of primitive myth, magic and gesture. Taking inspiration from the Balinese theater, which he had viewed at the 1931 Colonial Exhibition, Artaud asserted that "theatre is not psychological but plastic and physical." He was convinced that the theater of the East was able to achieve the communication of important feelings and passions more accurately than Western theater with all its words:

In the oriental theater of metaphysical tendency, contrasted to the Occidental theater of psychological tendency, forms assume and extend their sense and their significations on all possible levels; or, if you will, they set up vibrations not on a single level, but on every level of the mind at once.

Artaud viewed the written text as crushing the possibilities of drama, because speech inevitably obscures more than it clarifies, arresting the dynamic experience of communication. In drawing attention to the problems of speech, Artaud repudiated that vestige of Surrealist dogma that held out for the importance of literature. At the same time he proposed that modern theater restore the poetry behind the text. In so doing he introduced the problem of language that lies at the heart of the Theater of the Absurd. Indeed language may be the key preoccupation of the twentieth century search for

⁹⁰ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 277-279.

meaning in all the creative arts.⁹¹ Artaud himself may be regarded as a crucial bridge to the Theater of the Absurd to which we now turn our attention. Our stage remains France between the World Wars.

⁹¹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater And Its Double* (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 7, 71-72, 147-156; Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 279.

CHAPTER II

EXISTENTIALISM AND THE STAGE

The philosophical problems of semiology and ontology caused Antonin Artaud to diverge from Surrealist doctrine in the late 1920's and to formulate his own ideas regarding the possibilities of theater. Philosophers in Europe and in the United States also came to regard these issues as deeply significant. This chapter will consider the existentialist philosophers Sartre, Beauvoir, Marcel and Camus, discussing their philosophical ideas, but focusing on their efforts to dramatize their thought.¹ The plays produced by the existentialists of the 1940's linked the earlier experimenters of Dada and Surrealism to the Theater of the Absurd by rehearsing new ideas, without, however, adopting its form. In other words, though their perspective resembled the ideas of the Theater of the Absurd, the existentialist playwrights did not depart from the traditional dramatic conventions of the day. They served as a prelude to what Martin Esslin called "anti-literary theatre."²

To understand the dramatic work of the existentialists, it is important to explore the historical context in which existentialism developed, particularly in light of the war,

¹ Frederick Copleston, S.J., *A History of Philosophy*, vol. 9, *Modern Philosophy, From the French Revolution to Sartre, Camus and Levi-Strauss*. (New York: Doubleday, 1974, 1994), 328, n2, 240-241, 390-391. My own application of the title "existentialist philosopher" is somewhat loose in that it includes Camus who had studied philosophy but did not claim to be a philosopher by profession. It is also problematic, as will be evident in the description of Marcel's proposal of the label discussed in the text, and especially in light of the fact that Marcel, himself, later repudiated the label. However, it remains a useful adjective to describe writers who were preoccupied with the questions of Being and Becoming, human freedom and choice, and intersubjective relationships, and who also wrote for the stage in the immediate postwar period.

² Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 297.

genocide and depression that dominated the first half of the twentieth century. Though we shall also note the basic tenets of the philosophy, our focus will always be on the dramatic productions expressing the ideas. A play by Pablo Picasso foreshadowed the development of the Theater of the Absurd and leads to consideration of several representative existentialist works. To discuss the work of all French existentialist playwrights would exceed the scope of this study therefore this analysis will be confined to two plays by Jean-Paul Sartre. However, since Simone de Beauvoir, Albert Camus and Gabriel Marcel were also existentialists and playwrights who shared many Sartrean assumptions that similarly found expression on the stage, they too merit attention in this chapter.

In probing the nature of Being, the existentialist playwrights made extensive use of the metaphors of absurdity, revealing the power inscribed within it. As a theatrical device, the absurd situation, used as a metaphor for the anguish found in the human condition, expanded the possibilities of communication for the philosophers. A most obvious example of the absurd situation in a play we will consider is Jean Paul Sartre's *No Exit*—set in a living room in hell. The odd juxtapositions of comedy and tragedy defining the absurd had been periodically exploited on the conventional stage in earlier periods, as we have noted. The absurd situation could still be found in the twentieth century circus or music hall, but curiously had been dissociated from the realism of the literary theater since Ibsen. However, the absurd would return to serious theater in even more openly tangible ways with the stage innovations of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco in the 1950's.

In the years after the horror of the First World War, philosophers who came to call themselves existentialists found it necessary to introduce new words in order to adequately describe the sense of bewilderment that confronted modern humans. They judged this anguish to be derived from the universal human condition, the individual's quest for what it means to "be" and what constitutes the "self" and from an inability to develop satisfactory answers to these eternal questions. These philosophers saw this issue as the source of the

disaffection that afflicted the post-war generation. Modern anxiety went deeper than affixing blame for war guilt or expressing contempt for misplaced liberal optimism's inability to oppose the barbarism of armaments makers and ideologues. In the late 1930's and early 1940's, many theater companies in Europe and America pursued Marxist realism in the aftermath of worldwide economic depression. Existentialist philosophers were also writing for the theater, but saw the theater as a conduit for the expression of complex ideas and of the nearly inexpressible form of modern anxiety that had been plaguing human beings since Nietzsche announced the death of God and Kierkegaard described spiritual despair as "a sickness unto death."

The term existentialism, though not the philosophy itself, was born amid the turmoil of Paris at the end of the Second World War. Often considered Jean-Paul Sartre's own term, it was only adopted by Sartre and colleagues after some initial resistance. Simone de Beauvoir remembered a colloquium in the summer of 1945, at which fellow philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, wished to introduce Jean Paul Sartre as an existentialist philosopher. Sartre immediately complained that because he did not know what the term meant, it would be inappropriate. However, a few months later, Sartre had second thoughts as he delivered what was to be his first lecture to explain his philosophy; he entitled it *Existentialism and Humanism*. The name existentialism proved useful for communicating Sartre's ideas quickly to the general public. In the heady atmosphere of Paris following the Liberation of August 1944, there was an eagerness for information about Sartre's new philosophy.

Indeed, after the dismal years of the German occupation, Paris basked in a cultural renewal that touched off a postwar burst of creativity in the literary and creative arts. The tragedy of the war, the humiliation of France's early defeat, and the embarrassment of the Vichy accommodation, seemed to intensify the relief that Parisians felt in this burst of intellectual energy. It should be recalled that this period had a darker side as well; it was marked by strident denunciation of collaborationists and romanticization of the Resistance.

The new philosophy's association with heroes of the Resistance contributed to its warm reception among the French intellectuals and students who frequented the cafes of St. Germain de Prés. Existentialism was like a fresh breeze that blew through the heart of Paris and attracted the young, and the young at heart, to what seemed a daring, bohemian, and class-defying justification for all manner of change. Soon existentialism was described at least in the press, as more than a new philosophy—it became a "movement" or a "fad", complete with its own clique of celebrities, who also happened to be philosophers, and with fans who even assumed a characteristic wardrobe.³ In the long run, however, existentialism's position was undermined by the superficial knowledge of the philosophy by those who affected the faddish label. Unfortunately, the association of philosophical existentialism with this popular movement contributed to the skepticism of the public, and the coolness of its reception among academic philosophers. This particular form of existentialism could be seen as one of many post war ideas to experience a meteoric rise and fall in the culture of media celebrity where sixties Pop artist Andy Warhol predicted, "everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes."⁴ But there was a serious and lasting character to existentialism as well.

The foundations of existentialism or the philosophy of being had been well established in Germany since the turn of the century. The dominant theorists in the field of ontology were Karl Jaspers and Martin Heidegger. Although each had referred to his theory of Being as *Existenz philosophie*, and others had especially associated the word with Heidegger, both men disavowed any association with French existentialism.⁵ The tie

³ David E. Cooper, *Existentialism, A Reconstruction* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 1-12; Deidre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 360, 402. The wardrobe consisted mainly of black capri pants, and the ubiquitous black beret, which in reality Sartre only rarely wore.

⁴ Andy Warhol, *Catalogue, photo exhibition, Stockholm, 1968*, in *Familiar Quotations*, ed. John Bartlett, 15th ed. rev. and enl. Emily Morison Beck (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1980), 908.

⁵ Cooper, *Existentialism*, 1, 18 n.3. Curiously, however, as Cooper has noted Jaspers in a

that binds many otherwise independent thinkers within philosophical existentialism, at least superficially, is the method of study called phenomenology. As noted earlier, the academic discipline of philosophy had turned toward Hegelian idealism in the early nineteenth century, and in time, scientific positivism and dialectical materialism had sprouted from that very fertile field. In the late nineteenth century, dissent within the discipline prompted Wilhelm Dilthey to propose phenomenology as an approach to philosophic investigation that questioned the privileged position of objective knowledge and also served as a countervailing force to both of these highly regarded doctrines.

Phenomenology represented more than a critical reaction against the strains of a philosophy deeply concerned with economics and science. It was to be used as a new tool of discernment. The natural sciences attempted to define objects solely on the basis of the careful observation of their appearances, rather than through an analysis of their meanings. Dilthey contended that in the human sciences, such as philosophy or psychology, for example, it is impossible for the knower to be totally detached from his subject. In the natural sciences this detachment was the accepted method of scrutiny. According to Dilthey's theory, the knower in the human sciences must discover both the typical and the unique in his subject, an achievement that is only possible through his own participation in the process. Dilthey also claimed that the humanistic knower must set aside the scientific method, by abandoning established conclusions and the accompanying search for causes. Moreover, the philosophical observer must be open to wider possibilities of discovery. Students of Dilthey such as Karl Jaspers, Martin Buber, and Martin Heidegger were attracted to this alternative approach to philosophy. However, it was Edmund Husserl

collection of his writings in 1957 described a work of his own published in 1919 as an early work of existentialism.

who advanced phenomenology from a methodology of investigation to a systematic philosophy.⁶

Husserl was a committed rationalist, who used phenomenology to ground human reason in the extensive data that the human sciences had provided since the mid-nineteenth century. As a rationalist Husserl began with Descartes's *cogito*, but moved beyond it by positing that the "I think" cannot be separated from that which is thought. Using the diagrammatic method of bracketing, or phenomenological reduction, he introduced a system that, unlike the older concept of a detached subject and independent object, allowed phenomena to be observed without questioning their independent existence. Husserl also assumed the existence of "a 'transcendental ego' which, as the subject of knowing, transcends all contents of knowing, including the psychophysical ego. The contents of knowing also have a transcendence, that is, they announce themselves as other than the subject, but one less immediately known."⁷ Husserl also submitted that the existence of the world originates in the transcendental ego's exploration of the world which is the same as one's phenomenological knowledge of the world. Moreover, Husserl augmented Cartesian philosophy by proposing that there exist "other I's" that we recognize by analogy with ourselves. He saw the metaphysical world as being made up of these "other I's" and thus saw life as an intersubjective experience.⁸

Husserl's phenomenology had a broad influence. Existentialist Martin Heidegger took Husserl's phenomenological method and altered it to produce an ontological system, a system centered on the concept of Being-in-the-world. This was an idea that opposed the Cartesian duality of subject and object, and declared that humans exist within the world totally and cannot be described in any other way. Karl Jaspers developed his own

⁶ Maurice Friedman, *The Worlds of Existentialism*, 69-70.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁸ *Ibid.*

version of phenomenology which had an important impact on Heidegger's study *Being and Time* (1927), but Jaspers later rejected ontology as the appropriate offspring of phenomenology. Rather he posited what he called "the Encompassing" which was a "way of knowing that transcends the subject-object relation even more radically than phenomenology."⁹ Jean Paul Sartre was also attracted to Husserl's phenomenology. In 1933, shortly after he commenced his teaching career, Sartre won a fellowship to the French Institute in Berlin, arriving just as Adolf Hitler was assuming control of the German state. Phenomenology attracted Sartre because it opened possibilities for simultaneously describing human existence and the existence of the natural world.¹⁰

Existentialism used phenomenology as its method, but phenomenology was not the sole shaper of existentialism. Husserl purveyed a methodological form. Jaspers, Heidegger, Sartre and others used Husserl's method in the development of their own versions of existentialist philosophy but did not accept all of Husserl's theories. For example, Sartre accepted Husserl's phenomenology and his notion of intersubjectivity, but he did not accept Husserl's concept of the transcendental ego. Sartre's colleague Maurice Merleau-Ponty shared Husserl's conviction regarding the importance of the subject's experience of the world yet rejected his idealism. Such independence of thought often characterizes philosophical debate but it was especially descriptive of the existentialists of the late 1940s.¹¹ In general, each study of existentialism outlines a particular rivulet in the wide stream of existentialism and then contrasts it with one or more other approaches. In addition to composing philosophy treatises, the French existentialists branched out into literature and wrote essays, short stories and novels. These works too expressed the

⁹ *Ibid.*, 71.

¹⁰ Copleston, *Modern Philosophy*, 340-341, 350.

¹¹ Copleston, *Modern Philosophy*, 398; Friedman, *The Worlds of Existentialism*, 70-71.

unique character of their authors. Thus when several French existentialists began to write for the theater, the drama reflected unique variants of existentialist thought.

In spite of this individuality of emphasis, however, certain shared themes of existentialism can be discerned among the playwrights. The themes of existentialism which are of concern in this study are the broad motifs associated with the existentialist movement of the postwar period and not the specific principles of any one philosopher. Existentialism was frequently characterized in the media as a philosophy of gravity, even gloominess; this was because its themes reflect the feelings of dread and near despair that accompany the confrontation of the self with human contingency. As Kierkegaard put it, existentialism arises from what the "soul must experience on the brink of the great Void."¹² In the modern secularized world, this confrontation has come to entail grappling with the problems of alienation; problems with which Hegel and Marx had also contended. These problems include the alienation of the individual from the self, the alienation of individuals from one another and from their work or that which gives purpose to their lives. Existentialism is thus concerned with what it means to be human, with the human response to negative experiences in the world, and with discovering the potential of the human condition. Unlike other philosophies however, it does not imply the necessity of system building and it rejects the Platonic principle of essentialism—that one's "essence is prior in reality to existence."¹³

For existentialists, humans exist first and create their essence, what they are, by their own free choices. Thus existentialism accepts as incontrovertible, the importance of engagement in the world, in that to be really human requires a proactive encounter with life. It resists prescriptions and valorizes human freedom and the concomitant

¹² Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 29.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 104.

responsibility to act, in order to fully realize one's individual potential. Some of these points are vulnerable to misinterpretation and, indeed, have led to common misconceptions about existentialism, but the fundamental issues lent themselves to adaptation in the theater. Existentialism performed on stage provided a timely experiment in the communication of ideas. Despite their inexperience as dramatists, the philosopher-playwrights of the postwar years recognized that the theater allowed for subtlety in argumentation that was impossible in didactic philosophical writing. Thus, in the 1950's, when the popularity of French existentialism had begun to fade, the theatrical dissemination of the basic philosophy was still available through both the plays of the philosopher-playwrights, and, in an even more basic, undiluted form, in the Theater of the Absurd.¹⁴

Within a few months after the fall of Paris to the Nazis in June 1940, the music halls, cabarets, cinemas and national theaters were operating again. In spite of the many deprivations of the war, the public was quickly enticed back to the traditional forms of entertainment. The attraction of the theater was, as it had always been, part escape and part affirmation of the life of the community. It went on even when the public risked being caught in air raids during performances, or losing their way en route along darkened streets. Most citizens habitually carried flashlights in the evenings. Because of the inadequacies of public transport, Parisians also ran the risk of being caught stranded somewhere, or worse, they might be caught in breach of the curfew that was imposed from midnight until five a.m.. Simone de Beauvoir recounts that in the latter days of the war, there were times when literary readings and gatherings developed into all-night affairs to avoid curfew violation altogether: "The moment midnight had struck, choice also

¹⁴ Martin Esslin, "Is it All Gloom and Doom?" *New York Times*, 24 September 1967, Sec.2, 1, 3.

became necessity: of our own free will, yet willy-nilly, too, we were shut up in this apartment until dawn, with a forbidden city around us."¹⁵

The hardships suffered by the artists, staffs and directors of the theaters were considerable. Most obvious were the material deprivations. These included rationed goods of such stage essentials as paper for posters, tickets and programs. Costumes presented a challenge to the resourceful and sets required innovative reconstructions of old flats. Since the Germans were enthusiastic to preserve European culture, they supported the theater and the Vichy government even provided subsidies for certain productions. Publicity was not a problem; collaborationist newspapers advertised widely and the theater weekly, *Commedia*, continued publication in spite of strict censorship.

On the whole, material privations were modest sacrifices for the artists compared to the challenges of creative production and the ever present menace of censorship. More sinister was the injunction of the German occupiers and their Vichy government against Jewish writers and performers imposed as the theaters were reopening. This policy applied not only to Jewish artists but to anyone who could not prove his or her racial purity. The ban deprived actors, writers and staff members of their livelihoods and imposed months of economic distress which cost them not only their careers, but often resulted in their deportation and death. The outcome of this proscription was the permanent loss to the French theater of many talented people, and the further polarization of the theatrical community in invidious ways. Theater managers were required to turn over lists of suspected Jews and in return for their cooperation, the *Propagandastaffel* would permit their theaters to reopen without delay. This acquiescence to the will of the occupiers was felt most poignantly when director Charles Dullin renamed the *Theatre Sarah Bernhardt*, the *Theatre de la Cite*. Though Dullin claimed that he chose the name

¹⁵ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime Of Life, 1929-1944 (La Force de l'age)* trans. Peter Green (New York: Paragon House, 1992), 450.

to indicate a theater that would be accessible to all, the relegation of the famed Jewish actress to oblivion was resented. Perhaps the Nazis believed that by assigning anonymity to a theater building, they could provoke cultural amnesia in French audiences steeped in a theatrical tradition rich with heroes and myths.¹⁶

Those actors, writers and staff members who were allowed to continue working had to abide by the strict rules of censorship imposed by the Nazis. Often these strictures were overcome through the inventive use of older plays that could be performed without hint of subversion. This often yielded bizarre results as when the German authorities approved plays like Shaw's *Saint Joan*, strictly for its anti-English bias, neglecting to notice that it upheld French nationalism and moral righteousness. French audiences of course interpreted the story in their own way and supported three different productions during the war years. The final version, Vermorel's *Jeanne avec nous* was so popular, that it finally aroused the censor's suspicions and was quickly banned. According to historian Ruby Cohn, who has written widely on the period, there is no surviving list of the plays that were proscribed but it is well known that the German authorities encouraged Greek classics and German Romantic dramas. Faced with the prospect of producing the latter, several directors chose exile instead.

In the inter-war years, French theater had been dominated by great directors such as Jacques Copeau, Louis Jouvet, George Pitoëff, Jean Cocteau, Charles Dullin, and Jean-Louis Barrault. In the post-war period the stage became the domain of the playwright. Part of this transition and one of the most unusual aspects of the war years themselves was the human capacity for adaptation displayed by a group of playwrights whose dramatic work, in less perilous times, might never have gained any notice. In wartime Paris, however, there was a sprouting of interdisciplinary creativity that coincided with the

¹⁶ Brown, *Theater and Revolution*, 304, 424-425; Ruby Cohn, *From Desire to Godot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 24.

struggle to survive both physically and psychologically. The period calls to mind the heightened creativity of Renaissance Italy or the concentration of scientific investigations in the eighteenth century. Like the coffeehouse society of the liberal Enlightenment, the Paris cafés fostered intellectual productivity during the war. Wartime deprivation forced intellectuals to seek refuge in the heated cafés rather than remain in the isolation of the scholar's study. As a result, several new playwrights appeared between 1940 and 1945 whose principal vocations were in fields other than drama. Sartre and Beauvoír, for example, were philosophers who earned their livings as secondary school teachers. Gabriel Marcel was also trained in philosophy and spent a few years teaching, but was primarily a freelance writer who wrote plays even before he wrote philosophic treatises. Albert Camus was a journalist whose Resistance work closely tied him to politics.

Even more unusual among the wartime playwrights was the celebrated painter Pablo Picasso, whose involvement in drama had long been confined to the area of scenic design. Neither philosopher, nor latent existentialist, Picasso, however composed a play during the war that can be considered a bridge from Surrealism to The Theater of the Absurd. *Desire Caught by the Tail* (1944) provides an insight into the wartime creativity of Paris and the milieu in which the existentialists began to write their plays.

In the winter of 1941, sitting in an unheated studio after a day spent painting, Picasso turned to drama to express himself. Beginning with some scenic sketches, he wrote a play dealing with the privations of wartime and recalled the Surrealists' inventions of the 1920's. At the same time its emphasis on visual images also foreshadowed the Theater of the Absurd. Picasso, who was sixty years old in 1941, was a generation older than many of the Surrealists. An early enthusiast of both Dada and Surrealism, he had designed costumes and sets for several avant garde ballets, notably Cocteau's *Parade* in 1917 and *Tricorne*, *Train Bleu* and *Merkure* in the early twenties. Andre Breton and Louis Aragon favored him over rival Francis Picabia, a fellow Spanish painter in the early days of the Surrealist movement. Picasso was also a close personal friend of Robert

Desnos, the Surrealist poet. Through Desnos Sartre and Beauvoir were received into the charmed artistic circle of those, who, like Picasso, had remained in Paris during the Occupation.¹⁷

As both a Spaniard and Marxist, Picasso risked detention or worse when he chose to remain in Paris. Many of his Jewish and Communist friends had been picked up by the Gestapo, but he had been left alone. In spite of his well known Spanish Republican bias, his sexual licentiousness and his contempt for Fascism, he had not suffered as had other members of the intelligentsia. However, he could not get *Desire Caught by the Tail* produced commercially. It was daringly avant-garde and thus inherently suspect to the authorities. Moreover, it dealt with the preoccupations of wartime life: cold, hunger, sexual privation and smaller miseries like chilblains. Unsurprisingly, these subjects proved unattractive to producers who feared both audiences and censors. Subsequently, the play was given as a dramatic reading in the intimate atmosphere of Michel and Louise Leiris's apartment on March 19, 1944. Michel Leiris was a former Surrealist, an ethnologist and writer. Louise Leiris ran her Jewish brother-in law's art gallery which she had bought to protect it from the Nazis. The Leirises offered their ample livingroom overlooking the Seine as a venue for Picasso's play, and cast the roles among friends. As Simone de Beauvoir related the story of this unconventional production in her memoir, it took on the aura of a stellar performance despite the inexperience of the players. Many of the actors were already, or soon would be celebrities. As word of the unusual event had quickly spread through Paris, many celebrities of the artistic and literary scene soon clamored to

¹⁷ Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, 39. Desnos had also written a surrealist drama called *La Place de l'Etoile* in 1927, which he revised from memory in the Czechoslovakian prison camp, Theresienstadt, and it was later published in its revised version. He was arrested by the Gestapo in Paris one month before the first performance of *Desire* and died of starvation soon after his liberation.; Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 280-281.; Dorothy Knowles, *French Drama of the Inter-War Years 1918-1939*, (London: Harrap, 1967), 88.

fill the seats, and there was standing room only for the nearly one hundred guests by the time the play began at seven p.m..¹⁸

Desire Caught by the Tail was directed by Albert Camus, a young journalist, lately arrived in Paris, who had some experience with amateur acting groups in his native Algiers. The cast included the hosts, Michel and Louise Leiris, Jean Paul Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir, Raymond Queneau, Dora Marr (Picasso's lover) and actress Zanie Campan. Rather than costumes, the players donned their wartime best. Simone de Beauvoir, for instance, later recalled that she had borrowed pieces of her outfit. The actors sat in a semi-circle of chairs facing the audience. The extraordinary evening remained a resounding memory for many of the participants, not only because of the celebrities in attendance, but also because of the artistic audacity and political impertinence of producing so daring a play in so intimate a space. There was the further enjoyment of staying up all night, listening and discussing each other's works-in-progress. Beauvoir recalled that the event inaugurated a series of *fêtes* which she and her friends held over the next few months, leading up to the Liberation. Anxiously pursuing the new friendships among the artists and intellectual women she had met that night, she admitted that, in these subsequent gatherings, "we wanted to repeat the special sort of night we had enjoyed after the reading of *Desire Caught by the Tail*."¹⁹

The sketch that Picasso did of the opening Act of the play, shows a number of legs dangling around an untouched banquet table laden with three bottles of wine, six glasses, a plate of fish, a plate of ham and a human head on a plate. The obvious allusion is to the desire for food that had become an obsession during the war years. Throughout the play, Picasso playfully demonstrated how human desires in wartime—for food, sex,

¹⁸ Ruby Cohn, *From Desire To Godot, Pocket Theater of Postwar Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987) 26.

¹⁹ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 450-453.

warmth and security—could only be "caught by the tail" and never satiated. He relied not only on the visual, but on the other senses as well. For example, Picasso's stage directions for one scene demand that the aroma of a huge pot of potatoes frying should waft through the theater, obviously adding to the sensual delight of the scene, at least for those who might have eaten before the performance.²⁰ Reflecting Picasso's well known sexual appetite, much of the dialogue cheerfully utilized images of food to evoke erotic desire, while love plays second fiddle to lust in the relationships between the characters.²¹

Picasso designed *Desire Caught by the Tail* as a play in six acts, deliberately ignoring the conventional five act structure. His cast of characters were given unusual names like the two Bow-Wows, or Skinny Anguish and Fat Anguish. Several names evoke images of food such as Tart, Round End (of sausage), and Onion. The characters Curtains and Silence mock the traditional theater convention where their usual role is to simply exist. Most provocative was the sexual allusion in the name of Picasso's protagonist, Big Foot, an egotistical writer, sexually involved with Tart. Tart's Cousin, as the name indicates, is a very bland creature.²²

Writer and poet Raymond Queneau believed that Picasso wrote *Desire Caught by the Tail* very much in the Surrealist vein, where scenic images are more important than plot and dialogue. In fact, there is virtually no plot in *Desire*. The dialogue is disjointed, with various events occurring often abruptly, in the course of the six acts. A sudden storm ends the first Act, and a picnic leaves the actors in coffins rather than relaxing in a leafy glade in Act Two. In Act Three four female admirers of Big Foot cut off his hair and are they are bloodied in the process. Picasso's fascination with numbers is evident in Act Four

²⁰ Cohn, *From Desire To Godot*, 28-31; Roland Penrose, *Picasso, His Life and Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 337.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 29.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

when the cast wins a lottery only to be asphyxiated by the smoke of the sizzling french fries. The final act seems especially bizarre when a huge and blindingly bright golden ball marked "Nobody" forces cast members to put on blindfolds as they point accusingly at one another.²³

Picasso's sketches accompanying the script indicate that the characters might be realized on stage as bare legs and feet which, especially in the cold second Act, would rub against each other for warmth. Characters named for body parts had been used in Dadaist Tristan Tzara's play, *Le Coeur a Gaz*, and was a technique often associated with the Surrealists in drama and in painting. The personification of body parts was adopted not for its shock value alone, but for its layered interpretive value. Ambiguity of meaning remained an aim of the Surrealists, despite their lingering reputation for perverse obfuscation.²⁴

Michel Leiris the only other member of the cast besides Queneau who reflected on the play, offered critical praise. In an introduction to a volume of sketches by Picasso that he entitled "Picasso and the Human Comedy or the Avatars of Big Foot," Leiris proposed his own interpretation of the strange image of the golden ball in the final act. Just before its appearance, Big Foot makes a speech which calls for the lighting of lamps and the end of hostilities. Without warning, the enormous shining ball appears and temporarily blinds the cast members who, Leiris suggests, had only just begun to believe that through their struggles they could see themselves by seeing themselves through others. In being blinded by the huge ball called "nobody," Leiris maintained that Picasso's message is that human beings, caught in time, share in the limitations, in the "the blindness" of the human

²³ Cohn, *From Desire To Godot*, 31-32.

²⁴ Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, 17.

condition. This was cause for neither rejoicing nor pessimism. Picasso, Leiris concluded, as the greatest artist of his age, was also its most impartial chronicler.²⁵

This connection to the universality of Picasso's art oversimplifies the ambiguities of the play. Two Cold War images lie coiled in *Desire Caught by the Tail* that may be considered relevant to an historical discussion of the intersection of theatrical absurdist images and the anxiety of wartime France. They are the image of doves and of the golden ball. Ruby Cohn points to Big Foot's line, "Let's throw flights of doves against the bullets with all our might," as a foretaste of Picasso's famous dove of peace image, produced eight years after the play. Though censors would not have allowed an overtly antiwar play to be produced during the war, Cohn's reading of the play contends that it emphasized sexual desire over the desire for other creature comforts deliberately to obscure the even stronger desire for peace hinted at in the ending. Cohn goes on to suggest that the image of the golden ball is "at once a threat and a promise."²⁶ Although atomic research was inchoate and top secret at the time the play was written in 1941, the blinding light of the golden ball is nevertheless eerily suggestive of the blinding flash of the atomic blast. The image of a light greater than a thousand suns would haunt the postwar world and contribute to its fear of Armageddon. Both of these images call to mind the prescient images of artists and poets of the interwar years who predicted the devastation and genocide of the Second World War, and the concept of procognitive powers or "objective chance" advanced by Surrealism.²⁷

²⁵ Cohn, *From Desire To Godot*, 32.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 31.

²⁷ Surrealism did not wish to imply mere randomness in their use this term, rather they called it "objective chance" implying that there is a strong element of the unconscious in what appears to be randomness. The most startling example of "objective chance" is the 1931 painting *Self-Portrait with Enuclated Eye* by Victor Brauner, who, indeed, lost an eye seven years later in a fight. Chenieux-Gendron, *Surrealism*, 81.

The reading of *Desire Caught by the Tail* in March 1944 was attended by literary and artistic figures who would figure significantly in the postwar world. Actor and director Jean-Louis Barrault was there, as was actress Maria Casares, painter Georges Braque, photographer Brassai, poets and novelists Paul Eluard, Georges Limbour and Georges Bataille, psychiatrist and writer Jacques Lacan and the playwright Armand Salacrou and his wife Lucienne. The text of the play was first published in 1944 along with Picasso's four sketches. There were also several post-war performances in London, though most of them consisted of dramatic readings, because "some Rabelaisian details are impossible to act." One famous reading of *Desire* was held at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in which Dylan Thomas participated.²⁸

Simone de Beauvoir remembered that some followers of Picasso took *Desire* very seriously, as they did his every creation. However, few of those present at its premier ever mentioned it, even in their autobiographies. In their numerous reflections on the theater, neither Sartre nor Camus gave their impressions of it. The wartime reading was not reviewed and aside from the postwar London performances it was neglected until 1970 when Jean-Jacques Lebel produced it in Paris.²⁹ Like Joyce's play *Exiles*, drama was not regarded as Picasso's best medium and critics and friends generally dismissed *Desire* as dabbling.

There may be more to *Desire* than contemporaries remember. In *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin wrote that Picasso's play, like Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, made seminal use of image which was, after all, Picasso's metier and flowed naturally from the Surrealist

²⁸ Penrose, *Picasso*, see note 12, 338. The most obvious detail which Penrose refers to is in Act 5 when Big Foot and Tart fall to the floor in an embrace which induces Tart's onstage defecation.

²⁹ *Desire Caught by the Tail* was lavishly produced in 1970 by Jean-Jacques Lebel, famous for staging lavish Happenings. Cohn sees this as evidence of the play's role as an antecedent of the Happenings of the late 1960's and 1970's and the accompanying enthusiasm for the theatrical process. Cohn, *From Desire To Godot*, 35.

visual arts.³⁰ Esslin saw *Desire* as a play that could have been a Picasso painting sprung to life and verbally explicating its meaning from the gallery wall. Ruby Cohn added that for the discriminating student of theater, Picasso's *Desire* offers a fine example of the Surrealist legacy—devaluing dialogue, appreciating visual images, enhanced by sounds, smells and even (in a vicarious manner) by flavors. Cohn sees in this visual dominance Picasso's link with the later Theater of the Absurd, particularly because Picasso's purpose in both art and theater was to "decondition the spectator, wrest him out of his passiveness and fixedness, and allow him to make his own montage of events as he does in his daily life, itself a sort of permanent collage of successive and or simultaneous visions."³¹

Sartre, Camus and Beauvoir relished their parts in *Desire*, but by 1944 had already begun to write their own plays. They left no critique of Picasso's play. Since their own dramas dealt with similar themes, but done in more conventional forms, they appear not to have appreciated the germ of Absurdist drama within *Desire*. This is probably due as much to their academic bias in favor of discourse, as to the shortcomings of their artistic imaginations. Conscious of their positions as neophytes in the field of drama, they were primarily committed to the clear elucidation of philosophical ideas.³²

The new drama that was to tie together the philosophical elements of existentialism and of theatrical revolution called for by Artaud was germinating in *Desire Caught by the Tail*.³³ When he participated as the character, Round End, Jean-Paul Sartre was already a

³⁰ After the reading of his play, Picasso invited friends back to his studio which was just a few blocks away and allowed them to admire his original manuscript of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, an icon of the avant-garde revered by the Surrealists for its black humor. Cohn, *From Desire To Godot*, 34

³¹ Pierre Cabanne, quoted in Cohn, *From Desire To Godot*, 35; In their creative works the Surrealists used what Chenieux-Gendron has called an "obstinate disordering" and "unreasoning, irrational reasoning" which especially appreciated the collage process of abstract artists like Picasso.

³² Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime Of Life*, 453; Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre On Theater*, ed., intro, annotated by Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, trans. Frank Jellinek (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.), 184-185, 188-191.

³³ Cohn, *From Desire To Godot*, 35.

playwright. In 1940 while a prisoner of war in Trier, Sartre had written and produced a Christmas play for his fellow prisoners called *Bariona, or Son of Thunder*. He referred to it as a traditional mystery play based on the birth of Christ however it was soon obvious to his comrades, two of whom were priests, that it was really about the Roman occupation of Palestine. Its veiled references to liberty buoyed the spirits of the soldiers, and Sartre saw playwriting as a means of resistance, when he returned to Paris after escaping from the Germans. At a moment in French history when German propaganda was admonishing every loyal citizen to acknowledge defeat, and join them in their so-called European revolution, Sartre thought collaboration could yet be stifled by the right sort of play. Though he continued work on his philosophy, publishing *Being and Nothingness* (1944), as well as a novel, he searched for the story that would allow him to compose a play, unmistakable in message, yet, which the censors would not suppress.³⁴

The fruit of his search *Les Mouches* or *The Flies* (1943) reworked the classical *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. The *Oresteia* was a trilogy of plays which dealt with the blood feuds of the House of Atreus in the wake of the Trojan War. As the most powerful Greek king, Agamemnon of Argos was required to lead an expedition against Troy to retrieve Helen, the wife of king Menelaus, his brother, who had fled from Greece with her lover Paris. While Agamemnon was away from Argos, his wife Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus, plotted his murder. The murder was accomplished on Agamemnon's triumphant return to Greece from Asia Minor after ten years of war.

The action of *The Flies* is confined to that of the second drama of the trilogy known as *The Libation Bearers*.³⁵ The play opens fifteen years after the murder of Agamemnon. The scene is the town square in Argos which is dominated by a huge and

³⁴ Sartre, *Sartre On Theater*, 191-194.

³⁵ C. A. Robinson, Jr., ed., "Introduction" in *An Anthology of Greek Drama* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1965), x,xi.

terrifying statue of Zeus, king of the gods. Zeus, the god of death and the bringer of flies, is offered holocausts by the citizens of Argos to atone for the regicide. Orestes, son of Agamemnon was supposed to be killed by Aegisthus's henchmen, but instead, had been secretly brought up abroad. He returns to Argos incognito and finds the city still performing penance for the murder of his father. King Aegisthus wishes to gain favor with those who hold him responsible for the crime by leading the annual ceremony to commemorate the dead. Zeus, disguised as an ordinary human, meets Orestes and urges him to leave Argos. Displaying youthful naiveté and scholarly indifference to the sufferings of his native city, Orestes agrees to continue his wanderings since he has no interest in revenge. However, Orestes then encounters his sister Electra who confides that she has been mistreated by her mother, Clytemnestra and Aegisthus and is consumed by hatred for the murderers. Though he keeps his identity a secret from her, Orestes agrees to remain for the ceremony, in which Aegisthus will call up the dead, that they might walk among the living for a day and night.³⁶

In the second Act, during the memorial rite, Electra dances a joyous dance in defiance of the solemnity invoked by Aegisthus. She agrees to stop her dance only if there is a sign of objection from the gods. Zeus, who is in the audience, signals such disapproval, and Electra quits her dance. In defiance Electra has deeply stirred her brother leading Orestes to make his identity known to her. He joins in her commitment to revenge. Despite warnings from Zeus, the two embark immediately on a mission to murder Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. Though Zeus tries to warn the king of his impending doom, Aegisthus offers no resistance when Orestes attacks and kills him and the queen.³⁷

³⁶ Jean Paul Sartre, trans. by Stuart Gilbert, *No Exit and Three Other Plays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1955), 50-74.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 75-109.

The third and final Act finds Orestes and Electra, having taken refuge in a temple of Apollo, negotiating with Zeus who offers his protection against both the howling mob at the doors and the Furies, goddesses of remorse, who are ready to devour them. Electra, badly shaken by the murders, accepts Zeus's offer of protection, but Orestes, who sees that Zeus's offer masks the continuation of the life of expiation and torment that Argos has endured for fifteen years, rejects his help. Despite Zeus's arguments and awesome demonstrations of power, Orestes confronts the god and asserts his freedom. In claiming his freedom, Orestes takes the more arduous path and heroically confronts the crowd. He releases the citizens from their ordeal of penance, declines the proffered crown of Argos and leaves the city drawing the flies and the Furies with him.³⁸

The Flies illustrates anew the link between modern and classical theater.

Twentieth century avant garde drama, in reaction to nineteenth century Realism, returned to the classical and medieval theater for inspiration. In doing so, there was always at issue the playwright's fidelity to the ancient texts. Despite Sartre's liberal transformation of the story, he uses the *Orestia* as a vehicle for the integration of ideas, reflecting the modern practice, inherited from Ibsen. He bridged these traditions more effectively than some of his contemporaries like Cocteau, Elliot and O'Neill whose updated versions of the classics were criticized for having modern techniques and designs but little appeal to the intellect. As a philosopher first, Sartre's emphasis upon ideas should come as no surprise, but we may also be impressed with the success of Sartre the novice playwright clearly communicating to his audience. His success was based upon his use of modern colloquial speech while maintaining the classical tone through costume and scenery. *The Flies* opened at the Theatre de la Cité and, despite wartime shortages, the production was

³⁸ Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 110-127; Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker*, 201-202.

mounted in the traditional non-realistic style that the Greeks had invented, even utilizing masks and employing a professional sculptor.

Sartre was not interested in transforming the *Orestia* into a modern drama for novelty's sake, nor did he wish to reinterpret the story with the assistance of modern psychology. The liberties he took with the story allowed the plot to revolve around the relationship of god and human beings more than around the human relations of his characters. Thus while the play looks and feels like a retelling of a classic Greek tale, it is really a reinterpretation that allows its author to intrigue his audience and provoke reflection.³⁹

What was the message that Sartre meant to communicate? Sartre purposed nothing less than the revaluation of the "seditious" idea of freedom. As he had done in prison camp, he was anxious to rally his fellow citizens without alerting the Germans. Sartre saw the inaction of his fellow citizens of the Occupation as a form of complicity, of what he called "bad faith." Beyond this incitement to action, however, lay his conviction that true freedom is never merely received, but must be actively grasped by the individual. However, to accept *The Flies* on the level of political propaganda alone is shortsighted, as critic Eric Bentley pointed out in an early review. More important, the enduring and universal message that political freedom arises out of individual human freedom—the focal point of Sartrean philosophy. Such freedom could only be achieved through an understanding of the self and its necessity to act in order to achieve the realization of the individual. As Bentley observes, "for Sartre . . . self-fulfillment and altruism are complementary."⁴⁰

The Flies illustrates Sartre's ideas in other ways as well. Orestes, the obvious protagonist, is initially innocent and detached. He is knowledgeable, well educated, and

³⁹ Dorothy Knowles, *French Drama*, 27, 149; Simone de Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 426.

⁴⁰ Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker*, 205.

clever. He knows his true identity, though it has only recently been revealed to him by his elderly tutor. This knowledge has little apparent effect and he relishes his ability to go where he pleases, when he pleases. As the play proceeds, however, Orestes' detachment is replaced first by a wistful longing to have memories of his own, then by a need to fit into the life of the woeful city of Argos and, ultimately, by a desire to find his own place within his family. These wishes unite to urge him to act—a commitment he shoulders in the scene after Electra's dance when he determines to slay his mother and her lover. In accepting his fate, he is not accepting the arbitrary plan of the gods, as in the classic rendering of the Aeschylus tragedy. Rather, he is accepting his human condition and the freedom it entails. His dialogue with Zeus is crucial; it allows Orestes to proclaim defiantly that Zeus had blundered by giving humans their freedom: "Neither slave nor master. I *am* my freedom. No sooner had you created me than I ceased to be yours."⁴¹ Sartre's ideas concerning freedom are given human form in Orestes. Sartre held that humans are totally free—they do not choose this situation for themselves, it is part of being conscious. Each person has a right and responsibility to make choices. In choosing one commits oneself and ideally commits others as well. To fool oneself "by embracing some form of determinism, by throwing the responsibility on to something apart from his own choice, God or heredity or his upbringing and environment"⁴² constitutes bad faith. Thus, Orestes, forced to confront his situation, makes a decision which will have merit for him and ultimately his people as well.

At the end of the play, important questions remain concerning the action taken by Orestes. The audience looks for the result of Orestes' difficult choice and what it gained him. Orestes, in choosing to commit the crime of murder, also chooses to face the consequences in expiation for the sins of the city. The murderers have been punished and

⁴¹ Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 121.

⁴² Copleston, *Modern Philosophy*, 358.

Orestes feels no remorse for his decision to kill them. However, as Zeus had made clear from the the first scene, the collective guilt of the people of Argos is a sin of omission—that is, they did not take action on the night they witnessed the murder of Agamemnon. Years of slavishly offering oblations merely compounded their sin of inertia, a sin Electra repeats when she succumbs to Zeus's offer of oppressive protection.

In his final speech, Orestes intimates that the citizens' sins of omission are less easily satisfied than those of the actual murderers. Nevertheless, Orestes is willing to assume his people's guilt as well as his own because he has discovered the nature of his true self. He will do this out of his commitment to their welfare. He reminds the people who accepted Aegisthus, the criminal, as their king, that they did so because he was like them, without "the courage of his crimes." In contrast, Orestes declares, "You see me, men of Argos, you understand that my crime is wholly mine; I claim it as my own, for all to know; it is my glory, my life's work, and you can neither punish me nor pity me. That is why I fill you with fear."⁴³ This fear can be construed as the awe of those who recognize that Orestes is unafraid to accept the burden of responsibility that comes from admitting his guilt and living in exile. William Barrett sees here a connection between Sartre's play and Heidegger's definition of conscience as "the will to be guilty—that is, to accept the guilt that we know will be ours whatever course of action we take."⁴⁴

Another view, suggested by Philip R. Wood, holds that Sartre has attempted to introduce the Nietzschean view that in the wake of the dissolution of traditional religion, humans had to assert their freedom through actions for which they accept total responsibility, even when remnants of guilt are appended. Modern humans may still be nostalgically linked to outdated moralities, but freedom and commitment are the correct

⁴³ Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 126.; James D. Wilkinson, *The Intellectual Resistance In Europe* (Cambridge: A:Harvard University Press, 1981), 14-15.

⁴⁴ Barrett, *Irrational Man*, 252-253.

antidotes for remorse. Unlike the Aeschylus version, in which Orestes's violent act results in the toppling of the moral order and can only be resolved by the power of Zeus, Sartre's Orestes rejects the intervention of Zeus and stands alone. Orestes's repudiation of remorse illustrates Sartre's own convictions, first, that human freedom is of paramount importance and second, that conscience is a strictly human construct. While Sartre insisted that individual freedom was an absolute, he resisted extrapolating it into a universal. He allowed that choice was available in every situation and that freedom was not perfect but was bound within environmental considerations. Still human freedom, even in its most confined sense, was valuable in a world of relative values.⁴⁵

Sartre clearly took liberty with the ancient text by attributing modern existentialist motives to his hero. He removed Orestes from immersion in his own culture and values by assigning him a nomadic personal history. The tutor reminds Orestes early in the play of his ability to appreciate other cultures and worldviews because together they have deliberately wandered the world. The tutor has taken great pains to teach Orestes openness to alien beliefs and customs and to avoid the pitfalls of commitment. Anachronistically suspended in a world of relative values Orestes is allowed to experience the luxury of feelings that are unencumbered by cultural bias. As the prototypical outsider, he tries to avoid entanglements that might decrease his liberty. As the play progresses, however, his position as outsider becomes untenable and his aimlessness leads to an alienation from his real self, corrected only by his total immersion in his society and family through violent and revolutionary acts.⁴⁶

This commitment to action was a potent message in Occupied France, where collaboration went on daily, and where even the most minor resistance resulted in

⁴⁵ Bentley too hints at this Nietzschean connection though Wood is more emphatic. Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker*, 207; Philip R. Wood, *Understanding Jean-Paul Sartre* (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina University Press, 1990), 180-183.

⁴⁶ Wood, *Understanding Jean-Paul Sartre*, 183-186.

gratuitous and bloody reprisals. Simone de Beauvoir noted audience tension at the first performance of *The Flies* in the spring of 1943: "It was impossible to mistake the play's implications; the word Liberty, dropped from Orestes' mouth, burst upon us like a bomb."⁴⁷ The effrontery of the political message was apparently perceived by the German critic of the *Pariser Zeitung* who denounced the theme but still gave the play an agreeable review. Unfortunately, Sartre's immediate purpose was thwarted because, while censors did not close the play, sparse audiences led to a brief run. In the underground press, Michel Leiris and Merleau-Ponty wrote hearty endorsements of the references to liberty, but most critics, however, ignored or overlooked the political allusions and gave scathing reviews of the dialogue calling it "wordy, obscure and plain dull."⁴⁸

Sartre's definition of personal freedom was one of the few tenets of his existentialism that American philosophers found attractive in the early days of the post-war period. While Sartre's reputation was already established in Paris, it was less secure in the United States where his philosophical works were unavailable in English translation, unlike his novels. This suspicion of Sartre was exacerbated by media attention that associated him with a faddish bohemianism. Much of the groundwork for acquainting Sartre with the American public was done through the work of academics in French and Philosophy Departments who had spent time in Europe before the war, or took advantage of Fulbright scholarships immediately after the war. Sartre's devotion to personal freedom struck a resonant chord in America where individualism and liberty were traditional values. Some philosophers disparaged Sartre's ethical stance as irrational and anarchistic. However, others found in it an aspect of liberalism that might survive liberalism's discredited belief in inevitable progress, a legacy increasingly regarded as untenable after

⁴⁷ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 427.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

thirty years of war and persecution.⁴⁹

The Flies later played widely in various countries but the immediate response was limited since Sartre was unknown outside of France. The play did raise questions of Germany's war guilt when it played in Berlin in 1948. In a public debate there, Sartre was blamed for having written a play of "summary general absolution" and he pointed out that his intention had been to show how freedom requires choices to be based on present situations rather than a sterile past.⁵⁰ Since the 1940's, the play has been viewed as a topical piece dealing with the ethical choices faced in war. But it resisted relegation to the dustbin as a mere relic, serving Sartre well as a means of confronting the ethical questions important to existentialists—problems of power and oppression, and questions of survival and the nature of humanity. It also provides a readable access to Sartre's philosophy, particularly his major treatise, *Being and Nothingness*.

Sartre's *No Exit* (1945) was more widely applauded at its opening than *The Flies* and has continued to draw the greater attention over the years. The story of its inception can be pieced together from accounts by several sources. The wife of the business manager of the Vieux-Colombier Theater where the play premiered in 1944 was the popular actress Gaby Silvia. In her memoirs, Silvia relates that when Sartre's friend, Albert Camus, asked him to write a small play for four characters, Sartre obliged with *No Exit*. According to Beauvoir's somewhat different recollections, it was not Camus who requested the play but rather Marc Barbezat, a young producer friend.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Eleanor Ann Fulton, "Sartre In America: The Impact of Sartrean Thought on American Philosophers, 1945-1963," (Ph.D. diss., University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1991) 45-101.

⁵⁰ Professor Steiniger, quoted in Sartre, *Sartre On Theater*, 193.

⁵¹ Cohn, *From Desire to Godot*, 36-37. Sylvia told how Camus and Sartre had enjoyed the performance of *Desire Caught by the Tail* in the Leirises' living room, and that Camus, whom Sartre had first met at the dress rehearsal of *The Flies*, asked him to write a play that could be performed in an intimate setting such as a friend's flat; Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 438-439. An entrepreneur, Barbezat

Sartre's original plan was to rehearse in Paris, and then to take the economical little play on tour throughout Vichy France. As it happened, the realities of wartime intervened and the tour never materialized. Directed by Camus, the players rehearsed in Beauvoir's room at the Hotel La Louisiane. Camus who had previously directed Picasso's play, also played the character, Garcin.⁵² The other three roles were played by friends, Olga Barbezat, her sister Wanda Kosakiewicz, and Jacques Chauffard. During rehearsals, Barbezat was arrested by the Gestapo and, by the time she was released the production had undergone major changes. When the manager of the Vieux-Colombier Theater was introduced to Sartre and asked for a play, Sartre offered *No Exit*, and thus plans went forward to produce it in Paris. Camus whose directorial experience was limited, offered to step aside and a professional director, Raymond Rouleau, prepared to stage the play with a new cast. Rouleau was an experimental director who had been associated with Antonin Artaud at the Theater Alfred Jarry in the late 1920's, and had worked with both Roger Vitrac and Charles Dullin.⁵³

Sartre later explained that one of his motives in writing the play was indeed to provide work for three actor friends. By early 1944 he was well enough acquainted with the stage to recognize that each actor, friend or not, would jealously guard his or her time on the stage. Unwilling to incur the wrath of any one of his friends, Sartre determined that all three characters of the principal characters must remain on stage throughout the entire performance. To meet this obligation, he first thought to set the play in a bomb shelter during a prolonged attack, but instead he mischievously placed his characters in hell, and

owned a pharmaceutical factory near Lyon and independently published a biannual periodical in which *No Exit* was first published. In return for the opportunity for exposure the play would afford his actress wife, Barbezat agreed to underwrite all the production costs.

⁵² Camus was Sartre's second choice. Sartre had planned to ask Sylvaine Itkine to direct it but because he was Jewish and forbidden to work in Paris it would also have been dangerous for him in the unoccupied zone. Cohn, *From Desire to Godot*, 37.

