

THE USE OF RITUAL IN THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

A STUDY OF BECKETT, PINTER, GENET

by

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B.A., The University of British Columbia
(Victoria College), 1961.

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

Master of Arts

in the Department

of

English

We accept this thesis as conforming to the
required standard

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

May, 1964

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ABSTRACT

It is commonly felt among literary and theatre-going people today that the Theatre of the Absurd is making a comment on the meaninglessness and formlessness of contemporary life. The way the Theatre makes its comment is new and exciting: it simply places before our eyes meaninglessness and formlessness. And the Absurd is left at that. Directors can concentrate on the bizarre, making the plays, even The Caretaker, into three-hour runs of pointless juxtapositions that leave sophisticated audiences complacent. Too often the plays of Beckett, Pinter and Ionesco are treated as slices of life, without beginning or end. This paper was undertaken in an effort to discover whether there was not more to the Absurd play than imitation of life's daily chaos. Strong ritualistic elements had been noticed during a first random reading of some Absurd plays. A later discovery of Genet and his open experimentation with rituals, led me to suspect that the ritual so obvious in his plays also played a part, though a more furtive one, in the works of Pinter and Beckett. The following close examination of texture and structure has convinced me that the formal element, which distinguishes ritual, makes up the fabric of the Absurd play; and that this studied use of ritual makes the plays of the Absurd the most precise dramatic statements to have been seen on western stages since medieval days. Rather than exemplifying formlessness, the Absurd play often stands witness to the stark purity of formality.

I would like to express my gratitude
to Dr. Philip Pinkus, who arms the
student with a series of questions,
answers being no real end.

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Introduction

Already the Theatre of the Absurd has reached that stage of acceptance where some persons are beginning to reject it. The Absurd Theatre — which will be represented here by Beckett, Pinter and Genet — is now being accused of "dead-endism" (or possibly "Endgamism"). It is a cul-de-sac, a nihilistic novelty that has been played out. In previous centuries, the period of first acceptance would last some twenty years; the next twenty to forty would see the time of rejection; and after three generations had made their way through life, the time became ripe for sober, objective re-appraisal. In this rapid century, the sixty-year period of appraisal shortens to about six years. Samuel Beckett's Endgame appeared in 1957, and as soon as 1964, re-appraisal seems due.

One of the most serious criticisms directed against this new tradition of theatre is that it is so readily exhaustible, based as it is on the stark philosophy of existentialism. Ionesco's own understanding of the term, "absurd", is forbidding: "'Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.'"¹ Consequently, we must face the fact that once the meaninglessness of life has been portrayed on stage, it

¹ Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, New York, Anchor Books, 1961, p. xix.

might become not only meaningless to go on portraying meaninglessness, but also quite difficult. Guicharnaud, for one, comments on the "plenitude and immediacy"² of Waiting for Godot which, he insists, are not matched by Beckett's later plays, and mainly because the subject has been treated so adequately before. This is a definite problem with many of the trends in the arts today, though whether it is a problem that faces Beckett, Pinter and Genet, is a subject that will be tackled later. We can think now of Ad Reinhardt, the New York painter who reduced himself some years ago to painting nothing but black squares on black, apparent blackboards that develop, after a time of looking, into something resembling very dark Black Watch tartans. Where will he go from here? Obviously the answer is "Nowhere". (Further, he has said that he does not see the need of going anywhere.) However, we have to face the fact that one black Reinhardt painting might have been sufficient. To stress the Beckett-Reinhardt parallel too much would be fruitless and misleading as well, except to comment on their journeys. Each has followed a path of elimination, Beckett paring down language to its most precise minimum, stripping away inessentials of staging, and Reinhardt rejecting colours, most forms, even most canvas sizes (he only paints now on canvases the width of a man's arm-reach). Their progress is similar to moving in from the flying outer rim of a wheel to the centre, to the hub which

² Jacques Guicharnaud, Modern French Theatre, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1961, p. 212.

hardly moves, from complexity in to simplicity (and, they must hope, unity). Once there, there is little to say, and regardless of how important that little is, can one express the same thing over and over again?