⁵³ Cohn, *From Desire to Godot*, 37-39. Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 439, 444, 448-449, 461.

designated each the torturer of the other.⁵⁴ The set reflected Sartre's anger against his own bourgeois class by fixing hell to resemble a typical upper middle class living room, with a small table, three mismatched sofas, and a mantelpiece. The set directions are minimal but precise: "drawing-room in Second Empire style. A massive bronze ornament stands on the mantelpiece."⁵⁵ Because of the curfew, the play had to be short and without intermission. Thus, Sartre produced a one act play, which contributed to the claustrophobic atmosphere of the plot. However when it was produced, in late May of 1944, its compact form was unappreciated. Lasting only eighty minutes, *No Exit* was combined with another short farce in order that theater patrons would feel that they had gotten their money's worth.⁵⁶

The plot, thick with melodrama of the kind that filled Paris tabloids, revolves around three unacquainted individuals who find themselves doomed to spend eternity locked in a room together. Each character is aware of his or her doomed position yet spends the entire time in attempting to work out a plan of happiness with one of the others, only to realize the impossibility of such a task. Gradually, through dialogue rather than action, the characters reveal themselves and the choices they made in life that led to eternal damnation. Ultimately all three realize that what initially seemed only an arbitrary and inconvenient arrangement constitutes pure torture, because there is no respite even through the escape of sleep. This becomes clear through the circularity of the plot.⁵⁷

The cast included the three principals and a surly valet enters occasionally, serving as a minor yet demonic presence. The first character introduced to the room and audience by the valet is Joseph Garcin, a journalist from Rio, whose former life featured a career of

⁵⁴ Sartre, *Sartre On Theater*, 198-199.

⁵⁵ Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 3.

⁵⁶ Cohn, *From Desire to Godot*, 44-45.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

wife abuse and philandering. Garcin considers himself a hero and champion of pacificism, who fled his country in time of war. He was arrested at the frontier and executed by the Brazilian military for desertion. Next comes Inez, an acknowledged lesbian and former post office clerk who admits to feeling compelled to act sadistically even toward those to whom she is attracted. She is dead because she had seduced Florence the wife of her own cousin, who was later killed by a streetcar. In remorse over his death, Florence, turned on the gas in their flat as they slept and they were both asphyxiated. The third member of the trio is Estelle, a wealthy socialite whose lover committed suicide after she killed their infant daughter before his very eyes. Estelle considered his suicide selfish and absurd since no one, not even her own husband, knew anything about the affair or the child. Her own demise was rather banal, the result of pneumonia.⁵⁸

Sartre's renown as a playwright was established with this play although at the time it greatly shocked audiences with its sexual overtones. Lesbian characters had rarely even been seen on stage, consequently Inez's attempted homosexual seduction of Estelle appeared extremely indecent. Likewise, the rather conventional dramatic situation of an attractive man and two desirable women rankled because Garcin's sexual indifference to both seemed "unnatural." These almost soap opera stereotypes contributed to Sartre's reputation for daring. The bizarre situation in which the protagonists found themselves produced the tension that Sartre further developed through the repetition of certain words, such as "trap," by the aimlessly sexual circularity of the interactions of the characters; and even by the ugliness of the set, and the uselessness of the props that included a Barbedienne sculpture too heavy to move and a paper-cutter useless as a weapon since the characters are already dead. The dialogue is spare and taut, furthering the tension and at

⁵⁸ Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 3-30.

the same time introducing an attitude of creeping enervation as the characters become aware of time passing on earth while in the room, time is irrelevant⁵⁹

The dialogue in the room is occasionally interrupted by earthly visions granted to each character and set in the aftermath of his or her own death. These scenes reveal to the audience the circumstances of each life. For example, Garcin is distracted by scenes from his earthly newspaper office, and Estelle is haunted by the consolation offered to one of her adolescent lovers by her own best friend. Meanwhile, within the room, their situation preoccupies them. Initial attempts at alliance quickly devolve into a struggle for sexual dominance among the three. Simultaneously they come to realize that their particular arrangement was not the result of arbitrary chance. They begin to refer to an insidious "they" who are responsible for placing these three particularly well suited people together in order that they may torture one another. In fact, they suspect that the bureaucrats who run the netherworld have chosen this economy of punishment for its efficiency. Their roles are the inevitable result of their individual aversions, fears and flaws, the sum of their actions in life.⁶⁰

No Exit proceeds ineluctably from these premises with the characters appealing to each other's desires only to be cruelly rebuffed. Garcin's virility is ridiculed by Inez, the prototypical "castrating woman." Inez is rebuffed by Estelle for being lower class and sexually deviant; and Estelle is ultimately referred to as "slimy" and akin to a "quagmire" when Garcin realizes her self absorption and deviousness. Garcin longs for the shirt-sleeve honesty of his former male companions, the comradery of the smoke-filled newsroom. He strains to hear what his former editor and fellow writers are saying about him. Their opinion of his bravery, or lack of it, matters to him even after death. His feeling of uncertainty is pervasive, extending even to the knowledge of his own motives.

⁵⁹ Cohn, *From Desire to Godot*, 41-43.

⁶⁰ Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 9,14-15,18.

He fears that he may have deluded himself and that his pacifism masked true cowardice. Sartre allows Garcin to reveal his character by allowing him to boast about his sexual exploits and his abusive treatment of his wife. Certainly his inordinate need to appear a man of action suggests his own doubts. Sensing his fear, Inez early labels Garcin a coward, the epithet he fears most. Later in an attempt to romance Estelle, he expects a fawning admiration. At first compliant, Estelle goaded by Inez, ingenuously admits that it is his body rather than his character that attracts her, dealing a blow to Garcin's ego. Garcin comes to realize his dismal state when he knows that it is Inez's honest moral approval, rather than his former colleagues' favorable opinion, that he requires and will never get. Likewise, Inez 's already pathetically distorted self-image, an internalization of society's homophobia, leads her to sadistically sabotage the romance of the other two. Even Estelle who plays a sophisticated but also superficial society type at the start, is reduced to her truly miserable narcissistic self when Garcin recognizes that she cares not at all whether he is or is not a coward.⁶¹

Having watched the three characters gradually replace polite introductions by frank self-revelation and increasingly savage psychological probing, the audience is forced to recognize the downward spiral of characters trapped in their own patterns of behavior. As the three begin to savage each other, the door into the outer corridor opens, seeming to offer escape. Faced, however, with the choice of leaving or (Estelle's inclination) of throwing out one companion, there is no choice at all. Moments before all three had wanted only the possibility of escape; now they simply repeat their habitual patterns of behavior from life and shrink back from the unknown.⁶² Some critics labeled this scene a mere theatrical contrivance to insinuate a climax where there is none. Others have seen the open door as inconsistent with Sartre's philosophical point that only the living can

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 30-47.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 43.

make choices and that the choice to remain in their familiar hell therefore stretches credulity. However, the open door in and of itself does not imply a true escape, an end to the damnation and suffering of the three, but only the possibility of a different kind of hell. In remaining with the familiar, they are then acting once again in bad faith, which is consistent with the avoidance of choice.⁶³

The final dialogue confirms that each character is there as the tormentor of the other and that therefore they must endure an endless cycle of pain. In despair, Garcin delivers the most famous line of the play, "There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is—other people!"⁶⁴ Often misinterpreted as Sartre's reductionist and pessimistic assessment of modern human relations, it is more a diagnosis of the disease to which humans are susceptible. In later years Sartre resisted the tendency of the public to oversimplify his thought by focusing on this key phrase lifted out of context. He pointed out that his play, *No Exit*, is about the importance of human freedom, and about the problems of human relations, especially among those who have not recognized the importance role other people play in obtaining knowledge of ourselves.⁶⁵

In *No Exit*, as in *The Flies*, Sartre again expostulated existentialist philosophy. His characters demonstrated how the freedom to choose requires the assumption of responsibility for the choices made, no matter what consequences. *No Exit* also illustrated how an individual's self worth is determined not only from within but also, and often more substantively, by other people. That is, an individual's own idea of self stems from how he or she is viewed by the Other. This is clear when Inez says, "You're a coward, Garcin, because I wish it. . . . And yet, just look at me, see how weak I am, a mere breath on the

⁶³ Cohn, *From Desire to Godot*, 41.

⁶⁴ Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 47.

⁶⁵ Sartre, *Sartre on Theater*, 199-200.

air, a gaze observing you, a formless thought that thinks you."⁶⁶ An individual's ability to make free choices hinges on this understanding of self. Frequently one's self worth can be undermined by this dependence upon the gaze of the Other. In the opening of *No Exit*, there is much made of the lack of mirrors. The beautiful and vain Estelle finds this more than an inconvenience as she is forced to look into Inez's eyes to see her own reflection. Inez's game of flattery turns instantly to treachery as she lies about a blemish that she "sees" on Estelle's face. This is a metaphor for the kind of distorted reflection that can paralyze an individual. In the case of Garcin, a "real man" image is a front for cowardice. He has alienated his freedom to his being-for-the-other. His solution—is to play at courage through demeaning his wife and other women—deluding only himself. He is guilty of being insincere and acting in bad faith as Sartre uses the terms in *Being and Nothingness*.⁶⁷ Inez has been similarly objectified by the hostile gaze of the Other caused by disapproval of her sexual identity leading her also to act in bad faith in life. That is, in revenge for her own treatment, she will objectify others and treat them sadistically. This is her error for "it means she has implicitly accepted the terms in which she is condemned by the society in which she lives instead of freely assuming her sexual preference."⁶⁸ Finally Estelle, whose self-definition relies on being the object of male admiration cannot respond to Inez's sexual advances, and is equally incapable of responding to Garcin as he wishes her to, that is, by affirming his courage. Estelle is thus trapped within the cycle of her own behavior. This loss of freedom has resulted from her being-for-the-other rather than freely choosing her own self-definition. She wishes to objectify Garcin and appropriate him for her own self-gratification.⁶⁹ At play's end, the three characters are feeling the final

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 45.

⁶⁷ Wood, *Understanding Jean Paul Sartre*, 191-192.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 191.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 191-192.

despair of their situation and their own entrapment in an eternally repeating scenario alluded to in the play's final line: "Well, let's continue."⁷⁰

According to Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre's original title for *No Exit* was *Les Autres*, or *The Others* and it was first published under that title in the magazine, *L'Arbalette*.⁷¹ The title by which the play is known in French, *Huis Clos* meaning "in camera," is from the Latin "in chamber." It is a judicial term for an often secret proceeding that takes place behind closed doors. Both terms suggest elements of the play that are crucial existentialist underpinnings. *Les Autres* stresses the idea that for the individual the Other has a fundamental impact upon self perception and one's freedom. *Huis Clos* also suggests that the characters are in deliberation about actions already performed. The English translation, *No Exit*, suggests merely confinement and ironically the lack of freedom. On one level this is true since the characters are doomed by their errors and will pay the consequences by forfeiting eternal freedom. However, Sartre was anxious to relate the message of freedom and creative human choice and the title *No Exit* misrepresented existentialism as a philosophy of affliction and despair.

Eric Bentley saw *No Exit* as a modern morality play and a classic character study using Aristotle's definition. Aristotle observed that moral rectitude is revealed through the choices that an individual makes in life. For Bentley *No Exit* represents the story of three flawed individuals who continue to make choices in hell consistent with those they had made in life and which obviously has led to their predicament. Bentley called it a "philosophical melodrama" and associated it with Strindberg, a playwright whose

⁷⁰ Cohn, *From Desire to Godot*, 42; Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 47. In this instance, I chose to use Ruby Cohn's translation of the line as opposed to the Stuart Gilbert translation because it has a nuance of circularity that is missing from Gilbert's "Well, well, let's get on with it."

⁷¹ Beauvoir, *The Prime of Life*, 439.

importance for Bentley was in combining comedy and tragedy within the same play and producing an "intermediate genre" for which as yet there was no other name.⁷²

In their plays as in their philosophy, Sartre and fellow existentialists, Marcel, Camus and Beauvoir returned to considerations of real human dilemmas, and acknowledged the problems inherent in making choices. However, it is "the Act" that is paramount. The actions that take place in the plays are not studied for the motives attributed to those who enacted them. Rather, attention focuses on the Act itself as it takes place in the present. As Jacques Guicharnaud put it so clearly, "Acts are no longer considered as products but as invention."⁷³ Because the idea of the creation of the self is central to existential thought, it introduced an exciting new dimension to the drama of the post-war years. Existentialist plays went directly to the heart of drama, presenting the most difficult choices humans are required to make. In a story or novel, even quotidian events can uncover the individual who acts in bad faith. In drama, however, action needs to be compressed and the audience's attention concentrated. Thus, the philosopher-playwrights used acts of great violence or the imminent threat of violence in order to intensify the impact of the Act on the audience.⁷⁴ Camus's *Caligula* (1944) with its absurdly gratuitous slaughter represents an even more striking example than *No Exit* where numerous murders and suicides have already taken place before the curtain goes up. We should not discount the theatrical tension that Sartre accomplished by the deliberate and systematic revelation of the acts of violence in *No Exit*. In existentialist plays, it is understood that humans are defined by their freedom to choose, and thus by their

⁷² Bentley, *The Playwright As Thinker*, 198-201.

⁷³ Jacques Guicharnaud and June Beckelman, *Modern French Theatre, From Giradoux To Beckett* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1961), 134.

⁷⁴ *Ibid*, 132-137.

consequent actions. Therefore, it is fair that they are also judged by their actions alone. Their self delusions and the excuses, fostered by their physical situations or psychological flaws, are summarily disallowed. Garcin believes that he is a hero because in life he willed himself to be one. He excuses his lack of heroic acts, which might have proven his intention to be courageous, as mere chance—having "died too soon." Inez responds pitilessly: "You are your life and nothing else."⁷⁵

Dorothy Knowles, in a study of the Parisian Studio theater movement of the inter-war years observed that the existentialist philosophers were not merely using drama to stage philosophical exercises. Rather, because the philosophy focused on the world of human experience, it linked up naturally with drama. In describing Gabriel Marcel's drama, Knowles commented "the concrete nature of his thinking . . . blend drama and dialectics so effectively that the 'idea' and the 'action' coincide, . . . since an existentialist philosopher refuses to consider any but concrete situations, the natural expression of his philosophy is drama."⁷⁶ For Marcel as for the other existentialists, drama was an opportunity to delve into human relationships and to probe the borders of morality. Unfortunately, the issues which provided the dramatic thrust often resulted in disappointing denouements as "illumination" replaced action on stage. Simone de Beauvoir's first play, *Useless Mouths* (1945), is a case in point. To veil its wartime message, Beauvoir set the drama in a medieval French village under siege. As starvation sets in and winter looms ahead, the leaders of the village must determine who should be saved and who should be sacrificed so that the town might survive. The plot revolves around various subgroups of citizens who question the right and power of the leaders to make such choices. Ethical issues such as these were faced daily during the Occupation and the philosophers were urged to publicly display their probing. As Beauvoir

⁷⁵ Sartre, *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, 44-45.

⁷⁶ Knowles, *French Drama*, 248.

discovered, however, critics were quick to point out that *Useless Mouths* was "not so much a play as a dramatized philosophical statement" and "the actors do not interact but rather follow each other in building a seamless argument."⁷⁷ Despite such notices, the existentialists had the creativity and perseverance to continue composing these living demonstrations of their philosophical concepts. They were also fortunate to be the inheritors of a theatrical experimentalism, cultivated and kept alive by the directors and playwrights of the "little theater" movement of the 1920s and 1930s.

Considering the three decades following World War I as a whole, however, we are forced to conclude that Antonin Artaud did the most basic theoretical spadework for the changes taking place in drama. This was true despite his long absence due to his failing mental condition and ill health during the war years. Moreover, Artaud was the most frequently acknowledged by the playwrights themselves, as the guiding spirit of a new generation of playwrights. The new conception of drama that Artaud helped to inaugurate through his manifestos in *The Theater and its Double* centered upon criticism of *theatre dialogue*, that is, theater in which language played an overarching role. Artaud saw that kind of theater as a dead end: "The contemporary theater is decadent because it has lost the feeling on the one hand for seriousness and on the other for laughter,"⁷⁸. Other new playwrights, who were not philosophers, like Samuel Beckett, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee shared with Artaud the notion that theater needed to recapture the art of the visual, expressed like Picasso's *Desire Caught by the Tail*. At the same time, like the

⁷⁷ Deidre Bair, *Simone de Beauvoir, A Biography* (New York: Summit Books, 1990), 268.

⁷⁸ Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and its Double (Théâtre et son Double)*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), 42. Artaud also said, "a theater which subordinates the *mise en scène* and production, i.e., everything in itself that is specifically theatrical, to the text, is a theater of idiots, madmen, inverts, grammarians, grocers, antipoets and positivists, i.e., Occidentals."(41)

existentialists, the playwrights of the Absurd wished to invent a drama that was integral to life, used concrete forms, and was assembled from the active experience of living⁷⁹.

Sartre's early plays were different from the talkative French dramas of the inter-war years and from the avant-garde drama that during the fifties was at first called "anti-theater" and later the Theater of the Absurd. Though immersed in existentialism, *The Flies* was quite conventional in both dialogue and form. On the other hand, *No Exit* manifested a spareness of dialogue, a hardness of feeling and a circularity of design that would be taken up by the next generation of playwrights of the Paris avant-garde. Critics routinely trace the plays of Beckett, Genet and Pinter to Sartre's *No Exit*.⁸⁰ After the war, the brilliance of new playwrights, the accomplishments of sophisticated dialogue, and even the talents of actor's trained in Stanislavsky's acting "method" were insufficient to the task of communicating clearly the perplexing ideas of existentialism. The theater needed a new more visual means of communicating ideas.

⁷⁹ Knowles, *French Drama*, 315-317.

⁸⁰ Cohn, *From Desire to Godot*, 50.

CHAPTER III

BEYOND SPEECH: SAMUEL BECKETT

The name of the dramatist Samuel Beckett conjures up visions of poorly lit theaters with gaunt figures wandering a bare stage looking for something that is never found. The puzzlement and frustration that early reviewers felt has since been transformed into an academic industry preoccupied with finding meaning embedded in Beckett's work. To gain some perspective on Beckett's very distinctive vision—a vision that had a profound impact upon Harold Pinter and Edward Albee, the playwrights who are the focus of this work—it is necessary to discuss Beckett's life and career and to explore his intellectual influences. From this perspective, we can then assess his contribution to the modern and postmodern contemporary theater.

Since his death in 1989 at the age of 83, there has been debate over whether or not Beckett's drama, especially his later works, reflected an increasingly nihilistic view of life. Assuming this to be true, some scholars have described him both as the founder of the Theater of the Absurd and its logical culmination, implying that his work takes absurdism to its creative limits.¹ This issue merits critical attention because it is the contention of this dissertation that Beckett's work, admittedly pessimistic about human existence, was

¹ Rodney Simard, *Postmodern Drama: Contemporary Playwrights in America and Britain* (New York: University Press of America, 1984), x. Simard argues that younger playwrights in Britain and America after Beckett, recognized the revolution created by the Absurdist and fused their strong tradition of realism with the tenets of Absurdist theater, Epic theater and "other literary genres" to produce a postmodern synthesis in drama. Simard's work shares this study's goal to discern the evolutionary pattern of the Theater of the Absurd, but his characterization of Beckett's outlook as nihilistic is not convincing. Moreover, Simard's use of the term "postmodern" is overly inclusive—placing two playwrights as different as Sam Shepard and Tom Stoppard under its umbrella.

not nihilistic. On the contrary, Beckett's major opus, *Waiting for Godot* (1953) contained within it the seeds of further creativity and generativeness, which were in turn cultivated by Harold Pinter and Edward Albee, who then influenced their younger contemporaries. Beckett plays a crucial role in the history of both the literary and performing arts of the twentieth century. He was, as we shall see, both an innovator and an explorer. Beckett expanded upon the creative investigations of the modern writers of the twenties, absorbed the philosophical speculations of the inter-war period and produced a new dramatic form in the late 1940's. His experimentation in theater led him to film, television and what became known as performance art in the Sixties and Seventies.

In the early postwar period, Beckett singularly illustrated the trend toward cultural cross fertilization that was to increase rapidly over the next half century. Irish by birth, his first language was English. He wrote novels and plays in French which he translated into other European languages. His works were subsequently translated into a multitude of languages worldwide where they have enjoyed success in diverse cultures. In addition, Samuel Beckett's drama served as a catalyst for the changes that were to take place in dramatic criticism throughout the Sixties. He prepared the way for critical appreciation of innovative younger playwrights whose work has enriched the theater of the second half of the century.

Despite controversy over the meaning of Beckett's message, theater historians agree that he was responsible for the postwar revolution in theater which began with his *Waiting For Godot* in 1953. This fact does not diminish the importance of other experimenters, such as Picasso, Sartre, and Camus, whose contributions have been described in the previous chapter. Nor does it ignore Eugène Ionesco whose play, *The Bald Soprano*, premiered in 1950 and who is considered by some to have been the quintessential absurdist. However, *Waiting For Godot* was a bona fide landmark—it replaced traditional assumptions of what constituted acceptable theater. *Waiting For Godot* presented audiences with a new realism grounded in the illogical, the unlikely and

the absurd. Beckett's drama brought to the stage the modern artist's dilemma: the question of how humans might surmount the barrier of a desiccated language rendered impotent by war and holocaust to express themselves in a chaotic world. Beckett demonstrated to the audience what the existentialist philosophers had tried to explicate in their works and to suggest with conventional plays, namely, the absurdity of human existence.²

At the end of the twentieth century it is apparent that Beckett's significance was underestimated by his contemporaries almost as much as James Joyce's (1882-1941) importance was inflated by his friends. Beckett himself was among those intellectuals responsible for establishing Joyce's reputation. Paris in the early Thirties was a haven for artists who attempted to keep alive the creative burst of the postwar period despite the chilling pressures of worldwide economic depression and political polarization. Beckett, worshipped Joyce as the greatest writer of his time, an opinion shared by other fervent admirers like William Faulkner.³ At the same time, Beckett was troubled by his idol's weaknesses, Joyce's egotism, his serendipitous writing habits and emotional diffidence. Joyce's biographer, Richard Ellmann, reported that in spite of Beckett's closeness to the elder writer, Joyce rather callously informed the younger man that he held no allegiance to anyone outside his immediate family.⁴

Because of his celebrity as the author of *Ulysses*, James Joyce basked in the friendship of numerous writers. Because of his failing eyesight, he often used young

² Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, xxi, 295-297.

³ Frederik L. Gwynn and Joseph L. Blotner, *Faulkner In the University* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1994), 39.

⁴ Richard Ellman, *James Joyce*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 648-649, n. 648. An example of Joyce's serendipitous method appears in a story Beckett told Ellman in 1954. When he was once taking dictation from Joyce, Beckett wrote down Joyce's unintended response to a knock on the door. He later read the transcription back to Joyce, who, though puzzled, allowed the stray remark to remain. Ellman saw this as evidence of Joyce's willingness to "accept coincidence as his collaborator."

authors and linguists like Beckett as translators and transcriptionists. Unlike the others Beckett had the advantage of being a fellow countryman although one of a distinctly different social background and upbringing from that of Joyce. Beckett's biographer, Deirdre Bair, ascribed a certain snobbery to Joyce's inclusion of Beckett among his followers because of the young man's upper middle class Protestant roots. Beckett had grown up in fashionable Foxrock outside Dublin, the scholarly second son of a successful businessman.⁵ At the time of their first encounter in Paris, Beckett had been appointed to a two year position as English *lecteur* at the prestigious École Normale Supérieure. He intended to become a professor of Modern languages at Trinity College, Dublin. However, under the influence of Joyce and his circle, Beckett's life changed. He gave up the goal of academic life and committed himself to a literary career. As a result of what he later called Joyce's "moral effect," Beckett devoted himself to the integrity of art. Thus, the student who was initially in danger of becoming a mere clone of James Joyce came to be identified as a talent as brilliant as his mentor, and just as unique.⁶

Samuel Beckett's privileged upbringing and educational opportunities led to the fortuitous meeting with Joyce. Beckett attended private schools in Dublin and later the famous Portora Royal boarding school in Northern Ireland where cricket and rugby were his abiding passions. Remembered for playing nasty pranks on despised teachers, Beckett was not an outstanding student. However, despite average grades he was accepted at Trinity College, Dublin. At Trinity Beckett settled into the study of modern Romance languages and began to distinguish himself as a scholar. While the Romance languages were more popular among women than men at Trinity, Beckett, like James Joyce, had a gift. Dr. Thomas B. Rudmose-Brown, the Chairman of the Modern Languages Faculty,

⁵ Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett, A Biography*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1978), 19-24, 70.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 70, 73, 78.

seeing in Beckett an heir apparent, managed to get him the prestigious Paris appointment to the *École Normale Supérieure*.⁷

During his two years in Paris, Beckett's close ties with the Joyce family held a crucial snare. Joyce's daughter Lucia developed a romantic crush on the young man and, because he did not reciprocate, he correctly feared that his rejection of her would cause a rift with Joyce. Lucia had already manifested signs of the schizophrenia that would later require her institutionalization. After months of avoiding the inevitable, an ugly scene estranged Beckett from the Joyce family and he reluctantly returned to Dublin.⁸

Beckett taught at Trinity for a year, but then abruptly resigned. Rudmose-Brown was extremely disappointed in Beckett's inability to accept academic life and the Beckett family was equally disheartened by his restlessness. Beckett spent the next several years moving from Germany to Paris and back to London trying to make a living as a creative writer. Frustrated by his inability to generate a regular income, he regularly returned to his parent's home, Cooldrinagh, though he found it difficult to do so. Unlike his older brother who bowed to family demands and entered business, Sam was determined to follow his muse over all objections.⁹

Whenever Beckett returned to Dublin, his impatience with the insularity of the literary scene and the constraints of Irish nationalism and Catholic censorship irritated him so intensely that he knew he would always find it difficult to tolerate living in Ireland. Forced by circumstances to remain at home, he suffered from chronic illnesses which were eventually attributed to mental anxiety and depression. Shortly after his father's death in

⁷ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 39-56.

⁸ Ellman, *James Joyce*, 648-649.

⁹ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 54-55.

1933, Beckett's poor physical health led him to move to London to seek psychiatric analysis.¹⁰

Samuel Beckett's parental relationships were complex. His schoolboy worship of his father was replaced by a warm respect, and camaraderie developed between them from a shared interest in sports. Beckett's academic interests mystified the elder man, but during the years in which he was attempting to become a writer, his father was encouraging. In the last few weeks of his father's life, Beckett came to feel a great tenderness toward him. His relationship with his mother was much more problematic. Explosive confrontations characterized his early years and these continued through the 1930's. Because he shared her stubborn nature and moodiness, he needed large quantities of mental energy to resist her attempts to control his life.¹¹

Because this tempestuous contest of wills continued for so long, Beckett experienced frequent episodes of illness in his late twenties. His symptoms, which included outbreaks of painful boils, lung infections, and headaches, were so severe that Geoffrey Thompson, a friend who was studying psychiatry, urged Beckett to enter analysis in order to work out the causes of his debilitating condition. During two years of analysis in London, Beckett came to believe that his neurosis stemmed from a difficult birth which had arrested his psychological development, a theory suggested in a lecture by C. G. Jung which he attended with his analyst, W. R. Bion. Beckett consoled himself that his eccentric behavior—his inclination to hide in bed for days for example—represented the manifestations of a womb fixation. Once he had accepted this view, he felt able to get on with his life. Analysis had helped Beckett deal with his personal relationships, but there were also professional problems to be overcome. By this time Beckett was in his late

¹⁰ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 174-179.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 162, 188-190.

twenties, he had published only a few critical essays and some translations. He had as yet not found a sustained source of income from his writing.¹²

In the early 1930's, the literary world was preoccupied with Freudian psychology. As we noted in our discussion of Surrealism, artists considered the unconscious mind an uncharted sea of possibilities.¹³ Beckett defined the unconscious mind as a repository of memory and imagination, seeing it as an increasingly important creative tool. The Jung lecture was indeed pivotal to Beckett's development as a writer.¹⁴ Jung spoke on the role that complexes play in the unconscious. He described how complexes could resist the control of the ego as in schizophrenia where they become virtually autonomous, living "apart from the intentions of the person in whom they exist."¹⁵ In normal psychology, Jung, pointing to the poet as an example of one who utilizes the complexes of the unconscious mind to invent characters, claimed that the mind of the author could be read through a study of his characters. Beckett was already familiar with Parisian Surrealists' uses of the unconscious particularly automatic writing. He agreed with the principle that the unconscious mind of any writer was responsible for the creative drive. Yet, at the same time, Beckett found the creative process frightening because it forced him to confront deeply buried feelings. The internal contest between his use of the unconscious and his fear of it contributed to frequent bouts of writer's block as his writing matured.¹⁶

¹² *Ibid.*, 208-213.

¹³ For a discussion of Surrealism see pages 47 to 49 and 53 to 56 above.

¹⁴ Several scholars have noted that Jung's Tavistock lecture had a strong impact upon Beckett's later writing. Deidre Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 400-401 discusses its influence on Beckett's *The Unnameable*, composed during his mother's last days. Ricks noted that an anecdote imparted by Jung about a patient was used later in *All That Fall*, a radio drama. Christopher Ricks, *Beckett's Dying Words, The Clarendon Lectures, 1990* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 121-122; 121, n. 69.

¹⁵ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 208.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 400-401, 408; Carl G. Jung, *Analytical Psychology, Its Theory and Practice* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1968), 80-82.

In London, Beckett returned to the literary projects he had begun in Paris, mainly writing poetry and short stories. He made a little money doing criticism and book reviews. In May 1934, *More Pricks Than Kicks*, his collection of ten short stories, was published. The collection, featuring the picaresque adventures of Belacqua Shuah, a native Dubliner and lazy poet, illustrated Beckett's comic style, integrating social and literary satire with linguistic devices—puns, hyperbole and parody. One critic concluded, "the stories are disconnected in spite of occasional cross-references; [and] Beckett's comic veneer precludes sympathy for the characters."¹⁷ Not surprisingly, *More Pricks Than Kicks* sold only five hundred copies, and was banned in Ireland, on the basis of its title alone¹⁸

During this early period, Beckett was absorbed by two subjects that would later weave themselves into his literary creations. One was his preoccupation with death and in particular with suicide. The latter assumed the character of more than an adolescent attraction, coming dangerously close to morbid fascination which, during periods of deep depression, might have ended in his own suicide. During his first visit to Paris, he engaged anyone willing to discuss the subject, and in the inter-war years there were numerous examples of poets such as Hart Crane and Vladimir Mayakovsky who had taken their own lives.¹⁹ Observers later suggested that there was a conscious cultivation of self-

¹⁷ Ruby Cohn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1962), 39.

¹⁸ The title was taken from the story of Paul's conversion in Acts 9:5 of the New Testament. "I am Jesus whom thou persecutest: it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks." Beckett irreverently twisted the Biblical quote into a rude pun. Cohn, *The Comic Gamut*, 26; Bair reported that by 1951 a request had been made to overturn the ban but that the Censorship of Publications Appeals Board had been unable to obtain a copy of the book. Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 179-180; 666, n. 11. Dublin publisher John Ryan remarked that by the war years—known in neutral Ireland as the "Emergency"—it was "a badge of artistic distinction and intellectual courage to have had at least one book banned." See Ryan, *Remembering How We Stood*, (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, Ltd., 1975; issued with a foreword by J. P. Dunleavy Mullingar, Westmeath: Lilliput Press, 1987), 17.

¹⁹ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 78-79, notes that Henry Miller, Walter Lowenfels and Michael Fraenkel formed a self-styled death movement that predicted the end of the modern age and the flowering

destructiveness among the members of the artistic and literary circles of Paris. American Harry Crosby who with his wife Caresse opened the Black Sun Press in 1925, was known as "a sun worshipper in love with death."²⁰ Although Crosby's drunken escapades, fondness for opium and the Paris nightlife were legendary, his suicide in 1929 was more coldly calculated. In the same year, two Surrealists, Jacques Rigaut and Jacques Vaché also ended their lives. Such deaths contributed to intense discussion of suicide within the artistic community.²¹

Another preoccupation of Beckett's was his unequivocal insistence upon getting down to the essence of any subject. He insisted upon honesty, even to the point of describing the repulsive details of physical disability and decay.²² Evidence of both concerns appeared in Beckett's first published novel, *Murphy* (1937).²³ Less autobiographical than many of his earlier stories, the novel still relies on personal experiences and memories. Joyce had often advised young admirers that writing from their own lives was essential. The central character, Murphy, is a young Dubliner through whom Beckett intended "to demonstrate the possibility of successfully living the Cartesian

of an age of pure art.

²⁰ Noel Riley Fitch, *Sylvia Beach and the Lost Generation* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1983), 235.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 285-287, 300.

²² In Beckett's drive for spareness in his writing, there is an curious resonance of the work of philosopher I. A. Richards. Richards and C.K. Ogden's, *The Meaning of Meaning* (1923), sought to apply scientific precision to the study of language and its meaning. This book influenced the development of logical positivism, behavioral psychology, semantics, and literary criticism. Indeed Richards is considered a source of the New Criticism of the 1930's. Beckett's work reflects a similar concern but he used minimalist style to develop existentialist ideas.

²³ Beckett's first novel, *Dream of Fair to middling Women*, was not published in his lifetime. According to Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 146, he could not find a publisher when it was new. In later years, he considered it juvenile and withheld permission to publish. Bair contends that Beckett's real reason for withholding publication was that it contained many scathing portraits of Dublin friends and acquaintances who would have been hurt. Many scholars requested that it be published and thus, despite inevitable controversy, The Black Cat Press, a Dublin firm, published it in 1992.

duality of mind and body without the necessity of integration."²⁴ In a rich amalgam of allusions to astronomy, astrology, literature and the game of chess, Beckett wove a story that explored movement and stasis, the safety of the status quo and the risks of movement which inevitably involve loss. Beckett used Murphy to explore philosophical questions, setting him near the end of the book inside a mental hospital. This gave Beckett the opportunity to delve deeper into the hopes and dangers of psychiatry that already had played a crucial role in his own life.

The major philosophical influences in *Murphy* came from Dante, Descartes and Arnold Geulincx (1624-69), a Belgian follower of Descartes whom Beckett had read in his second year at the École Normale. Accepting the Cartesian mind-body duality, Geulincx held that humans ought only to be concerned with controlling their own minds—that intellectual independence represented the only means to achieve autonomy. Geulincx believed that to attempt to control the external world was both pointless and vain, leading only to frustration since even the physical body does not always respond to the mind's commands. In Beckett's time, psychiatry was beginning to corroborate and explain this view. Geulincx defined the effort to control as passion and because the opposite of passion was indifference, he and followers sought to cultivate indifference. Where nothing is possible one ought to refrain from the attempt to do anything. Though aware of this principle, Murphy was unable to follow it: he could not avoid trying to reach the unreachable mental patient, Mr. Endon.²⁵

Murphy, judged too abstract for the times, was summarily rejected by forty-two publishing firms before being accepted by Routledge. The literary style of the 1930's had

²⁴ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 220.

²⁵ "In the beautiful Belgo-Latin of Arnold Geulincx: *Ubi nihil valet, ibi nihil velis*." Samuel Beckett, *Murphy*, (New York: Grove Press, 1957), 178; Bair *Samuel Beckett*, 220, 226; Ruby Cohn, *The Comic Gamut*, 49; Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett, Poet and Critic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 267-268.

shifted to novels of social and political realism, growing out of the economic woes of the Depression, the rise of European fascism and the influence of the Russian Revolution. The experimental literature and the affluent public that had supported it in the 1920's were gone. Many of the little magazines of Paris, which had flourished when Beckett was a student, had disappeared, and readers had little patience with writers like Beckett who were avowedly apolitical. Though written in traditional form, *Murphy* was manifestly modern in its use of erudition and relative time, flashbacks, narrative explanations and comments. The splicing together of fragmentary episodes was in the Joycean mold but it also reflected Beckett's serious interest in film technique.²⁶ A psychological study of the interior of one man's mind was apparently the last thing that the public wanted, or so publishers believed. Reminiscent of the literary radicalism of the 1920's, *Murphy* had little in common with the social realism of Steinbeck or Hemingway.

During this period of literary rejection, Beckett, settled once again at home, became acquainted with the Dublin theater world. This connection developed through Mary Manning Howe, a family friend, who was about to have her first play produced by Hilton Edwards and Michael MacLiammoir at the Gate Theater. The script required some changes and Mrs. Howe asked Beckett to help with the rewrite. In assisting with the revisions, Beckett added a character of his own, but many of his other suggestions went unused. Still, Beckett enjoyed the work and began to attend rehearsals and productions of the dramatic societies existing on the margins of the professional Dublin theater.²⁷ These amateur groups, unlike the Abbey or the Gate theater companies, had the advantage of

²⁶ Frustrated by rejections, Beckett considered another career. He hoped to go to Moscow to study cinematography with Sergei Eisenstein. His letter to the famous director however never received a reply. Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 233.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 235-236. Mary Manning Howe was married to Mark DeWolfe Howe, a professor at Harvard Law School and biographer of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. Though living at this time in Boston Manning Howe had returned to Dublin to get her first play produced.

being unhampered by the threat of censorship.²⁸ The most famous society, the Drama League, under the direction of Lennox Robinson and Mrs. William Butler Yeats, produced modern plays, especially Pirandello, featuring actors from the established theaters who performed on infrequent Sunday evenings. Another society affiliated with the Abbey did plays by German expressionist playwrights Franz Werfel and Frank Wedekind. Seldom speaking and not active in these groups, Beckett quietly attended discussions of the productions.

Shortly after this exposure to the theater, Beckett began to consider writing his own play. In the spring of 1937, he returned from an extended journey to Germany which he had undertaken mainly to pass the time while he waited for the publication of *Murphy*. He began a play in four acts about great British essayist Samuel Johnson, whom he had been investigating for several years. Beckett, admiring Johnson's intellect and theoretical musings, also seemed to identify with his psychological problems and physical ailments. The play was abandoned after only ten pages. Subsequently, Beckett did not even consider it a part of his works and became irritated with interviewers who asked him about it. For drama scholars his abandonment of the work is of most interest. Beckett found it impossible to use the appropriate eighteenth century language for his characters. He sought to combine upper class usage for Johnson and his circle with lower class jargon for the other characters, weaving in an Irish lilt because he intended to produce the play first in Ireland. Although he set aside the play and never returned to it, he continued to see in Johnson a model for his own work²⁹ Ruby Cohn, who received from Beckett in 1972 the

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 236. Dramatic societies such as The Dramiks, the Drama League and the Dun Laoghaire Theatre Group were private and therefore out of the purview of the Censorship Board set up in 1929 by the government of the Irish Free State.

²⁹ Bair's evidence *Samuel Beckett*, 256, comes from an interview with Beckett on April 13, 1972 and a 1937 letter by Beckett to his friend Thomas McGreevy suggesting that Johnson was a kindred spirit, "in a sense was spiritually self-conscious, was a tragic figure, i.e., worth putting down as part of the whole of which oneself is part."

unpublished manuscript, along with permission to quote from it, believes that Beckett soon recognized the inherent incongruity in the piece. Beckett's own demands for authenticity and his innate reliance on a very modern use of irony and irreverent wit were at odds. The aural sensibilities of Beckett, the linguist and scholar, inhibited Beckett, the artist, from writing the play even though he had a well researched plot and the characters waiting.³⁰

Soon thereafter, Beckett acted upon the misery he felt in living with his mother. Following a confrontation he left Ireland for Paris, where he took up permanent residence. There, Beckett was able to renew old friendships and acquaintances, and, more importantly, reconcile with Joyce. Encouraged by his many literary contacts, he was also able to get enough work to support himself. The *Murphy* manuscript was finally accepted by Routledge, and, while the reviews were not ringing, there were enough good reports to establish a minor reputation and give him the assurance that he was a writer.

When war broke out in 1939, Beckett intended to remain politically neutral and continue his writing. When the Nazi occupation began to endanger his friends, however, he joined the French Resistance. In 1942, after the Gestapo infiltrated and destroyed his resistance unit or *réseau*, he and the woman he would later marry, Suzanne Deschevaux-Dumesnil, obtained forged papers and escaped by rail to Lyon, then continuing south on foot. They walked one hundred and fifty miles, into the mountainous area known as the Vaucluse in southeastern France, remaining there undetected in the village of Roussillon until 1945. In Roussillon, Beckett worked occasionally for the *Maquis*, the local Resistance organization. Unlike his underground work in Paris which had been to

³⁰ Bair's evidence notwithstanding, Ruby Cohn sees very little that would suggest Beckett's attraction to Johnson aside from common first names, poor eyesight, an ability to translate and careers that began rather late in life. Cohn emphasizes characteristics which differentiated Johnson from Beckett, not least of which were "the swift writer of periodic sentences against the slow writer of syntactical hesitancy, the professional man of letters against the deeply personal artist." *Just Play: Beckett's Theater* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), 144.

translate and pass on information, here he assisted on sabotage assignments. Beckett received both the *Croix de Guerre* with gold star, and the *Médaille de Résistance*, though very few friends ever knew about the awards. This period in Beckett's life was marked by tragedy that would continue to haunt him all his life. Paul Léon, a Jewish friend and member of the Joyce circle, was arrested by the Gestapo and died in a camp in 1942. Beckett's close friend, Alfred Péron, was arrested and sent to Mauthausen, the concentration camp used to incarcerate Resistance leaders, and he died shortly after his release in 1945. James Joyce, who had withdrawn to Zurich during the first winter of the war, died there in 1941. Though saddened by the news of Joyce's sudden death from a perforated ulcer, Beckett had by this time discovered his own literary voice and had long ceased to hold Joyce in the awe that had characterized his youthful attachment.³¹

During the war, Beckett produced a second novel, *Watt*, which was highly autobiographical and yet secretive and puzzling to later scholars. Beckett's last novel written in English, *Watt* has a simple plot filled with strange enigmatic characters. Watt goes by tram to the house of Mr. Knott, where he is employed as a servant until he is arbitrarily replaced. As the logic of the text breaks down, so does Watt's mind approach a breakdown, and it is insinuated that he will soon need to be institutionalized. The novel represented a new phase in Beckett's maturing style. Bair describes the war years as a period of intense self-discovery:

Unconsciously at first and then with gradually dawning perception, he watched his own writing become less and less like Joyce's as he concentrated for a single meaning, explicit, immediately apparent, in the most ordinary language possible, and with profound implication for his own personal existence as well as for the universal audience.³²

³¹ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 308-320; Ellman, *James Joyce*, n. 747.

³² Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 329.

After the war, while on a journey to Dublin to see about his finances and to look for a publisher for *Watt*, Beckett experienced what he later referred to as a moment of illumination, a creative epiphany. "Suddenly the vision occurred which was to result in the voluminous production of the next few years, the kind of writing that has come to be defined as 'Beckettian'."³³ This revelation was twofold in nature. He felt that his future work should come from deep within himself no matter how painful the source, and that his stories would be told by a voice that need not be a fictional character, or omniscient narrator. Thus, his next novels, the trilogy, *Molloy* (1951), *Malone Dies* (1951) and *The Unnamable* (1953) use a first person voice but one that is devoid of the specific details of time, location and plot. The stories thus achieve a universality for the reader while simultaneously engaging and camouflaging the author's most personal self.³⁴ During the immediate post-war period, Beckett also wrote his first novel in French, *Mercier et Camier* which was not published until 1974. Then, taking advantage of an introduction made years earlier by Alfred Péron, Beckett sent several of his short stories to Jean-Paul Sartre. These stories along with thirteen poems written before the war, were published in Sartre's magazine, *Le Temps Modernes* in 1946.

As a diversion from the stress of writing stories and novels, Beckett turned again to drama and wrote what he considered his first genuine play, *Éleuthéria*, which is the Greek word for freedom. A lengthy, conventional drama in three acts, Beckett never allowed it to be staged or even published. Nevertheless, as Ruby Cohn has suggested, within the script there are a few hints of his next play, *Waiting For Godot*. These include the use of vaudevillian techniques such as characters with colorful and rude names such as Krap or Piouk, and the exaggeration of physical traits or afflictions. Another peculiarity of vaudeville was the practice of including lines which mocked the sheer audacity of

³³ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 350.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 350-351.

performance, a self-consciousness which Pirandello had already made familiar to audiences. An example would be the mocking line, "Don't interrupt me unless you're sure you can be witty. We've been somewhat deprived of that up to now."³⁵ Despite this foreshadowing of a very different kind of drama, *Éleuthéria*, as a conventional play, included numerous characters and a split stage, that would have been costly to produce. The play represents such a contrast with the austerity of his later work that theater historians have puzzled over the question of how *Waiting for Godot* could have been conceived so soon thereafter.³⁶

Waiting for Godot made theater history when it opened in Paris in 1953 and we will come back to it shortly, in order to assess its impact on the theater and the younger playwrights, Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. After *Godot*, Beckett continued to write and direct plays, some of which—*Endgame* (1958), *Krapp's Last Tape* (1959), and *Happy Days* (1961)—became standards of repertory theater, though none ever attained the popularity of *Godot*. Beckett continued to write prose until the end of his life, but his dramatic writing brought him the most critical acclaim. Moreover, his drama was accomplished with less psychological pain and effort than his novels. Perhaps drama provided a less harrowing encounter with the self. As he said, "For me theater is first of all a relaxation from work on fiction. We are dealing with a definite space and people in that space. That's relaxing."³⁷ In drama, Beckett was compelled to create characters in a specifically confined situation which had the effect of intensifying his commitment to produce an art that was both deeply personal and universal.

³⁵ Cohn, *Just Play*, 168-169; Ruby Cohn describes the self mocking asides of the stage originating in the content, though not the rhythmic construction, of the ancient Greek parabasis, or address of the poet-playwright to the audience performed by the chorus during the intermission. Aristophanes, as poet commentator, often used the parabasis to reprove audiences for their lack of appreciation. Ruby Cohn, *The Comic Gamut*, 17, 314. n. 8.

³⁶ Cohn, *Just Play*, 163.

³⁷ Beckett quoted in Cohn, *Just Play*, 230.

By the mid-1960's numerous literary honors accrued to the once obscure Irish writer, among them the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969. Beckett continued in his later years to experiment with radio, film, television and theater productions. Many of these pieces exhibited his maturation as a playwright and director, although his style of theatrical minimalism produced curious reactions among reviewers. Beckett's later work seemed to audiences and critics alike to be devolving from the anti-theater of absurdism to the non-theater of nihilism, in which physical reality was less and less apparent. In his late plays fewer and fewer actors were present. Even the human voice all but disappeared in *Breath* (1971), a thirty second work whose entirety was a faint cry by a single actor.

As Beckett's work and fame became worldwide, his commitment to do his own translations became impossible. His production of prose and poetry went on only intermittently because he was increasingly occupied with directing and controlling the production of his works. Since his death in 1989 there have been continued controversies over control of his unpublished manuscripts. For example in 1992, Dublin's Black Cat Press published his first novel, *Dream Of Fair to middling Women*, in a limited edition. Beckett's literary executor, Jérôme Lindon, had given permission for publication but Beckett's London publisher, John Calder, held that Beckett himself would have refused it. Beckett loyalists were outraged but scholars were overjoyed. In 1995 *Éleuthéria* was also posthumously published amidst controversy. Some of the conflict over these works, no doubt, reflects the idiosyncratic style that Beckett had adopted after *Waiting for Godot*.³⁸

Following the debut of *Waiting For Godot*, Samuel Beckett achieved the fame that had previously eluded him. His reaction to this fame was characteristically perverse. Though he had always longed for the world's recognition as a validation of his art, Beckett

³⁸ J. D. O'Hara, review of *Dream Of Fair to middling Women* by Samuel Beckett, in *The New York Times Book Review*, 13 June 1993; Mary B. W. Tabor, "Beckett's Earliest Play Will be Published," *New York Times*, 26 January, 1995, 24.

stubbornly refused to cooperate in encouraging anything that even remotely resembled a personality cult. Deidre Bair relates that when she first met him in Paris, he said, "You are free to do as you choose in this matter of a biography," adding that he would "neither help nor hinder" her efforts.³⁹ In retrospect, Bair recognized this as an opportunity to avoid the perennial problem of biography—"an intrusive subject" who is able to influence the writer to produce "a contrived version of his life." On the other hand, Bair admits that it was extremely difficult to write a scholarly biography without being allowed to take notes or tape record any of her interviews with Beckett. Nevertheless, as we shall see, Beckett's insistence on controlling his work, as well as his legendary reclusiveness, were essential to his conception of art. For the historian trained in the skills of evidence gathering, it was a profound challenge, as Beckett, an equally exacting scholar, no doubt meant it to be.

Unlike his youthful writing filled with autobiographic detail, Beckett's later work reflected a self discipline which followed the literary norm that discouraged subjectivity both in the artist and the critic. This critical method, inherited from Eliot and Pound and popularized in America as the New Criticism, insisted upon "objectivity" in assessing a work of art, which to the New Critics meant analysis unencumbered by reference to the author's or the critic's background or biases.⁴⁰ Beckett seemingly acceded to this convention, yet he in fact cultivated a technique which allowed him to integrate biographical material into his work without the wry comments or mocking tone he had found necessary in his early writings. He did this by adopting the technique of monologue, no longer employing intermediary fictional characters to tell his stories. He nonetheless accomplished the critical task of appearing to distance himself from his work so well that he was often "faulted for his clinical abstraction."

³⁹ Beckett quoted in Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, xi.

⁴⁰ Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 38-40.

At the same time Jung's influence on Beckett remained strong. After the struggle to complete *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, the first two volumes of his prose trilogy, Beckett recognized that his best work did indeed come from his unconscious mind. He knew that the unconscious was beyond his control—it imposed itself irrespective of his conscious will—but he also believed that the creative act could curb its excesses. More importantly, he knew that there was no other path for him. It was evident to those who knew him well that Beckett's psyche was immersed in everything he created. Having spent many hours in conversation with him, Deirdre Bair testified that his later works "are so intensely personal, so filled with his own life that it is painful for him to reread them: to discuss them is an unthinkable horror."⁴¹

Samuel Beckett wrote *Waiting For Godot* while taking a respite from the psychologically draining task of novel writing. In the autumn of 1948 after he had finished *Malone Dies*, Beckett needed a change of pace. Writing *Godot* was "a marvelous, liberating diversion."⁴² He finished it in less than four months. In later years, Beckett became critical of the play and he always professed amazement that it garnered so much attention and became the subject of so much scholarship. He considered himself a novelist, and yet it was as a playwright that he has gained celebrity. *Godot* set him on the path of playwriting, leading to his creation of twenty-eight more plays.

The plot is deceptively simple. Two principal characters, derelicts named Estragon and Vladimir, wait in an outdoor space for the arrival of a person called Godot with whom they have an appointment. The play consists of two acts; the passage of time is indicated by a bare tree which sprouts green leaves in the second act. The one line dialogue or stichomythia, delivered like the cross talk of music hall comedians, vacillates between hope and despair. Vladimir, called Didi by Estragon, and Estragon, called Gogo by

⁴¹ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 211.

⁴² Samuel Beckett quoted in Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 381.

Vladimir, reveal complementary personalities through conversations about the past, and in revelations about their dreams, food, and ideas of God. Occasionally they irritate each other greatly, and thus they trifle with the idea of parting, but their dependence on one another precludes it. Then they consider suicide, which they talk themselves out of as they continue to wait for Godot about whom they seem to know little.

Godot succeeded as drama through dialogue that maintained audience interest in the possibility of a revelation. Vladimir and Estragon are approached by a wealthy and imperious man called Pozzo pulled along by his slave, Lucky. Lucky is harnessed by a rope pulled tightly around his neck and is weighed down with bags and other impedimenta. This second pair, in contrast with the protagonists, display a parasitic relationship. Pozzo exploits and abuses Lucky, whipping him mercilessly and calling him names. Pozzo, who is on his way to a fair to sell Lucky, proposes to let his servant entertain them all. Lucky launches into a dance and strange incessant monologue. After Pozzo and Lucky depart, a fifth character appears briefly—a messenger who comes from Godot to tell Estragon and Vladimir that Godot not come today, but will arrive tomorrow to keep the appointment.

Act Two is a reenactment of Act One except that when Pozzo and Lucky appear their relationship is fundamentally altered because Pozzo is now blind and Lucky is dumb. Pozzo has been chastened by his infirmity but he still allows Lucky to fetch and carry for him. The pair are still tied together but by a shorter rope, now necessary for their mutual survival. After Pozzo and Lucky depart the second time, Vladimir and Estragon receive the same message from Godot and for a second time their hopes are dashed. They again consider suicide but realize that they have neither rope nor belt long enough to hang themselves. Vladimir and Estragon end the play as they began it, waiting for Godot.

Of the numerous synopses and reviews, perhaps the most succinct was that offered by Vivien Mercier: "This is a play where nothing happens, twice."⁴³ However, the paucity of plot development and the circularity of structure belie the depth of meaning which scholars read into the play. Beckett, exasperated at the numerous requests for exegesis, allowed that the critics could read into it what they wished but maintained that "*Waiting for Godot* is a play that is striving all the time to avoid definition".⁴⁴

Completed by early 1948, *Waiting for Godot* was not produced for five years. Like Beckett's early novels, the play was submitted to theater managers around Paris only to be returned as impossible to perform and too obscure. Finally the maverick director, Roger Blin, who knew Beckett's work slightly, was persuaded to read the manuscript.⁴⁵ Two artists Blin admired, Tristan Tzara, the Dadaist provocateur and Max-Pol Fouchet, the poet, had praised Beckett's earlier work. Blin was impressed by Beckett's style, thus he expressed interest in both *Éleuthéria* and *Waiting for Godot*. He knew both plays would need revisions, and since he was busy directing, warned Beckett that it would be some time until he could muster the resources necessary to mount either play. As Blin later related, money became the deciding factor as to which play was produced first. He was partial to *Éleuthéria* because it would likely attract a larger audience as the more conventional play. However, the simplicity of *Godot* convinced him that production costs could be minimized. Despite the sparseness of the staging and costumes, it still took Blin three years to find the financial backing for the production, and even then part of the budget came from the French government. As a writer of a new drama in the French language, Beckett was awarded a modest grant to help launch production. The play was

⁴³ Vivien Mercier, "The Mathematical Limit," *Nation* 14 February 1959, 144-45.

⁴⁴ Beckett quoted in John Fletcher and John Spurling, *Beckett: A Study of His Plays* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), 39; Alec Reid, "From Beginning to Date" in *Samuel Beckett: A Collection of Criticism*. Ruby Cohn, ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 64.

⁴⁵ Blin was a follower of Antonin Artaud. On Artaud see pages 56 to 58 and 97 to 98 above.

produced in the tiny Théâtre de Babylone, also a bargain because it was destined to be demolished. The tiny space created its own problems for the set designer, but it served as an appropriately intimate venue for an avant-garde play. Like many of the pocket theaters of Paris, its principal recommendation was that it transformed the necessity of coping with post war poverty into the virtue of intimacy between audience and actors.⁴⁶

When *Waiting for Godot* finally premiered on January 5, 1953 in Paris, the critical reaction was equivocal. The play was surprisingly well attended since word of it had spread throughout the Left Bank. The audience reflected the natural curiosity of the literary and artistic community but most playgoers, once drawn out into the winter night, had no idea what to expect. The audience reaction to the first performance was promising and word of mouth encouraged further attendance. Though few critics attended the opening, those who did seemed to understand that an important playwright was in their midst. Sylvain Zegel, writing in *La Libération*, called Beckett "one of today's best playwrights."⁴⁷

Godot's guardedly favorable notices masked an ambivalence that suggested critics and audiences alike were baffled as to the play's meaning. Ruby Cohn's assessment of the early reviews notes a gap between the actual performance and the critical response. As a student in Paris who saw a performance of the Blin production, Cohn observed that little of the psychic energy of the performance was apprehended in the first critical notices. Studying the Paris newspapers of January 1953, Cohn found "no trace of the rhythmic intensity of that performance." The critics never managed to convey what was

⁴⁶ Cohn, *Just Play*, 189; For further discussion see Ruby Cohn, *From Desire to Godot: Pocket Theater of Postwar Paris* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

⁴⁷ Sylvain Zegel, "At the Théâtre de Babylone: *Waiting For Godot* by Samuel Beckett," *La Libération* 7 January 1953, reprinted in *Casebook On Waiting For Godot*, ed. and trans. Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 11-12. It was not literally true that Beckett was in their midst because the author had avoided first night nerves by remaining safely out of town at his cottage in Ussy-Sur -Marne.

remarkable, distinctive and exciting about the play.⁴⁸ Martin Esslin, another member of the original audience, later described the debut of *Waiting for Godot* as something other than a success, and it did not result in Beckett's immediate recognition as playwright of the hour. On the contrary, Esslin thought most Parisians saw the play as rather notorious, a "*succès de scandale* . . . a play that could not be anything but a hoax, a play in which nothing whatever happened! People went to see the play just to be able to see that scandalous impertinence with their own eyes and to be in a position to say at the next party that they had actually been the victims of that outrage."⁴⁹

Building on early notoriety, *Waiting for Godot* played for four hundred performances and did bring Beckett a measure of prestige and success. While he continued to think of himself as a novelist, he garnered invaluable theatrical experience from his collaboration with Roger Blin on the Paris production. His authority as playwright dominated the initial production, but when the play was translated into other languages for proposed productions in England, Holland, Ireland, Germany and the United States, his role was altered. He was consulted for some productions but more often merely provided the translation and written instructions or, as in the American case, forced to rely upon verbal instructions given to the director, Alan Schneider.⁵⁰

Conventional opinion assumed that the significance of *Godot* lay in its radical departure from theatrical conventions. As with Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* (1950), the immediate focus was on the comedic elements. The obvious techniques that identified the play with the avant-garde included Beckett's uncommon use of language, the clowning of Vladimir and Estragon, the austere set, and the word play reminiscent of the music hall.

⁴⁸ Cohn, *Just Play*, 189.

⁴⁹ Martin Esslin, "Is it All Gloom and Doom?" *New York Times*, 24 September 1967.

⁵⁰ Alan Schneider, "Working With Beckett," *On Beckett, Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 243.

Comments by reviewers focused upon these obvious aspects, perhaps in the hope that Beckett himself would shed further light upon the play's meaning. Beckett resisted his friends and his publisher who begged him to come to Paris to offer his explanations, or at least to be seen at a performance. He refused to do this *service de presse* because he knew it entailed answering questions of intent that he considered too personal to divulge.⁵¹

Although *Godot* owes much to Beckett's personal history, it is the one play that has stood most apart from its author, achieving a history of its own. Critics and scholars agree that *Godot* "somehow transcends his [Beckett's] life and becomes the most separate entity of all his writings."⁵² By the time he wrote *Godot*, Beckett was determined to allow himself to be his own best resource and to reflect his individual experience of the world. At the same time, Beckett's need to protect himself stemmed neither from an inordinate shyness, nor from the need to prove his objectivity. Rather, he felt obsessed with the need to keep a careful control over his work in order to protect his creativity. Beckett's post-war fiction and plays arose from the same deeply personal sources as his early work, but he spent a good deal of effort in stripping this writing of any traceable biographical references. As for many artists, Beckett's dilemma was to gain recognition while preserving the psychic space in which to continue to mine the inner resources of creative potential. Beckett accepted that he had to make use of his personal memories, no matter how painful or exhausting, but he hoped to bury them deep in his work in order to retain the solitude he required.

With *Godot's* renown, he faced the added burden of public celebrity. In the late twentieth century the phenomenon of public adulation stimulated by media scrutiny has been known to devastate psyches less fragile than Samuel Beckett's. In retrospect,

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 385.

Beckett seems courageous in his determination to avoid critics and public events where the costs of success are exacted. As A. Alvarez pointed out, Beckett did have the advantage of a success that was never commercial in the sense of "a Broadway phenomenon like Neil Simon [who] probably earns more in twenty-four hours than Beckett does in a year".⁵³

The rapid rise of Beckett's reputation can be attributed to Beckett's dramatic craftsmanship that camouflaged the deeply personal while it released universal applications that audiences understood on an intuitive level even when they professed not to comprehend "the meaning". The simplicity of the plot structure of *Waiting for Godot* contrasts with the play's dialogical abundance of detail which Beckett had culled from his own life. These included various scraps from years of scholarly pursuit—nuggets of erudition, intellectual skepticism, burlesque gags, a popular German song, and a hat toss suggested by a Marx Brothers movie. These were Beckett's particular memories, and yet in the form he presented, they constituted a cipher for shared human experience, which combined to give *Godot* its initial appeal. The general appeal was the result of his art, but it was also true that his audience, composed of recent survivors of the Second World War and those coming of age amidst the Cold War, was ripe for the kind of drama that Beckett designed. As Martin Esslin, Ruby Cohn and other Beckett scholars discerned, Beckett did not invent the anxieties of the modern world, "but he did find original forms for his feelings. The frugality of the forms heighten[ed] their evocative intensity."⁵⁴

Cultural flowering has characterized the end of both world wars; these periods are often compared in order to deduce the *méntalité* of post war generations. George Wellwarth's study of avant-garde playwrights, *The Theater of Protest and Paradox*(1963), compared the post World War I artistic movements with those of the post World War II

⁵³ A. Alvarez, *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Viking, 1973), 3.

⁵⁴ Ruby Cohn, *Just Play*, 11.

era: "Just as the first World War produced the immature frenzy of expressionism and the contemptuous rejection of surrealism and Dada, so the second World War has stimulated a philosophy of protest against the social order and against the human condition."⁵⁵ Others would argue that both cultural explosions were of a piece rather than time-specific reactions against the misery of war, even atomic war. The twentieth century's deepening nihilism and despair over the human condition connects also to the growing sense of the tyrannical weight of historic events—a philosophical inheritance from the nineteenth century. Indeed, some scholars contend that Schopenhauer and Nietzsche were Beckett's intellectual antecedents and hence responsible for the "savage purity of his pessimism."⁵⁶ Wellwarth characterized reaction to the human condition dramas of the First World War period as "hair clutching hysteria", but added that Beckett's avant-garde drama came to be seen as plausibly illustrative of "quiescent cynicism born of bitter experience"⁵⁷

Wellwarth's description assigns a hierarchy of pain to wartime experience with the more recent generation perceived as better able to channel its rage. Wellwarth also linked the social protest of the second post-war generation with existentialist philosophy. We have seen that this was so to some degree in the work of Camus, Sartre and their colleagues, but such a label easily becomes overly general and useless. In Europe and America, social commentators such as Walter Winchell found it expedient to suggest that those who found post-war society intolerable for any variety of reasons, from the fluoridation of drinking water to nuclear proliferation, were somehow bound together by their sense of outrage. In America, the Beats, who found bourgeois materialism offensive and hypocritical, shared some of the humanistic attitudes of existentialism. But it was a

⁵⁵ George Wellwarth, *The Theater of Protest and Paradox, Developments in the Avant-Garde Drama* (New York: New York University Press, 1964), x.

⁵⁶ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 79; Wellwarth, *Protest and Paradox*, 41.

⁵⁷ Wellwarth, *Protest and Paradox*, x.

gross oversimplification to lump them with Sartre, Camus and Beckett. Such imprecise categorization produced as much confusion in the theater as it did in more generalized social commentary.⁵⁸ As we shall see, young playwrights like Pinter and Albee, were lumped together with "angry young" contemporaries with whom they shared little more than passionate indignation.

Like some of his contemporaries, Beckett's wrote out of a need to deal with his own psychological problems, but that was only one condition of his creative drive. After *Godot* had made him a famous playwright, Beckett was frequently asked about his debt to James Joyce. Beckett once replied that he considered Joyce one of the world's greatest writers but that his own work was quite different, adding, "In my case, I write because I have to."⁵⁹ Perhaps Joyce's most valuable legacy to Beckett was devotion to the art of writing. That devotion arose from the commitment of both writers to continue the search for the significance of language, a subject requiring further analysis.

To explicate Beckett's artistic context, we need to consider some of modernism's values and assumptions. As we have seen, Beckett was influenced by his participation in Joyce's literary circle of the early Thirties. Beckett read aloud to Joyce from Mauthner's *Critique of Language*, an influential book of the period that suggested the shortcomings of language as the vehicle for the investigation and communication of metaphysical ideas.⁶⁰ The literary experimenters sought to revive language through new writing methods, just as the visual artists, dancers, poets, sculptors and musicians of the period used new methods

⁵⁸ Todd Gitlin, "Enclaves of Elders," chap. in *The Sixties, Years of Hope, Days of Rage* (New York: Bantam Books, 1987), 45-66.

⁵⁹ Beckett, quoted in Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 556.

⁶⁰ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 648-649; P.J. Murphy suggests that more work remains to be done on the influence of Mauthner's language critique on Beckett. See Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," chap. in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, ed. John Pilling (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 239 n. 34.

to revive out-moded forms. For example, Joyce used the interior monologue or stream of consciousness method of narration; he borrowed from myth, history and literature to create complex parallels and allusions; he invented words and puns; he combined Irish vernacular rhythms and allusions with English usage. Following the modern trend he also made use of psychology to probe his characters' motives. Like Shaw, Joyce was a great admirer of Ibsen's iconoclasm in grappling with subjects long considered taboo. Joyce's psychologized anticlericalism, for example, shocked his fellow Catholics in a new way.⁶¹

European and American writers became preoccupied with what they viewed as the exhaustion of human language and their consequent inability to express themselves meaningfully. The modern writer was thus faced with a paradox: to search for a closer approximation of expression than words could offer, notwithstanding the fact that words were the writer's sole instrument of communication. In the visual arts, abstract expressionism had offered a solution to modern painters, and musicians had experimented with dissonance and twelve tone scales. Proust, Joyce, Stein and others experimented with words, syntax and narrative technique in order to breathe new life into literature. In poetry T. S. Eliot attempted to resuscitate the language by viewing it as organic and therefore "passing through all the phases of the life cycle, and threatened, again and again, with exhaustion."⁶² Eliot's eclectic borrowings from older styles led him into daring experimentation which was followed by a conservative insistence on evolution rather than revolution in language. In the theater, Eliot's experiments with dialogue in verse were applauded but did not produce the hoped for revitalization. Beckett very early rejected the poetic experiments of Pound and Eliot, especially their borrowings from different

⁶¹ Ellmann, *James Joyce*, 357-379, 545-555.

⁶² Andrew K. Kennedy, *Six dramatists in search of a language: studies in dramatic language*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 90.

cultures. Disparagingly them as "jewel thieves"⁶³ he pursued his own search for a voice to revitalize language. His quest took him in an opposite direction, toward intensity and concentration that resulted in a new form of universalism. Nonetheless, Beckett always wrote skeptically on the possibilities of language, which is no surprise given his early and close exposure to the excitement of the Joycean experiment.

Modern vision has also placed a high value on "primitive" and non-western cultures. Reflecting the discoveries of archeology and anthropology in the early part of the century, modernists became attracted to cultures that had not emulated the "decadent" West. Modernism reordered aesthetic principles and searched out the simple and the supposedly primitive, privileging these over the accomplishments of a western civilization, now increasingly portrayed as the gaudy facade on a nearly empty edifice. The reaction against traditional representative forms was a founding principle of modern art. At the turn of the century, tribal masks from Africa inspired the Cubists while Gauguin's simple natural forms from Tahiti moved the expressionists. Likewise, modernist poets such as T. S. Eliot viewed language as organic, growing and changing over time, and searched for its roots. Literary modernists like Joyce were influenced by historians, Vico and Spengler, whose cyclical view of culture reinforced the organic view of language. As Andrew Kennedy notes, this led to the formation of "one of the central myths of modern art: the writer is present at Genesis, creating words out of inert matter and chaos."⁶⁴

In the theater of the early twentieth century, modernism caused similar interruptions. Though occurring more gradually than in literature or art, similar erosions—of naturalism and the logically constructed, tightly plotted narrative—took

⁶³ Samuel Beckett quoted in Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 95. Beckett once lodged a similar complaint against William S. Burroughs when Burroughs was explaining his cut-up method of writing. Burroughs reported that Beckett was upset and said, "But . . . but that's plumbing, that's not writing! . . . You're using other people's words" See Victor Bockris, ed., "Burroughs With Beckett In Berlin" in *On Beckett, Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 413.

⁶⁴ Kennedy, *Six dramatists*, 136.

place. Some of the changes could be seen in the work of the Symbolists and then the Surrealists.⁶⁵ As we noted, Antonin Artaud conceived his dramatic theories after he visited Bali. He stressed the importance of engaging the audience as they had once been engaged in primitive theater; he predicted the development of nonverbal theater. On the other hand, Eliot's dramas relied on the past as well as the present. He chose what he considered the more primitive and used it to create a new convention. For instance, he thought Aeschylus preferable to Euripides, the medieval Mystery plays preferable to Shakespeare. He sought what he considered dynamic sources, sources untouched by the decay of language.⁶⁶ When Beckett began writing plays, he did not follow Artaud's calls for purely non-verbal theater, but Beckett did adopt Artaud's stress upon intimacy between audience and performers. Beckett likewise believed in simplicity, stripping his artistic work down to the bare bones. Simplification held manifold possibilities.

As a disciple of modernism, Beckett asserted belief in the primacy of language and the importance of form. In an early critical essay on Marcel Proust, published in 1931, Beckett said:

For Proust, as for the painter, style is more a question of vision than of technique. Proust does not share the superstition that form is nothing and content everything . . . For Proust the quality of language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics. Indeed he makes no attempt to dissociate form from content. The one is a concretion of the other, the revelation of a world.⁶⁷

To the Beckett scholar *Proust* is "an explicit enough creed—the familiar (by now hackneyed) anti-naturalist trust in language as vision."⁶⁸ While Beckett admired literary

⁶⁵ On the Symbolist and Surrealist literary and artistic movements of the early twentieth century see pages 43-55 above.

⁶⁶ Kennedy, *Six dramatists*, 90-91.

⁶⁷ Beckett, *Proust* (London: Grove Press, 1931), 67.

⁶⁸ Kennedy, *Six dramatists*, 133.

modernism, as a member of the younger generation, he was equally anxious to establish his own distinctive voice in order to carry on the search for meaningful expression. In *Proust*, Beckett described his own aesthetic principle as based upon solipsism. He held that the artist was bound by the philosophical belief that the self is the only entity that can be known with certainty—that relationships of love and friendship are illusory. What this implied for Beckett was that "language is irredeemably private: words germinate in the skull of the speaker, at an inestimable distance from things and other persons, motive and argument, local time and place."⁶⁹ Beckett conceived of art as "the apotheosis of solitude." The writer's work was compressive, not expansive and "the only possible spiritual development is in the sense of depth."⁷⁰

In accepting creative stasis, Beckett diverged radically from the modernism of T. S. Eliot. Eliot once shared Beckett's radical view that drama ought to concentrate language, to compress it in order to produce a new vitality. In early criticism, Eliot also subscribed to the modernist aim "to create a verbal rhythm that would have the power of primitive-pre-rational-drama."⁷¹ However, in searching for such a dramatic language, Eliot had turned to composing verse dialogue and placing it within a naturalist theatrical convention. Eliot's aim was to avoid subjectivity and, according to Kennedy, "he was prepared to sacrifice expressive power for the sake of deliverance from a private language and the attendant danger of *stasis*."⁷² In time, Eliot, "the ceaseless experimenter", became "the preserver, who refused extreme solutions."⁷³ His youthful and radical ideas about

⁶⁹ Kennedy, *Six dramatists*, 131.

⁷⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Proust*, 47.

⁷¹ Kennedy, *Six dramatists*, 130.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 128.

language gave way to concern that subjectivity would impede creativity. Meanwhile, Beckett's creativity took fire from the idea of stasis.

Thus, in 1948—the year he wrote *Godot*—drama, that is, the written text which Artaud had decried as stifling, offered the committed wordsmith Beckett a new path out of the labyrinth of novel and poetry writing. Theater opened up a more flexible means of communication. What seemed a diversion from his real work provided Beckett the opportunity to experiment fully with words, gestures, light and a whole panoply of untried modes of expression. It is not excessive to claim that the difficulty Beckett had experienced in writing the prose trilogy created an internal pressure that propelled him toward drama. Beckett saw drama initially as an escape, but then as a new and liberating means to express the ideals of modernism. Not only could the manipulation of language be the source of a new aesthetic, as it had been for Joyce, but in straining the conventions of literary and dramatic practice, Beckett might produce a vivid combination of form and content as unique as Proust and Joyce. Despite the characteristic silences, pauses and gestures in his dramatic prose, Beckett never recanted his early belief in the power of language. Rather, he had arrived at "a more extreme point where language is perhaps the only reality, but words cannot be trusted—they can neither communicate nor express, they can only fail."⁷⁴

Beckett's idea of language as failure has led some critics to suppose that he was, by his own admission, engaged in a self-defeating enterprise. They focus especially upon Beckett's article "Three Dialogues," published in *transition* 50 (October 1950) in which Beckett and editor George Duthuit discussed the work of three contemporary visual artists, Pierre Tal-Coat, André Masson, and Bram Van Velde.⁷⁵ Beckett viewed the

⁷⁴ Alvarez, *Samuel Beckett*, 9-10.; Kennedy in *Six dramatists*, 134, mentions J. R. Harvey and Charles Marowitz as two critics who thought Beckett's modernist position on language had changed over time, becoming more pessimistic.

⁷⁵ Founded in Paris as *transition: an International Quarterly for Creative Experiment* it ran

artist's role as "the expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express."⁷⁶ Duthuit expressed surprise, complaining that this was an extreme idiosyncratic position. Yet many scholars have come to see Beckett's opinion as the key to understanding his aesthetic beliefs and philosophy.

Samuel Beckett's attitude toward existentialism or the influence of any other philosophy has been difficult to ascertain because of his famous reticence to publicly analyze or explicate his creative works. Asked by critic Tom Driver in a 1961 interview what he thought Sartre and Heidegger meant by the existence preceding essence, Beckett evaded the issue, claiming their language was "too philosophical" for him.⁷⁷ This remark was misleading, for in 1962 Beckett told Lawrence Harvey that if he were making of study of his own work, he would begin with two quotes—one by Geaulinx: "*Ubi nihil valis ibi nihil velis*," and one by Democritus: "nothing is more real than nothing." Harvey translated the Geaulinx quote as "where no value is attached, no desire is possible" and viewed both quotes as evidence of the value Beckett placed upon philosophy.⁷⁸ Later scholars have suggested that Beckett was inviting his critics "to adopt a philosophical perspective on his work."⁷⁹

A number of scholars have combed Beckett's background influences, letters, essays and prose in order to interpret his philosophical perspective. Among the first to associate

initially from 1927 to 1938. After the war it was sold to George Duthuit who renamed it *transition 48*. Beckett's article, appearing in October 1950 was written from notes of a conversation between Duthuit and himself.

⁷⁶ Samuel Beckett and George Duthuit "Three Dialogues," in *Samuel Beckett, A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Martin Esslin (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 17.

⁷⁷ Tom F. Driver, "Beckett by the Madeleine," *Columbia University Forum*, 4 (1961): 22.

⁷⁸ Lawrence E. Harvey, *Samuel Beckett, Poet and Critic* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970), 267.

⁷⁹ P.J. Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 224.

Beckett with the existentialist outlook was Martin Esslin, who included a study of *Waiting For Godot* in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). He noted especially that Vladimir and Estragon spend their time waiting for Mr. Godot who never comes, yet Vladimir still claims with satisfaction, "We are not saints, but we have kept our appointment. How many people can boast as much?"⁸⁰ Esslin saw here much to support G. S. Fraser's widely invoked Christian interpretation of the play with its message of hope deferred, the arrival of Godot representing salvation postponed to the next life, and the virtues of charity found in the two tramps.⁸¹ Vladimir and Estragon remain hopeful in spite of the arbitrary way in which they are treated by Godot, mirroring God's unpredictable bestowal of grace. Their perseverance seems irrational in the face of recurrent disappointment and tempts them to despair. Nonetheless their faith remains. However, Esslin argues that recognition of Vladimir and Estragon's near-despair makes the Christian interpretation too limited because it ignores the protagonists' preference to seek a solution to their predicament in suicide; only their own incompetence and lack of tools prevents it. Nor does the Christian interpretation take into account the uncertainty of Godot's coming, or the futility imputed to their act of waiting.

Esslin recognized that who or what Mr. Godot represented meant less than understanding the significance of waiting—the play's main theme. Esslin interpreted waiting as "an essential and characteristic aspect of the human condition. . . . it is in the act of waiting that we experience the flow of *time* in its purest form."⁸² The flow of time may provide a sort of background music when we are busy with daily chores. However, when we wait, time is suddenly foregrounded. As Vladimir and Estragon try to pass the time,

⁸⁰ Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 51.

⁸¹ Fraser's popular interpretation first an anonymous submission to the *Times Literary Supplement*, 10 February 1956. Titled simply "Waiting For Godot," this article inspired a good deal of correspondence and spawned several similar studies. See Cohn, *The Comic Gamut*, 220-222, 324 n. 25.

⁸² Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 17.

forgetfulness and uncertainty intrude with the result that the characters and the audience begin to sense that time itself is an illusion—an illusion which keeps us from the painful contemplation of the precariousness of our individual existence, and the absurdity of the human condition.

In his exegesis of *Waiting for Godot*, Esslin was careful not to pigeonhole Beckett too narrowly, observing that the play has an abundance of meaning. He regarded Beckett a poet of the stage, and therefore inclined to leave the meaning of *Godot* open to interpretation on many levels. At the same time, Esslin noted that consideration of suicide, a denial of God, opens up the play to broader philosophical interpretation. Esslin commends Jungian psychologist Eva Metman's interpretation that Godot is actually responsible for keeping his clients unconscious of reality: "The hope, the habit of hoping, that Godot might come after all is the last illusion that keeps Vladimir and Estragon from facing the human condition and themselves in the harsh light of fully conscious awareness."⁸³ Another illustration of this point occurs near the end of the play. Vladimir, pondering the possibility that he was asleep or perhaps still is and that time is a mere illusion filled with the repetition of habits, becomes momentarily aware of the painful truth of human contingency. Looking at his sleeping friend Estragon, Vladimir says, "The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener. At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on."⁸⁴ Then, distracted by the second arrival of Godot's messenger, the habitual waiting and hoping is revived and Vladimir turns eagerly away from this brief painful glimpse of reality. Comments Esslin,

⁸³ Eva Metman, "Reflections On Samuel Beckett's Plays," in *A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Esslin, 128-129; Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 24.

⁸⁴ Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*, 58-59.

"The routine of waiting for Godot stands for the habit, which prevents us from reaching the painful but fruitful awareness of the full reality of being."⁸⁵

Esslin found further support for this reading of *Godot* in Beckett's discussion of habit in the *Proust* essay. "Breathing is habit. Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals. . . . [and there are] perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being."⁸⁶

Waiting for Godot is filled with the diversions that the characters use to distract themselves from the contemplation of their existence. At the same time, the characters of the play reflect the preoccupation of the members of the audience with the mundane process of living that allows them to avoid the painful confrontation which Sartre and other existentialists considered necessary for an authentic existence. As Esslin states:

there is here [in *Waiting for Godot*] a truly astonishing parallel between the Existentialist philosophy of Jean Paul Sartre and the creative intuition of Beckett, who never consciously expressed Existentialist views. If, for Beckett as for Sartre, man has the duty of facing the human condition as a recognition that at the root of our being there is nothingness, liberty, and the need of constantly creating ourselves in a succession of choices, then Godot might well become an image of what Sartre calls 'bad faith'—the first act of bad faith consists in evading what one cannot evade, in evading what one *is*.⁸⁷

In subsequent years the existentialist interpretation of Beckett's work came under close scrutiny. Some critics see this view as fundamentally flawed. Initial departure from the existentialist consensus began among scholars who suggested that Beckett's early interest in Descartes, Geulincx and Malebranche gave his writing a strong rationalist undercurrent. His early novels, especially *Murphy*, explored the mind-body duality, and

⁸⁵ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 24.

⁸⁶ Beckett, *Proust*, 8.

⁸⁷ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 26.

his early notebooks, filled with information on Descartes, reinforced this idea. Jacqueline Hofer suggested that *Watt* should be read as "a farce on Logical Positivism" while John Fletcher found it more in keeping with the "skeptical tradition of empiricism".⁸⁸ More recently, post-Structural critics such as Thomas Trezise have argued that the existential humanist bias, which he claims has dominated Beckettian criticism, is based "on an unexamined notion of the human subject."⁸⁹ Post-Structuralist literary criticism, preoccupied with the creative world of fiction, does not admit a direct correlation between the literary world and existential reality. Furthermore, the privileged position of the author that the older existential humanism took for granted has been contested by post-Structuralism's rejection of "the central philosophical notion of the constituting subject."⁹⁰

Because Beckett was outspoken on the subject of authorial intentionality and control and also predisposed to question the authority of literary convention, he has been in the eye of this stormy debate. P.J. Murphy has conceded that until recently much Beckett criticism accepts the existentialist view. Nevertheless, he pointed out that existentialism "has always been proto-deconstructionist in its general thrust" particularly in "its fascination with the art of failure of Beckett's *Three dialogues*, with self-canceling structures and generally with the various 'nothings' which undermine the very modes of expression."⁹¹ While Murphy admits that the alliance between existentialism and deconstructionism has been uneasy, he emphasizes evidence in Beckett's later writings that the author moved beyond the "antinomies of existentialist and post-Structuralist approaches" and created a "larger synthesis whereby Beckett forges new languages for

⁸⁸ John Fletcher, "Samuel Beckett and the philosophers," *Comparative Literature*, 17 (1965): 55.

⁸⁹ Thomas Trezise quoted in P.J. Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 223.

⁹⁰ Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 223.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 223.

being which afford unprecedented insights into the ontology of the world of fiction."⁹² In "Beckett and the Philosophers", Murphy connects Beckett's literary creation with existential reality concluding that Beckett "is the most philosophical of writers because he is the most literary of writers, that is, he has persistently sought for a clarification of the essential co-ordinates of the creative act: who is speaking? with what authority? how do the words of literature have reference to the world outside the text—in-itself?"⁹³ From his earliest novels and poems, Beckett has required the reader to deal with what has been called "the problematic of the subject."⁹⁴

Murphy's essay describes how Beckett laid the foundation of this later work in his first two published novels, *Murphy* and *Watt*, "where his very extensive and thorough reading of the philosophers is most in evidence and where, in ways as yet hardly recognized, Beckett formulated his own version of the self and the boundary lines of its knowledge which would enable him to 'go on' after the celebrated impasse of *The Unnameable*."⁹⁵ In *Murphy*, Beckett borrowed from Geulincx and Democritus as well as Spinoza and in *Watt* he leaned heavily on Kant. There is strong evidence in both *Murphy* and *Watt* of wider philosophical influences than were earlier suspected. Murphy notes that Beckett's friend and former publisher, Barney Rosset, remembered Beckett sending to Berlin just before the war for Kant's multi-volume collected works. While a few scholars had noted a slight Kantian influence in this novel, Murphy cites recent scholarship that

⁹² Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 224.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ Iain Wright quoted in Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 223. See also Wright's article, "What matter who's Speaking?": Beckett the authorial subject and contemporary critical theory," *Southern Review* 16 (1983): 59-86.

⁹⁵ Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 224. This impasse refers to the serious writing block that Beckett experienced after completing the trilogy.

stresses Kant's importance to Beckett during the decade of the 1930's.⁹⁶ Murphy contends that Beckett in *Watt* displayed an understanding of the limitations of human knowledge that followed the philosophical tradition up to that point. Following *Watt*, however, his work began to critique Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers. Murphy notes that Beckett then began to claim that he no longer read the philosophers, and that his later works were written in light of this admission of his own ignorance. Given Beckett's reticence to claim any philosophical expertise, it has been a challenge for students to pursue this issue. Murphy, having established that Kant served as an intellectual point of departure for Beckett, asserts that scholars can now appreciate his philosophical sophistication.⁹⁷

Beckett's reservations with regard to Kant and other Enlightenment philosophers came to light in a 1988 interview in which he said that, "The eighteenth century has been called the century of reason, *le siècle de la raison*. I've never understood that; they're all mad, *ils sont tous fou, ils déraisonnent!* They give reason a responsibility which it simply cannot bear, it's too weak."⁹⁸ This conviction led Beckett to create his post-trilogy fictional world which probed the relationship between language and reality. In the process, Beckett came to the same conclusion as Heidegger in his criticism of Kant, regarding the uses of the imagination. In *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant had relegated the

⁹⁶ Ibid., 229. Recent scholarly investigations of the *Watt* notebooks reveal numerous notations on Kant. Murphy submits that "Kant/Knott is a double negative from which will stem some unexpected affirmations, as Beckett sorts can't from cant. The Kantian negatives concerning what man could and could not know are dramatized in the journey of Watt to the house of Mr. Knott." See also John Pilling and Mary Bryden, *The ideal core of the onion: reading Beckett archives* (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1992).

⁹⁷ Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 233. Murphy points out that Beckett continued to appropriate concepts from various Enlightenment philosophers, notably the skepticism of the empiricists, but only used them in a minor way in order to achieve a counterpoint in his writing and perhaps to parody the idea of taking a point of view. His main work reflected a critique of rationalism.

⁹⁸ Beckett quoted in Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 233, 236. Murphy goes on to point out that because Beckett was writing fiction not philosophy, he had to find a language that "could mediate this distantiating between would-be self and would-be world."

imagination to a "mere function of the understanding" while to modernists the imagination's central function was to affirm being in time. Though Beckett claimed not to understand the existentialists' distinction between being and existence, there is ample evidence that this distinction was embedded in his later work.

The issue of language and reality, once the province of the philosopher, has also become in recent decades an interest of writers seeking new definitions of the boundaries of knowledge, the borders of meaning. Beckett scholar, Carla Locatelli, has described how "Beckett's unwording probes into issues of the cultural encoding of meaning, not only to denounce the conventions of literary discourse, but to reveal the epistemological function of linguistic representation, and the intrinsic hermeneutic quality of our being."⁹⁹ Recent critical fashion dismisses as a logocentric fallacy the existence of the referent, that is, the assumption that language relates to reality, but this issue was most important to Beckett. Murphy's interpretation of Beckett suggests that the existential interpretation, though no longer convincing as the only interpretation, need not be dismissed as passé because it conflicts with newer post-Structural interpretations.

Beckett remains relevant because of the fertility of his work. Although his plays are often seen as proclaiming the sterility of the human condition, the opposite is true. This has become apparent as scholars have unearthed new evidence of the dynamic vision behind his absurdism. Beckett served as a bridge between the modernism of the early part of the century and the contemporary era of the post-modern. Although existentialism became associated with an unending spiral of despair, dramatized by the repetition and circularity of the plot of *Waiting for Godot*, absurdity in the theater has had an unexpected vitality. Beckett's plays, *Godot* in particular, have endured. How is it that in an age marked by audience ennui, a piece in which nothing happens has continued to fascinate

⁹⁹ Carla Locatelli, *Unwording the world: Samuel Beckett's prose works after the Nobel prize* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 1990), x; Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 236.

and irritate so many? Perhaps the answer lies in Jean Anouilh's oft quoted title of a review of *Waiting for Godot* written more than forty years ago in which he called the play, "*Godot* or the Music-Hall Sketch of Pascal's *Pensées* as Played by the Fratellini Clowns."¹⁰⁰ The multiple analogy gives a sense of the combination of form and content which Beckett employed in straining to express the inexpressible. In *Waiting for Godot* Beckett addressed modernism's task of revitalizing language and creating new forms of expression. At the same time, rudimentary characteristics of post-modernism such as emphasis on multiple perspectives and layers of meaning were also intimated. As one critic put it, in *Godot* "we hear the pace and detail of real speech, speech concerned with the real out there; but we also have the feeling that speech is referring to another landscape that can be seen only with the metaphysical eye. Nothing is, in fact but what is not."¹⁰¹

In addressing the allegations of nihilism which afflicted Beckett's reputation in the late 1960's and 1970's, several scholars have contributed an alternate interpretation.¹⁰² In a 1972 essay, Germaine Brée emphasized that Beckett's settings acknowledged a kinship with Dante. However, Brée also noted that Beckett's monologue style "illustrates the *via negativa*" of the mystic tradition.¹⁰³ Similarly, Andrew Kennedy, in *Six Playwrights In*

¹⁰⁰ Cohn, *Just Play*, 189. In the *Pensées*, Blaise Pascal (1623-1662) recognized human existence as finite within an infinite universe and rejected the attempt by Descartes to prove God's existence. Pascal is connected to the mystic tradition by this unquestioning acceptance of the mystery of creation. The Fratellini clowns were brothers, François and Albert Fratellini, whose comedy style hinged on their contrasting personalities and their differing reactions to people and events. This form of comedy derived from the *zanni* or clowns of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition.

¹⁰¹ Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), 82.

¹⁰² These writers include Lawrence Harvey, *Samuel Beckett; Poet and Critic*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970); Richard Coe, *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1964); John Fletcher, *Samuel Beckett's Art* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1967).

¹⁰³ Beckett's reliance on Dante is well known. His early poems and short stories in *More Pricks Than Kicks* and *Dream of Fair to middling Women* were suffused with names and lines from Dante, especially his favorite, Canto V of *The Inferno*. His old copy of *The Divine Comedy* in Italian was one of

Search of a Language (1975), hypothesized that, contrary to a paralyzing effect, "the idea of the failure of language has served Beckett as a myth *for* creation. It is a 'negative' myth which, as a source of creative energy, is comparable to the familiar power of certain negative emotions as motives to action, and to 'the negative way' as a source of spiritual life."¹⁰⁴ Kennedy described the *via negationis* in theology as a way of knowing God used by the mystics, particularly Meister Eckhart. Kennedy pointed to mysticism's modern association with Christian existential theology through the concept that to deny is implicitly to affirm. Mindful of Beckett's protestations against any religious belief, Kennedy surmised that Beckett used the negative as a creative method of sustaining the modernist myth that a dead language compels the writer to create language anew. Like Wittgenstein, Beckett denied the possibility of a private language, a language of interiority cut off from the world. The notion of a private language had haunted Eliot, who considered it overly subjective, a concern that did not inhibit Beckett. On the contrary, Beckett's subjective writing demonstrated that even what appears a private language is closely entangled with the public language of the human community.¹⁰⁵

Further analytical permutation has been offered by Hélène L. Baldwin, whose *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence* (1981) also describes Beckett's work as preoccupied with the mystic quest. Baldwin uses various sources—writings of medieval mystics like the anonymous author of the fourteenth century work *The Cloud of Unknowing* and St. John of the Cross, as well as Pascal's meditations and even the work of Beckett's close contemporary Simone Weil—in order to provide a comparative understanding of

the few books he had close to him in his last days. Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 52, xvi; Germaine Brée, quoted in Hélène L. Baldwin, *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1981), 5.

¹⁰⁴ Kennedy, *Six dramatists in search of a language*, 135.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 135-136, n.13, n. 14.

Beckett's fiction and plays. Though anxious not to attribute to Beckett Christian beliefs which he had denied, Baldwin still disputes the claim that Beckett was nihilistic. Rather, she sees in his work a pervasive and abiding interest in the mystic's quest for answers to human questions of existence—a quest chronically frustrated by human weaknesses and apathy. Beckett's plays do not answer the questions but, as with the mystics, that failure does not diminish the necessity to "go on," as Beckett himself put it.¹⁰⁶

Samuel Beckett's artistic drive was a burden not only to him but to those who shared his life. His family and friends became resigned to his eccentricities. His reclusiveness was, however, a constant irritant to his publishers and producers who held that the artist's availability was a necessary part of the business of perpetuating his reputation. It was anathema to Beckett. His introspective nature had long inclined him to seek out the company of fellow artists, especially painters. After the bittersweet experiences of the Joyce coterie, Beckett purposely avoided literary circles in both Dublin and Paris. He did have a cordial acquaintance with fellow playwrights, Sean O'Casey, William Butler Yeats, and Eugene Ionesco, but always seemed more at ease in the company of painters. He was greatly attached to Yeats' brother, the painter and sculptor Jack B. Yeats. He was also close to the brothers Geer and Bram van Velde, one a Cubist and the other an abstract artist. During the war he became friends with the French painter, Henri Hayden with whom he shared the refuge of Roussillon. After the war he became acquainted with American abstract expressionist Joan Mitchell, artist Jean-Paul Riopelle, and sculptor, Alberto Giacometti. Perhaps artists appealed to him because they generally believed that verbalization was unnecessary and, in fact, would obscure a pristine insight. It has been suggested that once Beckett began to write plays he became a visual artist like his friends. The battle with words and their usefulness led him from fiction into the stage's

¹⁰⁶ Baldwin, *Samuel Beckett's Real Silence*, 6-15; 143-160.

more public art in which he saw the opportunity to move further along the modern path of minimalism.

In analyzing Beckett's long association with the visual arts, Dougald McMillan traced Beckett's familiarity with museums and art galleries across Europe as well as his many allusions in fiction to specific works of art. In *Murphy* Beckett made allusions to visual perception as a means of commentary on the "the conflict between love and solipsism" while he used specific paintings as allegories for the human condition in *Watt*.¹⁰⁷ In his post-war trilogy, a sculpture by Rodin helped Beckett draw the contrast between two protagonists representing the crucial "conflict between direct experience and artificial expression". This fundamental issue remained at the heart of Beckett's own aesthetic struggles. McMillan recognizes Beckett as very much in the tradition of the visual artist since his work was "a record of his struggle to accommodate the forms and techniques of art to the necessity of 'honest' expression."¹⁰⁸

Beckett's aesthetic struggle to capture experience and express it honestly, first in poetry and prose and later in a new theatrical form, was complicated by his decision to write in a language other than his native language. Beckett lived in France and wrote in French by choice. French was not a forced accommodation to circumstances as the adoption of another language often is for writers who find themselves displaced because of war, economic need, or persecution. Moreover, as Beckett's fame spread because of *Godot*, he was required to do much of the physical labor required to insure fidelity between the written and performed text. Accordingly, during the late 1950's through the early 1970's Beckett translated all of his own published work into various European languages and only rarely was convinced by others to seek help with translation. When he

¹⁰⁷ Dougald McMillan, "Samuel Beckett and the Visual Arts: The Embarrassment of Allegory" in *On Beckett, Essays and Criticism*, ed. S. E. Gontarski (New York: Grove Press, 1986), 45; See also Ruby Cohn, ed., *Samuel Beckett: a collection of criticism* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1975), 126-7.

¹⁰⁸ McMillan, "Beckett and the Visual Arts," 131-5.

signed contracts with English and American publishers for the translation of *Godot*, there was pressure to allow these firms to hire translators so as to speed up publication. Beckett politely refused the offer and insisted on his own translation, even doing colloquial variations for the English and American versions. The work of transition required Beckett to make meticulous choices among words and allusions to be certain that the original meaning remained clear. Some scholars have claimed that Beckett's self-translations in essence amounted to versions of the plays and novels that were more like twins than translations.¹⁰⁹

The issue of Beckett's bilingualism has become increasingly important among recent scholars. Once a secondary consideration, Beckett's bilingual creativity has become a major focus because of "a new climate of ideas, through theoretical perspectives that celebrate internationalism, the subverting of certainties and the breaking of canonical traditions."¹¹⁰ In comparative studies of Beckett's self-translations, linguists have found a peculiar complexity in his translations that suggests an intense psychic double life. This dual existence went beyond Beckett's self-proclaimed eagerness to retain the French or English flavor of the original, to reveal a further aspect of his genius. Ann Beer notes that Beckett first chose to write in French for aesthetic and psychological reasons, a manifestation of his immersion in French culture. However, the crucial aspect of Beckett's bilingualism was disclosed when he matured as an artist. Observing that Beckett's influence on Pinter and Albee has often been attributed to his ability to reshape artistic forms, Beer notes that Beckett's bilingualism fed his fascination with language, giving him a freedom and the ability to "see artistic forms afresh. . . . He could undo and remake

¹⁰⁹ Ann Beer, "Beckett's Bilingualism" in *Cambridge Companion To Beckett*, 209.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 210.

[novels and plays] in full knowledge of a literary tradition but with the detachment of one who is not controlled by it."¹¹¹

As Beckett's oeuvre increased over time, with simultaneous productions taking place all over Europe, he lost the ability to maintain close scrutiny over his theatrical productions. Nevertheless, control over his manuscripts became increasingly important to Beckett in his later years, especially after the difficulty he encountered with censorship in England. When the first London production of *Godot* was proposed, the Lord Chamberlain insisted on the deletion of certain crude remarks and gestures. After refusing for more than a year, Beckett finally capitulated in order to save the show from cancellation, but a steely resistance to further accommodation took root in the author.¹¹² Beckett's courteous manner in person was well known, but he also developed an inordinate possessiveness with regard to his texts that made it difficult for actors and directors to work with him.¹¹³ For this reason, recent Beckett criticism, cognizant of Beckett's bias in favor of authorial control, has focused particularly on the strain between Beckett's imputed deconstructionist activity and postmodern literary theory "that rejects the central philosophical notion of a constituting subject."¹¹⁴

¹¹¹ Beer, "Beckett's Bilingualism," 215; See also Brian T. Fritch, *Beckett and Babel* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1988) and Raymond Federman, "The writer as self-translator," in *Beckett Translating/Translating Beckett*, ed. Alan Warren Friedman et al. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1987).

¹¹² Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 453, 487. In Ireland where Beckett's work had previously been banned, *Waiting for Godot* opened soon after London, ironically with all the objectionable deletions restored. Later when *Fin de partie* (*Endgame*) was premiered by a French troupe in London there was no fuss until it returned in its English language version. Excisions were again demanded and Beckett compromised up to a point. Finally the Lord Chamberlain was persuaded that "since the [offensive] word had been allowed to burn English ears in the original French production, it would be silly to insist on a change now."

¹¹³ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 324-326, 554, 624-630. Bair mentions several actors who refused parts because of Beckett and some who performed his plays but complained bitterly afterward. In one case, Beckett claimed that Albert Finney would not take direction from him in *Krapp's Last Tape* and simply let another director take over.

¹¹⁴ Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers," 223.

The main problem for actors and directors was Beckett himself. Beckett believed that the actor ought to be a vessel through which the author's meaning is made clear to the audience. In his early days, Beckett had enthusiastically endorsed the modern acting Method of Constantin Stanislavski of the Moscow Art Theater which rigorously trained actors both physically and mentally. The Method used psychology as a means of preparing the actors for their roles. By the 1970's however, Beckett had changed his mind telling Deidre Bair, "The best possible play is one in which there are no actors, only the text. I'm trying to find a way to write one."¹¹⁵ This attitude not only conflicted with the intelligent actor's sense of craft, but also it often required the submission of the actor's strong ego to the will of the playwright, implying a contest to be more or less successfully mediated by a director. As Beckett developed as a dramatist and then as a director, he found a few actors with whom he could work, and they in turn became devoted advocates for his message and style. Beckett's favorite European actors were Jack McGowran, Patrick Magee, Madeline Renaud and Billie Whitelaw. In Germany he found even closer cooperation; directors, actors and technicians all worked to present his plays as close as possible to his expressed intentions. Among the Germans, Beckett singled out the actors for special praise because they were able to do as he wished, "to efface all aspects of themselves."¹¹⁶ This attitude again links Beckett with postmodernist thought. Derrida for example saw the actor as "born out of the rift between the representer and the represented. Like the alphabetic signifier, like the letter, the actor himself is not inspired or animated by any particular language."¹¹⁷

Beckett had strong convictions on the function of the director. Alan Schneider, the director of the first American production of *Godot*, spent time in London watching the

¹¹⁵ Samuel Beckett quoted in Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 513.

¹¹⁶ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 561.

¹¹⁷ States, *Great Reckonings*, 107.

play with Beckett before rehearsals began in Miami. Schneider was anxious to be the first director to introduce *Waiting for Godot* to American audiences and invested a good deal of time discussing its meaning with the playwright. In a later essay, Schneider confirmed that Beckett thought the job of the director was not "to explain the author's meaning to the actors in a play, but to lead them to an expression of whatever can best convey that meaning to the audience."¹¹⁸ For this reason, Beckett suggested that the director ought to concentrate on the exact incident taking place on stage rather than seek an explication from the author which might shed light on the universal applications of the play. Beckett was perversely unwilling to impart such exegesis in any case. He was adamant that in his art, the author's primacy must be preserved lest interpretations stray from his intentions, never mind that these intentions might often be considered enigmatic.

As Beckett's life unfolded, the intense isolation, which his biographer saw rooted in childhood, became a ruling dynamic. His inability to attend public social events, to speak to the press, to participate in friendships sprang from an interiority that was also responsible for the creation of his unique art. This interiority likely shaped Beckett's dialogic transitions from the several characters in *Godot* to the multiple dialogues with self that framed *Krapp's Last Tape*, to the parallel monologues of *Play* and finally to the solitary monologues of his last plays. In the process of moving from the internal dialogue of the novels onto the stage, Beckett was required to confront the tension among individual subjects and the different voices of the same subject, all the while dealing with the echoing reverberations of his own inner voices of self.¹¹⁹ Building on modernism's recognition of those inner voices, Beckett replaced the exhausted theatrical convention of naturalism with a recreated drama. He introduced a language that was capable of

¹¹⁸ Bair, *Samuel Beckett*, 486.