VLADIMIR: Well? Shall we go?

ESTRAGON: Yes, let's go.

THEY DO NOT MOVE.

Prime among Beckett's list of eliminations is human nature, and indeed there would seem very little left to say once humanity (in the old Falstaffian sense) has been removed from the stage. This is a problem inherent in the philosophy behind the Absurd Theatre. Guicharnaud summarizes part of Sartre's thought:

The traditional idea that man commits such or such act because he is thus and so, is replaced with its opposite: by committing such or such act, man makes himself thus and so. Nothingness to start with, man spends his life giving himself an essence made up of all his acts The anguish that grips him is provoked by that nothingness, that absence of justification, and the metaphysical responsibility which makes him the creator of his own essence But more important it eliminates the notion of human nature, a fundamental concept in western thought, and treats human destiny in itself as meaningless and useless agitation, in other words, absurd.³

We can no longer use the vague concept of human nature to explain human actions. In their plays, Camus and Sartre describe the chaos of the times in language at once formal and rational, a language that belies the philosophy they profess. Following the same existential path, playwrights of the Absurd determine to achieve a welding of form and content by removing

³ Guicharnaud, pp. 136-137.

the structure of rationality and logic from their plays altogether (as they see it has been removed from life). As Esslin notes, all the hallmarks of the usual play have disappeared, for the Absurd plays have "no story or plot to speak of; . . . are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; . . . have neither a beginning nor an end; . . . seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; . . . of incoherent babblings."⁴ Instead, Esslin continues, this theatre "merely presents",⁵ without comment or argument, the absurdity of existence. Strangely, Guicharnaud uses almost the same words (both books appeared the same year). He writes that Beckett "attacks life itself. He does it without long speeches, without contradictory debates. He merely places existence on stage."⁶

One thing these critics are well able to do is describe what the Absurd Theatre is not. Eventually we must try to discover what it is. Neither Esslin nor Guicharnaud do justice to this theatre when they say it merely portrays existence. It is understood, of course, that they distinguish existence and life, and look on these plays as metaphysical, not just mimetic. Nevertheless, they have yet missed something. Does Pinter, in The Caretaker, for example, not succeed in giving anything more than the picture of existence?

⁴ Esslin, pp. xvii-xviii.

⁵ Esslin, p. xx.

⁶ Guicharnaud, p. 219.

What are we afraid of when Mick accosts a tramp who apparently has entered his room to steal something? The situation is normal enough, yet we find ourselves abnormally shaken by Mick's quiet and final question, "What's the game?" Surely there is more here than mere presentation. Indeed, it will be the concern of this thesis to discover if in fact the Theatre of the Absurd is not more than a mere vehicle for Nothingness. It could be that this disturbing theatre reaches down to tap deep and fertile springs at the back of our consciousness, and if so, the sources of this vitality should be located and explored.

CHAPTER I

Ritual in the Theatre

An undeniable first assertion is the theatrical success of the plays to be studied here. When we think of Godot, Happy Days, The Caretaker, A Slight Ache, The Blacks, The Balcony, to name a few, we realize that they are all engrossing theatrical experiences. Esslin, from a wider theatre-going experience than this writer's, can assert:

It is an empirical fact that, in defiance of most of the accepted rules of drama, the best examples of the Theatre of the Absurd are effective as theatre — the convention of the Absurd works.⁷

He goes on to ask significantly, "But why does it work?" First reactions to plays are often most important. Yeats' account of his feelings when attending the scandalous opening night of Jarry's Ubu Roi in 1896 is revealing. He wrote in his autobiography, The Trembling Veil:

'After Stephane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustave Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle colour and nervous rhythm, after the faint mixed tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us the Savage God.'⁸

A friend once remarked in similar vein, "Those plays are a drumbeat." The Absurd world leads directly to the primitive. We may join Ionesco, Beckett, Pinter, Genet, in finding the old rational world absurd and useless; but this is not neces-

⁷ Esslin, p. 301.