¹¹⁹ Kennedy, *Six dramatists in search of a language*, 168-9. Even in his early plays the several subjects may really be various aspects or personalities within a single subject.

expressing in both form and content the anxieties of his age; and, without overt analysis, he presented them on stage to his fellow human beings. This presentation demonstrated that, like the modern visual artist, Beckett was able to "bypass the stage of conceptual thinking" and create a new form of theater that audiences could accept as a work of art.¹²⁰

Beckett's plays demonstrated the modernist concern for both form and content, and placed demands on all aspects of production, no longer relying heavily on dialogue to convey meaning. While other theatrical experiments of the period included some elements of absurdism or relied on lyrical poetic speech, the Theater of the Absurd's attitude toward language was distinctively "anti-literary."¹²¹ Esslin declared that the Theater of the Absurd was a new theatrical convention primarily because it:

tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself. The element of language still plays an important, yet subordinate, part in this conception, but what *happens* on the stage transcends, and often contradicts, the *words* spoken by the characters.¹²²

Beckett's legacy to Pinter and Albee was the new conception of drama based upon "the psychological relationships which language only translates." Theater had been transformed into a dramaturgy "of human relations at the level of language itself."¹²³ As Beckett agonizingly followed his muse he transmitted the fearful burden of being self-consciously human in the twentieth century and in attempting to express his vision, he invented a poetic form transmuted to the stage.

¹²⁰ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 46.

¹²¹ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, xxi.

¹²² *Ibid.*

¹²³ Kennedy, *Six dramatists in search of a language*, 168-9; Jean Vannier, "Theatre of Language," *Tulane Drama Review* 7 (Spring, 1963): 182.

CHAPTER IV

A VERY POTENT QUESTION: HAROLD PINTER

Samuel Beckett's groundbreaking drama gradually met with commercial and critical success and this allowed the door to open wide for neophyte dramatists who also conceived of drama in an unconventional style. The two playwrights who will be the focus of this study are Harold Pinter and Edward Albee. The former is a contemporary British playwright and director and the latter an American playwright and director. Since the 1950s they have had successful careers and have produced award winning plays in recent years. They continue to be in demand for interviews and to lecture about their respective bodies of work. Born within two years of each other, Pinter and Albee gained reputations for writing avant-garde theater and were included in Esslin's first edition of *Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) although neither was widely known at that time. The goal of the following two chapters is to consider both playwrights as representatives of the new theatrical convention and to investigate their drama as a medium through which existentialist thought was disseminated.

This chapter will examine Pinter and the contribution of his art to the growth of the New Theater. Pinter's background influenced his writing and this requires examination. In addition, we will explore several of his early plays and their critical reception to discover their Absurdist qualities and their value as works of art. The exploration of his plays will be confined to plays produced before 1965 for several reasons. First, Harold Pinter's early plays, taken as a group fully represent many of the issues featured in existentialist thought—for example the centrality of mental anguish, individual alienation in the creative process, and the role of freedom and authentic choice

in the process of becoming truly human. Second, Pinter's play, *The Homecoming*, which debuted in 1965, marked a distinct shift in his attention from introspective issues of existence to the equally complex but external problems of interpersonal relationships. Third, the earlier plays in their starkness highlight the salient points which post-modernism has addressed as important, such as the possibility (indeed some would claim the impossibility) of true communication, the precarious position of language, the debatable role of interpretation, and the impact of all of these phenomena on relationships of power. In the process of looking at these early works, we will discuss the meaning of the creative process to Pinter and assess his place in the company of playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd.

While Pinter's career has flourished since the 1960s, our investigation here is focused on the early Pinter. This period provides sufficient material to reach an understanding of the substance of his plays, and to discover why they were disturbing and yet familiar to audiences of the 1950s and 1960s. While many of his later plays also broke new ground, it is noteworthy that even in the most recent reviews of his current work, there are often allusions to his early plays and the consistent themes that permeate his creative endeavors. For example, when Pinter introduced his most recent full length play, *Moonlight*, in London, in September 1993, critic, Benedict Nightingale applauded Pinter's return to a more personal drama after a series of political plays written during the 1980s. With a hint of nostalgia, Nightingale remarked of the lead characters, "They also needle each other in traditional Pinter fashion," concluding "*Moonlight* marks a genuine return to form".¹ That Pinter has had a prolific career, not only as playwright but as poet, director, screenwriter and actor does not diminish the importance of the early work. In fact, from the historian's perspective, it is precisely the early work which distinguished Pinter from

¹ Benedict Nightingale, "Pinter Stages a Refreshing Return To the Family Business" *Times* (London), 8 September 1993, 3.

his contemporaries and will assist in the present analysis of the impact of the Theater of the Absurd in cultural terms. In the course of this analysis, three of his early plays: *The Room* (1960), *The Birthday Party* (1960) and *The Caretaker* (1960) will be considered.

Pinter's personal history lends itself well to discussions of the artist as reflection of an era versus the artist engaged in isolated labor. Harold Pinter was born in Hackney, East London on October 10, 1930. His father, a women's tailor, was descended from Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Family tradition held that the Pinters came originally from Portugal. Pinter recalled his parents as very hard-working people, putting in twelve hour days. When war broke out in 1939, nine year old Harold, like many London children, was evacuated to Cornwall for about a year. Subsequently he recalled that he was rather unhappy there. His father remained in London to run his shop and in 1940 Harold and his mother moved closer to London and finally returned home in 1944. Though their house never burned, the neighborhood fires and air raids left a lasting impression.²

Pinter attended the local Grammar School and did very well in English literature, performing Shakespearean roles at sixteen. He had hopes of attending either Oxford or Cambridge but lacked the Latin required for admission. On the advice of a family friend he applied instead for a grant to attend the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA). Though he received the grant and attended RADA for two terms, he soon dropped out. Of this brief experience Pinter later said, "I was out of my element there. I was a very unsophisticated young man, and they all seemed to be very sophisticated there."³

In 1948 Pinter, faced with the military draft, declared that he was a conscientious objector and went before two tribunals to justify his status, but on intellectual rather than

² Harold Pinter, "Talk of the Town," interview by John Russell Taylor, *The New Yorker* 25 February 1967, 34-35.

³ *Ibid.*

on religious grounds. Although his parents attended synagogue, Pinter himself claimed to have no religious affiliation. He declared that he was a conscientious objector because he had witnessed war and saw it as a great evil. Pinter remembered taking a close friend, Morris Wernick, with him to the tribunal to speak on his behalf. Wernick, himself about to enlist, told the judge that since Pinter had made up his own mind on the subject, it was a waste of time to attempt to dissuade him. Though Pinter was grateful for the clear-headed logic of his friend's testimony, both tribunals turned down his petition. Pinter was then called before a magistrate's court, where he paid a fine and then went on with his life.⁴

Pinter had written poetry since early adolescence and in 1950 his first two poems were published in *Poetry London*. During the next few years Pinter worked fairly regularly as an actor reading radio plays over the BBC. He also joined an Irish touring company directed by Anew McMaster. Touring Ireland in the early fifties was sometimes difficult, sometimes idyllic and always cheap. The roving players were later immortalized in the 1992 film, *The Playboys*. The screenplay was adapted from a short story by Shane Connaughton, an Irish writer, who vividly recalled groups of young actors who came to his small town when he was a boy in the 1950's. An aura of celebrity was awarded any bona fide acting group no matter how roughshod or slapdash their community production might seem. Nostalgically recalling his own experiences in Ireland, Pinter marveled that they could arrive in a small sleepy town, quickly set up their improvised stage, and then play to packed houses. He often wondered where the crowds had all come from and characterized the experience as "a golden age for me and for others."⁵

In 1953, Pinter appeared in director Donald Wolfit's season in Hammersmith in London doing classic roles and the following year began appearing in various provincial

⁴ Harold Pinter, "Talk of the Town," 36.

⁵ Martin Esslin, *Pinter, The Playwright*, (New York: Methuen, 1984), 18.

theaters. In Hammersmith, Pinter, now calling himself by his stage name, David Baron, met the actress Vivien Merchant. They married in 1956 and continued to play in repertory companies in the south of England. A short time later, Pinter wrote his first play, *The Room*. A friend who was studying drama at the University of Bristol needed a play and Pinter obliged him with the script, produced in four days, and mostly written between his own performances. The Bristol performance, a minor success, was later selected for a national student competition. Harold Hobson, drama critic for the *Sunday Times* and judge at the competition, praised Pinter's play in glowing tones and the favorable publicity led a young impresario, Michael Codron, to request other plays from Pinter.⁶

In an essay written in 1964, Pinter asserted that though the theater is a very public place, his writing for it had always been a very private exercise. He claimed that it was his habit to start a play by placing his characters in real situations and allowing them to speak for themselves. Like Beckett, Pinter seemed to imply that his characters arose from his unconscious mind. He claimed that he did not begin writing with any abstract notion or goal toward which he launched his characters, and he emphatically denied that they were meant to be symbolic.⁷ Though the latter claim appears to be true with most of Pinter's characters, students of Pinter question whether it was always so since his earliest works used some very evident symbolism.

Pinter's early plays and, in particular, his first play, *The Room* is the most obvious example, for in it we find his several symbolic devices. The curtain opens on a room that, according to the scenic directions, is located in an old house.⁸ There is a man seated at a

⁶ Esslin, *Pinter*, 19.

⁷ Harold Pinter, "Writing For the Theatre," *Evergreen Review* 33 (1964): 80.

⁸ The following description is taken from Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party and The Room*, rev. ed. (New York: Grove Press, 1961, 1968), 91-116, a widely available edition of the play. Set design and character descriptions are from page 90. Direct quotes have been cited parenthetically in the text.

table and a woman who bustles about making food for the man, perhaps her husband. In the course of the first scene even though the man says nothing at all, we are able to learn from the prattling of the woman, Rose Hudd, that the room is warm, the evening is cold and icy and that her husband Bert is a driver who is going out shortly to make a delivery. We sense Rose's anxiety and concern for the man and her satisfaction in the security of the room which is warm and cozy. Though spare and dim, the room is particularly attractive when Rose considers the dank basement room which the couple had earlier been offered. Rose takes great satisfaction in having chosen this upper story room instead, but at the same time Pinter has introduced very early in the play a lurking sense of her vulnerability. When a third character, Mr. Kidd arrives, this fragile sense of security is further eroded. Mr. Kidd, whom Rose has always presumed is the landlord, confides that he had earlier rented this very room. When he is uncertain about many details that a landlord would surely know (such as the number of floors in the house), the audience becomes as wary as Rose. Mr. Kidd leaves and Bert is sent off, well nourished and wrapped up against the elements. Rose is left on her own and soon encounters a young couple, Mr. and Mrs. Sands, outside her door who are looking for the landlord. They have already explored the dark, damp basement where an unseen man told them that there was indeed a flat for rent. When they announce that it is room number seven, Rose's own flat, she is more than annoyed. Her shock is palpable. After the young couple leave, Rose is sought out by Mr. Kidd who is nervously eager to talk to Rose alone. Initially, Rose and he are at cross purposes because she obviously wishes to pursue the issue of why there should be any suggestion of her flat's availability and he wishes to unburden himself. Mr. Kidd relates that he has been greatly disturbed by the stranger who has been waiting in the basement for several days in order to speak to Rose. Mr. Kidd has had to wait until Bert is out of the building to bring the visitor to her room. Though she resists at first, she soon relents for Mr. Kidd intimates that the man will come up when Bert gets back if she doesn't speak him first. Rose meets the man Mr. Riley, a blind Negro who claims to have a message for

her from her father. She is hostile, even abusive, until Riley calls her by a different name—Sal. Riley's message seems to be more than a message from her father; Riley appears to be a medium through which her father speaks to her directly, begging her to come home. In a mysterious but in many ways tragic exchange, Rose softens and admits that she has in fact been expecting this uneasy reunion. Rose's husband, Bert suddenly reappears and seems not to notice the visitor until he has spent some time boasting about his driving ability in a startlingly erotic ode to his van. When he finishes his soliloquy, Bert notices Riley and in an abrupt, almost reflexive, and brutal attack kills the black man and walks off. After a moment of silence, the play ends with Rose clutching her eyes and saying, "Can't see, I can't see, I can't see." (116)

The Room was Pinter's first excursion into dramatic writing. It was first performed by students and Pinter relates that he found it exciting to go down to see it on his night off from acting. Harold Hobson's kind review at the Bristol competition notwithstanding, *The Room* was not officially reviewed until three years later. *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*, both one-act plays were first professionally staged at the Hampstead Theatre Club on January 21, 1960. They were popular enough to be moved within six weeks to the Royal Court Theatre in London's West End. A majority of the reviews were favorable and noted Pinter's ability to create a mood of foreboding and terror in a world that was confined and dreamlike. These ingredients would be found in all of Pinter's later plays. Harold Hobson was unequivocal in his endorsement of Pinter. He found the disconnection of cause and effect, the questions never answered and the characters never adequately explained to be thought provoking ways to engage the audience.⁹ A. Alvarez, writing in the *New Statesman* also applauded Pinter's talent for dramatizing the difficulties

⁹ Harold Hobson, "Vagaries of the West End," review of *The Room* by Harold Pinter, *Sunday Times* (London), 31 January 1960, 23.

of human communication.¹⁰ Another critic compared Pinter with the modern composer Anton Webern for "structures elusive, yet so precisely organized that they possess an inner tension nonetheless potent because its sources are not completely understood."¹¹ Some reviewers were less sympathetic though none was as harsh as they would be in reviews of his next plays. Alan Brien in a review for *Spectator* complained that Pinter was trying to combine realism with impressionistic comment and failing at the attempt.¹² The critic for the daily *Times* was puzzled by his purpose and objected that, "one's fascination with the play's subtle atmosphere of terror was mixed with frustration at not understanding it better."¹³ Others considered Pinter's dramas so similar to Beckett's that Pinter was dismissed as merely derivative. In fact, Patrick Gibbs in the *Daily Telegraph* called for further consideration of the continental playwrights in order to explain Pinter, obviously a tongue in cheek reversal of the norm.¹⁴ Because so few production reviews were written for *The Room* on its first run, it was left to drama scholars to undertake a more thorough analysis of the play.

One of the earliest full appraisals of *The Room* appeared in the first edition of Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961). He pointed out certain weaknesses that Pinter would quickly eliminate from his work to great advantage. One defect was the overly obvious use of symbols, like the blind Negro. Esslin pointed out that the careful pattern of suspense and fear deftly built up through the accretion of ambiguous dialogue,

¹⁰ A. Alvarez, "The Arts and Entertainment. Wanted—a Language," *New Statesman* 30 January 1960, 149-150.

¹¹ Esslin, *Pinter*, 24.

¹² Herman T. Schroll, *Harold Pinter: A Study of His Reputation (1958-1969) and a Checklist* (Metuchen, NJ: The Scarecrow Press, 1971) 15.

¹³ Review of *The Room* by Harold Pinter, "Strange and Subtle Double Bill," *Times* (London), 22 January 1960, 6

¹⁴ Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 16.

suggestive silences and the unpredictable actions of the characters was undermined when the blind Mr. Riley appeared. Riley was anything but a subtle messenger of impending doom. Rather he seemed to be an all too obvious dramatic device. Furthermore, *The Room* was marred by the sentimentality of the final scene in which Rose encountered her father in the form of Mr. Riley and by the melodrama of Riley's bludgeoning as Rose is blinded. Certainly, the shock of the violent ending encouraged the audience to emerge from the theater with questions—a characteristic of thought-provoking modern drama since Ibsen. However, Esslin viewed the ending as rather ham-fisted, coming as it did on the heels of an otherwise deftly crafted tension, that earned Pinter's plays the label, "Comedies of Menace."¹⁵ For Esslin, it was not merely that Riley's death and Rose's blindness were dramatic contrivances, but that Pinter's very promising style was interrupted by the resort to "crude symbolism, cheap mystery, and violence."¹⁶ Esslin ascribed this lack of consistency to youthful enthusiasm and noted that the positive attributes of this first effort far outweighed these cavils.

The issue of symbolism recurs in later studies of *The Room*. Bernard Dukore, writing in 1962, saw Pinter's use of symbols as different from those of Maeterlinck or Ibsen, but could not pinpoint the difference except to say that "The objects, the characters, and the behavior of the characters symbolize something, but we are never quite sure what that 'something' is."¹⁷ Dukore added that the characters were recognizable and that Pinter often "shows people reduced to nonentities, and he shows people fighting in vain against being so reduced."¹⁸ The idea of a room representing the security of the womb in an alien

¹⁵ Wardle, Irving. "Comedy of Menace," in ed. Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne, and Owen Hale *The Encore Reader* (London: Methuen, 1965) 86. Irving Wardle first coined the term though others have used it in reviews over the years.

¹⁶ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 201.

¹⁷ Bernard Dukore, "The Theatre of Harold Pinter," *Tulane Drama Review*, 6 (March 1962): 44.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

world was cited by scholars to explain the inability of humans to interact. Dukore contends that people in Pinter's plays are not merely isolated from each other by fear of the unknown. Indeed, they prefer to cultivate their isolation in order to feel more secure. They are fearful of exposure of any kind and this is manifest in Rose's obvious distaste for anything or anyone outside her door. As in a mantra she repeats how dark and icy it is outside, and how dark and damp it must be in the basement, thus favorably contrasting the warmth and light of her own room. Only when the new tenant implies that the entire building is dark, even when compared with the outside, does it seem obvious that her room with its meager light represents only the illusion of security. The final darkness of Rose's blindness suggests that the darkness in its many shades, represents not only the unknown strangers and events of the world but also the unknown self, the unexplored inner world. Or, as Kierkegaard might have put it, the darkness is the yawning void that awaits those who care to confront the issue of being.¹⁹

Other writers attempted to make *The Room* a simple allegory in which the room represents the "little nook of time and space that we are permitted to hold, though precariously, in this life."²⁰ The young couple represent the next generation on an already overcrowded planet looking for their space, their time. Rose's value is questioned in an insinuating way. Why should an old woman take up space when her existence means little to anyone? Her unrequited devotion to Bert in the face of his brutality is absurd and yet it is also the only thing that lies between her existence and her negation. It is that which makes her human.

The Room and Pinter's other early work raised the important question of his categorization. As Ruby Cohn pointed out in an essay in 1962, Pinter resembles the so-

¹⁹ Dukore, "The Theatre of Harold Pinter," 47-49.

²⁰ Augusta Walker, "Messages from Pinter," *Modern Drama*, 10 (May, 1967): 4.

called Angry Young English playwrights: John Osborne, Alun Owen, Shelagh Delaney, Arnold Wesker, John Arden and Ann Jellicoe. The similarity is found in his attempt to confirm the value of humanity in the face of a system that demeaned it. However unlike Osborne who verbally railed against the establishment, Pinter criticized tradition by negating it. Pinter wrote "bitter dramas of *dehumanization*"²¹ which indicted the representatives of traditional structures of religion, government and society who he portrayed as bent on destroying the individual.²²

Cohn's insight is important, for in the early days of his playwriting career, Pinter was frequently and erroneously subsumed into the category of the Angry Young playwrights. Pinter was a member of the post-war generation which shared in educational opportunities unknown to the lower classes of the previous generation. He too shared the common frustrations of those who came of age in the 1950's, admitting many years later, "I was full of contempt for so many things in those days."²³ As a generational label it was useful, but the more obvious reason that Pinter was included in this group was his use of realistic sets and local dialects. Moreover, he quickly became noted for the suppressed hostility which lurked just beneath the surface of his dialogue, as well as for the violence in his plots, both threatened and actual.

This subdued anger had already been openly articulated by a few of Pinter's contemporaries like John Osborne. Osborne's *Look Back In Anger* (1956) had fired the first salvo against the British establishment. The main character Jimmy Porter had given the world the British equivalent of James Dean's *Rebel without A Cause* (1955). Here the isolated, romantic folk hero as "Outsider" or "angry young man" was recycled. Porter was a modern version of the melodrama hero who had existed since the Romantic era.

²¹ Ruby Cohn, "The World of Harold Pinter," *Tulane Drama Review*, 6 (March, 1962): 55.

²² *Ibid.*, 55.

²³ Taylor, "Talk of the Town," 35.

Nevertheless Osborne struck an immediate chord with the public. When *Look Back In Anger* opened at the Royal Court Theatre in 1956, it had merited only cool reviews and was expected to run a few weeks at the most. However, after one act was televised it created a sensation and elevated Osborne to national attention.²⁴

The Angry Young playwrights wrote what were labeled "kitchen sink dramas" that introduced to the theater-going public the lives of ordinary people complete with working class behaviors and common vernacular. In raising the curtain on the life of the working classes, Osborne shocked critics and audiences alike by portrayals that emphasized the coarseness and brutality of life. Critics attempted to navigate these murky waters without charts and often petulantly launched tirades against what they saw as the sheer bad taste of the productions. Reviewers claimed that, since the aim of art was to elevate the mind, the modern style surely failed.

The vulgar "slice of life" of the 1950's was viewed by the critics as less uplifting than its equivalent had been in Ibsen's day, when, for example, Shaw's character Alfred P. Doolittle's lack of middle class morality provided an unpleasant if recognizable glimpse of reality. Moreover, critics were inclined to assign all young writers to the kitchen sink category, and were thus free to dismiss them and turn their attention to imported American musicals, revivals of Noel Coward's drawing room comedies, Restoration comedies, or the familiar classics from Shakespeare.

Categories are of course convenient, but the "angry" label does not fit Pinter for several reasons. The new English playwrights were superficially similar, yet as individuals, they differed greatly in motivation and, as it soon became clear, in levels of talent. The differences were not discernible at first because the dramaturgy was spare and the content reflected the social struggles of a changing but still very traditional English society. Often, these dramatists targeted frustrations felt by beneficiaries of England's social welfare state

²⁴ Glynn Wyckham, *A History of the Theatre*, 248.

as they bumped up against the vestiges of the traditional class system. Taboo subjects such as illicit sex, cohabitation, pregnancy, drugs, army life, and racism were aired and plays often ended without the conventional happy ending, thereby stimulating public impatience. The more socially conscious playwrights like John Arden, a disciple of Brecht, used their drama as political vehicles to proselytize. They offered detailed descriptions of what was wrong with society and called for fundamental change, but they offered no substantive program to guide the revolution. Other writers were content to dramatize the problems of post-war Britain displaying less ambition to improve conditions than to get the portrait right. It was often assumed that Pinter fit into this less politicized group.

However, Harold Pinter differed from his contemporaries. His drama focused on fundamental philosophical issues—human anxiety, isolation and the alienation of the individual—that were larger than Britain's social and economic dislocations. At the same time, these issues encompassed the unfairness of the class system and the inefficiencies and sterility of everyday life in bureaucratic Britain. These same issues had preoccupied the existentialists during and after the cataclysm of two world wars. Pinter's exposition of the dehumanizing forces of the times allowed the audience to confront issues they would rather not face. In contrast to the Angry Young playwrights, but no less distastefully for the audience, Pinter presented a brutal picture of the world. But rather than presenting a jeremiad that insisted that the image was an accurate reflection of reality, Pinter offered it as a metaphor for everyone to explore. When, after two decades of being avowedly apolitical, Pinter spent the decade of the 1980's espousing causes and writing overtly political plays, many critics were surprised. However Benedict Nightingale reminds us that this was not such a strange departure since a few scholars had "detected political resonances in his work, especially his early work."²⁵ These political resonances often

²⁵ Benedict Nightingale, "Harold Pinter/Politics" in *Around The Absurd, Essays On Modern*

involved the kind of false security found in *The Room* and the confrontation evoked by the intruders to that room. Pinter's own view was established in an interview in 1960. "This thing, of people arriving at the door, has been happening in Europe in the last 20 years. Not only the last 20, the last two to three hundred."²⁶

Scholars continued to study the early works in order to assess Pinter's lasting value. Martin Esslin's 1970 study of Pinter's work, *The Peopled Wound*, amplifies Pinter's distinctive place in postwar British drama by softening his earlier criticism of the young playwright's resort to dramatic devices. Esslin saw Mr. Riley as a character so mysterious and recondite and thus distinct from the other realistic characters that he almost became "a cliché metaphor, an allegorical figure from a different—a neo-romantic, or pre-Raphaelite genre."²⁷ Though critical of Pinter's inconsistent style, Esslin went on to suggest that Pinter's early interest in poetry provides evidence through which to explore the issue more deeply and to follow up on the poetic aspect of drama which was of vital importance in the Theater of the Absurd. Esslin held that the Absurdists were not anxious to tell a story, advance a position, or solve problems as were the Angry Young playwrights. Absurdist playwrights each communicate "one poet's most intimate and personal intuition of the human situation, his own *sense of being*, his individual vision of the world."²⁸ Esslin saw Mr. Riley as a poetic figure in keeping with the dreamlike (even nightmarish) quality of the play as a whole. Esslin reminds us that Pinter was a poet before he was a playwright. Even with this first play, Pinter drew his characters "from the world of lyrical dream

and Postmodern Drama, ed. Enoch Brater and Ruby Cohn, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1990), 129.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.

²⁷ Esslin, *The Peopled Wound: The Work of Harold Pinter*, (New York: Doubleday, 1970), 63.

²⁸ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 293.

images, which pervaded his early poetry, with particular force and clarity."²⁹ Even so, Mr. Riley represented a clear disruption in Pinter's style. Because Pinter's poetic mood was the result of a carefully constructed drama woven from commonplace details such as Rose's cliché riddled speech, and her rituals of tea preparation and weather watching, the spectral figure clearly does not fit. Pinter's ear for the vernacular, the tawdriness of the scene, the sheer ordinariness of the situation—all these phenomena evoked recognition from the audience and marked Pinter's drama from the start.

That the quotidian could result in poetry was not new, but that it could produce a concrete poetry on the stage was revolutionary. Esslin argued that poetry is the heart of the new drama and that the poetic subject matter necessitated absurdist form to give it expression. The playwrights of the new genre, like the artists of abstract expressionism, were anxious "to communicate a pattern of poetic images . . . to make in the spectators' mind a total, complex impression of a basic, and static, situation."³⁰ The plays were plays of situation rather than characterization. The image of a room was so often emphasized in early reviews because it provided the situation of the drama and could easily be apprehended as a metaphor for human existence. In addition, Rose and Bert's problematic relationship provided the initial underlying tension while other characters entering the room were inevitably also contributors to the unease. What would happen next was less important than the questions raised by the dialogue or even those raised by the lack of action. Esslin characterized this kind of theater as one of intuitive depth rather than of duration. Thus, the information being communicated to the audience should be almost instantaneous, but in fact it takes as long as is required to physically present the dramatist's complex images which come from his intuitive grasp of being. This dramatic form differs

²⁹ Esslin, *Pinter*, 60.

³⁰ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, 294.

greatly from the traditional story developed over time. In the Theater of the Absurd, as in any poem, time is irrelevant.³¹

In the new drama, background is negligible, and dialogic hints are meager. Sometimes, a character's name alone encapsulates his or her personality. This has been cited as evidence of Pinter's poetic craftsmanship when he has been criticized for stinginess in supplying clues to his drama. In *The Room*, for example, the last name of the protagonist couple, Hudd, has a solid almost an ominous sound, like the thud in the final scene as Mr. Riley falls to the ground and hits his head. When Hudd is linked with Kidd, the colorless name of the building's caretaker, they two become almost interchangeable and cause confusion to the prospective tenants, Mr. and Mrs. Sands. In fact when the young couple are looking for the landlord and mistake one name for the other, another layer of confusion is added to that which already encrusts the situation.³²

Pinter's drama also suspends absolute time. This phenomenon was not new in literature; Proust and Joyce made psychological and relative time a staple of the modern idiom. As we have noted, Beckett's plays adapted this development to the stage. Even in the new drama, however, there remained a continuity of the traditional stage directions which gave a time of day to scenes and represented the passing of time from scene to scene. Yet just as Pinter used language differently from other modern playwrights, he also applied a different measure to time's valuation. This is clear in the way he used memory. Where Proust used memory as a means by which to reclaim lost time, Pinter uses the uncertainty of memories to create ambiguity, mystery and menace. For example, Pinter's characters are often presented to the audience with little or no background information. This in itself is not unusual as characters are never fully described before they step on-stage. However, in most naturalist drama, the dialogue provided the necessary

³¹ *Ibid.*, 294-295.

³² Cohn, "The World of Harold Pinter," 61.

biographical details that would help build the characterization and motivation for the action of the play. With Pinter, the dialogue often introduces threads of personal history only to erode them in the next sentence through the suggestion of a faulty memory or fabrication. To illustrate this point, scholars often cite Mr. Kidd's first visit to the Hudd's room. In the course of his first brief visit, Rose asked Mr. Kidd if he had any help with maintaining the building while she vaguely and simultaneously recalled a woman who lived there when she and Bert first moved into their room. Pinter's ambiguity is deliberate and contributes to an undercurrent of apprehension. After denying that he had ever had such help, Mr. Kidd goes on to reminisce about his dead sister who had lived in the building and whom he dearly misses. He dimly recalls that she resembled his mother. While the ramblings of an old man seem innocuous at first, the audience is startled by the next few lines, "I think my mum was a Jewess. Yes, I wouldn't be surprised to learn she was a Jewess. She didn't have many babies".(99) When he exits the room moments later his entire story is rendered suspect as Rose declares, "I don't believe he had a sister, ever."(100) This might be seen as an instance of contrived elusiveness of the character's past because though some information is given, its usefulness is hard for the audience to judge. The end result is a further inability to predict accurately what to expect as the play unfolds. Pinter's characteristic unpredictability will be encountered again in the other early plays. It is indicative of the lack of importance he attached to standard devices to create background and indeed evidence of his belief in the vanescent character of the past.

After the debut of *The Room*, Pinter submitted *The Party* and *The Dumb Waiter* to Director Michael Codron. The former, soon renamed *The Birthday Party*, was first produced in Cambridge and then London in May 1958. It was not a success and closed in a week. Temporarily daunted by this rejection, Pinter's next project was a sixty minute play for the BBC called *A Slight Ache* which was broadcast on July 29, 1959. He followed this with another radio drama *A Night Out* that debuted in March of 1960. Pinter also wrote two sketches for a revue presented at Hammersmith in the summer of

1959, dialogues that were thought-provoking but lightly bantering, a style that became his trademark.³³ In March 1960 *The Birthday Party* was produced for television and *A Night Out*, in which he and wife, Vivien Merchant acted, was also broadcast by an independent television company. In April 1960 *The Caretaker* premiered in London starring Alan Bates, Peter Woodthorpe and Donald Pleasance.

Pinter's first full length drama, *The Birthday Party* is set in a boarding house near a seaside resort.³⁴ The house is run by Meg and Petey Boles who have only one guest at the moment. He is Stanley Webber, a pudgy unemployed piano player in his late thirties. Stanley is lavished with attention by the indulgent Meg who hovers over him and anticipates his every need. Her attentions at first seem strictly maternal and then playfully sexual. Petey, her husband, is an easy-going deck chair keeper who apparently gets along well with Stanley. Stanley lounges about the house in his pajamas and treats Meg with a mixture of indifference and contempt. He apparently has come to the resort to escape some problem in his past the nature of which is unknown. Lulu, the coquettish young woman who lives next door arrives with a parcel wrapped in brown paper, a birthday gift for Stanley. Lulu flirts with Stanley, and he suggests that they go away together, ignoring her more prosaic suggestion that they go out for a walk.

Soon two visitors, Goldberg and McCann, come to inquire about renting a room. Stanley seems startled by this intrusion and avoids meeting them. After Meg assures them that a room is available, she confides to the visitors that it is Stanley's birthday. There is no reason to believe either that it is Stanley's birthday or that Meg has any reason to suppose that it is. When Goldberg, the more garrulous of the two strangers, suggests arranging a birthday party in the evening for Stanley, Meg gets excited. It is apparent that

³³ Charles Marowitz, "'Pinterism' is Maximum Tension through Minimum Information," *New York Times*, 1 October 1967, Sec. 6, 89.

³⁴ The following description is taken from Pinter, *The Birthday Party and The Room*, 9-87, set description and characters are from page 8; direct quotes are cited parenthetically in the text.

the two men have been sent by their boss, Monty, to find Stanley. After they are shown to their room, Stanley returns and seems disturbed at the news that the intruders will stay. Though he denies that it is his birthday, Meg chatters on about it and presents him a gift, a toy drum. Though a ludicrous gift for a grown man, the drum underlines Meg's sentimentality for she considers a musical instrument the next best thing to a piano. Initially dumbfounded, Stanley hangs the drum around his neck and begins beating it in an increasing staccato. The first act closes on the scene of Stanley reduced to this childish drumming with "his face and the drumbeat savage and possessed."(36)

The second Act opens with McCann, the burly Irishman, introducing himself to Stanley who, when informed of the party in his honor, attempts to escape. McCann in an increasingly coercive tone insists that Stanley remain. When Goldberg arrives, the two put Stanley through a menacing but nonsensical cross-examination, Goldberg playing good cop to McCann's bad cop. Still, the mystery remains as to their mission, Stanley's supposed crime and who or what organization has sent them. Petey Boles announces that he has a chess club meeting and will not be able to stay for the party. When Meg and Lulu enter, the party gets underway. Goldberg assumes the role of host while a subdued Stanley watches the gaiety increase as the liquor flows. Meg reminisces with McCann over her childhood as Goldberg seduces Lulu. The conversation becomes jumbled and ambiguous and Stanley is blindfolded in a game of blind man's bluff during which McCann breaks Stanley's glasses, and then places the drum in his path. Stanley trips over the drum and puts his foot through it. He then moves toward the sound of Meg's voice and attempts to strangle her. Goldberg and McCann throw him off as the lights suddenly go out. In darkness the company struggles to find flashlights and to gauge each other's whereabouts. Soon Lulu faints and Stanley is found leaning over her as she lies spread-eagled on the table. Goldberg and McCann move toward him as Stanley begins to giggle madly and their shadows converge over him backed against the wall as the curtain comes down.

Act three opens the following morning and initially replays the first scene in which Meg asks Petey if Stanley is down yet. Meg notices the broken drum and wonders why she has a headache but otherwise continues her usual morning work. Goldberg comes in and assures them that Stanley is coming down, but after Meg leaves to buy more food, he confides to Petey that Stanley has had a nervous breakdown. Goldberg declares that he will get him to the "specialist". When Petey leaves and McCann comes in, Goldberg's demeanor changes. Where he had been robust, he now appears old and weary. In a scene riddled with contradictions and innuendoes, Goldberg switches from arrogant self-promoting businessman to a babbling nostalgic child. Soon Lulu enters complaining that she has been treacherously misused by Goldberg, who came to her room in the night. McCann abruptly demands that Lulu confess her sins. Lulu flees in confusion as Goldberg intimates that McCann has only been defrocked six months. In the finale, Stanley is escorted downstairs clean-shaven and wearing a suit. He appears catatonic and is able to utter only garbled sounds. Though Petey lamely suggests that they leave Stanley with him, Goldberg and McCann lead Stanley out the front door to a large waiting car. They reassure Stanley that he will feel better once he has been delivered to Monty. The play ends with Meg's return. As Petey declines to inform her otherwise, she thinks "her Stanley" is sleeping upstairs, having enjoyed his birthday party as much as she did.

The Birthday Party, Pinter's second play, opened on April 28, 1958 at the Arts Theatre, Cambridge and had its first London performance on May 19, 1958 at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith. The daily papers panned it. *The Times'* critic found it obscure and puzzling rather than deep and frightening, noting, "This essay in Surrealistic drama . . . gives the impression of having derived from an Ionesco play which Mr. Ionesco has not yet written."³⁵ Critic Milton Shulman of *The Evening Standard* called the play an "opaque, sometimes macabre comedy." The reviewer in the *Manchester Guardian*

³⁵ "Puzzling Surrealism of the Birthday Party," *Times* (London), 20 May 1958, 3.

claimed that Pinter's "characters speak in non sequiturs, half-gibberish and lunatic ravings"³⁶ and patronizingly quipped that "If the author can forget Beckett, Ionesco and Simpson, he may do much better next time."³⁷ Likewise, T.C. Worsley in the *New Statesman*, though he dubbed Pinter "an off-beat comic writer of very considerable promise," tartly claimed that it was a pity that *Waiting For Godot* had been so successful because it allowed new playwrights to "think they can repeat the unrepeatable (when even Mr. Beckett can't!)." ³⁸ Kenneth Tynan in the *Observer* thought the play was about the individualist's attempt to deal with the world at large and concluded that Pinter offered nothing new to an already old theme. W .A. Darlington in the *Daily Telegraph* found it painful to sit through and Cecil Wilson of the *Daily Mail* implied that it was merely an actor's exercise while killing time backstage as an understudy.³⁹ *The Birthday Party* survived this stinging derision less than a week.

The Birthday Party closed in spite of the kind words of *Sunday Times* critic Harold Hobson. As he had done at the Bristol theatrical competition, Hobson once again championed the new playwright declaring, "Mr. Pinter, on the evidence of this work, possesses the most original, disturbing and arresting talent in theatrical London." He went on to endorse the history of early bad reviews as a talisman of good luck by citing Osborne, Beckett, Ibsen and Shaw as perfect examples of playwrights of great merit who were likewise underrated by the critics in their early works.⁴⁰ A few other critics were positive as well. Frank Jackson in the *Sunday Citizen* pointed out that Pinter was in the

³⁶ Esslin, *Pinter*, 21.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.

³⁸ T.C. Worsley, "A New Dramatist, or Two," *New Statesman*, 31 May 1958, 692, 693.

³⁹ Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 10-11.

⁴⁰ Esslin, *Pinter*, 22.

uncomfortable position of being a prophet in his own land. Jackson saw the negative press as evidence that apparently "you can't be British ... and get away with mocking the formulas so dear to us."⁴¹

Pinter's work gained serious attention despite these setbacks. In *Encore*, a bimonthly theater journal, Irving Wardle discussed *The Birthday Party* in two separate articles. In the first, Wardle emphasized that Pinter was a writer whose theatricality was unquestionable. Illustratively, he pointed to Pinter's use of a theatrical device to disclose the character McCann. As the curtain rises on Act Two, McCann, the more volatile of the two visitors, is sitting alone at a table methodically tearing a newspaper into five even strips; the audience is not told why. This image of the brutish McCann in concentrated purpose "took on a malevolent power perfectly in key with the play and requiring no explanation."⁴² In a psychological reading of the play's theme, Wardle contended that *The Birthday Party* showed that the human tendency to withdraw from the world in order to protect one's illusions is doubly dangerous, since one's ultimate confrontation with the hostile outer world will not only prove disillusioning but will also exacerbate the original problem: fear. In the second article, Wardle coined the term Comedy of Menace to describe the current climate in the theater that had led playwrights like Pinter to write "dehumanized comedy."⁴³ Wardle included *The Birthday Party* as an example of theater in which menace defined that which will result in "violence approaching anarchy."⁴⁴ The menace that hangs over the play is first encountered in the entrance of Goldberg and McCann and Stanley's anxious reaction to them. Are they members of some hoodlum

⁴¹ Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 11-12.

⁴² Irving Wardle, "The Birthday Party," in *The Encore Reader* ed. Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne, and Owen Hale, 77.

⁴³ Wardle, "The Birthday Party," 76-78; Wardle "Comedy of Menace," 88.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 86, 90.

gang, a terrorist organization such as the I.R.A.? Or, are they perhaps well meaning agents of a mental institution sent to bring back a runaway? The audience has no idea, but the possibilities build the tension. Wardle described the counterpoint to this atmosphere of menace as the room/womb image which dominates the entire play. He even went so far as to diagnose the menace itself as fate.⁴⁵ Scholars would return to these seminal insights when they began to analyze Pinter's work in more detail.

After *The Birthday Party* closed, Pinter wrote resignedly to a friend, "the Play has come a cropper, as you know."⁴⁶ Nevertheless, it did not disappear and Pinter remained busy writing BBC radio dramas. *The Birthday Party* was next staged in Birmingham in January 1959 and Pinter himself directed. Serious reconsideration occurred later that year after two remarkable amateur productions. The Tavistock Players, a semi-amateur group, in Islington staged *The Birthday Party* in May and Questors produced it in Ealing in December 1959. A review of the latter by A. Alvarez in *The New Statesman* was not only positive but like Irving Wardle's articles very insightful. Alvarez thought that the Questors' director had instructed his actors to play Goldberg and McCann as messengers of death. Alvarez took exception to this interpretation, for he believed Pinter meant to portray a different form of death, the inability of the artist to express himself. Stanley in this interpretation is the "no-good artist and hopeless individualist [who] is destroyed by the respectable, smug and sinister agents of the Bitch goddess, Success." Because Stanley did not simply die at the end of the play, Alvarez implied that the loss of his power of self-expression was a worse fate, one which conjures up Kafka's nightmare world.⁴⁷ In the

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 91.

⁴⁶ Harold Pinter quoted in Esslin, *Pinter*, 18.; *The Dumb Waiter* had debuted in Frankfurt-am-Main earlier that year.

⁴⁷ A. Alvarez, "Death in the Morning," a review of *The Birthday Party* by Harold Pinter, *New Statesman* 12 December 1959, 836.

same month as the Ealing production, December 1959, *The Birthday Party* was also staged in Braunschweig, Germany. Pinter's second play done by a German company, it was well received.⁴⁸

A wider audience was introduced to *The Birthday Party* when it was televised by the independent company, Affiliated Re-diffusion (ARD)-TV on March 22, 1960. The review in *The Times* claimed that, "Few plays in recent years have created more violent argument on their first appearance [than *The Birthday Party*] . . . [it is] a play of atmosphere, and the atmosphere is before all else one of terror." The reviewer considered the lack of information about the source of Stanley's terror as the play's greatest asset. "It might be anything or nothing and this Kafkaesque mystery is hinted at, toyed with, crept up on, and snatched from view with a virtuosity and a black humour which Hitchcock himself might envy."⁴⁹ Like this review, most of the critical responses following the TV production of *The Birthday Party* were more positive than they had been two years earlier, though many reviewers were still searching for deep meanings and manifest symbolism. Critics applauded Pinter's ability to create sinister atmosphere, to draw interesting characters and to create fascinating drama out of dialogue that was both realistic and illogical, colloquial in sound and yet arranged to maximize its inherent absurdity. Indeed, some reviewers seemed willing to reconsider the play mainly because of Pinter's growing presence in the entertainment world. Pinter's radio work and short revue sketches had already widened his audience considerably, and tolerance was perhaps generated by familiarity with his style even when the content remained obscure.

Scholarly studies of *The Birthday Party* began to appear written almost as soon as the first production reviews. Most of the early essays from 1960 echoed positive comments made by the reviewers concerning Pinter's ability to evoke reality through deft

⁴⁸ Esslin, *Pinter*, 24.

⁴⁹ "A Simple Play, *The Birthday Party* on Television," *Times* (London) 23 March 1960, 16.

characterization, and humorous cliché-filled speech. One of the earliest essays, Tom Milne's in *Encore* compared *The Birthday Party* with plays by two other young British playwrights, and saw Pinter's play as concerned not with the violence among the characters but between Stanley, the protagonist, and the society that oppressed him. In other essays, the importance of atmosphere was stressed, specifically Pinter's ability to evoke a spine-chilling dread. Wardle's term Comedy of Menace became popular. While production reviewers had been satisfied that menace produced effective drama for the audience, scholars wanted to delve deeper into its origin and meaning. Charles Marowitz suggested that Pinter was more like the French playwrights than his own English contemporaries. Pinter too was concerned with inner human reality, and raised questions rather than drew conclusions. Marowitz likened him to a musician who plays with a theme in various ways and communicates more through ambiguity than through didactic statements.⁵⁰ H.A.L. Craig's article on poetry in the theater acknowledged Pinter as one of the new dramatists who had created a prose poetry on stage. Craig defined this new dramatic poetry as the moment when that which is taking place on stage "becomes an allusion to what is beyond being heard or said."⁵¹ Craig contended that Pinter, unlike Beckett, was unable to sustain the poetic allusion for an entire play.

Martin Esslin, as an early champion of the new wave in British drama, was at the center of the critical debate. In February, 1961 his article entitled "Pinter and the Absurd" discussed the new style of theater writing and Pinter's place within it. Later that year, in *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin went into greater detail by describing the poetic vein in which the new playwrights such as Pinter worked. In analyzing *The Birthday Party*, Esslin forcefully asserted that, like *Waiting for Godot*, this play need not be read as an allegory, as some critics had asserted, because it was able to stand on its own as a "valid

⁵⁰ Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 22-23.

⁵¹ H.A.L. Craig, "Poetry in the Theatre," *New Statesman*, 12 November 1960, 736.

poetic image that is immediately seen as relevant and true."⁵² Taking Pinter himself as the source, Esslin quoted extensively from transcripts of two interviews done in 1960, by Hallam Tennyson and Kenneth Tynan for the BBC. In the interviews Pinter claimed that his writing did not arise from a need to express any particular ideas that he as an artist wished to communicate. He asserted that the situation and the characters existed in his imagination and were for him so real that they compelled him to write the plays. Pinter saw no contradiction between writing realistic drama and writing about absurd situations since he believed that the absurdity of life is comical up to the point at which the horror of the human situation is exposed. Pinter insisted that since human beings deal daily with people whose motivations and desires are unknown, it was "realistic" that those things should be unknown on the stage as well. Furthermore, said Esslin, absurdist theater was united by its belief that it may be impossible to ever know the motivations and desires of human beings, not just because of their complexity but also because of the difficulty of verifying experience. In a production note that accompanied an early play program, Pinter wrote:

The assumption that to verify what has happened and what is happening presents few problems I take to be inaccurate. A character on the stage who can present no convincing argument or information as to his past experience, his present behavior or his aspirations, nor give a comprehensive analysis of his motives, is as legitimate and as worthy of attention as one who, alarmingly, can do all these things. The more acute the experience the less articulate its expression.⁵³

Indeed, he held that the character who cannot recite excuses for what drives his behavior is equal to the character who comes equipped with background and motivation. This notion was not widely accepted and critics of the period were not easily persuaded.

⁵² Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 204-205.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 206.

When *The Birthday Party* was revived in 1964 at the Aldwych Theatre, London, under Pinter's direction, the reviews continued to be mainly positive. Though only six years had elapsed since its opening flop, the tenor of the reaction was different and reflected both social changes that had taken place in Britain and a growing familiarity with Pinter's style by both the public and the critics. The general trend among newspaper reviewers was to accept Pinter's style but to confess a lack of understanding of it. A few critics had more earnest objections. In the *Daily Mail*, W. A. Darlington's praise was muted by the frustration of not knowing enough about Stanley's "crime" and both the critic for the *Times* and Bamber Gascoigne of the *Observer* were dissatisfied with the simplicity that Pinter, the director, had brought to the production. They thought the play predictable and "too obvious".⁵⁴ Other critics saw Pinter's newfound popularity as the problem. They pointed out that in the course of several years Pinter's audience had gone from uninitiated to overly indulgent. Herbert Kretzmer of the *Daily Express* thought this change contributed to the inflation of Pinter's reputation given his youth and limited output.⁵⁵ Stronger condemnation came from Arthur Thirkell who called the play nonsensical and J. C. Trewin who submitted that it was only slightly less irritating the second time around because Pinter's style had become more familiar. Notwithstanding such complaints, by 1964 *The Birthday Party* had been recognized as an important work, as Harold Hobson had predicted it would be. Pinter was considered an established playwright.

In consequence of his new status, the number of scholarly studies of his works increased. Many articles tried to ferret out of Pinter's several plays what they had in common in order to articulate the patterns of his creativity. Too often, however, scholars

⁵⁴ "A Slicker and Less Dangerous Pinter," *Times* (London) 19 June 1964, 18.; Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 50.

⁵⁵ Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 50.

followed the lead of the journalistic critics and resorted to simplistic categorization. A few scholars like Jacqueline Hoefler and Bernard Dukore searched for symbolism in *The Birthday Party*. In a 1962 article in *Modern Drama*, Hoefler wrote an essay that proffered an allegory. She saw Stanley as the prototypical artist, isolated and alone, facing the forces of modern society. His task was to "resist the straitjacket of clichés which society would force upon him."⁵⁶ Goldberg and McCann, Jew and Gentile, represented the remnants of the dominant Judeo-Christian civilization along with its capitalistic baggage of rules, order, acquisition, and profit. Though Stanley put up a noble fight, he was finally reduced to a babbling shell, while Goldberg and McCann took satisfaction in promising him the modern salvation due those who accommodate themselves to society's rules, namely, worldly success.⁵⁷ Bernard Dukore acknowledged that Pinter's symbolism was rather amorphous but proposed that Goldberg and McCann should be taken as representatives of Judaism and Catholicism, religions that are portrayed as traditional and repressive and which society uses to guarantee order and conformity. The job of the intruders was to torture Stanley, artist and individual, until even his powers of expression disintegrated into indistinct gurgling noises.

Critics anxious to make sense of *The Birthday Party* followed Dukore's lead and used the discussion of symbolism as their means. They suggested that Goldberg and McCann were representatives of a mysterious God-like power, or of the I.R.A., or even of a homosexual brotherhood. Reviewer, Jeremy Kingston suggested that the three acts of the play represented, Birth, Life and Death.⁵⁸ Polish critic, Gregor Simco, saw the heavies, Goldberg and McCann, as symbols of state oppression and the pressures of

⁵⁶ Jacqueline Hoefler, "Pinter and Whiting: Two Attitudes Towards the Alienated Artist," *Modern Drama* 4 (Feb, 1962): 402.

⁵⁷ Hoefler, "Pinter and Whiting," 402.

⁵⁸ Jeremy Kingston, "At the Play," *Punch* 24 June 1964, 941.

conformity reminiscent of the work of Kafka. However, the allegorical route was not pursued very far since, as one critic put it, "Pinter has left too many loopholes for the one-to-one identification which allegory demands."⁵⁹ Moreover, there was, as Esslin had already noted, Pinter's outspoken denial of any intended symbolism which he reiterated in later interviews and essays.

Pinter's opinion on this subject was restated in an address to drama students at the National Drama Festival in Bristol in 1962. He said, "My characters tell me so much and no more, with reference to their experience, their aspirations, their motives, their history. . . . To supply an explicit moral tag to an evolving and compulsive dramatic image seems to be facile, impertinent and dishonest."⁶⁰ Referring specifically to *The Birthday Party*, Pinter claimed not to know the identity of Goldberg and McCann, nor any more about Stanley than he himself reveals in the course of the play. Pinter allowed that some facts were stated in the course of the play but that "Not every fact is an accurate assessment of what has taken place." Furthermore, whatever legitimacy the facts may or may not have is immaterial. The characters of the play must act upon them.⁶¹

Esslin's reconsideration of *The Birthday Party* in 1971 views the play as a poetic image and one which is adaptable to a variety of interpretations, all of which offer insights into the poet's own preoccupation: "the totality of his own existential anxiety."⁶² Esslin offers three complementary interpretations of the play which emanate from the underlying image of existential anxiety. First, through information gleaned from a Pinter poem called

⁵⁹ James R. Hollis, *Harold Pinter, The Poetics of Silence* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970.) 41.

⁶⁰ Harold Pinter, "Between the Lines" Speech at the Seventh National Student Drama Festival, Bristol, reprinted as "Writing For the Theatre," *Evergreen Review* no.33 (Aug.-Sept. 1964): 81.

⁶¹ Hollis, *Harold Pinter: Poetics of Silence*, 42.

⁶² Esslin, *Pinter*, 85.

"A View of the Party" and written in the same year as the play's first performance, Esslin suggests that Goldberg and McCann could be messengers of some force sent to threaten Stanley or they could be the force itself. Because the poem describes the two intruders as both heavy and light, the dichotomy of reality and dream are presented simultaneously. The thugs therefore could be a thought police or even the tormenting thoughts about existence itself that haunt and oppress Stanley. Likewise, the image of the room as the self from which Stanley is evicted and the interior blindness which suggests annihilation support Esslin's reading of the play as the story of an individual in anguish. Stanley may even be the anguished modern artist, as reviewers had frequently identified him. Yet he is not the stereotypical artist in revolt against a world of philistines or even the artist in doubt about her or his value to society. Rather, Stanley is the artist as human being. This artist suffers from the worst affliction of the creative mind—self-doubt emanating from his loss of creative power, imagined or real.⁶³

On another level, Esslin proposed that *The Birthday Party*, like Beckett's *Endgame*, is about the fear of death. Stanley (Everyman) is turned out of his cozy (if somewhat seedy) human existence by Goldberg, a sort of human parody of the Jewish Lord of creation, and McCann, Stanley's projection of the physical suffering that will accompany his own life's end. The play is therefore also about the dread of loss that all humans experience when contemplating their own death. One's search for security in the face of such dread cannot prevent the inevitable from taking place. In Stanley's case, the affection that Meg has for Stanley is no insurance against Goldberg and McCann, especially since he feels only loathing for her.⁶⁴

Esslin's third level of interpretation also arises from the image of expulsion but is more overtly psychological. He interprets Stanley's ejection from the boarding house as a

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 84-87, 90.

⁶⁴ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 205.

metaphor for the expulsion of the individual from the protected state of childhood into adulthood with all its inherent fears, guilt, and emotional games. According to this interpretation, Meg is the archetype of the mother-figure whose ambivalent sexual and maternal attachment to Stanley causes him emotional confusion. As a result, Stanley refuses to conform to the rituals of adolescence and rejects Lulu out of fear that he could not meet the unknown outside world and in particular the sexual adjustments of adulthood. Goldberg too becomes the archetypal father figure who causes Stanley even greater anxiety. Stanley is paralyzed by fear of punishment from the father-figure for his incestuous tendencies. Stanley's final removal from the scene suggests the regret that is at once inevitable and traumatic as one passes from childhood and goes out into the world of work.⁶⁵ Esslin offered these three views as only a few of the many possible interpretations inherent in Pinter's poetic vision. This critical opinion was reiterated by other scholars and seems well supported by Pinter's own testimony, as when he said in a 1967 interview, "My main interest, actually, is poetry."⁶⁶ This was very different drama with very different premises from the traditional play.

In a study of Pinter's reputation from 1958 to 1969, Herman T. Schroll pointed out that much of the early criticism of both *The Room* and *The Birthday Party* was emblematic of cultural changes that were taking place in the theater in the early Sixties. "The reactions of the majority of reviewers showed that while older criteria for judging plays were gradually breaking down, the painful change to new criteria was far from complete."⁶⁷ The norm of the realistic play had conditioned critics to respond in traditional terms either giving constructive praise or warning audiences that they would find certain aspects of a production difficult, boring, offensive or stilted. The standards of

⁶⁵ Esslin, *Pinter*, 87-90.

⁶⁶ Taylor, "Talk of the Town," 36.

⁶⁷ Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 14.

criticism had therefore encouraged replication of the traditional play and Pinter, like Beckett and Ionesco earlier, was relegated to a critical limbo while the new drama became familiar to the critics as well as to the public. Theatrical reviews and scholarly assessments used an established critical language and few were interested adopting new criteria or new terms which might, in fact, require the adoption of a whole new perspective. Thus, the favorable production reviews of the early Pinter plays gradually outnumbered the negative ones as the critics learned what to expect from Pinter and as he himself educated the public through interviews and articles.

This trend toward popularity was deemed suspect as it often is in the success of an artist. In fact by 1970, Schroll argued that Pinter had been "in fashion" long enough that new insights were impossible for the critics because of the velvet gloves they wore when considering his work. His "canonization" had already led to a blunting of honest assessment that was the spur needed to press him forward. Schroll's argument, of course, presupposes that the critic operates as a sort of catalyst whose creative function it is to encourage the artist to strive for the highest achievements. Such an argument is not concerned with the commercial success of the artist only the creative value of the production. Yet, one would be hard pressed to find an artist able to reach either wide audiences or numerous critics without having first had considerable commercial success.

The most interesting phenomenon that Pinter encountered in his journey from obscurity to fame was the co-option of his surname as a critical tool. In its earliest use, "Pinteresque" was applied to the atmosphere of anxiety that had already been tagged menace, dread or "Kafkaesque". In later criticism, certain other characteristics of Pinter's dialogue and plot were added to this shorthand which included terms like "Pinterism", "Pinterites" and even "pinting" as a shorthand to assist in analyzing Pinter's work. The most ironic situation arose when Pinter was chided by one critic for not being consistently "Pinteresque" because he gave too much background on the characters of a later play. Later, Martin Esslin used this irony to illustrate the temptation to elevate such tools of

criticism to the level of rules—a practice that is inherently self-limiting. This was also the case with Esslin's own term, Theater of the Absurd, which he spent years qualifying and redefining in order to prevent its misappropriation.⁶⁸ The imposition of an absolute meaning to a descriptive adjective irritated Pinter. In a famous *Paris Review* interview, Lawrence Bensky brought up the word "Pinteresque" to which Pinter exclaimed, "That word! These damn words and that word Pinteresque particularly—I don't know what they're bloody well talking about!"⁶⁹

The evolving nature of theater and Pinter criticism can be further illustrated by consideration of his next major work, *The Caretaker*. Pinter's second full length play solidified his reputation. Written in 1959, it was staged in 1960 at the Art Theatre Club in London. Once again the story is set in a room, and involves three characters, two brothers, Aston and Mick and a stranger, Davies.⁷⁰ The play takes place one winter night when Aston, who is in his early thirties, brings home to his very cluttered room the old and disheveled looking Davies. Davies had been employed in a local cafeteria to sweep the floor and wipe down tables. This particular night a fellow worker, a Scotsman, had ordered Davies to take a bucket of rubbish out and Davies refused. He claimed that it was not his job and that he could not be ordered about. In the ensuing commotion, the boss fired Davies. Taking pity on the old fellow, Aston brought him home. In the course of conversation, Davies admits that he had left his wife years before, that he has been irregularly employed, and that he has been living under an alias for fifteen years. He had

⁶⁸ Martin Esslin, *An Anatomy of Drama*, (New York: Hill and Wang, 1977), 57-59.

⁶⁹ Pinter, Harold. "The Art of the Theater III," interview by Lawrence M. Bensky, *Paris Review* 10 (Fall 1966): 34.

⁷⁰ The following description is taken from Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker* (London: Methuen, 1968), 7-78, a widely available edition. Set directions and characters are from pages 5 and 6. Direct quotes are cited parenthetically in the text.

left his identity papers with a man in the town of Sidcup where he plans to go when the weather improves and he finds a pair of shoes that fit him properly. Aston accepts Davies explanation, and offers him a bed until he can "get [himself] fixed up." (16) Aston is a handy man who enjoys repairing small appliances but he also has plans to build a shed to serve as his workshop. Davies accepts the offer of a bed though there is already a hint of trouble. It is clear that Davies is a very fussy character with an aversion to foreigners, particularly those with dark skins. His definition of alien seems oddly generic when he applies the epithet even to the Scotsman with whom he had just tangled. Moreover, he is evasive about his own origins when Aston asks if he is Welsh. His paranoia is not confined to strangers as he frets over a gas stove in the room that isn't even hooked up and a bucket under the roof that catches roof leaks.

The next morning, when Aston goes out Davies is left alone in the room. He begins poking through the accumulated clutter when Aston's younger brother Mick, jumps him from behind, accusing him of thievery. Davies has no idea who Mick is or why he is tormenting him until Aston comes back and explains that Mick is in the building trades, owns the house and that Aston is redecorating it for him. After this encounter, Davies becomes wary of Mick. Later Aston suggests that Davies might be employed as the caretaker for the place. However, Davies is reluctant and thinks up numerous excuses why he could not do the job.

Act Two opens with Davies returning to the dimly lit room where he is again frightened by Mick who wields a vacuum cleaner plugged into the light socket because the wall socket no longer works. Mick acts as if he is anxious to confide his worries in the old man. Hinting that Aston is something of a slacker, Mick too suggests that Davies take over the caretaking duties. Davies remains hesitant, but Mick knows how to flatter the old man into believing that his offer is bona fide. When Mick asks for references, Davies claims that as soon as he gets down to Sidcup, he will be able to supply them. The scene then shifts to the following morning when the relationship between Aston and Davies

begins to show signs of strain. Aston blames the old man for making noises in his sleep that disturbed his (Aston's) rest. Davies counters that his sleep was disturbed by the draft from the open window which Aston had insisted upon. While Davies petulantly harps on his immobility due to the lack of proper shoes, Aston describes in heartrending detail how he was once institutionalized for mental problems. While still a minor, his mother gave permission to the doctors for shock treatments—a traumatic event from which Aston obviously never fully recovered

The third act opens with Davies and Mick day dreaming over the possibilities that the house offers for new interior decoration. Davies takes the opportunity to vent his complaint that Aston is becoming difficult to live with because he communicates so little. It is obvious that since hearing Aston's story, Davies's estimation of Aston has deteriorated. What had been gratitude and tolerance turns to derision. Even when Aston finds Davies a pair of shoes that fit, he complains that they have no laces; when some are found, he insists that they are the wrong color. In the next confrontation with Aston over their sleeping arrangements and the lack of heat, Davies launches his most shameless attack, calling Aston crazy. At the height of this exchange, Aston suggests that Davies ought to leave but Davies in an ironically irrational twist orders Aston to vacate his own premises, assuring him that Mick has promised him the caretaker post. However, Davies does leave to find Mick. When he returns with Mick a few hours later, he expects to be reinstated. However Mick's sympathy dissipates as Davies begins to make his case against Aston. Always ready to turn the tables on the unsuspecting old man, Mick implies that Davies has been playing him for a fool the whole time. In the end, Davies is reduced to the odious sycophant that he appeared to be at the beginning. Pleading to be given another chance to remain in the safe harbor of the room, Aston orders him out and turns his back on him and Davies is left a victim of his own perverse nature.

The Caretaker debuted on April 27, 1960. As with the earlier plays, even those reviewers who were puzzled by the meaning of Pinter's plays, thought that he had a good

sense of what a theatrical evening ought to provide a contemporary minded audience. They urged their readers to see it. With six plays produced in three years, Pinter was not only busy, he was beginning to be successful in the conventional sense of gaining the interest of larger commercial theater owners. Also, he was noticed by some of the more conservative scions of traditional British theater, such as Noel Coward who wrote in *The Sunday Times* that "Mr. Pinter is neither pretentious, pseudo-intellectual nor self-consciously propagandistic. [*The Caretaker*] is written with an original and unmistakable sense of theatre and is impeccably acted and directed."⁷¹ Kenneth Tynan, on the other hand, noted parenthetically that Coward's admiration for Pinter was probably linked to Coward's own penchant for playing dialogue word games, albeit in upper-class banter, back in the 1920s.⁷²

In London, *The Caretaker* received both positive and negative reviews but the general tenor was one of familiarity. While the praise was generally more unrestrained, the disparagement dismissed the play as more pretentious than Pinter's earlier plays. Other critics lauded his ability to create memorable characters, develop atmosphere and mood, and reveal a world of tragic loneliness. Kenneth Tynan reversed his earlier opinion about Pinter's talent and wrote that *The Caretaker* exemplified Pinter's writing at its best. With wit, Tynan commented, "Pinter's ear ranks with Jenkins' and Van Gogh's among the great ears of history: his characters are robots whose conversation is so intimately real that it reconciles us to the frequent unreality of their behavior."⁷³ Abrupt mood shifts, verbal non sequiturs, and bizarre juxtapositions in dialogue and gesture were by now trademarks of Pinter's drama. Audiences were still shocked but entered the theaters more prepared

⁷¹ Esslin, *Pinter*, 27.

⁷² Kenneth Tynan, "Acting under the influence," a review of *The Caretaker* by Harold Pinter, *Observer* (London) 21 January 1962.

⁷³ *Ibid.*

than in the past. The consequent loss of freshness was a small price to pay for providing the audience with a better orientation to the absurdist mode.⁷⁴ However, one of the chief complaints voiced by critics was that Pinter's innovative style was already stale. Alan Brien and A. Alvarez both remarked that the ingredients were known and in danger of becoming repetitious. Tynan also decried the faddishness of Pinter's style because of the imitators that were popping up everywhere. As Herbert Schroll has remarked, "For some reviewers, the fashion grew old and boring the moment it began."⁷⁵

Some critics also made the customary effort to pin down the meaning. Alan Pryce-Jones in the *Observer* saw the main theme as an investigation into individual identity. Another critic listed human unpredictability and cruelty as the key issues, while Irving Wardle saw human destructiveness as central. Some reviewers found Christian meaning—paradise lost—when Davies was expelled from the flat. Others thought the small room symbolized a haven of humanity within the jungle of life. Still another, saw objects such as the shoes, the small statue of Buddha, and the garden shed as symbols of hopes deferred or substitute goals. Such symbolism raised the play's meaning to a universal plane while others thought that the theme of missed communication among the three characters was sufficient food for thought without searching out larger meanings.⁷⁶ Kenneth Tynan joined in the allegory game and suggested that the three characters stood for the Freudian Ego, Id and Superego of individual personality.⁷⁷ Irving Wardle's article "There's Music in That Room" expanded upon his earlier insights on the sinister tone of

⁷⁴ Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter*, rev. ed. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1981), 21.

⁷⁵ Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 20.

⁷⁶ James Boulton, "Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker* and Other Plays" *Modern Drama* 6 (September, 1963): 138; Kent G. Gallagher, "Harold Pinter's Dramaturgy" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 52 (1966): 246-247; Augusta Walker, "Messages From Pinter" *Modern Drama* 10 (May 1967): 8.

⁷⁷ Alain Schifres, "Harold Pinter, Caretaker of Britain's new theatre," *Realites*, December 1966, 1F.

Pinter's plays, but described the source of menace as interior, within the human heart. Instead of terror arriving with the stranger at one's door, each character becomes a potential victim because of his vulnerability to mistreatment by the others. In an ironic twist, the most victimized character of *The Caretaker* was the invited stranger.⁷⁸

Frequently, Pinter was compared with Beckett whom he acknowledged as an important influence. But in comparing *The Caretaker* with *Waiting for Godot*, only a few critics were admiring. More complained that it was a pale imitation. Denis Donoghue in his "London Letter" in the *Hudson Review*, wrote, "By swift comparison with *Godot* and *All That Fall* even, *The Caretaker* is rather thin; to assimilate is to masticate. At most, Beckett is guilty of bringing to the end of the line an insight which is good only as a marginal corrective. Pinter has the additional guilt of righteousness."⁷⁹ He went on to suggest that Henry James correctly discouraged the use of the imagination only to point out life's miseries without also showing life's praiseworthy aspects. "*The Caretaker* lies when it says that people, their strictly essential selves (?) [sic], are morons, thugs, imbeciles, grunting their way through meaningless events."⁸⁰

A broader audience opened up for Pinter when his work was produced in Europe and the United States. Nonetheless, similar reservations appeared in Paris when *The Caretaker* (*Le Gardien*) premiered at the *Theatre de Lutèce* in January 1961. Even though it was staged by Roger Blin who had first produced *Waiting For Godot*, the reviews were indifferent. Indeed, the reviewer for *L'Humanite* was especially biting, labeling it "the rear guard of the avant-garde."⁸¹ *The Caretaker* fared better on

⁷⁸ Irving Wardle, "There's Music In That Room," in *The Encore Reader*, ed. Charles Marowitz, Tom Milne, and Owen Hale, 130.

⁷⁹ Denis Donoghue, "London Letter: Moral West End," *Hudson Review* Spring, 1961, 95.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*

⁸¹ Esslin, *Pinter*, 27; Schifres, 1F.

Broadway, opening in October 1961, where it was critically acclaimed though less financially profitable than in London. It was Pinter's first Broadway production but American audiences and reviewers had the advantage of a barrage of pre-production publicity that included interviews in which Pinter challenged the resort to allegorical interpretation and denied having an artistic or ideological agenda. American critics often repeated Pinter's denials in their articles and then went on to develop their own allegories nonetheless. Some felt no need to read a message into the play, since, as Henry Hewes wrote in the *Saturday Review*, the play is self-contained in "the absolute urgency of the stage action."⁸² Other critics like Harold Clurman and John Gassner rejected Pinter's disclaimers and projected an interpretation which saw Aston representing Christ, Mick as the superhuman angel and devil, and Davies in all his weakness as representing humanity. For the most part, however, the search for meaning was limited to an agreement that there was depth to Pinter that made interpretation possible on several levels.

The Caretaker earned fewer negative reviews than had the earlier plays, but the bad reviews were vehement. For some American reviewers, Pinter's claim that he did not write from a plan sounded disingenuous. They could see that he had a purpose—to present a purposeless universe. Others accepted his claim as confirmation of their initial impressions, that Pinter lacked not only depth but intention. Those who wrote harshly about *The Caretaker* seemed to take pride in their dwindling numbers, implying that their colleagues and contemporary audiences were being hood-winked. John McClain's boasted in the *New York Journal American*: "It really pleases me, in a perverse way, to discover that I was virtually alone among the critics in my opinion that the two short plays by Harold Pinter that opened at the Cherry Lane last week were muddled, incomprehensible and stiff with arty nonsense." McClain saw Pinter's chief offense as a failure to

⁸² Henry Hewes, "Nothing Up the Sleeve," *Saturday Review* 21 October 1961, 34.

communicate with "the general public for which I am privileged to report."⁸³ In one of the more scathing assessments of *The Caretaker*, by John Simon described Pinter's plays as the product of an actor with a superficial knowledge of what is popular in modern drama, but who "has no style, no ideas, no poetic fantasy." Complaining about the play's incomprehensibility he added, "When the language happens to deviate into sense, as in the elder brother's description of how he was given shock treatment, the drabness and triviality of the writing become manifest."⁸⁴ Echoing English criticism that found Pinter's plays purposely obtuse, the Americans gave them a democratic twist transforming the offense into a reverse snobbery. Yet, Harold Clurman, the dean of American critics, defended Pinter by insisting that plays like his "in the main though they rarely communicate 'consolation', they are not difficult, unintelligible or esoteric. Through lack of experience, many of us are still bewildered by them."⁸⁵

Nonetheless, there remained a strong critical minority that viewed Pinter as a false prophet. For these reviewers, the falseness of Pinter's art was revealed best by the acting. The actors often received excellent reviews even when the critic disliked the play. This was never more true than in *The Caretaker* where Donald Pleasance as Davies was singled out for praise. A few reviewers maintained that the excellence of the acting was the single characteristic that made the play bearable. One critic contended that had *The Caretaker* been "Badly acted [it] would be a nightmare."⁸⁶ Critic Stewart Lane noted that the acting and direction in a Pinter play were often crucial to its impact, citing the differing receptions accorded different productions of the same play. This separation of acting and

⁸³ John McClain, "Alone—But Unbowed," *New York Journal American*, 2 December 1962.

⁸⁴ John Simon, "Theatre Chronicle" *Hudson Review* Winter, 1961-1962, 590, 591.

⁸⁵ Harold Clurman, "The Reality of Harold Pinter" *New York World Journal Tribune*, 29 January 1967, 30.

⁸⁶ Eric Keown, "At the Play," *Punch*, May 11, 1960, 65.

production in critical evaluation often led interviewers to question the influence of Pinter's background as an actor. Pinter himself replied that while acting, writing and directing were all very different pursuits, he did keep the actors in mind as he wrote. When finished with the third draft of *The Caretaker*, he rehearsed and blocked each scene himself in the privacy of his office in order to work out the play's plausibility before he showed it to anyone else.⁸⁷ Inevitably, the issue of the numerous pauses written into each script intrigued the critics. Alan Schifres noted that the pauses gave "the actors the very special problem of having to discover what happens in themselves during those pauses and why those pauses are there."⁸⁸ Laurence Bensky once reminded Pinter that the director Peter Hall had observed that Pinter's plays relied on an exact verbal rhythm and form. Hall pointed out that the written direction "pause" meant something different from mere silence and that the direction given by an ellipse (. . .) did not necessarily mean a complete stop. Pinter acknowledged that he did give weight to his written stage directions and remembered that, "Hall once held a dot and pause rehearsal for the actors. . . . Although it sounds bloody pretentious it was apparently very valuable."⁸⁹

Scholars too were interested in Pinter's use of pauses and the melodic quality of his dialogue. The issue of language and its absence, or rather, the silences in Pinter's plays has been widely discussed. In a 1965 essay, F.J. Bernhard noted that Pinter's ear was so keen that "he makes distinctions between slight pauses, pauses, silences and long silences."⁹⁰ Citing the 189 pauses in *The Caretaker*, Bernhard saw this use of silence as evidence of the rhythmic form that Pinter imparted to each play. For instance, Aston's speech

⁸⁷ Mel Gussow, "'Old Times' Ushers in New Pinter Era," *New York Times* 11 November 1971.

⁸⁸ Schifres, "Harold Pinter, Caretaker," 1F.

⁸⁹ Pinter, "The Art of the Theatre III," Bensky interview, 24.

⁹⁰ F. J. Bernhard, "Beyond Realism: The Plays of Harold Pinter," *Modern Drama* 8 (September 1965): 189.

describing his shock treatments was keyed to the slowness of the character in the aftermath of those treatments. Long vowel sounds and slurred consonants and the ellipses included between phrases gave the speech a languorous internal rhythm that revealed the pathetic state of Aston's existence. Bernhard believed that Pinter's lines could each stand alone as very convincing realistic speech, but when integrated into a whole play, the overall effect was more like an orchestral work. When asked if he was indeed influenced by music in his writing, Pinter replied, "I feel a sense of music in writing which is a different matter from having been influenced by it."⁹¹

Among scholarly critics, reaction to *The Caretaker* mirrored the media's criticism. That is, there were more favorable articles than unfavorable ones, and initially the trend was to seek a theatrical category to pigeonhole Pinter. The categories utilized included Comedy of Menace, Theater of the Absurd, Theater of Situation, Realism or Naturalism, and some newer formulations like Compressionism or Hyper-realism.⁹² In spite of Esslin's attempt to define the Theater of the Absurd as an elastic form that was based in reality, it was soon set in opposition to Realism. This made the inclusion of Pinter more problematic. John Russell Taylor in *The Angry Theatre* saw Pinter as a part of the younger generation of playwrights but one whose plays were growing in realism unlike many of the other "Angry young playwrights" like Wesker and Osborne. John Arden in reviewing the published text of *The Caretaker* also called Pinter a realist but not in the same sense as the term had been applied to Ibsen.⁹³ Other essays puzzled over how Pinter could be anything but an Absurdist even though his plays were very close to everyday life. The issue of categorization haunted early Pinter criticism until some resorted to the

⁹¹ Pinter, "The Art of the Theatre III," Bensky interview, 20.

⁹² Laurence Kitchin, "Compressionism. The Form" *Drama in the Sixties* (London: Faber and Faber, 1962), 46.

⁹³ Schroll, *Harold Pinter*, 22.

contrived Pinter lexicon referred to above, that is, the shorthand adopted by many critics to refer directly to Pinter's unique blend of realism and absurdity without having to bother with outside analogies. Words like "Pinteresque" were rejected by the playwright himself as meaningless but have continued to be used, some have argued, to compensate for a critic's lack of time, preparation, insight or ability to analyze the work.⁹⁴

Academic critics also began to study Pinter's larger significance in the history of theater. Despite his youth, Pinter began to be included in books of theater history. There he was elevated to the title of "trend setter," an extremely precarious endorsement in a Britain undergoing the media explosion of Carnaby Street and the Beatles. Robert Brustein in *Theatre of Revolt*, George Sutherland Fraser in *The Modern Writer and His World*, George Wellwarth in *The Theatre of Protest and Paradox*, Herbert Blau in *The Impossible Theatre* all saw Pinter as a modern playwright who was part of a larger trend in drama reflecting the anxiety of modern life and the centrality of "non-affective communication"—both issues initially addressed by Ionesco and Beckett.⁹⁵

In retrospect, it is easy to see that the inclusion of Pinter in theater histories was appropriate. However, at the time it seemed premature. In *Theatre of the Absurd* Esslin was the first to point out that it was very early to attempt to place Pinter's work in an accurate perspective. By 1962 Pinter had only about seven plays to his credit. Less than a decade later John Russell Taylor's *Harold Pinter* reiterated Esslin's point and in 1971, Arthur Hinchliffe agreed that Pinter was still very early in his career to merit critical study. Nonetheless, the number of scholarly works, theses and dissertations continued to proliferate.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Numerous examples of these terms abound in reviews, see especially Charles Marowitz, "Pinterism' is Maximum tension through Minimum Information," *New York Times*, October 1, 1967, sec. 6, 36; John Bryden, "Three Men In a Room" *New Statesman*, 26 June 1964, 1004.

⁹⁵ George S. Fraser, *The Modern Writer and His World* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1964), 240.

⁹⁶ John Russell Taylor, *Harold Pinter* (London: Longmans Green, 1969), iv-viii; Arthur

Esslin, who had defined the genre Theater of the Absurd, felt free to nominate candidates. In including Harold Pinter, Esslin was convinced of three things. First, he saw in Pinter, as with all the Absurdists, an appetite for experimentation. He recognized Pinter's repudiation of the traditional "well made play" with its exposition followed by denouement recipe. When Pinter turned away from this formula, he substituted a technique quite close to Checkov. That is, he brought down the fragile scrim that separates comedy from tragedy as Checkov did. Yet Pinter differed from Checkov; he integrated the comedy and tragedy without providing the author's mediating voice. Pinter forced his audience "to undergo the extremes of uproarious laughter and apprehensive silence with the juxtaposition of the comic and the threatening in near hysterical alternation"⁹⁷

Esslin focused particular attention on the dialogue in Pinter's plays. Pinter used language in an unorthodox way for the theater of the 1960s. Like Beckett, he used everyday speech with a scrupulous attention to detail to create atmosphere, usually one "invested with menace, dread and mystery."⁹⁸ In describing this important element which many of the Absurdists shared, Esslin says:

there is no real contradiction between a meticulous reproduction of reality and a literature of the Absurd. Quite the reverse. Most real conversation, after all, is incoherent, illogical, ungrammatical, and elliptical. By transcribing reality with ruthless accuracy, the dramatist arrives at the disintegrating language of the Absurd. It is the strictly logical dialogue of the rationally constructed play that is unrealistic and highly stylized. In a world that has become absurd, transcribing reality with meticulous care is enough to create the impression of extravagant rationality.⁹⁹

Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1967), i.

⁹⁷ Ronald Knowles, "Pregnant Pause; Harold Pinter," *Sunday Times* (London), 5 September 1993, 9.

⁹⁸ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 199.

⁹⁹ Esslin, *Pinter*, 198.

Pinter is noted for his unerring observations of the prosaic in human behavior and his gift for reproducing the modern vernacular with all its ambiguity and dangerous inaccuracy. Pinter has said that words are extremely important and not to be taken for granted. In fact, he contended that words were not to be trusted since the sheer bulk of them encountered day to day often leads to their devaluation. He also advised against trusting writers who believed in words absolutely. While admitting to deriving a good deal of pleasure from being a wordsmith, he confessed to "another strong feeling about words which amounts to nothing less than nausea . . . Given this nausea, it's very easy to be overcome by it and step back into paralysis." The trick is to confront this feeling head-on and to "move through it and out of it, then it is possible to say that something has occurred, that something has even been achieved."¹⁰⁰

The final element that made Pinter embody Absurdist theater as Esslin defined it, was his sense of the past. Pinter returned to the basic elements of drama, that is the pre-literary drama that Artaud had called for in the early 1930s when the dominance of the text was first challenged.¹⁰¹ For Pinter this point was crucial: "The curtain goes up on the stage, and I see it as a very potent question: What is going to happen to these two people in the room?"¹⁰² The suspense is provided by the situation. What will happen next? It is a discontinuous world. The couple may have a past but, as the curtain rises, it is not necessary to the plot that we know any more than we are given together with the hints and

¹⁰⁰ Pinter, "Writing For the Theatre," 81.

¹⁰¹ Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, 68-73. In this work, originally published by Gallimard in 1938, Artaud, who had been captivated by the Dance Theater of Bali, claimed that in the West art had long been confused with aestheticism and that this confusion exposed a "spiritual infirmity." (69) He insisted that "the Occident has declared its alliance with the text and finds itself limited by it . . . the theater seems . . . merely the material reflection of the text." (68) and thus relegates gesture, movement and everything else that makes up theater to an inferior position; Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 199, 277-280.

¹⁰² Harold Pinter quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 199.

allegations put forth in the dialogue. Often, even the dialogue provides no clue to the past and very little information about the present, the motivations of the players, or the relationships of the characters. This expository sparseness means that the words of the play must be useful and appropriate, yet are often simultaneously ambiguous, especially in syntax. This characteristic initially provoked criticism of Pinter's drama. Pinter felt no obligation to respond and critics saw his silence as arrogant obscurantism. Pinter's spare method however, sustained the sense of mystery that allowed his plays to be understood on numerous levels. For Esslin, this element, the element of poetry is most crucial to the Absurd Theater. It is the element of poetry. As he reminds us, Pinter is dealing with human nature, contingency and the absurdity of the human condition. Pinter the poet is also the playwright and there is no need to reconcile the two.¹⁰³

In his role as poet, Pinter was disposed to take up issues of universal import masked by prosaic dialogue. In reflecting on the question of communication quite early in his career, Pinter acknowledged that his work was often impugned for showing the breakdown of communication in modern life. Pinter denied this characterization most emphatically. "I believe the contrary. I think that we communicate only too well, in our silence, in what is unsaid, and that what takes place is continual evasion, desperate rearguard attempts to keep ourselves to ourselves." He maintained that there exist two kinds of silence. "One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it."¹⁰⁴ In a much quoted phrase, Pinter sees this "stratagem to cover nakedness" as a means of evading the painful confrontation that is communication of the Self with the Other. We humans do this, he said, because, "To disclose to others the poverty within us is too

¹⁰³ Esslin, *Pinter*, 270-271.

¹⁰⁴ Pinter, "Writing For the Theatre," 82.

fearsome a possibility."¹⁰⁵ This awareness of the power of the subtext and recognition of the limits of language and, in this case, dialogue to transmit ideas is bound up with the notion of what constitutes theater. Dialogue is more than spoken language according to Esslin. "In drama dialogue is, ultimately a form of *action*; it is the element of action, the inter-action between the characters, their reactions to each other, which constitute the truly *dramatic* element in stage dialogue."¹⁰⁶ Thus, as action dialogue is colored as much by the silences imposed as by the words chosen and by the way both words and silences are expressed. Pinter is credited among other members of the avant-garde with the discovery of this dramatic element embedded in dialogue that is otherwise inarticulate, illogical and even nonsensical. This recognition was only possible once the content of the dialogue became less important than the dramatic action of the dialogue and the emotions that even silence could articulate.¹⁰⁷

In reflecting on the nature of communication in the plays of Pinter, scholars eventually became aware that this new type of dialogue was useful not only to show obvious emotions but also to reveal repressed emotions. Employing various linguistic devices such as repetition, hyperbole, clichés and solecisms as well as pauses, Pinter conveyed a new range and depth of reactions in his characters that had been impossible in earlier forms of drama where verbal expression was privileged. In so doing, the violence submerged in the plot was allowed to percolate to the surface. In *The Caretaker*, the open violence that had taken place on the stage in the earlier plays was missing but it was ever present in the shadows. It was there in the beating that Davies received before the play began, and in the exaggeration of Davies' tale begging for shoes at a monastery from which he was scurrilously ejected, and in Mick's trick in the dark with the vacuum cleaner

¹⁰⁵ Pinter, "Writing For the Theatre," 82.

¹⁰⁶ Esslin, *Pinter*, 239.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 240.

which terrorized the old man.¹⁰⁸ As with the two earlier plays, this mood of violence was no less dangerous than the actual blows of *The Room* or the verbal abuse of *The Birthday Party*.

Scholars saw Pinter's mood of violence as more than a mere reflection of the brutality of modern life. They began to investigate the subtle insidiousness of language itself as a tool of domination. In a 1968 essay in *Drama Critique*, Earl J. Dias pointed to Pinter's own admission that power, "the question of dominance and subservience" had always interested him.¹⁰⁹ In discussing *The Caretaker*, Dias sees Pinter's use of long pauses as a means whereby each character takes time to plan his strategy in the ongoing war for domination. This is particularly true of Davies who as the natural "odd-man-out" (because of his lack of biological connection) plays one brother off against the other in the hope of ingratiating himself. Despite the fact that he is an old man, irascible and with little education, he makes a daring attempt to subvert his hosts' living arrangements using language as his only weapon.

The struggle for power is elemental to drama and as a component of dialogue even through silence, dramatic tension is enhanced in Pinter's plays. The struggle for dominance is a feature of Absurdist theater as we already noted in *Waiting for Godot*. It has figured prominently and consistently in Pinter's work for both stage and screen, and is linked by Pinter himself to memories of ugly confrontations between Sir Oswald Moseley's Fascists and Jewish leftists in East London in the late 1940s. Edward Albee was equally adept at exploring the struggle for power between humans as we shall see as we turn our attention to contemporary developments in American drama. This issue also connects the

¹⁰⁸ James Boulton, "Harold Pinter: The Caretaker and Other Plays," *Modern Drama*, 6 (September 1963): 137-138.

¹⁰⁹ Earl J. Dias, "The Enigmatic World of Harold Pinter," *Drama Critique* 3 (Fall, 1968): 120.

Absurdist with post-modernism in the sense that "established institutions of culture,[were viewed] as agents of subjection, as projections and manipulations of power."¹¹⁰

In 1962, in the same month that *The Caretaker* ended its Broadway run, *The Collection* was staged in London on a double bill with a Strindberg play. Pinter collaborated with Peter Hall in its direction. Pinter also wrote his first screenplay from the Robin Maugham novel *The Servant* (1963), for which he was awarded the British Screenwriters' Guild prize. The taut psychological tale of a servant manipulating his master starred Dirk Bogarde, Sarah Miles and James Fox and was directed by American Joseph Losey, who had moved to Britain during the McCarthy era. In an oddly theatrical grassroots effort that same year, a film version of *The Caretaker* was subsidized by a group of celebrities including Noel Coward, Leslie Caron, Peter Hall, Richard Burton, Elizabeth Taylor and Peter Sellers. When screened the following year at the Berlin film festival, it won a Silver Bear award. In 1965, the British Academy Award went to Pinter for the screenplay adaptation of Penelope Mortimer's novel *The Pumpkin Eater*, and the BBC broadcast his new television play, *Tea Party*. In Paris, reviewers who had been reluctant to praise his earlier work, were warmer toward a double bill of *The Collection* and *The Lover*. In June of 1965 *The Homecoming* debuted in London and seemed to most critics to mark a change of direction for Harold Pinter. In November of that year, Pinter starred as the unrepentant Garcin in a BBC television production of Sartre's *No Exit (Huis Clos)*.¹¹¹ By 1965, Pinter, a highly respected playwright, screenwriter and director was, like his American counterpart Edward Albee, one step ahead of the celebrity merchants busy wagering on whether he could live up to his own reputation.

¹¹⁰ Joseph R. Roach, "Theatre History and the Ideology of the Aesthetic," *Theatre Journal* 41 (May, 1989): 156.

¹¹¹ Esslin, *Pinter*, 30-31.

CHAPTER V

WORDS ON A MIRROR: EDWARD ALBEE

Edward Albee's career continues to thrive in the 1990's despite dire predictions from critics for the past thirty years. Like Harold Pinter's, Edward Albee's reputation for writing serious drama has grown even when he has inspired controversy among scholars and reviewers. Unlike Pinter, whose early interviews like his plays were often ambiguous. Albee's interviews have been less guarded and more unequivocal especially in his assessment of the state of the modern theater and drama criticism. Much of what the public knows of Albee comes from interviews or from his written reflections. In this chapter, we will examine Albee's career and three of his early plays, *The Zoo Story* (1960), *The American Dream* (1961) and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962). The analysis of Albee's work will explain why he merits inclusion along with Beckett and Pinter among the playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd.

Edward Franklin Albee was born on March 12, 1928 in Washington, D.C.. Abandoned by his parents immediately after his birth, he was adopted two weeks later by an affluent couple, Reed and Frances Albee from Larchmont, New York. Reed Albee was the son and heir of theatrical entrepreneur Edward Albee II, who operated a chain of vaudeville theaters that he sold to Joseph P. Kennedy's R.K.O. corporation in the early days of the Great Depression. The couple named the infant after his adoptive paternal grandfather, raising him in a lifestyle of privilege reflective of the Albee fortune. Reed Albee bred and trained horses. Though the younger Albee's theatrical connection is often mentioned in biographical accounts, the extent of its influence on Albee's childhood was minimal since the Albees were no longer involved in theater. In an interview with fellow playwright, Terrence McNally in 1985, Albee remembered that veteran actors like Ed

Wynn or Sophie Tucker would visit from time to time, but Albee remained vague as to whether these celebrities may have kindled his interest in the theater. He recalled that there was no regional theater at that time in Larchmont, twenty miles north of New York City, thus, as a youngster he was sent off in the family Rolis Royce to plays on Broadway. Albee fondly recalls seeing the Rogers and Hart musical *Jumbo* (1940) with Jimmy Durante, and later Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* (1946) on its first run, a play which made a major impression on him.¹

In place of friends his own age, young Albee was surrounded by nannies, chauffeurs and tutors. His home life was dominated by a strong willed mother, who was twenty-three years younger and almost a foot taller than his father. As a consequence of his privileged yet isolated upbringing, Albee became resentful of his parents and a problem child at school. The most positive influence in his youth came from his paternal grandmother with whom he shared an affectionate relationship.

After attending Rye Country Day School, Albee was sent to Lawrenceville, a boarding school where it was hoped his errant behavior could be curbed. There at the age of twelve, Albee wrote his first play called *Aliqueen*, a short three act farce. Most of Albee's juvenile writing was in the form of poetry and fiction. To his mother's chagrin, Lawrenceville did not "straighten him out." He continued to cut classes, refused to do homework, and ignored sports. Inevitably he was packed off to the harsher regime of Valley Forge Military Academy, from which he was expelled in less than a year. His final destination was Choate School in Connecticut, an elite prep school where he began to find a niche as a writer.

At Choate, Albee was encouraged by sympathetic English teachers and the available forum of the *Choate Literary Magazine* in which his poems and fiction appeared.

¹ Edward Albee, "Edward Albee: In Conversation With Terrence McNally," *Dramatists Guild Quarterly* 22 (Summer 1985): 12.

When his poem called 'Eighteen' was published in the Texas literary magazine, *Kaleidograph*, he began to see himself as a serious writer. In 1946, *Choate Literary Magazine* printed a play *Schism* by the eighteen year old Albee showing the obvious influence of Eugene O'Neill, the plot centers upon a cynical young man, Michael Joyce, disaffected by the Catholic Church, who attempts to persuade his sweetheart to run off thereby abandoning her ailing grandmother. In a melodramatic confrontation between the young man and the grandmother who is against the romance, the old woman collapses. The youth conceals her in an adjoining room and cajoles the granddaughter to leave without telling her of the old woman's condition. The duplicity of Michael Joyce paralleled the duplicity that he scornfully envisioned in the Church. As C.W.E. Bigsby has noted, Albee, even at this very early stage in his career, was concerned with the moral price exacted for inhuman behavior done in the name of love, a theme that runs through his later plays.²

Albee graduated from Choate; he went to Trinity College in Hartford, but was asked to leave after a little more than a year. He cut classes and rebelled against the requirement to attend chapel. At age nineteen he found himself back in Larchmont temporarily unemployed and lacking direction. He had done a minor amount of acting in secondary school and wryly observed that, while he was not tossed out of Trinity because of his acting, his role as the Emperor Franz Joseph in Maxwell Anderson's verse play *The Masque of Kings* certainly hadn't helped his reputation at the college.

Albee lived at home for a year, commuting to New York to write continuity pieces for music programs on WNYC radio. He irritated his parents by cultivating artistic friends of whom they strongly disapproved. Armed with a small annuity provided by his grandmother, Albee moved into Greenwich Village to pursue his writing. In the early

² C. W. E. Bigsby, "Edward Albee," chap. in *A Critical Introduction to Twentieth-Century American Drama*, vol. 2, *Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, Edward Albee* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 252.

1950's, Greenwich Village was the center of a new burst of creativity which paralleled its heyday in the 1920's when Eugene O'Neill and many other artists lived there. He attended plays as often as he liked, remembering the excitement of seeing many of the latest European playwrights, Camus, Genet, Brecht and Beckett; he even saw Picasso's *Desire Caught By the Tail*. The Beat writers—William Burroughs, Allen Ginsburg and Jack Kerouac—were beginning to establish their reputations, while Tennessee Williams, Elia Kazan and the Actors' Studio were introducing a new realism to the theaters.³

Albee lived in Greenwich Village for only a brief time because, despite periodic employment, insufficient funds forced him to move to the West Side where the rents were even cheaper. He worked as a record sales clerk, a waiter, a copyist and a Western Union messenger. He continued writing. After Albee produced his first play and it was well received, he was able to look back on this period as one in which his creativity was directed mainly toward poetry. He found his true calling in 1959 when he sat down to write *The Zoo Story* which he finished in just three weeks. According to C.W.E. Bigsby, Albee's recollection of sudden accomplishment as a dramatist which appeared in the preface he wrote for a published version of *The Zoo Story* in 1960, was quite disingenuous, though it represented a very clever marketing ploy. In reality, during the 1950s, Albee had written about seven plays and two operas (one was only a fragment) of varying lengths, of these "none would benefit from performance."⁴

By 1958 Albee met the young composer William Flanagan with whom he would share a flat for the next nine years. Albee's homosexuality further estranged him from his adoptive family. Flanagan and Albee spent their evenings with a circle of musicians and

³ "An Interview With Edward Albee," in *The American Theater Today*, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Basic Books, 1967), 116 -117; John Gassner, "Pioneers Of the New Theater Movement," in *The American Theater Today*, 15 -24.; David Halberstam, *The Fifties* (New York: Villard Books, 1993), 297.

⁴ Bigsby, "Edward Albee," *A Critical Introduction*, vol. 2, 256.

artistic friends in the Village who were also struggling for recognition. Facing the age of thirty with very little published, Albee sat down to write a play as a sort of birthday present to himself and produced *The Zoo Story*. A contemporary one-act drama about the seemingly random Sunday afternoon encounter between two strangers in Central Park, *Zoo Story* muses upon the changes that ensued from that encounter. When Albee finished the play he sent it to the composer Aaron Copeland, whom he knew, and Copeland sent it to playwright William Inge. Inge sent Albee an encouraging note but no American producers seemed interested, particularly as audiences supposedly hated one-act plays. Albee also gave a copy to Flanagan who was impressed enough to send it to fellow composer David Diamond, who lived at that time in Italy. Diamond was also interested in it and forwarded it to a Swiss actor friend named Pinkas Braun. Braun liked *The Zoo Story* well enough to make a tape of the play with himself playing both roles and sent it to Stephani Hunzinger, then head of the drama department of a large Frankfurt publishing company. By this circuitous means *The Zoo Story* came to the attention of a producer in Berlin willing to undertake its premier production on September 28, 1959. Thus the first production of Albee's first play took place in the unlikely city of West Berlin at the Schiller Theater Werkstatt. Albee confessed that he almost did not attend the opening because he thought it extravagant to fly to Germany. While there, he later admitted, he felt a sense of artistic dissociation. This feeling he said was "complicated in the case of *The Zoo Story*, as the play was being presented in German, a language of which I knew not a word."⁵

As the Berlin production of *The Zoo Story* was being readied, Albee received word that the play would be produced the following January, Off-Broadway. As in the Berlin production it would be produced in tandem with Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* at the Provincetown Playhouse in Greenwich Village. The rights had been purchased from

⁵ Edward Albee, *The American Dream and The Zoo Story* (New York: Signet, Penguin Books, 1961) 8. Hereinafter cited as either *The American Dream* or *The Zoo Story*; Edward Albee, "Edward Albee: In Conversation With Terrence McNally," 14.

Albee's literary agent by producer Richard Barr while Albee was in Germany. This site must have seemed propitious to the young author as the Provincetown Playhouse had been the offspring of the group of intellectuals who had made Greenwich Village the center of an American oppositional culture in the first two decades of this century. The original Provincetown Players were a group of amateur actors who took their name from the summer colony on Cape Cod where the group had first gathered to write and perform their own works. Among the founders were writers, artists, political activists and journalists, like George Cram Cook, Susan Glaspell, John Reed, Mary Heaton Vorse, Max Eastman, anarchist Hutchins Hapgood, and the artistic designer Robert Edmond Jones. Most important, however, the Provincetown Players advocated the drama of Eugene O'Neill, whose work came to dominate the Playhouse. These amateur thespians were also unique in their commitment to perform exclusively American drama and to collaborate equally in the writing, directing and staging of each play.⁶ That Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* was the one-act chosen to be played with *The Zoo Story* was also appropriate, because Albee, like Pinter, revered Beckett as the greatest living writer of the period.

The Zoo Story opens in Central Park with two benches on either side of the stage facing the audience.⁷ Peter, "a man in his early forties, neither fat nor gaunt, neither handsome nor homely. He wears tweeds, smokes a pipe, carries horn-rimmed glasses" and is sitting on one of the benches reading a book. He stops to clean off his glasses and returns to reading when Jerry, a younger man, approaches. Jerry is "a man in his late

⁶ Robert Károly Sarlós, *Jig Cook and the Provincetown Players, Theatre in Ferment*. (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 1-8.

⁷ The following description is drawn from Edward Albee, *The American Dream and The Zoo Story* (New York: Signet, Penguin Books, 1961), 11-49. I have chosen this edition because it includes both plays to be discussed and two prefaces written by the author. Direct quotations are cited parenthetically in the text. The character descriptions and stage directions are on page 11.

thirties, not poorly dressed, but carelessly. What was once a trim and lightly muscled body has begun to go to fat; and while he is no longer handsome, it is evident that he once was. His fall from physical grace should not suggest debauchery; he has, to come closest to it, a great weariness." Jerry begins to speak and at first, Peter simply doesn't notice, but when Jerry demands his attention he gives it politely though he is evidently impatient to get back to his reading. Jerry announces that he has been to the zoo and has walked from there to here. Jerry asks Peter, "Have I been walking north?"(12) He seems to be looking for reassurance rather than information since he can explain that he came from Sixty-fifth Street, where the zoo is located to Seventy-fourth Street a trip which, for anyone acquainted with New York City, is obviously north. A moment later, however, Jerry suggests that it is not due north—the more accurate geographical term—but Peter assures him, "It's northerly."(13)

Having intruded thus far, Jerry continues to insinuate himself into Peter's Sunday afternoon ritual of reading on the same park bench he regularly occupies. Jerry's rather manic way of speaking occasionally annoys Peter. Nevertheless, he is civil and engages Jerry in conversation though he clearly would rather not. Jerry begins to question Peter about his personal life, his marriage, children, pets and occupation, even his salary which Peter, though rather shocked by the impertinence of the question, reveals. Peter is occasionally puzzled by his sense that there is a level of communication that is not taking place, even though words are being exchanged. For example, when Jerry first asks Peter if he is married and Peter replies affirmatively, the issue appears to be settled, but almost immediately Jerry startles Peter by stating the obvious, "And you have a wife."(15) As the conversation progresses, Jerry explains that earlier that morning he had begun his walk up Fifth Avenue at Washington Square, and Peter immediately inquires whether his new acquaintance lives in Greenwich Village. This would explain Jerry's odd behavior since the Village was known for artistic and intellectual eccentrics who are perceived to be less dangerous than the mentally disturbed. When Jerry says that he only took the subway

down to the Village in order to be able to walk all the way back, Peter's theory collapses and he seems genuinely disappointed. Jerry, aware of Peter's disappointment asks him accusingly if he had been trying to "Make sense out of things? Bring order? The old pigeonhole bit?"(22) As their conversation continues Peter is upbraided by Jerry more than once for his patronizing attitude. Jerry also drops scattered bits of information that puzzle Peter and which Jerry promises to explain to him later.

Despite the hints and non sequiturs, Jerry and Peter get along and Jerry begins to reveal himself. He tells Peter that he lives in a rather ugly roominghouse on the upper West Side and owns only a few personal items and some letters. Among the items that Jerry lists are two empty picture frames. These intrigue Peter enough to ask why Jerry has no photos for them. Jerry explains rather bitterly that his parents are dead and his next nearest relation was an aunt who "dropped dead on the stairs of her apartment, my apartment then, too, on the afternoon of my high school graduation."(24) In response to Peter's inquiry about a girl friend, Jerry reveals that he enjoys prostitutes but never sees the same one more than once. In fact, he has never had sex with anyone more than once. Jerry then confides that when he was fifteen he had an eleven day homosexual relationship with the son of the park superintendent. He thinks that he was in love with the boy but admits that he may have been in love "just with sex."(25)

When Jerry's revelations begin to make Peter uncomfortable, Jerry changes the subject. Rather, he revives the topic of the zoo and his reasons for going there. But he prefaces his story with an account of his landlady whom he despises. The landlady according to Jerry is not only ugly, dirty and a lush, she is also promiscuous and regularly accosts him in the hallway. Jerry resorts to various tricks to keep her and her "black monster of a dog" out of his path, but it has become more and more difficult.(28) From the day Jerry moved into the house, the landlady's dog made a point of growling and snarling at him and had once torn his trouser leg. Jerry sardonically recalled that he had found it odd that the dog should be so wary of him since most human beings had only

shown him indifference. At any rate, he had taken to rushing past the dog, but decided one day that he would try to win over the mutt but failing that, he would kill it. He bought a handful of hamburgers and threw away the buns to use as bait to coax the animal into a warmer behavior. The dog, grateful for the food only until it was gone, continued to menace Jerry as he raced through the front hall and up to his room. He spent a week attempting seduction and then determined to proceed with plan B. At the mention of this, Peter, who has become more and more reluctant to listen further, grew agitated. Jerry continued nevertheless, explaining that he bought a lone hamburger and laced it with rat poison. The dog promptly devoured it but did not die, lying close to death for a few days during which time the landlady was concerned enough to stop drinking. The dog recovered and the landlady asked Jerry to pray for the dog's recovery. He declined to do so, but not because he wanted the dog to die. Perversely, Jerry claimed he wanted the dog to live in order that he could find out what new relationship might exist between the dog and him. By the end of the story, Peter had become mesmerized by Jerry's account of how the two got along by feigning indifference.