⁸ Esslin, p. 257.

sarily to admit nihilism, for a new world is discovered beneath. The shock of the theatre takes us somewhere.

From almost any point of view, the theatre's most important manifestos since the fact of Ibsen are those of Antonin Artaud that appeared in the collected form of Le Théâtre et son Double, 1938. Described as "one of the most extraordinary men of his age, actor, director, prophet, blasphemer, saint, madman — and a great poet",⁹ Artaud was at least a man of passion. One thing he felt particularly passionate about was the state of the theatre of the Western world (he was also passionate about the state of the Western world), and in his writings, he called for a revitalization of the former (and through the former, the latter).

The basic image of his book is named in the title, the theatre's double, that is, its shadow. The shadow, for Artaud, represents the unknown, the mysterious and the dark; our every action has a shadow that motivates it, at least in part. Rather than trying to bring these shadows out into the light of rational consciousness, Artaud is more interested in exploring new areas which will bring a new crop of shadows. As conscious life grows, the mysterious beneath it will grow, until living becomes a rich process. Today, to his sadness, rather than allowing the shadows to flourish, we are trying to destroy them. He elaborates,

⁹ Esslin, pp. 277-278.

If our life lacks brimstone, i.e. a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations in their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force.¹⁰

Any attempt at rational explanation or description of life is bound by definition to fail, since it excludes the shadows of the irrational unconscious which play such a large part in directing one's life. Artaud's definition of life, by the way, is important: "When we speak the word 'life', it must be understood that we are not referring to life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating centre which forms never reach."¹¹

Artaud's, in short, is a call to incomprehensibility, but he cannot be dismissed that quickly. Jung's influence, first of all, whether direct or indirect, is extensive and interesting. Both even use the same extended image of alchemy as a framework for some of their thinking. The central image and idea of the shadow is one they share strikingly in common. Jung sees man's psychic life as an iceberg, with a large and dangerous portion, nine-tenths, submerged. The visible portion could not exist where it is except for the dark base; yet expose the base, and there would be no more iceberg. As an entity, the iceberg depends on both base and crest. This shadow, claims Jung, must not be exposed, although it can (and should) be called upon, or evoked, on occasion. One

¹⁰ Antonin Artaud, The Théâtre and its Double, Mary Caroline Richards, trans., New York, Grove Press, 1958, p. 8.

¹¹ Artaud, p. 13.

should be aware of it. The basis of his kind of psychoanalysis is to communicate with and tame the wild shadows by finding names and images for them that would build up into a communicable myth. Through myth, one can touch the unknown without destroying, and without being destroyed. Erich Fromm has criticized Jung roundly on accounts which are relevant here. He feels that Jung was simply too fearful of the contents of his own unconscious to want to examine it, and wrote in a recent review of Jung's autobiography:

The reader . . . does not have to be a psychoanalyst to be impressed by Jung's deep affinity for death, destruction, the past, the dark, ice, stones and everything that is not alive.¹²

Jung, then, has skipped out the back door to sacrifice science for security. Fromm has also attacked Jung on the grounds of opportunism for offering to an upset world a handy and inclusive wafer which anyone could find palatable. Jung's careful ambiguity, writes Fromm, meant that "the believer could choose God; the unbeliever, the unconscious."¹³

This is certainly not the place to go into the pros and cons of Jungian psychology as a science, as we are not concerned with healing, but with aesthetics (though if the aesthetics perchance have healing power, so much the better). What must interest us is the connection of poetry (and poetic

¹² Erich Fromm, "C.G. Jung: Prophet of the Unconscious", Scientific American, September, 1963, p. 286.

¹³ Fromm, p. 288.

drama) with the unconscious.¹⁴ The value of the image and the symbol is that they are invested with so much non-literal meaning. They can never be fully understood and have to be accepted as rich repositories of seeming inexhaustible suggestion. The value of the shadow is that it is a shadow: in the light, it becomes (to our great loss) no longer a shadow. Thus we see that if Jung had no scientific grounds for respecting the privacy of his unconscious, he certainly had aesthetic grounds. His concept of the force of the unknown allows the fine arts to be restored to their former place of dignity as sacred keepers of the keys to the spirit, a spirit whose force is contingent upon the fact of being unknown.