Suddenly, *The Zoo Story's* atmosphere shifts. Jerry comes over to Peter's bench and sits down next to him. He asks Peter what he thinks of the story. Peter is perturbed, replying he doesn't know what to think, that he doesn't understand the story. Jerry, at first animated, becomes defensive, then resigned to Peter's lack of insight. Peter begins to giggle at a minor joke that Jerry does not find funny. Soon Jerry begins to tickle Peter who perhaps because of his confusion, embarrassment and tension continues to laugh almost hysterically in a sort of cathartic reaction. During this playful interlude, Jerry reminds Peter that he was going to tell him about the zoo. Regaining composure, Peter appears amenable to listening.

As Jerry begins to tell his zoo story, he again prefaces it by noting his reason for going to the zoo. He says that it was to "find out more about the way people exist with animals, and the way animals exist with each other, and with people too."(39-40) While

Jerry begins to paint a picture of the zoo as hot, crowded and smelly, he simultaneously begins to edge himself down the bench nudging Peter and demanding he move further along. What began as Jerry's nonchalant gesture, now accompanied by his description of the noisy, bird screeching zoo, quickly turns menacing. Jerry pokes Peter's arm, demanding that he give up his bench entirely. Peter, confounded by this sudden aggression, becomes testy. As Jerry's effrontery increases Peter grows resentful of Jerry's entire intrusion into his quiet Sunday and particularly his expropriation of the seat he considers his own. Insults are hurled back and forth and finally Jerry provokes Peter into issuing a challenge to fight over the bench. Jerry agrees but pulls a knife, then swiftly tosses it at Peter's feet and insisting that he pick it up and use it. Peter resists and Jerry slaps and insults him repeatedly until Peter grabs the knife and holding it far from his body in a defensive position advises Jerry to leave. Instead, Jerry rushes full speed at the knife in Peter's hand and is impaled upon it. Peter is left whimpering in disbelief as Jerry thanks him for being the instrument of his destruction. It was this event that he had planned and even foretold when they first met in the park. With his dying breath Jerry predicts that Peter will be watching this story on his own television set that evening and that he will never again occupy the bench from which Jerry has permanently evicted him. On this note of violence and absurdity, the play ends.

The Zoo Story, well received in Germany was reviewed in the *Darmstadter Echo*, *Frankfurter allgemeine Zeitung*, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, and *Die Welt*, with the latter noting the connection between Albee's work and the works of Beckett, Poe, Kafka, Freud and the macabre *Grand Guignol*.⁸ Several British and American newspapers announced the premiere of a new American playwright in Berlin. The *New York Times* mentioned

⁸ Scott Giantvalley, *Edward Albee: a Reference Guide*, (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1987), 1-2; Michael Rutenberg, *Edward Albee: Playwright In Protest*, (New York: DBS Publications, Inc., 1969), 15. The *Grand Guignol* a small theater in Paris famous for its plays of horror and the macabre.

that the young playwright was cheered by the Schiller Theater audience as was the German custom. Richard Amacher, author of a 1968 critical study of Albee, recalled that:

In Germany, particularly, I found, during my Fulbright professorship at the *Englische Seminar* of Würzburg University (1961-62), more interest in Albee than in any other American playwright. Thornton Wilder, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill, and Arthur Miller, all highly popular elsewhere in Germany, were possibly better known; but they did not excite the students so much as Albee. The air rang with talk of the "absurd"; and the new, imaginative experiments of Ionesco, Genet, and Beckett had captured audiences of both provincial towns and cosmopolitan centers. The satire and annihilating social criticisms of Albee and the Continental "absurdist," allied with their strong imaginative flair, appealed strongly to the Germans and other European who were looking for a new order of social and religious values. These people did not resent the destruction of much that they knew was false; and, it seemed to me, they rather welcomed the advent of a playwright who could represent a genuinely self-critical attitude on the part of postwar Americans toward their institutions and culture.⁹

When *The Zoo Story* opened Off-Broadway the following January, reactions were also mostly favorable. As an alternative to the commercialism of Broadway, Off-Broadway's importance as a center for artistic experimentation would grow during the sixties. Playwrights, directors and critics blamed Broadway for lack of dynamism and reliance on very profitable standard offerings, particularly musical comedies. The theatrical bottom line on Broadway was profit and decisions based on this motive precluded ventures with untried American dramatists or the experimental plays that were being nurtured in Europe's little theaters. When asked later about the Off-Broadway movement, Albee replied, "Oh, in the middle 1950s there were maybe eight or ten productions a year in small experimental theaters. Then, by 1964, there were three hundred. The whole thing exploded."¹⁰ As Off-Broadway came into its own, *The Zoo Story* received notice from major critics and Albee's reputation spread rapidly. C.W.E.

⁹ Richard E. Amacher, *Edward Albee*, rev.ed. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1982.), 8-9.

¹⁰ Albee, "Edward Albee: In Conversation With Terrence McNally," 14.

Bigsby noted, "Few playwrights (other than O'Neill) can ever have acquired such a national reputation on the basis of a few one-act plays produced in such unlikely places as the Schiller Theater Berlin, the Schlosspark Theater, the Jazz Gallery (*The Sandbox*), the York Playhouse (*The American Dream*) and the White Barn, Westport, Connecticut (*Fam and Yam*)."¹¹

In general, major critics favorably reviewed *The Zoo Story*. Walter Kerr complained that the play lost dramatic momentum because it turned from dialogue to soliloquy but called Albee a writer "with a certain wit and a promising degree of theatrical intensity." Brooks Atkinson disparaged the script with the remark, "Nothing of enduring value is said," but added that Albee was an "excellent writer and designer of dialogue." In a second review, Atkinson called *The Zoo Story* "one of the few stimulating theatre evenings of the season" but continued to object, as did others that the melodrama of the ending diminished the play as a whole." Harold Clurman also saw flaws in the script but likewise thought that Albee "could prove to be an important talent." Henry Hewes called *The Zoo Story* "an extraordinary first play," writing that Jerry awakened "the human soul out of its deep modern lethargy to an awareness of of its animal self." Donald Malcolm, echoing the general tone of approval, saw Albee as a writer worth watching, cryptically remarking that while the characters Jerry and Peter may bear a New Testament symbolism, it was not obvious enough to distract the audience. Jon Swan reiterated the opinion that Albee had a gift for creating modern American dialogue: "Mr. Albee's dialogue is dialogue of our day and no other—mainly monologue, ceaselessly self-ironic, graphic, and in its directness, unpredictable."¹²

¹¹ Bigsby, "Edward Albee," *A Critical Introduction*, vol. 2, 264.

¹² Walter Kerr, "Two One-Act Plays Given At Provincetown Playhouse," *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 January 1960; Brooks Atkinson, "Theatre: A Double Bill Off Broadway," *New York Times*, 15 January 1960; Brooks Atkinson, "Village Vagrants," *New York Times*, 31 January 1960; Harold Clurman, "Theatre," *Nation*, 13 February 1960, 153-154; Henry Hewes, "Benchmarkship," *Saturday Review*, 6 February 1960, 32; Donald Malcolm, "Off-Broadway: And Moreover . . ." *New Yorker*, 23

The flavor of the negative reviews of *The Zoo Story* may be gleaned from those of Tom F. Driver in *Christian Century* and Robert Brustein in the *New Republic*. Driver faulted the play for excessive melodrama and thought that the story would lead only to "the conviction that one shouldn't talk to strangers in Central Park." Brustein was stronger in his disdain, particularly with regard to the role of Jerry. In this review Brustein assumed Albee had been influenced by the Beats, and claimed that he had accepted Allen Ginsburg's "sexual-religious claptrap" and that Jerry's dramatic death scene had more to do with psychosis than with self-sacrifice or cosmic insignificance.¹³

In May 1960 Edward Albee won an Obie for *The Zoo Story* as a "distinguished play."¹⁴ In August *The Zoo Story*, produced in London on a double bill with Tennessee Williams' *This Property is Condemned*, received the greater critical praise. A *New York Times* article summarized the varied reactions from the English papers. Reviews in the *News Chronicle*, *Daily Telegraph* and *Daily Mail* were mixed but emphasized Albee's dialogue writing ability. The highest praise, from Elizabeth Frank in the *News Chronicle*, called the play "an extraordinary tour de force."¹⁵

Albee did not fare badly from the critics, given the social milieu of the late 1950s as a period of broad conformity and of entrenched influence by critics. The initial tendency was to find Albee's plays shocking but then to connect them to various dissident movements and traditions. This categorization mitigated the shock of the plays allowing Albee to be rapidly assimilated, yet at the same time tended to deny him the status of original artist. Reviewers drew comparisons with playwrights of a similar style, like

January 1960, 75-76; Jon Swan, "The Zoo Story," in Scott Giantvalley, *Edward Albee*, 7.

¹³ Tom F. Driver, "Bucketful of Dregs," *Christian Century*, 17 February 1960, 193-194; Robert Brustein, "Krapp and a Little Claptrap," *New Republic*, 22 February 1960, 21.

¹⁴ O.B., for Off Broadway, is an award given to the best Off-Broadway plays and performances of the year.

¹⁵ "Zoo Story in London," *New York Times*, 26 August 1960.

Beckett and Ionesco. Others compared him with then current giants of the American stage, Tennessee Williams, Eugene O'Neill and Arthur Miller. Alternatively, those who found *The Zoo Story* sensational and angry sought to connect the author to the Beat poets. Like Pinter, Albee was included in a vaguely defined group of iconoclastic young playwrights—Jack Gelber, Arthur Kopit and Jack Richardson for example—who shared the ability to write provocative plays on infrequently explored topics such as drug addiction, as in Gelber's *The Connection*. Martin Esslin included Albee in the Theater of the Absurd even though his style in *The Zoo Story* was not as boldly unrealistic or surrealistic as it would become. A few critics pointed out that Albee's style was unique, noting the dialogue's transformation from casual if somewhat forced conversation at the opening—the "self-conscious, careful speech of the 'square' [Peter] with the colorful hipster imagery of the transient [Jerry]"—to the almost operatic intensity of Jerry's monologue about the landlady's dog.¹⁶ *The Zoo Story* employed that most salient characteristic of absurdism, the blurred distinctions between the realistic and the fanciful, the comic and the tragic, the satirical and the grotesque and used both language and action to effect this result.

In both reviews and scholarly essays, Albee was most frequently referred to as a social critic. When asked if he considered himself a social critic, Albee replied that he did not intentionally assume the role but that a playwright looking back at his play may often feel that the "play should not have had to have been written."¹⁷ In a conversation with the actor John Gielgud, Albee said, "it was one of the responsibilities of playwrights to show people how [sic] they are and what their time is like in the hope that perhaps they'll change

¹⁶ Henry Goodman, "The New Dramatists, 4: Edward Albee," *Drama Survey* 2 (Spring 1962): 75.

¹⁷ Edward Albee, "Two Interviews with Edward Albee," interview by Michael E. Rutenberg, chap. in *Edward Albee: Playwright In Protest*, 241.

it."¹⁸ He further asserted that there was a crisis in the theater because "the audience primarily wants a reaffirmation of its values, wants to see the status quo, wants to be entertained rather than disturbed, wants to be comforted and really doesn't want any kind of adventure in the theater."¹⁹ This might well be taken as a renewed declaration of independence for the mid-twentieth century playwrights, echoing similar opinions expressed by Ibsen and Shaw in their day, Molière and Aristophanes in theirs.

Albee's premiere of *The Zoo Story* in the United States coincided with Pinter's first English production of *The Room* in January 1960. Critics in the United States were no more prepared than their English counterparts to examine the work of these new playwrights and to consider new standards of judgement. During this first wave of "experimental theater pieces," critics relied on familiar yardsticks such as length and dramatic tension. Thus, Albee's writing was examined for literary style. Critics applauded his ability to create dramatic tension by writing fine dialogue. But the old cavil that Sartre's short plays had encountered was revived when Albee kept writing one act plays until *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. The spareness of the stage in *The Zoo Story* was seen as analogous to Beckett's in *Waiting For Godot* and, since the dialogue adequately filled the space and didn't bore the audience, Albee was pronounced "promising." The American beat idiom in which Jerry spoke was mildly lampooned in a few reviews but Albee's ear for the street talk of his generation was more often praised, as was Pinter's ear for working-class argot.²⁰

The major complaint of the critics, even those who liked *The Zoo Story* was that Albee's resort to a melodramatic suicide represented a disappointing denouement. Jerry

¹⁸ R. S. Stewart, "John Gielgud and Edward Albee Talk about the Theater" *Atlantic Monthly*, April 1965, 62.

¹⁹ Stewart, "John Gielgud and Edward Albee," 64.

²⁰ Henry Hewes, "Benchmarkship," 32; Donald Malcolm, "Off-Broadway," 75-76.

Tallmer concluded that the ending implied the nihilistic belief that violence is the only means of communication left in modern society. Similar comments had been made when Pinter's *The Room* was reviewed. While critics applauded the atmosphere of menace and dialogic tension created by both playwrights, they felt Pinter and Albee overstepped the boundaries of dramatic necessity in showing frank violence in the final moments of their respective first plays.²¹

The Zoo Story ending also became the central bone of contention among academics, who used it to speculate on Albee's lasting value as a playwright. Martin Esslin's *The Theatre of the Absurd* included Albee as a writer of absurdist drama although he had produced only five one-act plays by 1961. Esslin suggested that there were few American absurdist playwrights because the country had not experienced the disillusionment and pessimism that Europeans had experienced from both World Wars. Americans maintained a belief in progress and opportunity that Europeans had abandoned by 1945, though but saw Albee formed an exception to this rule. *The Zoo Story* was a very good example of the Theater of the Absurd because its ironic tone and black humor "attack the very foundations of American optimism."²² As noted above, Esslin had criticized Pinter's melodramatic ending of *The Room* because it diluted the layers of subtle mystery the playwright had built up over the course of the play. He likewise faulted Albee's *The Zoo Story*, observing that although it was good absurdist drama, the climax of the play was marred. Esslin asserted that "when Jerry provokes Peter into drawing a knife and then impales himself upon it, the plight of the schizophrenic outcast is turned into an act of sentimentality, especially as the victim expires in touching solicitude and fellow

²¹ Atkinson, "Village Vagrants," sec. 2, p.1; Jerry Tallmer, "Theatre: The Tape and the Zoo," *Village Voice* 20 January 1960, 9-10. On Pinter, see page 154 above.

²² Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 225.

feeling for his involuntary murderer."²³ Unlike popular or media reviewers, Esslin was less concerned with the use of violence as a dubious contrivance to end the play than with fact that the violence blunted the impact of the play's powerful existential message. Modern human beings, living in isolation and as alienated from one another as animals in a zoo, nevertheless do reach out to make contact with one another and do so in spite of seemingly insurmountable obstacles of language and meaning. By too neatly concluding the story, the absurdity of the human condition is abandoned in favor of a traditional dramatic ending. In Albee's favor, however, Esslin compared the realism of the play to Pinter's and found that his dialogue rang as true.

In *Drama Survey*, Henry Goodman, agreeing with Esslin on the sentimental nature of Jerry's dying speech, saw something more. In an age of unbelief, the earlier monologue about the landlady's dog has Jerry describing how a "person has to have some way of dealing with SOMETHING. If not with people . . . if not with people . . . SOMETHING."(34) In his increasing frenzy Jerry finally suggests that perhaps "the dealing" should be "with God who, I am told, turned his back on the whole thing some time ago."(35) This speech seemed to Goodman a cry for the loss of belief. In contrast, Jerry's speech as he lays dying, was a cry of empathy for Peter's loss of innocence. Goodman maintained that the fusion of these sentiments, despair and compassion, had led Jerry to a reaffirmation of human belief. This interpretation, stressing the rediscovery of faith also connects to Jerry's puzzling assertion at the beginning of the dog story: "What I am going to tell you has something to do with how sometimes it's necessary to go a long distance out of the way in order to come back a short distance correctly."(30)

A similar interpretation by Rose A. Zimbardo's essay "Symbolism and Naturalism in Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story*." Zimbardo saw a Christian allegory, with Jerry as the sacrificial Jesus and Peter, the thrice denying apostle. In a 1965 interview Albee denied

²³ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 226.

that he had purposefully written an allegory or that Jerry and Peter were names chosen with that purpose in mind but he remembered Zimbardo's essay as "pointing up rather beautifully, I thought, that Jerry in *The Zoo Story* was Christ." He added, "I begin to suspect that I put an awful lot more Christian symbolism into my plays than I am consciously aware of."²⁴

In a 1960 interview with Arthur Gelb, Albee denied that ending his play with a suicide expressed nihilism. Rather, he believed that Jerry had intended to sacrifice himself in order to pass on to Peter his keen awareness of life. In 1961 Gerald Weales called *The Zoo Story* sentimental, a charge he expanded in 1969 by challenging Albee's claim that he was not nihilistic. Weales found *The Zoo Story's* ending incongruous because Albee employed a concept of love that didn't fit the play. He maintained that Albee wanted the audience to believe "Jerry's 'you have to make a start somewhere' speech in which he expounds the steps-to-love doctrine."²⁵ This idea holds that an individual can make human contact by first getting acquainted with objects, plants or animals. Jerry begins with the landlady's dog but, since Jerry's relationship with the dog deteriorated, Weales questioned how Albee could impute a redeeming role to Jerry's death. Weales found the ending illogical because the murder-suicide "tries to suggest one thing (salvation) while the logic of the play demands something else."²⁶ Furthermore, Jerry is passing on his awareness of life in a most extreme way. Peter is undoubtedly affected by the violent act, but there is no evidence that Jerry has succeeded in permanently changing Peter in any way.

²⁴ Rutenberg, *Edward Albee: Playwright In Protest*, 231.

²⁵ Gerald Weales, "Edward Albee: Don't Make Waves" in *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1975) 20. Weales believed that the "steps-to-love doctrine [was] a soggy inheritance from Carson McCullers ("A Tree. A Rock. A Cloud.") and Truman Capote (*The Grass Harp*).

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 20.

Weales' article was one of the earliest to ponder the issue of language and to question its limits. Jerry demonstrated the impotency of language in the long-winded tale of his futile attempt to change his relationship to the landlady's dog: "The dog has returned to garbage, and I to solitary but free passage. I have not returned, I mean to say, I have *gained* solitary free passage, if that much further loss can be said to be gain."²⁷ Failure to make contact with the dog seems to foreshadow his failure to make human contact with Peter. Despite Albee's reservations, Weales' introduced the possibility that the playwright intended to probe the boundaries of communication, thus contradicting the assumption that Albee had simply resorted to a formulaic ending. Weales also connected the play to its period by concluding that Peter's violent initiation could be read as a sign of the times, and should not be "surprising when we consider that violence and death became twisted life symbols during the 1950's (as all the kids said after James Dean's fatal smashup, 'Boy, that's living')." ²⁷

In a similar study of *The Zoo Story*, Charles R. Lyons postulated two additional points contradicting the characterization of the finale as mere sentiment and sensationalism. First, on a structural level, Jerry's elimination of the incriminating fingerprints on the knife and his return of Peter's book allowed the audience to accept the play as "abstract and complete-not the first act of Peter's play." Audience attention remains focused on the central ideas of the play rather than left to guess the legal consequences for the endlessly frustrated Peter.²⁸ Second, the violent act served to bond Jerry and Peter in a shared experience in a way that their shared conversation could never do, thus initiating Peter into an awareness of his own fragile reality. Lyons argued that in wishing to dispel Peter's innocence, Jerry dramatized to Peter his own nightmare state

²⁷ Gerald Weales, "Edward Albee: Don't Make Waves," 20.

²⁸ Charles R. Lyons, "Two Projections of the Isolation of the Human Soul: Brecht's *Im Dickicht Der Staedte* and Albee's *The Zoo Story*," *Drama Survey*, 4 (Summer 1965): 135.

"generated by a clear vision of the essential human tragedy: the isolation of the individual soul." Inevitably, Jerry would be "unable to assure the transmission of that vision to Peter," but would die in his attempt to do so.²⁹

Thus, the question for scholars remained whether Albee was interested in theatricality or in philosophical ideas. One of the important changes in theatrical convention that absurdist writers were anxious to impose was that the audience should leave the theater mulling over the drama. The audience should be proactive rather than reactive—that is, the play should provoke discussion rather than corroboration of current standards of behavior. Esslin's contention that Albee shared the existentialist underpinnings ascribed to the Theater of the Absurd provoked debate in part because Albee's reputation grew so rapidly. Some critics were suspicious of his rapid celebrity, and when Albee began to object to certain kinds of criticism, they speculated that perhaps Albee was a facile playwright who had absorbed the absurdist style without understanding its intellectual roots. This explains the repetitive interview questions probing the major influences on his career. Albee himself once quipped that he had read most of the writers who were supposed to have influenced him only after he had written his first four plays.³⁰

Those critics arguing against Albee's inclusion in the Theater of the Absurd tended to identify Albee's work as having a distinctly American caste. This identity portrayed him realistic but not cynical, a social protester who was not an ideologue, and a pragmatist who was also an optimist. Two British academics, Brian Way and C.W.E. Bigsby, argued that Albee did not share the despair of the European absurdists, contending against Esslin's inclusion of Albee on the basis of a latent rationalism in his drama. Brian Way declared that although Albee's plays were important absurdist dramas, they suffered in the final

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 136. In this act of compassion, Peter becomes the real victim of the piece as pointed out in Anita Maria Stenz, *Edward Albee: the Poet of Loss* (The Hague: Mouton, 1978).

³⁰ Edward Albee, "The Art of the Theater IV," interview by William Flanagan (Montauk, NY, 4 July 1966) *Paris Review* 10 (Fall 1966): 106-107.

analysis from a "failure of nerve," because "Albee still believes in the validity of reason—that things can be proved, or that events can be shown to have definite meanings—and, unlike Beckett and the others, is scarcely touched by the sense of living in an absurd universe." Way hypothesized that Albee was attracted to the Theater of the Absurd because it provided a vehicle for his criticism of the emptiness of American life, but that he lacked absurdist philosophical convictions. Way noted that Albee employed the characteristics of absurdist technique such as the use of cliché and polite repartee which serve to contradict the action taking place. He also noted Albee's use of another pattern of absurdist writing which he termed pseudo-crisis. Jerry's story of the dog seems to create tensions that in a traditional play would move the plot along but which in the absurd play have no consequence, mirroring the stasis of an absurd universe. But, upon Jerry's death "all the traditional assumptions of naturalism flood back into the play. It is postulated, quite as firmly as in any Ibsen social drama, that a catastrophe is also a resolution of the situation of the play, and that events, however obscure, ultimately have a definite and unambiguous meaning." Albee's exploitation of the violent ending renders suspect the earlier actions of the play: "The slightest hint that events in an absurd play are amenable to everyday explanation is completely destructive of their dramatic effectiveness." Thus the suspicion of the audience that Jerry could be "explained" as a psychotic transient with suicidal tendencies, as he was often described in early reviews, undermines the absurdity and makes the story an interesting but not unusual New York City vignette.³¹

Biggsby echoed Way's disapproval of Esslin's categorization of Albee for similar reasons, adding an important codicil. Biggsby found the human isolation at the center of *The Zoo Story* to be "socially not metaphysically derived, [and . . . is] self-imposed rather

³¹ Brian Way, "Albee and the Absurd: *The American Dream and The Zoo Story*," in *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Biggsby, 26,31,40,41.

than determined." Albee, according to Bigsby, was at an early stage of his career in which it was important to "identify and embrace the real and the true." In later plays Albee would find this goal less attainable. Thus, when direct conversation failed between Jerry and Peter, the playwright had Jerry resort to metaphor in order to drive home the notion that human communication was ultimately attainable. Unlike the absurdists, Albee "was not interested in denying the bleakness of the [human] scene but in identifying the one area of possible hope, no matter how tenuous it might be." In fact, Bigsby sees in Albee's belief in "revivified human relationship as lying at the core of a reconstituted society"—a neo-romanticism perhaps inherited from the Beats that later appeared in the popularity of "love-ins" and communes in the late 1960's. Albee's belief in the healing power of human contact was based on a definition of love that goes beyond the theoretical and beyond the gratification of the sexual encounter: "It is an acknowledgment of the irremediable, a confession that there comes a point at which evasion serves no further purpose and the self concedes that its definition depends upon the existence of the other. And that mutuality makes demands upon the conscience."³²

Clyde G. Smallwood's *Elements of the Existentialist Philosophy in the Theatre of the Absurd* offered the strongest defense of Albee as a playwright of the Theater of the Absurd. An American philosopher influenced by French existentialism, Smallwood employed Emmanuel Mounier's 1951 definition of existentialism to measure the association of the playwrights of the Absurd with the philosophical concepts of existentialism. Smallwood used Mounier's four basic concepts: "(1) the contingency of the human being, (2) the instability of the human being, (3) the impotence of reason, and (4) the 'bounding leap' of [faith needed by] the human being." Smallwood further defined each attribute. First, human contingency, whether humans originate from God or not, describes the sheer fact of human existence which is already established when the human

³² Bigsby, "Edward Albee," *A Critical Introduction*, vol. 2, 258-260.

consciousness becomes aware of itself. Second, the instability of human beings means that existence is not static because being always includes becoming. Third, the impotence of reason refers to the fact that no matter how strongly human reason tries to objectify human existence in order to understand it, there remains an element of inescapable subjectivity which reason cannot grasp: "The dynamic and contingent self cannot be grasped nor fathomed by reason alone. This is the paradox of truth explored by Soren Kierkegaard." Finally the "bounding leap" of human existence refers to the ability of humans to constantly act to define themselves as humans in spite of the obstacles posed by contingency, instability and the impotence of reason.³³

Smallwood analyzed twenty-two plays by absurdist playwrights, Adamov, Albee, Beckett, Genet, Ionesco, and Pinter, in order to discover which plays contained some or all of these four basic concepts. *The Zoo Story*, he concluded, contained both the concept of human instability and the concept of the "bounding leap" of human existence. The character Peter exemplified what the existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Marcel, called "the 'time table' life, a life in which one is lost in a world of things." Such a life seeks to escape from the dread inherent in one's consciousness of existence. Existentialists term this form of living inauthentic because it prevents or postpones one's confrontation with dread. But the engagement with dread, which produces anguish, can lead the individual to choose the authentic life. Smallwood argued that in *The Zoo Story*, Jerry disrupts Peter's "time table" existence particularly when he provokes Peter into defending his park bench, and displays his inability to cope with aggressive behavior. Peter's inauthentic life allows Jerry to direct the action that brings about the suicide that Jerry desires—his own suicide.³⁴

³³ Clyde G. Smallwood, *Elements of the Existentialist Philosophy in the Theatre of the Absurd* (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, 1966), 5,13,56.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 57, 62.

Smallwood explores *The Zoo Story's* "bounding leap" by reminding readers that for the existentialists, death was considered "the final and greatest possibility of the human being." Neither imposition nor accident, death was an inevitable possibility which humans must recognize as part of their existence. Since the authentic life demands that the individual be involved in the effort to actualize life's potentialities, death plays an enormous role. Not only is it one of life's possibilities, it colors one's attitude and reveals life's contingency. Jerry, who represents the authentic life "has become aware of the meaninglessness of the world through his own failures, but he does not yield to the inertia in Being. Rather, he actively wills his last possibility—death."³⁵

A philosophical analysis such as Smallwood's supports the view that Albee not only understood existentialism, but used its basic ideas in his plays. Though Albee emphasizes the possibility of action, it is action in the existentialist sense of striving to live an authentic life. The arguments by Bigsby and others that he does not share a metaphysical outlook with other absurdist playwrights overlooks the evidence. Albee's apparent optimism masked an existentialist attitude that has become clearer with time. *The Zoo Story* not only employs elements of absurdism—the blurred distinctions between the real and the fanciful, the comic and the tragic, the satirical and the grotesque—it boldly probed philosophical questions of identity, isolation and death.

Albee's *Zoo Story* ignited several other intellectual flashpoints of the 1950s—the portrayal of sexuality and the debate over what constituted realism in the theater. Albee's portrayal of sexuality divided critics and was noted, though not as much as it would be at a later time. Several scholars observed that the play could be seen as a verbal analogue to sexual intercourse, with the language increasing in intensity to a climax that is then transformed into the visually symbolic. The outstretched knife serves as a phallic symbol and the murder-suicide represents the climax of Jerry's eccentric kind of love. One critic

³⁵ Smallwood, *Elements of the Existentialist Philosophy*, 125.

contended such an analogy symbolized rape rather than intercourse since Peter seemed to be an unwilling partner in the relationship.³⁶ The power rivalry in the plot lent itself easily to such an interpretation which nonetheless remains controversial. In the early 1960's, literary critics often used Freudian terms, leading some of Albee's more homophobic critics, such as Tom Driver, to cite such interpretations as evidence against his work.³⁷ Others merely hinted their disapproval, as when Robert Brustein attributed a "masochistic-homosexual perfume" to the play. When the play opened in Paris, the reviewer for *Le Monde* admitted an imperfect knowledge of English but described *The Zoo Story* as a homosexual encounter, already dramatized by Pinter and Genet, adding that perhaps Albee was overly influenced by Freud. American critic Richard Kostelanetz also construed *The Zoo Story* as a failed homosexual pass. However, not until Albee's later plays, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (1962) and *Tiny Alice* (1964) did critics such as Jerry Tallmer, Stanley Kauffman, Martin Gottfried and Philip Roth raise a storm of negative criticism about their alleged homosexual subtexts.³⁸

A new line of critical attack, exemplified by Thomas Driver's essay "What's the Matter with Edward Albee?" sought to hold Albee to the standards of realist drama. For Driver, *The Zoo Story* failed because it was based on an unbelievable premise. Peter should simply have seen what was coming and left the Park: because "no sane, average-type person would be a passive spectator in the presence of behavior obviously headed

³⁶ Thomas B. Markus, "Tiny Alice and Tragic Catharsis," *Educational Theater Journal*, 17 (October, 1965): 226. See also Mary M. Nilan "Alienated Man and the Nature of Love," *Modern Drama* 16 (1973): 57.

³⁷ See page 225 below for Driver's comments on Albee's homosexuality and *The American Dream* and *The Zoo Story*.

³⁸ Robert Brustein, "Krapp and a Little Claptrap," *New Republic*, 22 February 1960, 21-22; Richard Kostelanetz, "Edward Albee," in *On Contemporary Literature*, (New York: Avon Books, 1964), 225-231; B. Poirot-Delpech, "*The Zoo Story et The Death of Bessie Smith d' Edward Albee*," *Le Monde* 12 June 1963, 14. Tallmer wrote for *The New York Post*, Kauffman for the *New York Times*, Gottfried for *Women's Wear Daily*, Roth, a novelist wrote "The Play That Dare Not Speak Its Name" in *New York Review of Books*, 25 February 1965, 4.

towards destructive violence."³⁹ In reply, Thomas Markus, pointed out that the crucial weakness in such an analysis was that it assumed that the play was realistic. Markus offered three points in rebuttal. First, though the setting is Central Park, the audience does not accept it as a replica of that place. Second, the two characters are not realistic but rather stereotypical representations—"Madison Avenue prototype . . . [and] the beatnik from a TV serial."⁴⁰ Third, the language of the play sounded normal but was not: "The language that the two characters engage in is again only realistic to the ears of those who are supercilious enough to think that they could be so witty. We must not mistake the fact that Jerry and we have a common base for our language with the idea we speak a common tongue."⁴¹ This defense of Albee's dialogic technique was echoed by Robert S. Wallace who saw Albee's use of repetition, sarcasm, clichés, extended monologues and interruptions as a means of both keeping the audience involved and yet distancing them in order that they cannot identify with either Jerry or Peter as they might have in a more traditional play. The language not only keeps the audience from slipping into a passive role but allows Albee to attack the numerous fictions of modern American life. By providing an abundance of language through Jerry's storytelling, Albee reveals to the hollowness of language when Peter still fails to understand Jerry's words. This failure is most obvious at the end of Jerry's story of the landlady's dog when Peter says, "I . . . I don't understand what . . . I don't think I . . . (Now, almost tearfully) Why did you tell me all of this?"⁴² By using the new conventions of absurdist dialogue in a naturalistic framework, Albee, "emphasizes the dramatic illusion and forces the audience to realize its

³⁹ Thomas F. Driver, "What's the Matter With Edward Albee," in *American Drama and Its Critics: A Collection of Critical Essays*. ed. Alan S. Downer (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965), 240.

⁴⁰ Markus, "Tiny Alice and Tragic Catharsis," 226.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 226.

⁴² Albee, *The American Dream and The Zoo Story*. 36.

own vicarious use of fiction. In *The Zoo Story*, the integration of form and content cleverly makes the play a teaching experience."⁴³

Because Albee had several plays produced in rapid succession in the first three years of the 1960's, many scholars had the opportunity to compare and contrast Albee's work almost immediately. They found themes in *The Zoo Story* that recurred in the other plays, for example, Albee's aversion to modern complacency as corrosive to the human spirit, his hatred of the false values of materialism and his "preoccupation with mutilation, emasculation and sexual warfare."⁴⁴ Peter represented the successful modern man emasculated by society's demands for conformity and the acceptance of empty values. Jerry, the victim of parental abuse and neglect whose life has been a search for affection but who has only managed to find temporary satisfaction in lust and who cannot make any genuine human connection is reduced to despair. Jerry's solution is to resort to suicide. In planning his own suicide, Jerry concomitantly plans a cure for Peter's complacency, the disease Peter does not even know he has. Such interpretations tell us as much about the concerns of society as the playwright's perceptions. In sum, *The Zoo Story* united existentialist philosophy and elements of absurdist art though still tinged with realism. It also forecast other social concerns growing out of philosophical issues that continued to engage Albee's attention as he experimented with style.

The American Dream represented Albee's transition to a more obviously surrealist type of drama. Contrasting sharply with *The Zoo Story's* realistic setting and somewhat stereotypical characters, *The American Dream*, another one-act, was closer in style and structure to the European absurdist dramas of Beckett and Ionesco. *The*

⁴³ Robert S. Wallace, "The Zoo Story: Albee's Attack On Fiction," *Modern Drama* 16 (1973):53.

⁴⁴ Henry Goodman "The New Dramatists, 4: Edward Albee," *Drama Survey* 2 (Spring, 1962):74.

American Dream opened Off-Broadway at the York Playhouse on January 24, 1961, four days after the inauguration of John F. Kennedy.

The American Dream features five characters: Mommy, Daddy, Grandma, who is Mommy's mother, Mrs. Barker and Young Man.⁴⁵ It is set in sparsely furnished apartment living room, its lean hyperbolic style evoking Ionesco as many critics noted. As the curtain rises Mommy and Daddy are alone on the stage, waiting for some visitors who are late. They discuss how difficult it is to get timely assistance or repairs with Mommy describing a shopping expedition which she insists proves this point. Mommy had gone into a shop to buy a hat, found one and after being assured that it was a beige, she bought it. Later she met an acquaintance whom she describes as "a dreadful woman [with] . . . dreadful taste, two dreadful children, a dreadful house, . . . , but she *is* chairman of our woman's club, so naturally I'm terribly fond of her." (60) When this woman insists that the hat is wheat colored, not beige, Mommy marches back into the shop and makes a huge fuss. The clerk goes into the next room and emerges with what appeared to be the very same hat, claiming this one was truly beige. Listening patiently to the anecdote, Daddy guesses that the result of the fashion brouhaha was that the salespeople had merely resold Mommy the same hat. Mommy smugly agrees, taking a perverse pleasure in having gone round in circles to gain nothing.

Mommy and Daddy then return to the reason for their waiting. They seem to be waiting for the repairmen to fix their toilet, because they launch into a dialogue about its poor condition. They justify the repair, not for their own sakes since they can avoid the plumbing problem by going out, but because Grandma is dependent on the household facilities. Mommy intimates that she would like to see Grandma put away in a nursing

⁴⁵ The following description is drawn from Albee, *The American Dream and The Zoo Story*, 57-127. These plays were published separately, however I have chosen this edition for convenience as it includes both plays and the preface by the author which is discussed below. All direct quotes from the play are cited parenthetically in the text.

home. Daddy seeming more sympathetic to Grandma denies that he would ever do such a thing. It soon becomes clear that Mommy had grown up poor and married Daddy for his money. Mommy brought Grandma with her and Daddy very generously supported them both. Mommy claims her own position derives from past sexual favors, and resents Grandma's presence because she "can't stand it, watching her do the cooking and the housework, polishing the silver, moving the furniture."(67) Daddy contends Grandma likes to do chores.

Grandma herself then makes an appearance, loaded down with beautifully wrapped boxes. There are so many boxes Grandma requires two trips to bring them into the room. While she is busy, Mommy explains that Grandma had always wrapped boxes prettily, in fact even her school lunches were so well wrapped that she never opened them. Grandma, an affable but sometimes crotchety old woman, complains of being spoken to harshly simply because she is old, and denounces the maltreatment accorded to the elderly generally. Mommy reminds her how lucky she is, warning her that it would take very little to call in "the van man" to put her away. Suddenly the doorbell rings and Daddy becomes anxious, confessing that he is not sure he wants to see the repairmen. It is evident that they are not really expecting the plumbers. Mommy smoothly assures Daddy that he had acted decisively, and responsibly in his decision to call the visitors. Daddy remains unconvinced and continues to hesitate before opening the door to Mrs. Barker. He quickly welcomes her, but just as quickly suggests that she should leave. Mommy reminds Mrs. Barker that she had been there before, but Mrs. Barker seems to have no recollection of a previous visit. Oddly, neither Mrs. Barker, nor Mommy, nor Daddy have any idea why she has been sent. When asked about her work, Mrs. Barker replies that among other things she is the chairman of Mommy's woman's club. At first taken aback, Mommy immediately recognizes her as the woman from the previous day's encounter. A nonsensical discussion ensues as Mrs. Barker removes her dress for comfort and Mommy

forbids her to smoke. It is also revealed that Daddy has recently had an operation for an undisclosed ailment.

Tension begins to build as Mommy and Daddy try unsuccessfully to discover why Mrs. Barker has come to call. Meanwhile Grandma continuously interrupts them with sundry remarks ascribed to her consumption of the latest bookclub selection and TV shows. Finally Daddy is sent off to break Grandma's TV, an action meant to reduce her insolence and Mommy goes in search of water for Mrs. Barker, who is feeling faint. Grandma, left alone with Mrs. Barker, tells her why she has been called to the apartment. Here Albee's own history seems on display as Grandma relates that twenty years earlier a woman very much like Mrs. Barker had come from the Bye-Bye Adoption Agency to arrange Mommy's and Daddy's adoption of a boy. Grandma then details how the adoptive parents found numerous faults in the child and in a vain effort to improve him, gouged out his eyes and cut off various body parts. When the child finally died, Mommy and Daddy decided to call the adoption agency in order to demand a refund. The audience understands that this is the reason for Mrs. Barker's visit even before she does. Mrs. Barker remains disconcerted by the story but recalls arranging the adoption.

From offstage, Mommy and Daddy complain that they can't find any of the things they have been looking for, including Grandma's room. At Mommy's urging, Mrs. Barker goes into the kitchen to find herself a drink of water, and leaves Grandma alone. Just then the doorbell rings again and in walks a beautiful looking and muscular young man who is looking for work. His dialogue with Grandma wanders from topic to topic though soon he relates his life story. He was an identical twin separated at birth from his brother whom he never knew. He describes a series of painful psychological losses incurred at various times in his life. These sound mysteriously similar to the physical losses incurred by Mommy's and Daddy's adopted son. These painful episodes left the Young Man a mature and beautiful organism yet dispossessed of all human emotions. Incapable of love, he allows himself to be used by others. Grandma is suddenly convinced that this young man

could satisfy the current complaint lodged by Mommy and Daddy against the Adoption Agency. Grandma counsels the Young Man to go along with her actions unquestioningly when she calls in Mrs. Barker. Grandma describes this fellow as the van man and asks him to help her with her boxes, which he does. While he is taking the boxes outside, Grandma whispers some advice to Mrs. Barker that will solve her dilemma and give employment to the young man.

After Grandma goes out, the parents return to the livingroom. Mrs. Barker explains that Grandma has gone with the van man. Mommy is shocked, confessing to Mrs. Barker that there never was a real van man and that she and Daddy had only made him up to frighten Grandma. When they find that Grandma is truly gone, however, they become remorseful. They are quickly distracted, however, when Mrs. Barker opens the door and introduces the Young Man as the surprise she had been planning all along. He will serve as the identical replacement for their adopted son. Everyone will be satisfied. Grandma, watches the unfolding of her recently hatched plan from the edge of the stage, visible only to Mrs. Barker and the Young Man. While everyone is still celebrating in a state of blissful ignorance, it is Grandma's privilege to close the play: "So let's leave things as they are right now . . . while everybody's got what he wants . . .or everybody's got what he thinks he wants."(127)

Early reviews of *The American Dream* were similar to those of *The Zoo Story* and the later production, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* They were almost evenly divided between positive and negative assessments, a feature Albee himself pointed out in an interview in 1980.⁴⁶ Howard Taubman thought the play confirmed Albee's talent although he complained that his playfulness with clichés became "tiresome" John McClain and other reviewers recommended play for its humor and freshness. Richard Watts' glowing

⁴⁶ Edward Albee, interview, in *Edward Albee: Planned Wilderness*, Living Authors Series, ed. Patricia De La Fuente, no. 3 (Edinburg, Texas: Pan American University, 1980), 8.

review, later quoted on the book jacket, found *The American Dream*: "packed with untamed imagination, wild humor, gleefully sardonic satirical implications and overtones of strangely touching sadness."⁴⁷ Walter Kerr and Henry Hewes viewed Albee's attack on empty images of typical American success as the play's major contribution. Most of the reviewers saved their negative comments for *Bartleby*, a one-act opera which shared the bill with *The American Dream*.⁴⁸ The opera, based on the Herman Melville story, was composed by William Flanagan, and Albee co-wrote the libretto with James Hinton, Jr..

Other weekly journal critics offered a divided opinion on *The American Dream*. Whitney Balliett praised "a comic nightmare . . . [with] 'Alice in Wonderland' dialogue." Robert Brustein saw a "scorching satire on upper-middle-class family life," noting that Albee borrowed Ionesco's surrealistic techniques and then allowed the play to degenerate into the subjective story of a specific dysfunctional family, possibly the author's. Brustein concluded that Albee's talent was as yet undeveloped and none of his first three plays escape the "same vital defect: the absence of any compelling theme, commitment, or sense of life which might pull them into focus." Moreover, Brustein observed, Albee's "premature fame" based on such inadequate work could easily prove a creative liability. In a scathing review, Tom F. Driver, a familiar adversary, agreed with Brustein that *The American Dream* was merely derivative of Ionesco, adding that Albee had written a self-pitying play that revealed his own homosexual guilt. *The American Dream* reminded Driver of *The Zoo Story* because Jerry's basic problem was his inability to "outgrow" his adolescent homosexuality, and he suggested that Albee should try to deal with his own

⁴⁷ Howard Taubman, "The Theatre: Albee's *The American Dream*." *New York Times*, 25 January 1961; John McClain, "York Double-Header Wins a Split Decision" *New York Journal-American*, 25 January 1961; Richard Watts, Jr. "Another Striking Play by Albee," *New York Post*, 25 January 1961.

⁴⁸ Henry Hewes, "On Our Bad Behavior" *Saturday Review* 11 February 1961, 54; Walter Kerr "The American Dream" *New York Herald Tribune*, 25 January, 1961.

problem and avoid the temptation to "expose himself in public."⁴⁹ Such *ad hominem* comments were rare, but Albee was particularly provoked to respond to negative critics.

Albee's first response appeared in a preface to the 1961 published edition of *The Zoo Story* and *The American Dream*.⁵⁰ As for Harold Pinter, the author's response to criticism involved some very basic concerns. Paramount among these was the issue of whether criticism ought to concern itself with the style and theatricality of a particular production or whether content was also fair game. Albee acknowledged that many of the press reviews had been flattering, but he took exception to negative press. Admitting that it was a bit foolhardy for a neophyte to complain, he charged that American media abused the privilege of criticism. Albee claimed that some negative remarks had nothing to do with style, but centered primarily on content: "May I submit that when a critic sets himself up as an arbiter of morality, a judge of the matter and not the manner of a work, he is no longer a critic; he is a censor." This attitude, he warned, prevented critics from seeing the real content of the play which in the case of *The American Dream* was: "an examination of the American Scene, an attack on the substitution of artificial for real values in our society, a condemnation of complacency, cruelty, emasculation and vacuity; it is a stand against the fiction that everything in this slipping land of ours is peachy-keen." The underlying charge was that critics, uninitiated in the absurdist idiom, were poorly equipped to do their jobs. Their resort to comparisons, especially with European playwrights, traditional formulas and their condemnations, the product of impatience rather than analysis, seemed to justify Albee's complaints. Not surprisingly, however, his salvos while meant to educate succeeded only to further enflame. Thus began a series of public skirmishes with critics that would continue to characterize Edward Albee's career.

⁴⁹ Whitney Balliett "Three Cheers For Albee," *New Yorker* 4 February 1961, 64; Robert Brustein, "Fragments From a Cultural Explosion," *New Republic*, 27 March 1961, 29-31; Tom F. Driver, "A Milestone and a Fumble," *Christian Century*, 1 March 1961, 275.

⁵⁰ Albee, *The American Dream and The Zoo Story*, 53-54.

In June, 1961, the Foreign Press Association named Albee's *The American Dream* along with his one act, *The Death of Bessie Smith*, the best plays of the 1960-61 season. In October *The American Dream* opened in London and was met by generally favorable notices. Alan Pryce-Jones likened it to German expressionist dramas of the twenties. Harold Hobson and Eric Keown noted its similarity to Ionesco. On the other hand, Charles Marowitz judged the similarity quite thin, complaining that Albee did not make the most of his material, especially the character of the Young Man who could have been used to convey more biting satire. Roger Gellert found that the play had very little meaning beyond the trite message that for the bourgeoisie, dreams are an anodyne preferable to reality. He remarked that despite its several weaknesses, *The American Dream* had been successful in New York because of "the traditional American love of self-chastisement."⁵¹

Martin Esslin's *Theatre of the Absurd* assessed *The American Dream* as an example of a play that deals with subjects common to the Theater of the Absurd and in a style similar to the Europeans but "translates it into a genuine American idiom." For Esslin Albee's Americaness lay in his attack on the American ideals of progress, optimism, and world mission as well as his satire on the "sentimental ideals of family life, togetherness and physical fitness." Through euphemism and cliché, the family in *The American Dream* avoids facing the reality of the human condition. The American preoccupation with the accouterments of bourgeois life affords the principal characters the opportunity to continue seeking after that which they think they want. For Mommy and Daddy, it is the perfect child, who personifies the future of the American dream; only Grandma knows their objective is empty. Esslin linked Albee's style with Ionesco's

⁵¹ Alan Pryce-Jones, "Alan Pryce-Jones at the Theatre" *Theatre Arts* 45 (March 1961): 68; Alan Pryce-Jones, "Alan Pryce-Jones at the Theatre" *Theatre Arts* 45 (May, 1961): 56; Harold Hobson, "Theatre," *Sunday Times* (London), 29 October 1961; Eric Keown, "At the Play," *Punch*, 1 November 1961, 657; Charles Marowitz, "Albee Makes the English Scene," *Village Voice*, 9 November 1961; Roger Gellert, "Albee et al." *New Statesman* 3 November 1961, 667.

because both used playfully inverted clichés, but he praised Albee's ability to render a convincingly American rendition. Esslin characterized Albee's dialogue as having "the oily glibness and sentimentality of the American cliché" and pointed out that it was as distinctive as the "flat, repetitive obtuseness of Pinter's English nonsense dialogue."⁵² Thus, though the absurdist idiom was the same, Esslin showed that it took on a different flavor not only from writer to writer but from nation to nation.

The early 1960's saw the expansion of the critical debate over the nature of the Theater of the Absurd. Almost a decade after *Waiting For Godot*, the new convention remained unfamiliar, though it had acquired a recognizable label with Esslin's 1961 book. Audiences and critics were looking for signs of stability. Regarding the permanence of the new convention Faubion Bowers held that the most probing writing of the day came from the new playwrights who "'stretch' possibility in order to see how far it can go" and ask important questions about meaning, truth and illusion even when "nothing happens, nobody arrives, with no beginnings, no ends, no climaxes." Bowers singled out Albee's use of language in *The American Dream* as an illustration of polite conversation turned upside down and inside out, as for example, when Mrs. Barker arrives and is asked matter of factly, "Are you sure you're comfortable? Won't you take off your dress?"(79) Bowers applauded Albee's intellectual challenge, saying the "play's perversity is in hearing all the things we accept without thinking distorted until we have to think about how distorted they are when we speak them boldfaced." Echoing this insight, Wallace Gray noted that incongruity is a common comedic device which the absurdist use but certainly did not invent. Nevertheless, *The American Dream* demonstrated distortionist dialogue in a surrealist vein reminiscent of Dali and thus makes visible emotions that are not readily "accessible to verbal explication." At the same time, the distortion and exaggeration retain

⁵² Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 226-27.

a recognizable American flavor. As Michael Rutenberg saw, by connecting the satire to a technique of the ancients that shared the absurdities of surrealism. When Grandma divulges the fate of the adopted child, its castration and dismemberment, Albee follows the method of the Greek playwrights who did not show violence on stage but reported or implied the horror. Albee followed up each account of violence with a comic line that amplified its cruelty. Thus, the use of clichés such as "Cried its heart out!" took on a shockingly literal quality leading the audience to expect the worst. Rutenberg assumed that the overall effect was probably offensive to some members of the audience as a "stinging surrealistic accusation thrust at American parenthood."⁵³ The question was whether Albee intended his play as an unequivocal indictment of a specific generation or, as his Preface to the play seemed to indicate, of American post-war society as a whole.⁵⁴

Richard Amacher further explored this question and the distinctly American caste of Albee's absurdism. His discussion of *The American Dream* emphasized the social satire of its language and itemized ten false values of American society that Albee targeted. These were: mistreatment of the elderly; the importance of stereotypical masculine virtues; power and sex as substitutes for love; the importance of physical appearance and fitness; the importance of wealth; upward mobility and the exaggerated value of television. According to Amacher, Albee assigned these vices to the weakness of Mommy and Daddy's affluence, while Grandma represented a sturdier era and no nonsense pioneer stock. The treatment of the Grandma character in several Albee plays has been used as evidence not just of Albee's preference for the company of his grandmother over his

⁵³ Faubion Bowers, "Theatre of the Absurd: *it is here to stay*," *Theatre Arts*, 46 (November 1962): 23-24, 65; Wallace Gray, "The Uses of Incongruity," *Educational Theater Journal* 15 (December 1963): 347; Michael Rutenberg, *Edward Albee: Playwright In Protest*, 72-73 This idea elaborated upon the point made much earlier by Whitney Balliet, "Empress of the Blues," *New Yorker* 11 March 1961, 114.