Artaud follows Jung in that he makes it his impassioned business, before all, to preserve the shadow, that art may resume its essential function, which is to create magic. He is interested in that most inclusive of arts, the theatre, where "music, dance, plastic art, pantomime, mimicry, gesticulation, intonation, architecture, lighting, and scenery"¹⁵ meet, and where each pours forth its own "intrinsic poetry", and where all these poetries combine and clash in an explosion

¹⁴ Archetypal criticism, growing so popular today, would seem often to be a misuse of Jung, for through archetypes, some critics think they are explaining "all". This would be contrary to Jung's designs, for knowing "all" implies limits (a travesty of most concepts of art), and dispels magic. Archetypal symbol opens up a new and mysterious world, and it is this world that should concern the critic, not just the keys to it. The archetectonic symbol is only a means.

¹⁵ Artaud, p. 31.

that rocks the psyche to its roots. This was not what was happening on the stage that Artaud knew, which was a "petrified" theatre, "connected with our petrified idea of a culture without shadows";¹⁶ a "theatre of dialogue" where there seemed to be a need "to use words to express ideas that are obvious. For to me obvious ideas are, in the theater as everywhere else, dead and done with."¹⁷

"The true purpose of the theater", he feels, "is to create Myths, to express life in its immense, universal aspect",¹⁸ and, as he has asserted earlier, "All the great Myths are dark."¹⁹ He calls for the theatre to establish a new contact with what the Mexicans call the manas, the "forces latent in every form, unreleased by contemplation of the forms for themselves, but springing to life by magic identification with these forms."²⁰ The theatre, in sum, is to become totemic. Calling his theatre the Theatre of Cruelty, he says it must primarily teach man that he is not free, for in the most basic and primitive areas of his being, his own personality and character no longer count. Where man has no control, he is tied. While man at the theatre is being trapped into viewing his own will-lessness, he can be bombarded with many other

¹⁶ Artaud, p. 12.

¹⁷ Artaud, p. 41

¹⁸ Artaud, p. 116.

¹⁹ Artaud, p. 31.

²⁰ Artaud, p. 11.

shocks. The anarchic power of laughter will show him "that metaphysical fear which is at the root of all ancient theater."²¹ Ritual, in word, sound, gesture and movement, as Artaud saw it in Balinese theatre, will breed a terror, as man watches human characters become "mechanized beings, whose joys and griefs seem not their own but at the service of age-old rites, as if they were dictated by superior intelligences."²²

Has the Theatre of Cruelty found its expression in the Theatre of the Absurd? Esslin's description of the Absurd would tend to make the answer affirmative. He writes that Absurd theatre:

. . . represents a return to the original, religious function of theatre — the confrontation of man with the spheres of myth and religious reality The Theatre of the Absurd is intent on making its audience aware of man's precarious and mysterious position in the universe.²³

With the constant description of the theatre as religious and mythical, it becomes apparent that ritual must be our touchstone to understanding. In fact, what Artaud basically wants is a return to ritual drama, to ceremony. Genet has written that "'the highest modern drama has found expression through two thousand years and every day in the sacrifice of the Mass'",²⁴ and it is the drama of the Mass that he hopes to approximate. If the purpose of ritual drama is, as Ferguson

²¹ Artaud, p. 44.

²² Artaud, p. 58.

²³ Esslin, p. 293.

²⁴ Esslin, p. 149.

feels, "the 'celebration of the mystery' of human life",²⁵ then basic to its performance will be repetition, which gives the feeling of continuity, order, a link with the past, a concept of the future, a connection with the rhythms of nature, peace and harmony. Moreover, the fact of re-enactment suggests importance and, further, sanctity.