⁵⁴ Albee, Preface, *The American Dream and The Zoo Story*, 53-54.

parents, but of the hardy practicality she represented and that he he assumed represented a classic American attitude.⁵⁵

By 1962, Edward Albee was a prize winning and prolific playwright with five plays being produced Off Broadway, in Summer stock and on college campuses. His rapid rise, however, could not offset doubts, especially among the critics, that his talent was limited to one act plays. His plays were seen as inspired takes on various European absurdists, but there was a strong suspicion that he was incapable of sustaining a conventional three act play. The speculation abruptly ended in 1962 with the opening of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at the Billy Rose Theater on Broadway.

Virginia Woolf consists of three acts, the first called "Fun and Games", the second, "Walpurgisnacht" and the third was "The Exorcism".⁵⁶ The play features four characters, made up of two married couples. George and Martha are middle-aged and Nick and Honey are younger. George is described as a thin man of 46 with graying hair, his wife is "A large boisterous woman, 52, looking somewhat younger. Ample, but not fleshy." Nick, 30, is blond, handsome, and his 26 year old wife, Honey, is small, blond and nondescript. All the action takes place in the living room of a house on a New England college campus in the course of one late Saturday night.

The curtain goes up on the darkened living room and the audience hears a crash against the front door. Martha is laughing as she and George enter the room and switch on the lights. It is 2 a.m. and they are returning from a faculty social, hosted by Martha's father, the college president. Despite the hour, Martha announces that she has invited

⁵⁵ Richard Amacher, *Edward Albee* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1968), 42-45.

⁵⁶ The following description draws on Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: Atheneum, 1962) I have used this the original published edition throughout. Direct quotes, cited parenthetically in the text refer to this edition. The original working title of the play was *The Exorcism*, later relegated to the title of the third act. Albee got the idea for the title of *Virginia Woolf* from a question scrawled on a mirror in Greenwich Village bar. Character descriptions are taken from page 1.

another young couple. Startled, George asks who they could possibly be entertaining so late. Martha replies that it is a new professor and his wife, "Because Daddy said we should be nice to them, that's why."(10) George looks resentful, but Martha, who thinks herself very clever sings, "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf?"(12) Martha becomes louder and when George refuses to applaud, Martha turns insulting. They trade jibes about her age, his thinning hair, her appetite for drink and his alleged timidity. The repartee is sometimes witty, more often prosaic, but apparently a familiar habit. The insults rise to a crescendo, then sputter out amid hints about "the kid," whom George warns Martha not to mention to the guests.

The doorbell rings. With the arrival of the guests, the play enters a new phase. Nick and Honey sense the tension, immediately regretting their decision to come. Martha ignores their scruples and insists, "Hey, *kids* . . . sit down."(21) While they make small talk and fix drinks, George makes sarcastic remarks about Martha and acidly mimics Honey's pleasantries, which puts Nick on his guard. The conversation turns to the party and the President who is admired by all, except George. It is evident that his life has been controlled by his position as the President's son-in-law. Martha takes Honey on a tour of the house, leaving Nick and George alone.

George and Nick share another drink, and George irritates Nick by baiting him with word games. Nick suspects that his words will be only be twisted and so he declines to play. Nick assures George that he and Honey will leave just as soon as the women return. With questions calculated to draw a maximum of information, George discovers that Nick will be in the Biology department, and that he and Honey have no children because they have deferred starting a family until they get settled. George observes bitterly that they may soon feel more than settled since Martha's father expects unceasing loyalty. "Martha's father expects his . . . staff . . . to cling to the walls of this place, like the ivy."(41) George ruefully confides that though he may look old enough to be the Chairman of the History Department, he is not. During the war he held the post

temporarily, but was replaced as soon as the soldier professors returned. He predicts that when Nick is in his forties, but looks fiftyish, he will run Biology and jokes that "Musical beds is the faculty sport around here." (34) George plays the role of elder, world-weary and cynical, creating a marked contrast to Nick, the vital young biologist who symbolizes the future. George casually acknowledges that genetics is a subject he finds suspect, yet he also admits that history is an even more disappointing discipline.

Honey returns, but Martha is changing clothes, which seems to irritate George. Feeling awkward, Honey tries to change the subject, inadvertently launches the first salvo of the evening when she says cheerily, "I didn't know until just a minute ago that you had a son." George is stunned, as the stage directions emphasize: "(Wheeling, as if struck from behind.) WHAT?" (44) He mutters a warning to Martha just as she enters dressed in an outfit that emphasizes her voluptuousness. Nick admires and Honey disapproves as Martha becomes increasingly flirtatious when the conversation turns to Nick's academic and athletic accomplishments, among them boxing. Martha relates an anecdote of her own, recounting how she knocked George down in front of his colleagues during one of her father's backyard fitness exercises. Clearly seething, George goes out and returns with a shortened shotgun aimed at the back of Martha's head. When he pulls the trigger, it pops and a Japanese parasol emerges from the barrel of the gun. The guests scream and laugh in a mixture of horror and relief. Martha, sexually excited by the incident, flirts with George who brushes her off in retaliation for earlier mistreatment.

The atmosphere relaxes and Nick's occupation becomes the next subject of discussion. George informs Martha that Nick is a biologist probably involved in genetic engineering, a subject with science fiction possibilities. Martha is impressed with the notion of a race of superior looking men, while Honey, rapidly becoming inebriated, is puzzled to hear of this aspect of her husband's work. Nick gets defensive when George begins to lecture against unfettered science and the homogenization of the human species. Deploing the idea that diversity and unpredictability will be gone, George declares that he

for one will oppose the inevitable tide of science. In disgust, Nick sarcastically rejects George's assertions and Honey, shocked by the sexual language being bandied about, innocently attempts to change the subject. She asks Martha when their son, whose birthday is tomorrow, is coming home. George too wants to know but Martha, who tries to deflect it, regrets that she mentioned the subject. When George and Martha begin to raise issues of conception and paternity, the guests are shocked by their frankness. To diffuse the situation George declares "but the one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of is my partnership, my chromosomological partnership in the . . . creation of our . . . blond-eyed, blue-haired . . . son."(72)

The air appears cleared and conversation turns again to Martha's father. While George has gone to get more liquor, Martha accuses George of hating her father for planning his life. George was supposed to advance from History Chairman to the Presidency when the old man retired. George reenters the room in time to hear Martha say that her father had changed his mind several years after their marriage and had concluded that (in Martha's words) "Georgie-boy didn't have the *stuff* . . . that he didn't have it in him!"(84) George warns Martha to stop and breaks the bottle he is holding just as she characterizes him "A great . . . big . . . fat . . . FLOP!"(84) As Martha continues to verbally torment him, George and Honey, who is very drunk by this time, attempt to drown her out singing "Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf"(85) until Honey bolts from the room to vomit. Nick and Martha follow her, leaving George alone on stage and the first act ends.

The second act, Walpurgisnacht, is named for the eve of May 1 when according to German legend, devils made merry. The scene opens with Nick mildly assuring George that Martha is ministering to Honey and coffee is being readied. Nick complains to George that he and Martha ought to save their mutual flagellation until they are alone. George claims that he doesn't enjoy being ridiculed in front of strangers and counters that Nick's callous lack of sympathy isn't attractive either. George offers Nick another drink

and they drop the subject. Referring to her condition, Nick acknowledges that Honey is not merely delicate, but prone to vomiting. In fact, he admits that he had married her because of an hysterical pregnancy. Having shared this intimate revelation, George relates a story of a friend at school who had ended up in a mental institution for accidentally killing both of his parents. At the end of the story, both men seem to have developed a temporary truce, but soon resort to sarcasm and one-upmanship as they compare notes on marriage. They both grant that they have accommodated themselves to disappointing marriages, yet each wishes to remain unconnected and self sufficient. At one point Nick exclaims, "Don't try to put me in the same class with you!"(102) Nick discloses that Honey has an inheritance and George too claims that Martha has inherited money from her father's second wife. Nick, wary of George by now, doesn't necessarily believe this tale, and George admits that he is right to beware. George also admits that he has been fishing into Nick's personal history, "because you represent a direct and pertinent threat to my livelihood, and I want to get the goods on you."(111) Nick, becoming insolent, agrees with George that he will do very well at the university, boasting that he will use his wits to become indispensable and sleep with as many faculty wives as necessary. Said in jest, Nick suspects that George thinks he is serious and stops himself. George observes that it may scare him to realize it, but Nick is capable of such behavior and should consider himself warned about the campus quicksand. Nick rejects George's advice, claiming that he can look after himself.

The two women return, Honey looking pale and shaky and Martha anxious to continue her verbal fencing. In discussing their son, George and Martha hint at an abnormal relationship for which each blames the other. Ignoring Nick's caution, Honey requests more brandy and demands they all dance. Soon Martha is dancing erotically with Nick, telling him about George's novel which her father had forbidden him to publish. It told the story of a young boy who had killed both his parents and made it look like an accident. George begs Martha to stop, but she goes on. When the old man demanded

that he drop the book, George claimed that it was not fiction, but his own autobiography. George is enraged by Martha's deliberate betrayal and plots his revenge.

George then announces that the first game—Humiliate the Host—is over. The second game, Hump the Hostess, will have to be deferred. The next game of the evening will be Get the Guests. George will recount the plot of his second novel based on the adventures of a young Midwestern couple. He presses forward with a thinly veiled description of Nick and Honey's life in intimate detail. Honey is still drunk enough not to recognize the characters, but Nick catches on almost immediately and demands that George stop. Reveling in his sudden power, George even shocks Martha as he exposes Honey's hysterical pregnancy just as Honey recognizes herself in the story. In horror at Nick's betrayal, she screams and runs out, sick again. Nick, shaking with anger, tells George that his game was cruel and vicious but George calmly points out Nick's guilt as well as his own selfish reaction to his wife's humiliation.

When they are alone, Martha reviles George for going too far, but George counters that the performance was all for her. He thought it would appeal to her lust for blood, and reminds her that she had humiliated him all evening. Martha claims that their relationship thrives on such violence but that it was wrong to inflict it on others. This verbal assault rises to a climax as they charge each other with insanity and agree that their relationship has disintegrated and they are committed to total war against each other.

Nick returns and fixes himself a drink. While George goes out with the ice bucket, Martha moves beyond flirtation and despite Nick's worry that George could return any moment, Martha and he are soon in an intimate embrace. George, sees them from the doorway, and retreats. Announcing himself by singing, he acts casually, pours drinks, and then takes up a book. Martha, infuriated that she is being ignored by George, kisses Nick. Further goading George, Martha announces that she is kissing one of the guests, but George responds, "Oh, that's nice. Which one?"(170) Martha sends Nick to wait for her in the kitchen, then turns on George promising to seduce Nick, but George feigns

indifference and Martha leaves the room. Once alone, George continues his charade briefly, then his suppressed anger explodes as he hurls his book at the door chimes on the wall. Immediately Honey appears, still drunk and disoriented; half asleep, she admits she doesn't want any children, that she fears pain. George's attention is riveted to her outburst and Honey suddenly wakes. Preoccupied with the sounds of laughter coming from the kitchen, George threatens to tell Honey what is going on. Just then, however, Honey reminds him that the doorbell rang, and he is struck by an idea that will guarantee his revenge. He will tell Martha that word has just come that their son is dead. Honey, convinced that it is true, weeps as the curtain falls on Act two.

Act three opens with Martha alone on-stage, demanding to know where everyone has gone. In her soliloquy Martha confides that she carries a sadness deep within, something that she shares with George. Nick comes in and reports that Honey is still lying on the floor of the bathroom. It is apparent that their tryst was abbreviated due to Nick's intoxication. Martha denounces him as "a flop" but then confesses that in spite of her reputation as seductress, the truth is shabbier. She points out that men usually need to be drinking to work up the courage to go to bed with her. Then to Nick's total disbelief, Martha swears that George is the only man who has ever made her really happy in spite of her wish to be miserable. He has had the ability to keep up with her games, to tolerate her derision and "who has made the hideous, the hurting, the insulting mistake of loving me and must be punished for it."(191) Nick not only doesn't believe Martha, he expresses contempt for George as the spineless creature Martha has labeled him.

The door chimes interrupt them and George walks in with a bouquet of snapdragons meant, he declares, for the imminent birthday celebrations of their son. George and Martha begin to pick at each other over trifles and George attempts to decipher her allusions to Nick as the houseboy. He doubts there was a seduction, and when Nick pleads with Martha to withdraw the label, George says, "Someone's lying around here; someone isn't playing the game straight."(201) In one of the most telling

lines of the play, Martha counters, "Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference." to which George promptly responds, "No; but we must carry on as though we did." (202)

Soon George announces that the final game of the evening is about to begin, one called Bringing Up Baby and he demands that Nick fetch Honey from the lavatory. When Nick leaves, Martha appears suddenly vulnerable and pleads with George not to proceed with the game. Determined, George seems sympathetic but then grabs her by the hair and challenges her to get angry and ready for battle. Martha rises to the occasion and when the guests return, at George's prompting she begins to recite the story of their son. Martha, in a sort of trance, describes his birth, his eyes, his hair, his toys and even his bedroom. She details his illnesses and accidents, his nightmares, his beauty and his wisdom. Martha's revelations sound so nurturing, so maternal that suddenly Honey reverses herself and declares, "I want a child." To which George caustically inquires, "On principle?" (223) Martha, hardly listening, says the child's perfection had been undermined by George's weakness. George, expecting the customary litany against him, is disappointed when Martha ends the account with their son away at college and "He is fine. Everything is fine." (224) George goads Martha into an argument over which parent was more loved, but in the midst of this diatribe, Honey grows hysterical and demands they stop as she believes they are talking about their dead child. This provides George the opportunity to tell Martha his story about the telegram announcing the death of their son. At first Nick and Honey are stupefied by the reactions of both parents. Nick is especially confused by Martha's incoherent reaction. The stage directions describe her as "quivering with rage and loss" as she says "NO! NO! YOU CANNOT DO THAT! YOU CAN'T DECIDE THAT FOR YOURSELF! I WILL NOT LET YOU DO THAT!" (232) The guests quickly realize that George and Martha are communicating on a private level. Only gradually do they realize that this child with its intimate personal history is a fiction, a figment of the imaginations of their hosts. Martha, still denying the inevitable begs to

know why George has committed this annihilation. George explains that it is because Martha had broken their rule by mentioning their son to Honey, an outsider. The guests quickly depart leaving their hosts to the privacy of their grief, and the realization that for the rest of their lives there will be just the two of them, as, of course, there had always been.

Albee's move to Broadway was interpreted by some followers as a betrayal of the serious values which Off-Broadway represented. There were those, including the play's director, Alan Schneider, who had urged Albee not to take the risk with this, his first full-length play, since his reputation had been made in the little theaters of Off-Broadway. Nevertheless, Albee insisted on a Broadway production. The financial and critical risks were great because the play contained many of the attributes of the experimental plays of Off-Broadway. These included the "single claustrophobic set, the excoriating language, the disconcerting emotional and theatrical power, [that] were remote from the usually bland products of the Great White Way."⁵⁷ As insurance for the play, however, the very clever producer, Billy Rose in whose play it would appear lowered ticket prices for the show in previews which helped its public relations image. Even so, it had to earn its reputation and it very quickly did.⁵⁸

Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf? opened at the Billy Rose Theater in New York City on October 13, 1962, it created a sensation. Critics and audiences were drained by its sustained psychological tension and the depth of passion it plumbed. The notices from the major critics were positive, and audiences flocked to see it. Later, criticism would be divided but the general impression was that Albee had scored a major success. Walter

⁵⁷ C.W.E. Bigsby, "Introduction," in *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Bigsby, 5.

⁵⁸ "Billy Rose and *Virginia Woolf*" *Theatre Arts*, 46 (November 1962):8.

Kerr admired the "first two stinging acts" but found the sentimental discussion of the son in the third act inappropriate. He summarized it as "a horror play written by a humorist." John McClain called the play compelling and predicted that Albee "will become one of our major dramatists, if he doesn't qualify on the basis of this one alone." Howard Taubman agreed that Albee had the potential to become a major playwright. Seeing *Virginia Woolf* as a "lament over man's incapacity to arrange his environment or private life so as to inhibit his self-destructive compulsions." Richard Cooke cited the dialogue for special praise though he found the ending a disappointment. Michael Smith in the new *Village Voice*, wrote that *Virginia Woolf* represented a different kind of play despite its seemingly conventional aspects. In a glowing tribute, Smith said, "Albee has found fire in the soggy ashes of naturalism" issuing into a new stylistic technique that would constitute "the birth of a contemporary American theatre."⁵⁹

Those who criticized the play did so not on the basis of analysis but as a reaction of shock and impatience. John Chapman called the play "a calculated exercise in depraved obscenity." Pointing out that women outnumbered men in the audience, Chapman claimed that women seemed to be attracted to the abundant profanity. The play was faulted by other critics for being too long and repetitious, running three and a half hours. *Time* saw the play as "superficially Freudian" and a letter to the *New York Times* suggested that the play was really "about male homosexuals," and that Albee's attribution of "the vicious, waspish, gratuitous destructiveness of people living in special circumstances to all people" undermined the entire play.⁶⁰

⁵⁹ Walter Kerr, "First Night Report," *New York Herald Tribune*, 15 October 1962; John McClain, "A Real Big One Has Arrived," *New York Journal-American*, 15 October 1962; Howard Taubman, "The Theater: Albee's *Who's Afraid*," *New York Times*, 15 October 1962; Michael Smith, "Theatre Uptown: A New Kind of Play," *Village Voice* 18 October 1962.

⁶⁰ John Chapman, "For Dirty-Minded Women Only," *New York Sunday News*, 21 October 1962; "In the Drama Mailbag," a letter from Jo Coudert, *New York Times*, 2 December 1962. This letter suggested a homosexual interpretation that Albee denied in numerous interviews. He has consistently opposed single sex productions of the play and withheld his permission.

Such petty accusations often distracted critics from consideration of the larger questions within the play. The most nagging reservation centered upon the credibility of the imaginary son, an issue that was taken up by the critics who wrote for the weeklies and later for the drama journals. Some saw the destruction of the imaginary child as an artificial device or *deus ex machina* to end the play. Others thought the death of the fantasy child allowed the play to end dubiously. Robert Brustein, for example, thought "the play collapses at its moment of climax," because Albee prevailed upon the audience to accept a moment of truth after an entire play built on theatrical illusions. Harold Clurman concurred in the *Nation*. Clurman thought that there were scenes of love-hate which the audience recognized while the conclusion was embarrassingly unbelievable. Alfred Chester in *Commentary* contended that the son may have been the result of self deception, but the play remained unconvincing because of the impossibility "that human beings may be sustained by illusions they know to be such." In a later interview, Albee himself agreed that the couple were "not self-deluding people by the end. They're not even self-deluding people at the beginning of the play. They are always totally aware that they are dealing with a myth not reality." Albee maintained that the critic's argument that the illusory child was inessential to the play was, from the author's point of view, incorrect.⁶¹

The controversy continued to bubble around *Virginia Woolf*, which kept Albee's name in the news. In May 1963, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was nominated for a Pulitzer Prize but the nomination was rejected because one member of the advisory board found it offensive. Although John Gassner and John Mason Brown both resigned from the board in protest, no Pulitzer was given for drama that year. Gassner and Brown were well established critics and their support of the play in the face of controversy was a tribute to

⁶¹ Robert Brustein, "Albee and the Medusa Head," *New Republic* 3 November 1962, 30; Alfred Chester, "Edward Albee: Red Herrings and White Sharks," *Commentary* April, 1963, 296; Harold Clurman, "Theatre," *Nation* 27 October 1962, 273-274; Edward Albee, "Two Interviews With Edward Albee," interview by Michael Rutenberg, *Edward Albee: Playwright In Protest*, 230.

Albee's talent and a benefit to his growing reputation. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* had already been awarded the New York Drama Critics' Circle Award for best play and had garnered five Tony awards for best play, best actor (Arthur Hill), best actress (Uta Hagen), best director (Alan Schneider) and best producers (Richard Barr and Clinton Wilder) of the 1962-1963 Broadway season. Later that summer, Albee won the Foreign Press Association of New York Award for *Virginia Woolf* as he had for *The American Dream* the previous year. This was a notable event because Albee was the first playwright ever to receive this award twice.⁶² Meanwhile foreign productions were being mounted. In October, Ingmar Bergman opened a production of *Virginia Woolf* in Sweden. Boleslaw Barlog directed it in Berlin, and Franco Zeffereilli known primarily as a film director, staged the play in Rome. A South African production was proposed and Albee insisted that audiences be integrated. In the first performances, the director and star Jerome Kilty attributed the small number of nonwhites in the audiences to their inability to afford the ticket price. Later when production was stalled by government censors, the director suggested to the *New York Times* that the ban on performances may have been caused by the government's resistance to integration rather than quibbles over its offensive language or morality.⁶³

Albee's celebrity created unpredicted benefits for The Theater of the Absurd. When *Virginia Woolf* was set to open in Boston in September 1963, the censor required cuts. Albee was accused of capitulation when he left town before the opening, thereby handing over to his producer the final decision about changes. Albee's implicit sanction of

⁶² Paul Gardner, "Virginia Woolf Honored," *New York Times* 8 July 1963; "Virginia Woolf Is Named Best Play of Year," *New York Times*, 29 April 1963.

⁶³ "Albee Play Divides Stockholm Critics," *New York Times* 6 October 1963; "Virginia Woolf in Rome," *New York Times* 9 November 1963; "Albee Play Seen By Few Africans," *New York Times*, 24 September 1963; "Kilty Believes Albee Stand On Integration Causes Ban," *New York Times*, 4 October 1963.

any censorship was seen by *Boston Globe* critic Kevin Kelly as a lack of principle.⁶⁴ Nonetheless, this incident represented a virtual last gasp for established codes of theatrical expression. As in Pinter's England, openness to controversial subjects increased as the public taste responded to the new theater. Letters to editors about *Virginia Woolf* suggested that the new theater was not only viable, but that a stimulating play could get audiences thinking and talking. The field of discussion broadened as publicity mounted in preparation for the Hollywood filming of *Virginia Woolf*. Even the commercialism of Hollywood and the employment of stars like Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton, symbols at the time of unrepentent moral decadence, could not obscure the wider importance of the ideas of the play. The materialism, conformity and isolation which Albee wished to condemn in his drama became part of the interviews and press reports documenting the movie. These issues also shadowed Albee along the path of his growing celebrity.

Almost immediately academic journals began to analyze *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* The debate over the significance of the illusory child continued in John Gassner's premised on the idea that the couple's childlessness appeared to be an unconvincing motive for the vehemence of George and Martha's attacks on one another. However, justification could be found, Gassner said, "if one acknowledges a latency of meaning in the play." The root of the couple's problem lay in their loneliness and dependency which led them to savage each other in order to avoid the darker terror—an awareness of "the emptiness of their being". Gassner concluded that the relationship should be termed "*existential*" and that the play was "a drama of the 'absurd' (which is not at all the same thing as 'an absurd drama') in which cause and effect *are* disproportionate." In contrast, Richard Schechner, editor of the *Tulane Drama Review* called Albee dishonest, castigating *Who's Afraid of*

⁶⁴ Kevin Kelly, "Virginia Woolf Gulps Her Sacrilege: Mr. Albee and The City Censor," *The Boston Globe*, 8 September 1963.

Virginia Woolf? as "a tragedy which is bad theatre, bad literature, bad taste." The play's foul language and dirty jokes had contributed to its popularity but what made it dangerous was its false message that allowed Americans to think of themselves as decadent and to resort to escapism and self-pity: "There is no real, hard bedrock of suffering in *Virginia Woolf*—it is all illusory, depending upon a 'child' who was never born: a gimmick, a trick, a trap." Schechner proclaimed that he was weary of play-long 'metaphors' which lack philosophical, psychological and poetic validity: "I'm tired of plays that are badly plotted and turgidly written being excused by such palaver as 'organic unity' or 'inner form.'"⁶⁵

Schechner's reaction mirrored the offended sensibilities of critics in religious periodicals but met an immediate response in his own journal. Alan Schneider, the director of *Virginia Woolf* replying in the same issue of the journal, contended that Schechner seemed to mistake the messenger for the message. Albee was not responsible for the vices of society, but rather than obscure those vices through escapism and illusion, he was determined to expose them. Moreover, Schneider said, "If the child in *Virginia Woolf* is merely a 'gimmick' then so is the wild duck, the cherry orchard, that streetcar with the special name, even our old elusive friend Godot." Because Albee was not the first to explore the theme of reality and illusion, it was more vital to look at his method. According to Schneider Albee's most salient dramatic contributions were a sense of "reality based on a classic simplicity, a contemporary feeling unmatched in our theatre, a musical economy—in spite of its length—and an ability to hold and shatter his audience." Such a loyal defense, of course, did not make the negative essays suddenly decline in number or vehemence. On the contrary, as prizes were collected and glowing terms attached to Albee's name, there seemed to be more discussion of his abilities and significance. As with Pinter, the early estimates of his merit soon turned to inflated claims

⁶⁵John Gassner, "Broadway In Review," *Educational Theatre Journal* 15 (March 1963): 79; Richard Schechner, "Who's Afraid of Edward Albee?" *Tulane Drama Review* 7 (Spring 1963):8.

of genius and, almost simultaneously an intensified search for flaws and inconsistencies. These debates featured Albee's own intellectually exciting and tenacious defense of his work, thus fanning the flames of indignation on all sides.⁶⁶

Early scholarly essays on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* illustrated this conflict and thus helped to further define the Theater of the Absurd. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* was frequently compared with the later O'Neill plays, especially *A Long Day's Journey Into Night* because both plays turned on exposure of the secret guilts and betrayals of intimate family life.⁶⁷ Essayist Diana Trilling, questioning that association, also found the play unrepresentative of the reality of university life as she had known it. Trilling wrote that *Virginia Woolf* was not the truth serum that Albee had hoped it would be, because audiences did not automatically relate to the characters. George and Martha's witty repartee and their discussions of modern pessimistic elitist literature did prove their allegiance to the university culture. However, middle class audiences observing the troubled lives of these characters, could feel smug, even if intellectually inferior. The college professor's problems were not the audiences' problems. Relieved of guilt by association with the characters, audiences were reassured and not disturbed as they had been by *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*, where the troubled family could be anybody's.⁶⁸ Trilling implied that, despite its popularity, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* would never achieve the universality of O'Neill's drama.

Trilling's essay reveals an inherently modernist critical approach that compares Albee to O'Neill using standards of realism appropriate to O'Neill, but not to Albee.

⁶⁶ Alan Schneider, "Why So Afraid?" *Tulane Drama Review* 7 (Spring, 1963):11.

⁶⁷ See for example Robert Brustein, "Albee and the Medusa-Head," *New Republic*, 3 November 1962, 29-30; John Gassner, "Broadway In Review," *Educational Theatre Journal* 15 (March 1963):77-80; "Game of Truth," *Newsweek* 29 November 1962, 52-53.

⁶⁸ Diana Trilling, "The Riddle of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" in *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C. W. E. Bigsby, 80-88.

Trilling assumes that Albee's intention was to write a play with characters who resemble the audience or who are familiar enough to arouse their sympathy. This presupposes for Albee the conventions that had framed the plays of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller. Albee, however, had a more inclusive definition of realism, suggesting the self-consciousness of postmodernism.

Because *Virginia Woolf* seemed less absurdist than Albee's previous plays, critics were puzzled about the development of his style. Martin Esslin speculated that Albee seemed to be moving "from the near-pastiche of Ionesco to a style outwardly more realistic, but charged with all the obsessive and grotesque over-and undertones of the Absurd." Others also noted Albee's ability to combine two traditions. Henry Knepler discussed Albee's integration of the absurdist tradition into the American theatrical tradition. Albee used the themes and methods of the absurdists such as human isolation and anguish but placed these themes within a distinctly American and modern Freudian style emphasizing sexuality and family ties. C.W.E. Bigsby, though agreeing with John Gassner's understanding of Albee's style as fundamentally naturalistic, suggested that Albee's realism was not tied to exact replication on the stage because Albee was "not so much concerned with maintaining a precision of appearance as with seizing an essential reality."⁶⁹ The nature of that reality caused the most discussion among scholars, for they were anxious to either tie Albee to the Theater of the Absurd, or to establish a new category in which to place him. They also wanted to uncover the full meaning in the play in order to Albee's potential and predict his significance.

The question of whether Albee was an absurdist writer continued to be debated throughout the 1960's. As we have noted, C.W.E. Bigsby claimed that Albee's vision

⁶⁹ Martin Esslin, "Brecht, the Absurd and the Future," *Tulane Drama Review* 7 (Summer, 1963): 51; Henry Knepler, "Edward Albee; Conflict of Tradition," *Modern Drama* (10 December 1967): 274-279; C. W. E. Bigsby, "Edward Albee," chap. in *Confrontation and Commitment, A Study of Contemporary American Drama, 1959-1966* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1967), 87.

differed from the vision of writers like Ionesco and Beckett and took exception to Albee's being labeled an absurdist by Esslin. Bigsby, like Kenneth Tynan, held that writers like Ionesco were anti-humanist, noting that the distinction between Albee and the European absurdists lay in Albee's message which was ultimately life affirming rather than despairing. Albee's humanism was the humanism of Sartre, who differentiated between mere existence and the meaning to be derived from existence. This humanism recognizes that humans in their consciousness of self should see contingency not as "a debilitating force but the confirmation of freedom." As Sartre wrote in *Existentialism and Humanism* meaning is contingent upon freedom of choice and the responsibility it entails. Bigsby contended that "the absurd for Sartre and Albee alike, lies not in man's situation but rather in the ridiculous prospect of his surrendering freedom and thus identity to a systematized conformity."⁷⁰ Thus, Albee's optimism came from his embrace of freedom and the act of becoming, not simply from a naïve American innocence.

Bigsby's analysis continued by characterizing *Virginia Woolf* as a milestone in American drama because it was the first full-length play that avowed the basic absurdist concepts but "formulates a response which transcends at once both despair and casual resolution." The play traces how the four characters withdraw from reality and pass through a Faustian series of games and stages of sensuality that go from inebriation to sexual abandon. Bigsby explains, "The retreat into illusion which seems to provide an alternative to a harsh existence is not, however, an attractive alternative. For Albee points out that far from facilitating human contact, illusions alienate individuals from one another and serve to emphasize their separation." George and Martha's real problem was existential. It was not their myth making per se, but their inability to confront the anguish of existence without resorting to the consolation that their illusion provided. According to Bigsby, the characters manifested their inability to deal with reality by playing games,

⁷⁰ Bigsby, "Introduction," *Confrontation*, xviii-xix.

speaking in riddles and singing "adult" nursery rhymes. They are undeveloped and undisciplined, childlike in both language and actions. Albee is convinced that far from serving as mere distractions, illusions anesthetize and distort perception.⁷¹

Bigsby further argued that Albee was anxious to strip away the illusions that allow people to evade the confrontation with the reality that existentialist philosophy urges on them. George and Martha can only gain maturity and communion through the ritual exorcism of their illusion and this takes place in the final act when the child is uncreated in the presence of Nick and Honey. After ridding themselves of the illusion, George and Martha seem to acknowledge their shared responsibility for his creation when they speak the same line to Nick's question, "You couldn't have . . . any?" Almost simultaneously they say, "*We* couldn't." (238). With this confession of their shared sterility, Albee hints that real contact may now begin since the illusion that precluded their acting authentically has been destroyed. Bigsby summarizes: "Denied even the vicarious survival implied by children, they have to settle for the irreducible reality of an existence whose meaning has to be generated by actions taken and relationships forged." This redemption is by no means assured, however, by the sacrifice of the son. It may be that the epiphanic moment that holds open the possibility of an authentic existence, but as Bigsby cautions, George and Martha may simply begin the cycle of self-deception all over again.⁷²

In a more recent study, C.W.E. Bigsby connects *Virginia Woolf* to later changes in Edward Albee's work. In the 1960's, Albee "was a liberal voice recalling the individual to

⁷¹ Bigsby, "Edward Albee," *Confrontation*, 80-81, 86; See also John Gassner, "Broadway In Review" *Educational Theatre Journal* 15 (March, 1963): 77-80. Further support comes from Matthew Roudané who argues that *Virginia Woolf* is an affirmative play despite its reputation. Albee was conscious of the need for his characters to get down to the marrow (borrowing George's term from Act Three) "of perception and experience" and to confront the void in order to begin to give meaning to their lives. Albee saw the acceptance of human contingency as the first step toward ultimate freedom and meaning. Matthew Roudané, "Toward the Marrow," chap. in *Understanding Edward Albee*, (University of South Carolina Press, 1987), 81.

⁷² Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction*, vol. 2, 270, 271.

his moral and even spiritual responsibility. Fundamentally that remains his stance but his confidence has slowly been eroded, his sense of human potential qualified by the evidence of further decline. . . . His, like Beckett's, has become an entropic art, a reflection and ironic presentation of the world". Albee's later work, by contrast, displayed the breakdown of articulation and character the "verbal oratorios of the early plays, the splendid articulateness, has given way to fragmented speeches," This breakdown in the usefulness of language, Bigsby points out, can be seen in *Virginia Woolf*. The play begins with a deluge of words and ends with a thin trickle. The word games, euphemisms, eloquent descriptions give way to silences and monosyllables as the possibility of true communication creeps nearer. That is, Albee shows the deceptiveness of language as it obscures meaning, amplifying confusion rather than clarifying it. Bigsby adds that language was not the only obstacle to consciousness. History and science, as represented by George and Nick, are "forms of evasion, rationalizations. They are fictions, ways of structuring the world and experience in such a way as to deny its contingent power."⁷³

The difficulty of true communication appeared not only on stage but also revealed itself between artist and audience. Bigsby alluded to this when he defined Albee as "a writer who distrusts not only the devalued language of public exchange but even his own articulateness."⁷⁴ In an interview in 1981, Albee was asked, "If language is unreliable, as you seem to indicate it is, is that trend a good thing or a dead end?" Acknowledging that silence alone is a dead end, Albee pointed out the importance of the interplay of sound and silence—our inheritance from the Greek dramatists, and from Chekov and Beckett. Albee said that for the playwright, "silence is merely another weapon of language." When the interviewer suggested that many of Albee's characters use language as a mask, Albee

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 9, 270.

⁷⁴ Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction*, vol 2, 270.

concluded. He saw his characters, like Pinter's, "Using it at great lengths to avoid communication."⁷⁵

Albee continued to be preoccupied with peeling away the layers of self deception and illusion that keep human beings from confronting existence. This confrontation was a necessary first step toward freedom and meaning, while the distractions and evasions had untold negative repercussions for the self and for society: "One of my concerns is that we do isolate ourselves and end up not participating in our own lives. . . . if we deny our social responsibilities long enough, we find we're no longer capable of doing anything when the time comes."⁷⁶

In various interviews Albee warned that this passivity can be extrapolated to the larger community and indeed the nation. George and Martha, he agreed, could be identified with the Washingtons and Nick with Nikita Krushchev, thus making *Virginia Woolf* a political allegory. In writing the play, Albee thought there "might be an allegory to be drawn, and have the fantasy child the revolutionary principles of this country that we haven't lived up to yet."⁷⁷ As a satire on politics and Cold War science in mid-twentieth century America *Virginia Woolf's* timeliness might condemn it to obsolescence in light of later developments. This has not happened because *Virginia Woolf* was not primarily a political satire but rather a classic satire (in the sense of Molière) with timeless themes of human behavior. Questions of revolutionary principles and ideological rubrics were relevant to the play but less significant than eternal questions of reality, illusion and the ramifications of being.

⁷⁵ Edward Albee, "An Interview With Edward Albee, March 18, 1981," interview by Charles S. Krohn and Julian N. Wasserman, *Edward Albee, An Interview and Essays*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman (Houston: University of St. Thomas, 1983), 18-19.

⁷⁶ Michael Billington, "Thoughts from a troubled American," *Manchester Guardian Weekly* 20 November 1994, 26.

⁷⁷ Edward Albee, "Two Interviews With Edward Albee," interview by Michael Rutenberg, in *Edward Albee: Playwright In Protest*, 230.

The measure of Albee's contribution to the theater is often taken in terms of this his most famous play, rather than the breadth of his oeuvre. This focus became apparent in 1990 when Albee staged a revival of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* which began in Los Angeles, ran four weeks in Houston, toured briefly in the U.S. and then played in Lithuania, and eventually in a turbulent Moscow. In an interview during rehearsals Albee reflecting on the central theme of the play said, "I find that self-deception leads not only to personal trouble but to political malaise and to social irresponsibility."⁷⁸ In Vilnius, the capital of Lithuania, the headline of the newspaper review read, "'Who's Afraid of the Tanks?'" Lithuanian audiences, recognizing that a painless solution to the quest for independence would be not forthcoming, were willing to confront the alarming reality of Soviet military intervention. As *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* has been performed over the years and around the world, it frequently bridged the gap between cultures as few other modern American plays have done.

Because *Virginia Woolf* was so successful and because Albee continued to defy easy categorization, there has been a continuous stream of essays, theses and dissertations and each new play stimulates more. Albee has continued to experiment with theatrical styles, while retaining an amazing thematic consistency. His preoccupations with family relationships, the limitations of language, the blind alley of self-deception and the layers of experience which make up the life of the individual continued to be woven into his plays and adaptations. These are themes have defined and challenged all absurdist playwrights.

Albee, like Beckett and Pinter, has been very determined to follow his own direction. To the popular lament that he has never duplicated the success of *Virginia Woolf*, Albee has replied that commercial success should not be confused with artistic success. In answer to those who find his later plays too obscure, Albee has rejected the

⁷⁸ Edward Albee, "Text, Subtext, and Performance: Edward Albee on directing *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*" interview by Rakesh Solomon, *Theatre Survey* 34 (November 1993): 101.

assumption "that experiencing a work of art shouldn't be any work, shouldn't be an experience of participation on the part of the audience." Finally, to those who complain that his works are grim and humorless, Albee responds, "But the function of art is to instruct us. To bring order. To think clearly. . . . I mean, no serious art that's come down through the centuries has been anything but critical and unpleasant ultimately." Inevitably, Albee will continue to inspire controversy particularly when he confronts critics, for he believes that they are not the final arbiters that they aspire to be. Rather, "the final determination of the value of a work of art is the opinion of an informed and educated people over a long period of time." Albee was nominated for a Pulitzer prize in 1963 for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, won in 1967 for *A Delicate Balance* and again in 1994 for *Three Tall Women*. Thus, with such an accumulation of well received work Edward Albee seems sure to receive the kind of "final determination" he finds persuasive.⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Louis Calta, "Albee Lectures Critics On Taste," *New York Times*, 13 March 1965; Don Shewey, "Edward Albee," *American Theatre* April 1992, 18.

CHAPTER VI

ABSURDISM AND DRAMA CRITICISM

The playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd opened up a Pandora's box of possibilities for the theater which, like related artistic disciplines, went through a period of frenzied activity in the 1960's. Following the lead of Beckett, Pinter and Albee, plays became more and more experimental. Among the most daring was English director Peter Brook's production of *Marat/Sade* (1964), featuring an Artaudian interpretation of Peter Weiss's play in which the Marquis de Sade presents a play for the inmates of the Charenton mental asylum. The inverted world of the madhouse with its blurred distinctions between audience and actors was provocative and disturbing.¹ Pioneer theatrical movements of the period included Julian Beck and Judith Malina's Living Theater which began in New York and moved to Europe, and Jerzy Grotowski's Laboratory Theater from Poland which toured Europe and America.² In the visual arts, performance art and Happenings were staged in galleries and in parks. Off-Broadway became more economically viable and Off-Off-Broadway was born. Audiences were shocked by the nudity in *Hair* (1968) and *Oh Calcutta* (1968) and the "concept musical"

¹ Christopher Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre, 1892-1992* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 126, 129-130.

² Grotowski's Polish Laboratory Theater, founded in 1960 and given research status in 1962, explored communication between actor and spectator. His theories seemed to parallel Artaud's, though he did not read *The Theater and its Double* until 1964. The Becks began their first experimental theater in 1948, and took inspiration from a variety of sources, beginning with Japanese Nōh theater and the medieval mystery plays, the Ubu plays of Jarry, and the surrealist plays of Strindberg, Stein and Picasso. Their theater, strongly influenced by Grotowski's work, was characterized by a use of dream, myth and ritual. Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre*, 2-3, 149-166, 181-192.

was introduced with *Cabaret* (1966). Based on Christopher Isherwood's *Good Bye to Berlin* (1939), *Cabaret* had a political flavor and served as a strategy to compete with more politically confrontational theater groups like Joseph Chaikin's Open Theater and Richard Schechner's Performance Group. Interestingly and in contrast, there were revivals of standard plays and musicals, both on Broadway and in the growing number of regional theaters.³

In Europe, the medieval mystery play cycles were restored, reflecting scholarly investigations into their origins and community interest, most notably in York, England. Greek plays such as *Oedipus Rex* (1967) were adapted to film, and the Royal Shakespeare Company filmed stage productions of the classics.⁴ Shakespeare was contemporized with modern dress as in the Richard Burton-John Gielgud production of *Hamlet* (1964) or adapted, as in Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead* (1966). Thus, in the 1960's one might find a 1928 musical like Jerome Kern's *Showboat* sharing the same season's bill with an avant-garde production of Arthur Kopit's *Oh Dad, Poor Dad, Mama's Locked You in the Closet and I'm Feeling So Bad* (1961). The increased theatrical activity of the early 1960's owed something to the legacy of stability and affluence of the 1950's in America and the recovery of the European economy, but it also reflected a synchronous artistic richness and restlessness that historians have yet to fully explain.

³ John Elsom, *Cold War Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 85-108; Joseph Chaikin, a member of the Living Theater, formed Open Theater in 1964 after the Beck's moved their company to Europe. The Open Theater used myth and ritual like the Living Theater, but was more overtly political. Richard Schechner claimed to be a follower of Grotowski, and aimed for theatrical purity. His production of *Dionysus in 69* (1968) which included the spectators in each performance was very ritualistic. It was meant to reveal theater as a process rather than as a production. Both groups were unstructured, giving the performers final control over the performance, although the Open Theater usually worked from an authored script. Innes, *Avant Garde Theatre*, 167-180.

⁴ The medieval mystery plays were religious plays rooted in the Easter service and the story of the resurrection of Jesus. For further discussion see pages 17 to 19 above. Regarding modern revivals, see John Wesley Harris, *Medieval Theatre In Context, An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1992.) and Glynne Wickham, *The Medieval Theatre*.

Changes in the theater mirrored turbulent social changes taking place on both sides of the Atlantic. The Civil Rights movement gathered strength amid the material prosperity of the fifties and in turn excited other "rights" groups, such as women, homosexuals, migrant farm workers and Native Americans to call for change. The Viet Nam War increased the polarization of American society and produced a backlash against change. Nixon's Silent Majority considered much of the social and cultural experimentation excessively radical. In Europe too, the quest for social and political change met with countervailing pressure from established regimes. The most blatant example was the suppression by Soviet tanks of the breath of freedom known as Prague Spring in 1968. Reactions were not limited to totalitarian states, however, as student protests in Paris, remembered as the *événements de mai*, lost momentum in the face of Gaullist control.⁵

When Martin Esslin wrote *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1961, he reminded his readers that even though the new theatrical convention had its roots in antiquity, it represented novelty in the contemporary era, adding that "only after the movement of today has been placed within its historical context can an attempt be made to assess its significance and to establish its importance and the part it has to play within the pattern of contemporary thought."⁶ He considered this caution necessary because he was writing his assessment as the new theater was just emerging. However, it is a tribute to Esslin's scholarship and prescience that his assessment continued to be considered authoritative for thirty years. Only recently have some of his assumptions been subject to criticism. These comments have issued largely from the convulsions in literary criticism that also arrived as a consequence of the creative whirlwind of the 1960's. One of the aims of this study has been to put the Theater of the Absurd in its historical context. Another goal has been to

⁵ Violent student riots also took place in London and Berlin, and in America, political assassinations, student strikes and incidents of police brutality at the Democratic National Convention testified to a breakdown in communication. Elsom, *Cold War Theatre*, 98-108.

⁶ Martin Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, xxiii.

consider the changes in drama criticism that were encouraged by the convulsions in theatrical convention brought about by the Theater of the Absurd. Because drama criticism has always been inextricably tied to literary criticism, we must first examine changes in literary criticism. This chapter explores the relationship between drama criticism and literary criticism in order to amplify our understanding of the significance of the playwrights discussed and the impact they have had on the theater and contemporary playwrights.

Drama criticism could be discussed as it connects to theatrical production. That is, as we have studied Pinter and Albee, much of the analysis of their work has been drawn from various critical responses in newspapers or magazines. Later criticism by academics often relied on these first sources in delving further into the value and meaning of a play. However, since plays usually originate in written texts which are also widely published, they are customarily evaluated on broader grounds than just the performance impression. In short, as literary criticism has changed over the course of the past thirty years, it has affected theatrical criticism. Surprisingly, drama criticism has not been more a focus of the literary debates over critical theory that have proliferated, beginning with the New Criticism of the 1930's, and continuing today in the recent developments that fall under the umbrella of post-modernism. Thus we begin by examining the traditions and working assumptions of drama criticism, as it was understood in the 1950's and 60's. Then we will briefly sketch the changes in literary criticism since the New Criticism of the 1930's and relate these larger patterns to the theater. Because literary criticism became increasingly important during this period, its influence was indeed felt in theater criticism, but the Theater of the Absurd's break with theatrical conventions caused more consternation for drama critics than did new literary strategies. At the same time, apprehensiveness enabled critics to assimilate the changes in theater and provoked their reflection on what theater was meant to do. Finally, we will analyze how critical reflectiveness in turn instigated new mechanisms of evaluation and prompted a new awareness of theater's value as an art form.

As criticism began to evaluate and inform the public about the Theater of the Absurd, new questions were asked that presaged not only the further experimentalism of the 1970's and 1980's, but also deconstructionism's current resistance to theories of the theater arts.

Criticism is as old as drama and is intricately bound up with it. In the West, critical practice followed certain rules that evolved from the same theories defining drama, that is, from the *Poetics* of Aristotle. The rules of drama, known as the Unities of place, time and action, were first framed by Lodovico Castelvetro, a sixteenth century translator of Aristotle. The Renaissance fascination with the "discovery" of laws of nature in science, politics, art and so forth had its equivalent in drama in the theory of the Unities. Established in practice by the age of Shakespeare, the Unities became the basis of modern criticism. The theory dictated that the action of a play should fall within a narrowly prescribed place and period of time, including only one or two actions in order to avoid confusing the audience. Subsequently, plays were assessed according to their fidelity to these rules. The play in which all action takes place within twenty-four hours and in a single household or village square was dubbed "the well made play."

Further elaboration of the theory of the Unities preoccupied critics, and the degree to which order should be imposed by such laws encouraged the burst of critical debate that flourished in the late seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This debate, reflecting the neo-classicism of the period, evaluated the playwright's aptitude for order, balance and verisimilitude. The Elizabethan playwrights were condemned for carelessness, most famously by critic Thomas Rhymer (1641-1713), who "could not see the greatness of a Shakespeare when that greatness was accompanied by absurdities and shortcomings."⁷

⁷ Barret Clark, *European Theories of the Drama with a Supplement on the American Drama*, (New York: Crown Publishers, 1965), 158.

Nonetheless, although the Unities could not guarantee inspiration, they served as an invaluable template for aspiring playwrights well into the nineteenth century.

In the late nineteenth century, French critical theorists Ferdinand Brunetière and Francisque Sarcey proposed additional laws of drama. Brunetière's principle, *La Loi du théâtre*, articulated in his preface to Noël and Stoullig's *Les Annales du théâtre et de la musique* (1894) proclaimed that in order to interest an audience, a play must always include a crisis. While crisis had long been accepted as an elemental principle of tragedy, Brunetière extended this requirement beyond the theories of Aristotle and others. He declared that the necessity of a struggle, the result of an exertion of human will, should be applied to all drama. Sarcey proposed the corollary that every plot contained "certain possible scenes that the playwright was bound to present on stage."⁸ That is, whatever action moved the plot along should not be hidden from the view of the audience or take place off stage. American critic and professor of Dramatic Literature at Columbia University, Brander Matthews (1852-1929), popularized the principles of Brunetière and Sarcey and summarized their benefits. Matthews believed that Brunetière's law prompted the playwright to choose subjects worthy of dramatization, while Sarcey's encouraged dramatists to explain the plot through display rather than speeches. Matthews also categorized certain dramatic conventions as essential or universal and others as accidental, or temporary. For example, it is an essential convention that actors must face the audience and speak loud enough to convey their messages. While an incidental convention has a mutable, temporal quality, as in the medieval practice of the Portuguese stage where the devil was assigned to speak in Spanish, the language of the enemy.⁹

⁸ Brander Matthews, "The Art of the Dramatist" in *The Development of the Dramatist*, in *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. Barrett Clark, 475.

⁹ In the twentieth century, Bertold Brecht alluded to this aspect of drama when he wrote that his epic theater could not be performed everywhere, even though the human issues with which it dealt were universal. Brecht thought that epic theater resembled the mystery plays of the Middle Ages in that it was a product of a particular time and place. Because epic theater was meant to be instructive, and to "make

The traditional conventions were accepted without question in European and American theatrical practice until the beginnings of realism in the late nineteenth century. With the advent of Ibsenism there were deviations. Critics such as William Archer, who introduced Ibsen to English speaking audiences, contested the laws. Archer's definition of the dramatic was, "any representation of imaginary personages which is capable of interesting an average audience assembled in a theater."¹⁰ This definition departed radically from accepted practice, opening the door to further experimentation by playwrights only too glad to suspend the rules and allow the audience's imagination to take over.

With the expansion of newspapers and theaters at the turn of the century, journalists were employed as professional critics to encourage even greater audience attendance. S. R. Littlewood, who began his career as a newspaper critic in 1897, testified that drama reviews were exhaustive, reflecting not only a keen interest in the theater but a relative dearth of news items competing for space, as compared to the mid twentieth century when political news and cultural competitors in the entertainment world, demanded notice. One aspect of traditional play reviews never abbreviated was the plot summary, considered crucial to informing the public about the merits of the play. The critique of each play included not only a synopsis of the plot, but often a critique of the genre of which the play was a part. There followed a review of the specific production in which the collaborative arts of direction, acting, set design, costumes and music were evaluated.

visible the means by which those onerous conditions [hunger, cold and hardship] could be done away with," it would not be welcome in many nations because they would not tolerate such a public discussion of their problems. Bertold Brecht, "Theatre For Learning," in *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. Clark, 312.

¹⁰ William Archer, "Playmaking" in *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. Clark, 449.

By the mid-twentieth century, drama criticism accepted Archer's modern flexible definition of drama, although some traces of the ideal of the "well made play" lingered. Playwrights, however, refused to be constrained by the Unities and experimented broadly. By the 1950's Littlewood contended that the theory of the Unities had, after all, been based "on an entire misconception of Aristotle, supplemented by Horace's comparatively irresponsible lines in his *Ars Poetica*."¹¹ This meant that it was untrue that precise realism of time, place and action on the stage was necessary to create illusion. Such an attitude not only disregarded the evocative power of the actors, it underestimated the imaginations of the audience. Critics applauded the relaxation of the rules in the belief that the theater would benefit greatly by allowing both actors and audience more freedom. Reflecting on the new technology of the twentieth century, Littlewood held that it was not even necessary to give the audience visual clues to the action of a play because "audiences are not dependent upon sight, as broadcast [radio] drama sufficiently proves."¹² The challenge of writing for radio was willingly taken up by the playwrights of the Absurd, especially Beckett and Pinter.

In practice, theatrical criticism combined methods inherited from both journalism and literature. Many important theater critics of the twentieth century have been academics as well as working journalists who loved the theater. At the turn of the century, George Bernard Shaw, was the theater critic for the *Saturday Review* (London) and William Archer who had studied law at the University of Edinburgh, wrote for various London papers. In America, from the 1920's to the 1950's, Joseph Wood Krutch taught dramatic literature at Columbia University and wrote for *The Nation*. A younger contemporary, Francis Fergusson, was an American Rhodes Scholar who studied at

¹¹ S. R. Littlewood, *The Art of Dramatic Criticism* (London: Pitman & Sons, 1952), 76.

¹² Littlewood, *The Art of Dramatic Criticism*, 77.

Oxford and also translated Sophocles' *Electra*. British born Eric Bentley had a degree in comparative literature from Yale. Northrop Frye was a professor of English at the University of Toronto and John Gassner was a college lecturer, poet and literary critic. Drama criticism combined literary explication with analysis of individual productions which included assessment of acting techniques, set designs, methods of direction and so forth. The drama critic took literary criticism of the written texts for granted and assumed the written drama to be fundamental and indispensable to interpretation and to audience understanding. This reflected the fact that critics born at the turn of the century or a bit later were more often college graduates with literature rather than theater arts degrees. Many were also playwrights and directors and, less frequently, actors.

Beyond writing reviews of plays, modern critics explored the nature of tragedy or comedy and described the historical contexts that had influenced drama's evolution as an art form. Some critics assessed modern drama as a reaction to the theories of Aristotle. Influenced by modern psychology, Joseph Wood Krutch wrote that Aristotle's definition of tragedy as the "imitation of noble actions" was irrelevant in the twentieth century. Since modern human beings no longer believed in the nobility of the human race, Krutch argued, they could no longer write true tragedies.¹³ A more Jungian approach characterizes Francis Fergusson's *The Idea of a Theater* (1949), an analysis of ten great plays beginning with *Oedipus Rex*. Following the theories of English scholar Gilbert Murray and also influenced by anthropology, Fergusson held that Greek tragedy originated in ancient rituals that drew from the cycles of nature—birth, death and regeneration. Fergusson's "model for drama was prediscursive and prerational primitive ritual—pure action—immediately accessible to the community." The critic could amplify

¹³ Joseph Wood Krutch, "The Tragic Fallacy" in *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. Clark, 492-501; 133-136.

and enhance knowledge of a play but could "never replace" the mysterious experience of the performance.¹⁴

This idea, apparently downplaying the authority of the critic, contrasted markedly with the ideas of critics like George Jean Nathan, a collaborator of the iconoclastic H. L. Mencken. Assuming the critic's omniscient voice, Nathan questioned whether drama was the democratic art that it seemed to be. For, though drama has an "intrinsically democratic soul," it is always first tested in the "extrinsic aristocratic soul that is taste, and connoisseurship, and final judgment." Nathan rejected the idea that there should be any laws or critical theories that would constrain drama or the critics. He defined his job as assessment—determining whether the play held any interest for the audience and what kind of audience that might be. He also believed that drama criticism, like the theater itself, was collaborative and creative, owing its existence to the work of art under scrutiny. In a paraphrase of Hamlet's instructions to the players, Nathan observed, "Criticism, more than drama with her mirror toward nature, holds the mirror up to the nature of the work it criticizes."¹⁵ This concept of the role of the critic presupposed a certain exclusivity of educational preparation, urbanity and sophistication that by the 1950's was starting to be questioned. In the second half of the twentieth century any unanimity of the critic's purpose became impossible to assume in good part because of the problems of language.

The devaluation of language connects the Theater of the Absurd with the criticism it engendered. The issue of stalled, fragmented and occluded communication, frequently alluded to in our examination of Beckett, Pinter and Albee was the logical outcome of the

¹⁴ Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism from the Thirties to the Eighties*, 134-135; See also Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theater* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1949).

¹⁵ George Jean Nathan, "The Drama As An Art" in *European Theories of the Drama*, ed. Clark, 483, 487, 489; Hamlet instructs the touring players thus: "For anything so o'erdone is from the first and now, was and is, to hold a mirror up to nature, to show virtue her feature, scorn her own image, and the very age and body of the time his form and pressure." (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2)

age of ideology. Using Marxism to illustrate this point, Esslin cited the case of the employer who in a capitalist system attempts to sympathize with his worker, knowing full well that his words do not alter their actual economic relationship. In the immediate post war period it was still possible to listen to Churchill's rhetoric and believe that it lifted the spirit of the English nation. Yet this was also the period of the Nüremberg trials where interrogators' questions probed at the open wounds of war and revealed leaders whose rhetoric proclaimed the ideals of Western civilization but repudiated them in fact and action. The devaluation of language grew apace in the cynicism of the post-war generation. When Camus wondered in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) why suicide would not be preferable to living in a world devoid of meaning, the question resonated with many who were privately struggling in the wake of horror and loss. Yet the return of society to its normal state of complacency also proceeded in the late 1940's and 1950's. Critic Eric Bentley called middle-class culture "the most imperturbable of all imperturbabilities".¹⁶

The drama critic's position became increasingly difficult as a result of these social riptides. As we have noted, the prevailing definition of the critical vocation was to reflect upon the work of art and then to explain and evaluate it. But the Theater of the Absurd demonstrated rather than explained life's absurdity, an inherently subversive act. Some critics simply chose to forestall the implications of the new drama by deeming it incomprehensible and therefore unworthy of consideration. Other critics, like Eric Bentley, saw the absurdist illustration of discontent as the hallmark of great drama. Significant art, Bentley asserted, had always been and should always be audacious: "Artists are disturbing, unsettling people, not by what they preach but by what they are, conservatives like Dante and Shakespeare being far more disturbing and unsettling than our little revolutionaries. The greater the artist the greater the upset." Bentley saw the

¹⁶ Eric Bentley, "What Is Theatre? A Point of View," in *Theatre of Commitment*, (New York: Atheneum, 1967), 92.

theater of the mid-1950's as a demoralized institution in need of some explosions as well as some soul searching silences. He argued that post-war apathy should be countered by a vigorous theater because, by its very nature, theatricality is audacious: "We have been told often enough of all the gradual, thorough, and fine-spun things that the novel can do, but have we explored the possibilities of theatre in the opposite direction—the realm of the sudden, the astonishing, the extravagant?" Bentley saw the absurdists as addressing both the horror and the complicity of the modern era. He contended that such insolence as the theater could muster should be guided by the same rules of moderation and creativity that had traditionally produced great art. Thus the blend of audacity and restraint that modern theater ought to provide would in the end be the same ingredients that had fostered the dramatic masterpieces of the past.¹⁷

Writing in 1956, Eric Bentley anticipated the views of Martin Esslin who more fully articulated the significance of the Theater of the Absurd five years later. The new experiment stretched traditional dramatic boundaries, by insolently undermining the rules of stage conduct, devaluing language and resorting to poetic imagery to express thoughts and feelings impossible to express with words. Yet absurdist drama displayed both youthful impertinence and a long memory. Esslin argued that the Theater of the Absurd combined rationalism with mysticism. It agreed with the modern scientific outlook that while the universe can be explained only through trial and error, there are many things that are, and will forever remain unknown. The absurdists also stressed the limitations of human understanding, a view shared by Eastern and Western mysticism. Though these ideas may appear incompatible, Esslin insisted on the synchronic nature of scientific skepticism and mystical acceptance of an irrational world. Both attitudes accept that there are no systems of thought either theological, ideological or philosophical that "claim to

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90-91, 93-97.

provide complete answers to all questions of ultimate purpose and day-to-day conduct."¹⁸

It can be argued that the devaluation, suspicion, and subversion of language was a phenomenon that was bound to occur in the century of Einstein and Freud. However, for those whose self definition is inextricably bound up with language—writers, poets, dramatists, essayists and critics—the present century has been an extremely unsettling time. The democratization of society had put critics, as arbiters of taste, in awkward positions—sniffing, in many cases prejudicially, at the drama they were expected to review. The discussion at mid-century was framed by fractious debate on the meaning of high culture and middle or popular culture. Even this debate, however, did not provoke the intensity of feeling of later arguments on the role of literary criticism. The issues were similar, that is, both eras addressed the place of the arts in society and the role of the critic as a judge of the same. However, in the late 1960's when deconstructionists in Europe and America began questioning the authority of any clearly defined standard of culture, the position of the critic became tenuous. The critic was no longer seen as a sober judge passing judgment for the benefit of the public. Deconstructionists held that the meaning of the work of art was ambiguous and that its interpretation necessarily reflects the norms of the historical period in which it is produced. Each reader recipient became capable of interpretation; the value of a work was no longer determined by either the artist or the critic, but by any who "read", appreciated, or came into contact with it. Criticism as a separate creative process was called into question. In fact, in literary studies both creation and criticism were subsumed under the heading of "writing."¹⁹

¹⁸ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 316.

¹⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory, An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 139.

In the theater, commercial considerations complicated the situation. As we have seen with Beckett, Pinter and Albee, success often led to further opportunities for creativity. For many less commercially successful playwrights with an experimental bent, the opportunities were limited despite the support of powerful critics. Of course, critics had always held that their power was exaggerated and that discouraging words in a column often had the opposite effect of encouraging attendance at a play.²⁰ Long before post-modernism, the question of the power of the critic had been debated. Following his retirement from the *Saturday Review* in 1956, Eric Bentley wrote a humorous letter to the editors of the Off-Broadway *Showbill*. The all powerful critic who could ruin a play was very much a commercial reality both on and Off-Broadway in those days. As a corrective, Bentley proposed that all critics should "shoot themselves," or at least offer their resignations. Failing a response to either proposal, Bentley hoped that somehow at least one Off-Broadway house could find a way to mount a production which barred critics and thus established an independence reminiscent of its heady days of experimental risk-taking when unknown playwrights like Eugene O'Neill made their mark.²¹ Bentley's words were prophetic because in the years following his retirement there was indeed a burst of creativity, staged mainly Off-Broadway, that included several posthumous O'Neill productions, the Theater of the Absurd, Brecht's Epic Theater, the Theater of Cruelty and the work of the Angry Young English playwrights. Ironically, this flood of creativity occurred just as dire predictions of theater's demise in the face of competition from television were being broadcast in Europe and America.

²⁰ There are many such accounts by critics, see, for example Eric Bentley "Professional Playgoing" in *What Is Theatre?*, 3-8.; W. A. Darlington "No Defence for Criticism," *New Theatre Magazine*, April 1961, 4-7; Frank Rich, interview by Terry Gross, "Fresh Air" National Public Radio broadcast April 5, 1994.

²¹ Eric Bentley, "A Letter To *Showbill* " in *What Is Theatre?* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), v-vii.

The Theater of the Absurd, which we have explored through the works of Beckett, Pinter and Albee, offered the world a form of drama that was both new and very old. It differed sharply from the popular dramas which immediately preceded it and was therefore quite puzzling and difficult for audiences and critics to understand and accept. At the same time it shared fundamental characteristics with classic Greek plays as well as a drama of ideas that had been passing in and out of fashion since the Middle Ages. Theater as an art form had long been bound up with the written word. In the twentieth century that association was bound to change because the convulsions of the era had, among many other things, inclined modern writers to become preoccupied with the problematic of language. As modernist assumptions about the use of language began to change, the theories of Antonin Artaud offered an alternative. Artaud restored the atavistic physicality of performance along with its ritualism. The possibilities for a theater that was truly able to engage the audience led to Brecht's socio-political theater and later to the agit-prop theater of the 1960's and 70's in which the actors improvised or directed themselves with minimal scriptwriting. The Theater of the Absurd offered another route to engagement. It provided writers who were still very much involved with the word, with the opportunity to produce dramas that were a compromise between the modernist demand for examination of the text and the proposition that language is inadequate to the task it has perennially set for itself, that is, to create a true representation of reality. In reaching this compromise, absurdist theater was able to reestablish theater as an art form that did more than strive to approximate reality. It was as if someone had whispered, "let go" and playwrights, no longer bound by the laws of realism, set out to expand indefinitely the boundaries of theater.

Drama was no longer a performed text, a literary piece transmogrified into a play. The new absurdist convention expanded the entire idea of what a play could be—a more truly collaborative effort among the literary, visual and performance arts. Where once a play had been the collaborative result of set designs, costumes, lighting, acting, and music

that animated the text, now all of these components were on an equal footing because verisimilitude was no longer the goal. As with the modern visual arts earlier in the century, abstraction was accepted as no less real than classic representational art. As the dialogue in absurdist plays became more colloquial, more spare and intense, writers often relied on design, lighting and costumes to expand the audience's apperception. In Beckett's sight gags, for instance, clowning presented in body language what could not be easily expressed in words. These changes in theatrical convention were often called gimmicks by the critics. However, when encountered more often by audiences these gestures began to be acknowledged as signposts to categorizing plays as avant-garde and then appraised for their clues to the meaning of the work. As earmarks of a significant change in the theatrical convention, as Martin Esslin noted, odd body language reflected a whole new emphasis. Drama no longer aimed at convincing the audience of the play's approximation to real life, but instead, openly acknowledged pretense.

The outstanding difference between traditional drama and the Theater of the Absurd involved a changed emphasis. The new plays were woven together of interdependent arts that showed rather than told the audience that theater was capable of representing reality in a new way—through shadows and light, movement and stillness, dialogue and silence. This dramatic art form was thus closer to poetry than to journalism, and the potential for theater to be considered a serious art form was enhanced by this altered frame of reference.

As critics began to recognize the challenges thrust upon them by Absurdism's format, they complained bitterly and dismissed the new play as for example, "merely a stunt," or "a painstakingly formed plastic job for the intellectual fruitbowl."²² As we have noted, even critics who wrote favorable production reviews concentrated their remarks on

²² John Chapman, *The Daily News*; Walter Kerr, *New York Herald Tribune*, both comments on *Waiting For Godot* quoted in Eric Bentley, "Undramatic Theatricality," in *What Is Theatre?* 297-298.

the set, the lights, and the acting. They were not inclined to commit themselves to a more detailed interpretation of absurdism, at least not in print. Other, more conservative critics were downright hostile. Both kinds of critics were on Martin Esslin's mind when he wrote *The Theatre of the Absurd* in 1961. Given the introduction of the new theatrical convention, Esslin explained why a critical reaction was inevitable:

A public conditioned to an accepted convention tends to receive the impact of artistic experiences through the filter of critical standards, of predetermined expectations and terms of reference, which is the natural result of the schooling of its taste and faculty of perception. This framework of values, admirably efficient in itself, produces only bewildering results when it is faced with a completely new and revolutionary convention—a tug of war ensues between impressions that have undoubtedly been received and critical preconceptions that clearly exclude the possibility that any such impressions could have been felt. Hence the storms of frustration and indignation always caused by works in a new convention.²³

The playwrights of the new convention were among the first to offer arguments to counter the negative criticism. In a famous exchange, British critic Kenneth Tynan who had been one of Eugene Ionesco's earliest and most ardent supporters, and Ionesco himself discussed the issue of realism in the theater. In June, 1958 Tynan wrote a review of the Royal Court Theater's revival of *The Chairs* and *The Lesson*. Tynan complained that Ionesco was a "self proclaimed advocate of *anti-théâtre*: explicitly anti-realist and by implication anti-reality as well."²⁴ Ionesco's reply, published a week later refuted Tynan's assumption that, as an anti-realist, Ionesco believed that words held no power and that communication through language is impossible. He declared, "The very fact of writing and presenting plays is surely incompatible with such a view. I simply hold that it is

²³ Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, xxiii-xxiv.

²⁴ Kenneth Tynan, "The Chairs and The Lesson" review reprinted in *A View of the English Stage*, (London: Methuen, 1975, 1984), 237.

difficult to make oneself understood, not absolutely impossible."²⁵ Ionesco went on to maintain that the human condition is responsible for this inability to communicate and that ideologies offer no real or lasting solution to the problem. With a prescience that foreshadowed the arguments of the later deconstructionists, Ionesco argued that ideologies foster the use of a worn out language which ought to be "relentlessly split apart in order to find the living sap beneath A work of art is the expression of an incommunicable reality that one tries to communicate-and which sometimes can be communicated."²⁶

In reply, Tynan contended that both art and ideology draw on the human condition and neither is superior. Furthermore, Ionesco's revelation that his search for truth had taught him to be introspective was objectionable in an artist because it produced a subjectivism that artists should avoid in the attempt to say something about "objective reality." Moreover, such subjectivism would undermine the goal of the critic to objectively assess the work of art. Tynan saw plays as statements by artists created for the public, and he maintained the right to object whenever necessary to such a statement. The alternative would be to merely congratulate the playwright on his efforts whether they were honest or not. Certainly, Tynan would have found the current post-structuralist definition of criticism even more objectionable.

Ionesco's final article, published separately, questioned Tynan's definition of "objective reality" arguing that the real issue at question was the perennially recurring debate over form versus content in art. Ionesco believed that Tynan had accused him of writing plays in which the content was undermined by the experimentalism of the form. Ionesco's perspective sought to relate changes in theatrical form over time to shifts in the critic's approach to literature: "To approach the problem of literature through the study of

²⁵ Eugene Ionesco, "The Playwright's Role," *Observer* (London), 29 June 1958.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

its ways of expression (which is what the critic ought to do, in my opinion) amounts to approaching its basis, to fathom its essence."

Ionesco proudly admitted that he attempted to subvert language: "To renew language is to renew the conception, the vision of the world." Reminding his readers of the importance of form for the modernists in art and literature since the early twentieth century—a movement in which in drama's participation had been arrested since the mid-1920's—Ionesco proposed to push forward again. In this, his most salient manifesto, Ionesco said, "I have tried, for example, to exteriorize the anguish . . . of my characters in objects; to make the decors speak; to visualize scenic action, to give concrete images of fear, of regret, remorse, estrangement to play with words (and not send them packing) perhaps even by distorting them—which is permitted among poets and humorists. I have tried to amplify theatrical language."²⁷

Ionesco's attempt to renew the language of the theater through the use of absurd features such as human beings who choose to become creatures in *Rhinocéros* or the deaf and dumb orator addressing an invisible crowd in *Chairs*, was analogous to changes in novel writing inaugurated by Joyce or Woolf a generation earlier. Making communication meaningful meant that there was a need to make it new. In the theater this search for novelty took a conservative approach that leaned heavily on the past, but critics still found the new genre disturbingly iconoclastic. The unfamiliar was deemed radical and this radicalism, not the absurdist tradition that Esslin and others could document, became the focus of controversies such as the Ionesco-Tynan debate.

Beckett's reaction to such criticism was to avoid interviews and long-winded explanations and to continue to work. His work became his reply. He had struggled so long to find his voice, that he single mindedly pursued the art and left explanations to

²⁷ Eugene Ionesco "The Heart is not Worn on the Sleeve" *Tulane Drama Review* 7 (Spring 1963): 135. This essay, Ionesco's final reply was never published in the *Observer*, it appeared in English for the first time in this issue of the *TDR*.

others. This "silent response" did not suit Beckett's younger contemporaries, Pinter and Albee. They were and continue to be artists engaged in dialogue with the public and with the critics, active participating in numerous interviews, in which questions about the meaning of their theater have been raised. In the early years they defended their plays against charges of anti-reality such those Ionesco had faced. Both Pinter and Albee saw their own work and the plays of fellow absurdist playwrights as realistic rather than the reality-defying plays that critics labeled them. In a much reprinted article, written initially in the *New York Times* in 1962, Albee reversed the charges, calling the Theater of the Absurd realist because it freed human beings from the self constructed illusions of everyday life and reminded them of their real condition in a senseless world. He rejected the assumptions that this Absurd theater was too depressing or that one should attend the theater "to relax and have a good time." He denominated the standard Broadway fare as the more likely Theater of the Absurd because, except on rare occasions, "it panders to the public need for self-congratulations and reassurance and presents a false picture of ourselves to ourselves." A lazy public, Albee predicted, will get the kind of live theater it deserves. Noting that the younger audiences were attracted to the Theater of the Absurd, he believed that they could serve as a catalyst for the acceptance of the genre.²⁸

Over the years, Albee expanded upon this theme. He proposed repeatedly that dramatic art, to be useful, ought to be challenging, that is, more than a decorative means to provide the audience with an escape. In contrast to much television and film drama, theater is not mere fantasy, quite the opposite. In fact, Albee argued, his own plays as well as Beckett's were examples of a truly realist or naturalist theater. While his plays might seem abstract, they actually accept a chaotic universe and "direct our attention to a sense of rhythm, to a sense of order-to a comprehension of what it is to be, to be aware of

²⁸ Edward Albee, "Which Theater Is the Absurd One?" in *Modern American Theater: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1967) 173-174.

oneself." Albee claimed that the real value of the university was in undertaking a "positive corruption" of the nation's youth. That is higher education could "corrupt the future theater audience, to corrupt it into expecting and demanding more of the theater than they now get." In an interview given almost thirty years later, his hopes had diminished. He was discouraged to observe a generation who had studied the Absurdist playwrights in college and enthusiastically attended live theater, now satisfied with escapist television or superficial comedies if they attended the theater at all.²⁹

Harold Pinter too offered an articulate defense of his own work. In the early years, Pinter expressed surprise and puzzlement over negative reception. He admitted that he had been depressed after *The Birthday Party* was ravaged by the London critics. However when his wife reminded him that as an actor he had often shrugged off poor notices, he went back to work and ignored the reporters. He continued to work and was again surprised when the poor reviews gave way to a relatively rapid acceptance and then celebrity, all within two years. In 1961, he attributed his fame to "some change of climate that I cannot define; some change in the theatre-going public itself, or some adjustment of the public taste to certain developments in the drama." Subsequently, Pinter's remarks have been by turns sarcastic and disingenuous, sometimes both: "I'm not a theorist . . . I write plays, when I can manage it, and that's all." When asked by a journalist early in his career what his plays were "about," Pinter deflected attention by flippantly replying, "The weasel under the cocktail cabinet." He intended to evade the question but came to regret the remark when in later interviews he was repeatedly asked to explain the line. Finally

²⁹ Edward Albee, "An Interview With Edward Albee, March 18, 1981" interview by Charles S. Krohn and Julian N. Wasserman, *Edward Albee, An Interview and Essays*, ed. Julian N. Wasserman (Houston: The University of St. Thomas, 1983), 11; Edward Albee, "An Interview With Edward Albee," interview by Alan S. Downer, in *The American Theater Today*, ed. Alan S. Downer (New York: Basic Books, Inc., Publishers, 1967), 115.

the line metamorphosed into a famous quote, pregnant with a depth of meaning Pinter had never intended.³⁰

Pinter's opinion of the critics was often revealed through humor. In a speech to the National Student Drama Festival audience in 1963, Pinter surmised that the difference between the disparagement that had greeted *The Birthday Party* and the success of *The Caretaker* had to do with the kinds of pauses he had employed in each play. He caustically remarked, "the fact that in neither case could you hear the dots and dashes in performance is beside the point. You can't fool the critics for long. They can tell a dot from a dash a mile off, even if they can hear neither." Nevertheless, Pinter had a method for coping with perennial critical apprehensiveness to which he was subject whenever a new play was about to open. He recounted the appalling boos that had followed the premier of *The Caretaker's* in Düsseldorf in 1962. Taking bows with the cast in the European fashion, he was amazed both at the volume of the audience's disapproval and the steely resolve of the cast who suffered through thirty-four curtain calls. When the cast finally took their last bow, only two members of the audience remained. After that traumatic evening, Pinter claimed to be unfazed by any kind of negative critical analysis.³¹

In 1970, Pinter accepted the German Shakespeare Prize in Hamburg and wrote an address which again displayed the famous Pinter "modesty." Pinter claimed that he could not understand why he had been chosen to receive this prestigious award. He knew that his work had achieved an enormous respect in numerous countries around the world by that time. Nevertheless, Pinter added, "The language used, the opinions given, the approvals and objections engendered by one's work happen in a sense outside one's actual experience of it, since the core of that experience consists in writing the stuff." In a

³⁰ Harold Pinter, "Harold Pinter Replies," interview by Harry Thompson, *New Theatre Magazine* January 1961, 8.

³¹ Harold Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," *Evergreen Review* 33 (August-Sept. 1964): 80.

powerful insight into the act of playwriting and criticism, Pinter went on to explain his detachment: "I have a particular relationship with the words I put down on paper and the characters which emerge from them which no-one else can share with me. And perhaps that's why I remain bewildered by praise and really quite indifferent to insult. Praise and insult refer to someone called Pinter. I don't know the man they're talking about. I know the plays, but in a totally different way [from the critics, judges or audience], in a quite private way."³²

Absurdist playwrights have also had to defend their work against charges of apathy, or lack of social commitment. As previously noted, Pinter's early drama was often compared with the social commentary plays of Osborne and Wesker. Pinter was frequently called upon to explain why his plays, whose characters expressed a barely suppressed rage, were not more overtly political. His replies varied. On one occasion he said, "I find most political thinking and terminology suspect, deficient. . . . I object to the stage being used as a soap box, where the author desires to make a direct statement at all costs, and forces his characters into fixed and artificial postures in order to achieve this." Occasionally in the mid-sixties, after Pinter had attained a certain amount of public recognition, his views were solicited on very specific political issues such as whether Britain should join the European Community. He was often unresponsive. When interviewed later, Pinter explained that certain issues, such as the Common Market, did not matter to him, but that "it isn't quite true to say that I'm in any way indifferent to current affairs."³³

As the years passed and Pinter's celebrity increased, his opinions also became better known. Although denying an interest in politics, he did acknowledge that the terror

³² Harold Pinter, Hamburg speech reprinted in "Introduction" in *Complete Works: Four*, (New York: Grove Press, 1981), x.

³³ Pinter, "Harold Pinter Replies," 9; Harold Pinter, "The Art of the Theater, III," interview by Bensky, 27.

in his plays had to do with his abiding preoccupation with the issue of violence: "The violence is really only an expression of the question of dominance and subservience." In the seventies and eighties that preoccupation led him to deal more directly with political issues both in his own plays *One for the Road* (1983), *Precisely* (1984), and *Mountain Language* (1988) and in adaptations he did for stage and screen. Notable examples are his screenplay of *A Handmaid's Tale* (1990), Margaret Atwood's futuristic novel of a patriarchal society that subjugates women in order to exploit their reproductive powers, and David Mamet's *Oleanna* (1992), a study in the dynamics of power between student and teacher which Pinter directed in London. Pinter has pointed out that his early plays were also about these dynamics, though the critics often failed to see it. It is ironic that recent critics have been more dismissive of his overtly political plays than they had been of his early supposedly apolitical works. Critics even applauded *Moonlight* (1993) for its alleged return to his "classic" style.³⁴

Albee too was often taken to task by critics over the political overtones in his work. Some of this was the result of his own decision to maintain a high public profile. Shortly after the success of *The Zoo Story*, for instance, Albee made a tour of the USSR for the U.S. State Department. His comments were eagerly sought by journalists as ammunition in the verbal Cold War. On stage, the political content of his plays seemed straightforward; *The Death of Bessie Smith* (1960) and *The American Dream* (1961) were liberal indictments of American racism and materialism. Only later with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* and *Mao/Box/Mao* (1968) did academic commentators see a broader indictment of the "collapse of will, more especially among those intellectuals who have betrayed a central responsibility" to maintain the tenets of a liberal humanism. At times Albee appeared both radical and utopian as when he talked about the dangers of losing

³⁴ Harold Pinter, "The Art of the Theater, III," interview by Bensky, 30; Harold Pinter, *One for the Road*, interview by Nicholas Hern (New York, Grove Press, 1986), 7.

America's revolutionary traditions: "the revolutionary principles of this country that we haven't lived up to yet."³⁵ Over the years, his public commitment to social causes grew and, like Harold Pinter, he became active in various causes—literary freedom for dissident Soviet writers and, anti-apartheid playwrights in South Africa, and in recent years, support for the cause of AIDS research.

In a 1967 interview Albee contended that a vicious cycle defined the critic-audience relationship. He termed it "staggering" that Walter Kerr had said that "the majority of the influential critics feel that it is their responsibility to reflect what they understand to be the taste of their readers." In contrast, Albee believed that the audience "assumes that its taste is fashioned by the critic, by the same critic who believes that his function is to represent the audience's taste."³⁶ Albee was convinced that since this misunderstanding persisted, the public had become lazy and expected to be given the sort of entertainment their taste required, hence further perpetuating the cycle. This hostile attitude towards the critics inspired Albee and several producers to undertake a remarkable experiment. Earning a great deal of money from the success of *Virginia Woolf*, they set up a theater foundation as a tax shelter. Young playwrights were given access to a theater, a director, actors and if they wanted one, an audience to produce their plays before the critics saw them. The Playwrights Unit using space at the Cherry Lane Theater and other small houses Off Broadway, worked with between thirty and forty playwrights at a time. From 1963 to 1974, when it ended due to financial problems, the Playwrights Unit undertook about one hundred and twenty productions, introducing the first efforts of many young playwrights, including Sam Shepard, John Guare, Terrence McNally, and Lanford Wilson. A tangible reminder of Eric Bentley's wish for Off-

³⁵ Edward Albee, "Two Interviews with Edward Albee," interviewed by Michael Reutenberg, *Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest*, 230; C.W.E. Bigsby, *A Critical Introduction*, vol. 2, 274.

³⁶ Edward Albee, interview by Downer, *The American Theater Today*, 114.

Broadway, the Playwrights Unit became a landmark of the experimental possibilities of 1960's theater.

When asked about the alleged power of the critics, Albee's responded by recounting his quarrel with the critics of *Tiny Alice* (1964). Albee pointed out that during two weeks of previews, audiences had displayed various reactions, from hearty approval to rigorous assault. When the critics saw it, they "informed the public that the play was really too complicated, too difficult or too confused (as opposed to confusing) to understand. From that point on audiences went into the theater confused. Now, these were the same people who, before the critics told them they couldn't understand the play, were understanding it fine." Albee insisted that he was not indicting the popular drama that audiences were demanding but rather pleading for a theater of entertainment but also theater of engagement, one in which the audience was able and willing to react to what took place on stage. In a 1981 interview Edward Albee ended his long embattled relationship with the critics, calling it "a misplaced war". He admitted that for a long time he had railed against critics because he considered them incompetent but had come to believe that in a democratic republic newspapers and magazines had every right to hire critics of whatever level of competence they wished:

the only problem was not with the stupidity of the critics The problem was basically in the fact of an audience or readership who assumed that what a critic said was a fact rather than a highly biased and quite often uninformed opinion and that you can't understand what a critic says unless you understand the mind of the critic and the limitations of the particular critic. And so it is the responsibility of people who read criticism to know whether they are reading the work of an ass or a man with some wisdom.

In the same interview, Albee proposed that the best critics are those who are themselves broadly involved in the arts—not exclusively playwriting but any of the arts, rather than being journalists only. Albee himself has written frequently as a critic on painting and

sculpture, so it was a natural contention that the artist in one field is more able to comprehend and to tell the artist in another field something useful about his or her work.³⁷

That the Theater of the Absurd had very articulate practitioners and defenders from its earliest period was fortunate because, in the late fifties and early sixties, the reluctance of the critics to accept the new convention was obvious. At the same time, however, there were signs that the drama was only one area of many in transition. A small sample of tremors—the social disruptions of the Civil Rights movement in America, the anti-nuclear movement in Europe, France's questioning of American hegemony, in France and elsewhere, which took place during the internal debate over Algeria's independence—foretold significant change. In the discontent that spread through society during this period, writers and artists pointed to language as a previously underestimated source of power. The rigidity of the literary canon came under scrutiny and there was a concerted effort to rectify the omissions of those groups of people, women, minorities, and the disabled, who had been marginalized or categorically ignored. Dramatic criticism was for the most part unaffected by the debates that took place in literary criticism in the decades of the seventies and eighties. All the same, it is worthwhile outlining here a few of the relevant issues in these debates in order to gain some perspective on the way drama criticism has been ultimately affected. More important, it will allow us to see how the Theater of the Absurd germinated larger discussions over the significance of language and meaning.

In the 1930's, the New Critics of literature added a dimension to the radical adventures of modernists with their emphasis upon reasserting a sense of order. The extreme passion for precision that was part of this critical method might be seen as

³⁷ Albee, interview by Downer, *The American Theater Today*, 118; Albee, "An Interview With Edward Albee," interview by Krohn and Wasserman, 3, 23.

somewhat analogous to Futurism in the visual arts which in its stress upon geometric design moved in an opposite direction from the emotional manifestations of abstract expressionism. The New Criticism, focusing particularly on poetry, was influenced by the views of T. S. Eliot and Cambridge critic, I. A. Richards. Richards saw an internal coherence and logic within each poem which made it an individual work of art and a worthy object of study. This conviction invited a break with more traditional historicist methods of criticism and simultaneously elevated the study of literature to a more serious position within academia. The self-styled New Critics in America included John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, Cleanth Brooks and Allen Tate. The basic principles of the New Criticism included, "literature viewed as an organic tradition, the importance of strict attention to form, a conservatism related to classical values, the ideal of a society that encourages order and tradition, a preference for ritual, and the rigorous and analytical reading of literary texts." The dominant method of literary criticism from the late thirties through the fifties, New Criticism held that the literary text was available to the reader as an entity which could be related to the world but was neither merely a reflection of the author's intentions nor assumed its meaning from its effect on the reader. Consequently, by saving the work of literature from such subjectivism, the critic also freed it from social or historical context. This method of criticism, also referred to as the "formalistic approach," analyzed the overall form of the literary piece, by studying such aspects as its logical structure; texture, including its imagery and metaphors; point of view; theme and tension. New Criticism was less interested in the text's content than its form, though it was less strict in this regard than the Russian Formalists of the 1920's had been. In fact, one critic declared that "to speak of content as such is not to speak of art at all, but of experience."³⁸ New Criticism appealed in an era of growth in higher education when

³⁸ I.A. Richards, "Poetry and Belief" in *Modern Culture and the Arts*, ed. James B. Hall and Barry Ulanov (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967), 296-307; Vincent B. Leitch, *American Literary Criticism*, 24-52; Wilfred L. Guerin and others, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches to Literature* (New York:

literature professors looking for status within the university found a method that took its cue from the sciences. It allowed the critic to affect detachment from the text and to view it as an object of study. New Criticism served as a means of confronting the sciences on a relatively level playing field in an era which took for granted the superior value of the scientific method. As Richard King makes clear, the New Criticism also served as a refuge from the immediate Southern past that many New Critics shared. The movement allowed critics like John Crowe Ransom, Allen Tate, and Donald Davidson, the Agrarians, poets and critics who met in the 1920s as undergraduates at Vanderbilt University to find within literature—the same unchanging "monumentalist" values that they ascribed to the traditional organic society of the Old South—a region they saw as being uprooted and displaced by industrialization and commercialism from the North.³⁹

New Criticism dominated literary studies well into the 1950s, teaching a generation of students the discipline of "close reading" to encourage the appreciation of literature. In utilizing what have been called enabling fictions such as "the organic society" or the "ideal reader" and following certain protocols, the critic explained and evaluated the text. Some New Critics adhered strictly to these criteria, while others sanctioned "endlessly varied interpretations" of the texts, suggesting a link to the later deconstructionist movement, though they shared neither the nihilism nor the confrontationalism of most deconstructionists.⁴⁰

A turning point occurred in 1957 when Northrop Frye published *Anatomy of Criticism* which declared that the laws that governed literature could also be applied to the

Oxford University Press, 1992), 72; Mark Schorer, quoted in Guerin and others, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches*, 76.

³⁹ Leitch, *American Literary Criticism*, 38-40; Richard King, *A Southern Renaissance, the Cultural Awakening of the American South, 1930-1955* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980), 51-95.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 33-35.

art of literary criticism through a system based on myths since both were basic ancient genres governing literature (tragedy, comedy, romance). They not only corresponded to the seasons, for example, winter was analogous to tragedy, but also found their analogues in criticism. Frye's thesis strengthened the argument for formalism that the New Critics had proposed. Furthermore, because archetypal myth criticism could be applied to various kinds of literature, it was favored over New Criticism in the new American Studies and Comparative Literature programs in the universities.⁴¹

Although Frye's work was compelling and influential, by the late 1950s other methods of literary criticism were also competing for attention. Many of these methods reacted directly against New Criticism with its claim of objectivity. These included the psychoanalytical approach utilizing Freudian and Jungian theories; a phenomenological method inherited from Edmund Husserl; the hermeneutical approach of Martin Heidegger and his protégé Hans Georg Gadamer; and the authorial intentionalism of E. D. Hirsch. Although too various and complex to describe here, we can say that they were united in suspicion of objectivism.⁴²

At about the same time, first in Europe and then in America, the linguistic theories of Ferdinand Saussure were being shaped and expanded by structural theorists Claude Levi-Strauss and Roman Jakobson who applied the study of signs or semiology to literary criticism. Saussure defined language as a composition of signs. Within each sign was a signifier (the word or icon) and a signified (the meaning), whose relationship to the signifier was both arbitrary and functional. Undermining the traditional rationalist belief that language reflected reality, this theory substituted the conviction that language actually constructed reality, although a "reality" based solely upon language constituted a "new"

⁴¹ Northrup Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957), 74-75.

⁴² Leitch, *American Literary Criticism*, 149-237; Guerin and others., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches*, 114-115, 265-66.

reality. As language thus defined was a human construct unaffected by historical or cultural considerations, it followed that "meaning was neither a private experience nor a divinely ordained occurrence: it was the product of certain shared systems of signification." Structuralism implicitly challenged literature's privileged position among academic disciplines by demystifying texts and locating literature's critical method in linguistically scientific rather than in objectivist (The New Criticism) or subjectivist terms.⁴³

From the 1930's to the 1960's, the focus of literary criticism moved from the poem to the novel to self absorption with critical theory itself. The pertinent questions had moved from considerations of literature as an important form of discourse to questions about what constitutes meaning, the traditional stalking ground of philosophy. Under scrutiny, structuralism raised its own questions about meaning—questions which led to "post-structuralism." Both structuralism and post-structuralism may be thought of as post-modern or post-metaphysical, in that they both break with most underlying assumptions about the recent past. Structuralism, as an ahistorical system, assumed that an objective reading of literature was possible. It could not deal with "semantic slippage" within a language system. Structuralism developed a system of rules that excised both the material object and the human subject, consequently creating major problems for those who undertook literary interpretation. Since language is intimately connected with human subjects, which implies a field or wide system of references and history, it was not long before structuralism reached a plateau of usefulness. As a scientific inquiry, it refused to admit subjective observations or to grant value judgments. It could, Terry Eagleton notes, propound certain rules of the mind but after it had "characterized the underlying

⁴³ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 91-126; Guerin and others, *A Handbook of Critical Approaches*, 237-250; Leitch, *American Literary Criticism*, 238-252; Donald M. Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1982), 117-124.

rule-systems of a literary text, all the structuralist could do was sit back and wonder what to do next." The answer was forthcoming from within structuralism itself.⁴⁴

In brief, post-structuralism developed in the late sixties because the structuralists themselves raised fundamental concerns about the possibility of deriving meaning from such a narrow and theoretical language system. They were joined by philosophers like Jacques Derrida. Derrida's work had many dimensions but one was to extend the phenomenological work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Merleau-Ponty, a colleague of Sartre, believed that philosophy should investigate the world experientially from within the world, defining phenomenology as "a philosophy for which the world is 'already there' as an inalienable presence which precedes reflection."⁴⁵ The focus of inquiry for the post-structuralists became the signifier-signified relationship within the sign system. The question was whether a single meaning could be derived from that relationship, if each signifier in reality was defined by another signifier, and that by another and so on. The answer appeared to be that meaning is discoverable not in the one to one relationship of signifier to signified but in seeing language as a whole process. Post-structuralists saw meaning derived from the complex web of language as the process in which signs include both their meanings and the meanings that have been excluded. Furthermore, sentences are pieced together organically not mechanically as the structuralists had posited. The binary oppositions that comprised the structuralists' system of language had to be taken into account in post-structuralist description of meaning. Thus, embedded in the meaning of a text were both the apparent meaning of the signs as well as traces of excluded, perhaps unconscious, meanings. Moreover, since language is a temporal process in which words follow words and accumulate meaning in their relationship to other words, the

⁴⁴ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 109.

⁴⁵ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "What Is Phenomenology?" in *The Worlds of Existentialism*, ed. Maurice Friedman (New York: Random House, 1964), 83.

meaning of a composition can only be revealed as the text is unraveled, and even then, its meaning will be ambiguous and relative—subject to further reading and criticism.⁴⁶

This literary and philosophical work led to a new understanding of literature and a new technique of literary criticism called deconstruction, in which the literary text was examined for the binary oppositions within it. These oppositions could be exposed to show how texts have within themselves the seeds of their own undoing. That is, the deconstructive critical method delves into a text in order to expose its internal oppositions and show how such oppositions in fact undermine or contradict the text's purported intention. Furthermore, according to Derrida, language is constructed of differences, without the limitations of fixity, linearity, hierarchy, and meaning. Derrida refused to accept the notion of a transcendent signifier, or first cause, and thus imparted to the movement an openness to meaning that was fundamentally different from structuralism, which was a system preoccupied with order and meaning. Because the act of writing is as much language as is speaking, deconstructionism implies that it is likewise a process which cannot be confined to a single concept. Meaning unfolds and writing of either text or criticism is an open-ended enterprise because meaning unfolds through the process, and suggests other meanings. Both composition and criticism are therefore forms of literature, creatively engaged in, that grant provisional meaning but refuse to deliver a final interpretation. Deconstructionists, satisfied to celebrate the dynamism of this process, are undeterred by the lack of definitive meaning. Here we recognize a parallel to the problems and achievements of the absurdist playwrights we have considered in this study.⁴⁷

The deconstructionists' celebration of process over meaning brings into focus the artistic accomplishments of the absurdist playwrights of the 1950's who conveyed ideas by

⁴⁶ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 127-130; Leitch, *American Literary Criticism*, 267-282.; Lowe, *History of Bourgeois Perception*, 165-176.

⁴⁷ Leitch, *American Literary Criticism*, 270-273.

showing them on stage in all their diversity, and multiplicity. The playwrights exposed meanings that philosophers, even those who wrote plays, found difficult to articulate. In describing the differences between existentialist theater and the Theater of the Absurd, Martin Esslin noted that in spite of "their relentless probing still, by implication, [Sartre and Camus] proclaim a tacit conviction that logical discourse can offer valid solutions, that the analysis of language will lead to the uncovering of basic concepts." Thus, while the existentialist philosophers thought they had crossed a conceptual threshold, Esslin saw them with one foot on the other traditional side, preferring to rely "on Shavian discussion and exemplification." It was left to the absurdists who "by instinct and intuition rather than by conscious effort "presented existentialist preoccupations. They did so in "a poetry that was to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself." This method of artistic endeavor shared the defamiliarizing techniques of abstract art, Brecht's alienation projects and, more closely, the contemporary theories of Robbe-Grillet's *nouveau roman*.⁴⁸

Like the deconstructionists, the absurdists were chided for describing the way things are, the "how" rather than the "why" of life and for supposedly offering no practical solutions or new understanding. Charges of nihilism, as we have seen, were frequently applied to Beckett's work in particular. For the traditional literary critic whose job had been to interpret, explain, and determine the meaning of a text, the implications of deconstruction were and are revolutionary. Because absolute authority is denied, the value of deconstructive criticism depends on elements of creativity very different from those found in traditional literary criticism. Similarly, in dealing with the Theater of the Absurd, drama critics who had been trained to describe and explain the traditional well-

⁴⁸ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, xx, xxii; Bigsby, *Confrontation and Commitment*, 8.

made play felt deeply constrained by their encounter with the works of Ionesco, Pinter, Beckett and Albee.⁴⁹

Critical insecurity derived from questions of language that were inherent in the plays. It was not the colloquialisms, stichomythia of the music-hall, or physical shenanigans of the clowns that nagged them. It was the absence of sound, the silences, the pauses. Again and again, the critics wanted to understand and explain the silences. What were these supposed to mean, to represent? How could one perform the function of the critic without assigning an specific meaning to every event in the play? It was difficult to understand that the absurdist dramatists seemed to be suggesting that absence of meaning was a fixed part of human existence. If one accepts that "it is the mysterious conspiracy between language and man which gives rise to the conception and embodiment of meaning," then the absence of language must have seemed very threatening indeed.⁵⁰

Drama criticism has been affected relatively little by the debates that have accompanied the changes in literary method over the past thirty years. To C. W. E. Bigsby, this is unfortunate. In a lively essay called "The absent voice: American drama and the critic," Bigsby noted that "the critical establishment" has treated drama with "a casual disregard" that is puzzling given the flurry of criticism in nearly every other discipline. Of course, there have been nods to post-modern literary debates as these have been gradually absorbed into ordinary usage. Theater itself has become a far more inclusive medium, reflecting the social struggles and creative explosion which occurred in the 1960's. Many voices absent from the theater of the previous decades have been heard. Nevertheless, while drama criticism remains an unproductive field, Bigsby sees no reason for its neglect. Bursting with possibilities for exploring the ambiguity of language and

⁴⁹ Eagleton, *Literary Theory*, 130-134; Guerin and others., *A Handbook of Critical Approaches*, 254-258.

⁵⁰ James Hollis, *Harold Pinter, The Poetics of Silence* (Carbondale, Ill: Southern Illinois University Press, 1970), 1.

action, theater is "the most sensuous, the most alluring, the most unformed of the genres. Each production restores a kind of innocence only to take pleasure in violating it." Bigsby's vision offers a challenge to critics because "the theatre is unique in its silences. In the literary text such spaces close. Even the blank page of a Laurence Sterne can be turned in a second. In the theater silence is not merely kinetic potential. It may teem with meaning."⁵¹

The abiding intellectual preoccupation of the twentieth century has undoubtedly been language. Early modern artists and writers considered language an artifact reflecting desiccated nineteenth century values. Each method of modern literary criticism that came along offered a new perspective on literature and had implications for other disciplines as well. Such was the case for drama criticism as well, though as a profession it has never enjoyed the prestige of literary criticism. This disregard relates to its marginalized position within university culture and its commercial character. Despite the differences between the two fields, there has, nevertheless, been an inevitable cross-fertilization of ideas. As we have seen, traditional drama criticism evolved from literary and journalistic practices and came to include professors and playwrights. During the late fifties and early sixties when Beckett, Pinter and Albee were gaining recognition, the traditional playwrights were sometimes bewildered and often annoyed. They wrote mainly about the familiar aspects of the plays until the unfamiliar became known and categorized. This categorization in turn upset the playwrights who complained that critics rely too heavily on them, lumping together artists with totally differing viewpoints because their methods seem to be similar. Even this situation points up the problems inherent in language. The Theater of the Absurd employed a style that highlighted language, its dialogue depicted the difficulty of

⁵¹ C.W. E. Bigsby, "The absent voice: American drama and the critic," in *Modern American Drama, 1945-1990*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 1, 3, 7.

building relationships which hinged on the meaning to be derived from discourse. Yet even the critics could not agree on the significance of this kind of theater because they were anxious to employ language to simplify that which cannot be simplified. In other words, the critics played out the intrinsic problems of the plays: the inexactness of language.

Among the critics of the Absurd, there were only a few able to recognize that the playwright's unorthodox use of language reflected more than artistic caprice. In order to understand and appreciate this development, one had to be widely familiar with many disciplines, not least contemporary philosophy, but also with changes in artistic trends and theater, as well as numerous European languages. Martin Esslin exemplified the new mid-twentieth century scholar, knowledgeable of several disciplines and at home on both sides of the Atlantic. He was in a pivotal position to undertake the important critical work that assisted the reception of the Theater of the Absurd. If Bigsby is correct, there has been a scarcity of serious critical work in drama since then, at least in America. Some have suggested that Esslin's work was too much of a success and stilled the constructive voices of dissent that would today be writing the best criticism. But perhaps, as this study has tried to show, the search for answers from critics might also be conditioned by the fact that a similar quest was never a goal of the absurdists themselves. They were playwrights who absorbed the philosophical preoccupations of their time and the anxiety of their age and because they were artists more than philosophers, it was the questions that mattered. In recent years as critics have thoroughly probed the issues of language and meaning, they have sought out Beckett's work. Though many studies have investigated Beckett's novels, the implications discovered in them have generated further investigation into the plays. While Bigsby is correct to see a disproportionate attention given by critics to literature over drama, the discussion has really only just begun and the ground is fertile, the questions many. In fact, Bigsby echoing Beckett, Pinter, and Albee, describes the creative drive of the playwright as artist, in the arena of word written and word spoken as:

a revealing suspicion of language not merely on the part of the avant-gardist, disassembling his art in a radical gesture of defamiliarisation, but also on the part of the committed playwright for whom that language is a barrier between the urgencies of a tangible world and those he would make aware of those realities. More than that, the gap between act and word is a reproach, that between fact and word an irony; the disproportion between need and its expression is a constant reminder of the impossible project in which the writer chooses to engage.⁵²

This struggle with language placed the playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd in a unique position in history, because they were very much a part of the modernist period relying on the value of the written word, not willing to give it up to the "process" of the performance, or to the interpretation of actors and directors. At the same time, they were asking many of the same questions regarding language that were germinating in structuralist thought and deconstructive criticism. The questions remain visible in their plays, and are most immediately accessible through performance. Questions about meaning and illusion, about the possibility of true communication are found there in the theater, in the expression derived from the entire web of signs that are the lighting, scenery, bodies in motion, text and subtext, even the spaces in between. Bert O. States has observed that we limit our understanding of the theater by reducing it to semiology: "The danger of a linguistic approach to theater is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects." Thus to make the play a present reality, States urges us to see the theater with both a "significant eye" and a "phenomenological eye."⁵³ Seeing each performance in this way, the complexity of the questions asked by the playwrights of the Theater of the Absurd can be appreciated anew—as a dynamic inhospitable to deconstruction. It is after all the questions that matter.

⁵² C.W. E. Bigsby, "The absent voice," 10.

⁵³ Bert O. States, *Great Reckonings in Little Rooms: On the Phenomenology of Theater* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 7-9.

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