At first look, ritual in the Absurd theatre appears to be employed in a very determined manner to achieve certain shock effects, of which, of course, Artaud would have happily approved. Ritualistic re-enactments and a rich ritualistic literary texture of incantatory language and revolving patterned conversations, force us hypnotically into the frightening world of primitive psyche. We feel as if we are attending a sacred rite. The effect of this sustained use of ritual is to confront us with deepest insights into our primitive selves, which shocks us into awareness of our existence on many levels. If the following pages can demonstrate such emphatic use of ritual in the Absurd Theatre, the critics who proclaim its exhaustibility will be answered, for into the definition of ritual is worked the concept of the efficacy of repetition.

²⁵ Francis Ferguson, The Idea of a Theatre, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, p. 128.

CHAPTER II

Samuel Beckett: The Life Game

i.

Waiting for Godot

A country road, a leafless tree, evening, and two tramps: the opening scene of Waiting for Godot²⁶ suggests at once the "unaccommodated man" of Shakespeare at his most elemental. Beckett's vagabonds represent man cut off from the "religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots" of which Ionesco spoke. Indeed, there is nothing in Vladimir or Estragon to remind us of these roots. When Estragon introduces himself to Pozzo as Adam (p. 25), the reference serves only to remind us how very far he is removed from the Christian roots, and to enter his world, we must forget our connections with these roots also. From the start, we are forced to lose our bearings, for only when we have can we begin to be aware of existence. Beckett's remarks some thirty years earlier in his study of Proust are still relevant to his present work:

Life is habit. Or rather life is a succession of habits, since the individual is a succession of individuals; Habit then is the generic term for the countless treaties concluded between the countless subjects that constitute the individual and their countless correlative objects. The periods of transition that separate consecutive adaptations . . . represent the perilous zones in the life of the individual, dangerous, precarious, painful, mysterious and fertile, when

²⁶ All page references to Waiting for Godot will be to the Grove Press edition, 1954.

for a moment the boredom of living is replaced by the suffering of being.²⁷

That the theatre-goer may enter that perilous and mysterious zone, he must give up the network of habits that constitutes his adjustment, and assume, for the moment, the network of habits that someone else finds sufficient, or nearly sufficient.

Vladimir and Estragon have found it a satisfactory habit to wait for an unidentified Mister Godot who represents for them salvation. The tramps enact the ritual of waiting for a saviour, and it keeps them occupied most of the time. They act out the general pattern of all our lives as we similarly wait, filling up most of our time with little acts that give us the impression we are "living". Vladimir and Estragon expose our lives as attempts to fill in the gap between birth and death, to fill in the waiting.

As Vladimir and Estragon act out life before us, it becomes a ritual. Their waiting assumes the properties of a sacred rite offered to Godot who has said that he would think over their "kind of prayer", their "vague supplication" (p. 13). What follows becomes another such kind of prayer, as Estragon and Vladimir merge their personalities in a chant about Godot, who has to consult his "family", "friends", "agents", "correspondents", "books" (and the holy ghost, Amen). As the chant ends, Estragon asks, "Where do we come in?" and Vladimir's

²⁷ Samuel Beckett, Proust, New York, Grove Press, n.d., p. 8.

answer is: "Come in? On our hands and knees." (p. 13)

Godot may not represent God in any particular sense, but he certainly is a power that demands to be placated. Estragon resents this grovelling, and asks why they have lost all their rights and prerogatives. "We got rid of them", says Vladimir (p. 13), that is, they do not want the right to do or not to do, as it does not matter. Estragon is amazed, "We're not tied? (PAUSE.) We're not — ". He is going to ask why they wait and crawl on hands and knees if they are not tied to Godot in any way. His question is not finished because it is foolish. He knows, and we know, that he would wait anyway. The necessity of waiting provides a structure within which to live, a ritual to enact: it is the ritual that neither will give up. Further, it is pointless to assert rights, for they are but superficial. The problem of life is elsewhere, as they recognize:

VLADIMIR: One is what one is.

ESTRAGON: No use struggling.

VLADIMIR: The essential doesn't change.

ESTRAGON: Nothing to be done.

(p. 14)

When there is nothing one can voluntarily do, immediately one starts acting. Once one is aware that any occupation or movement is not essentially going to change anything, all is sham or mime. Activity becomes ritual.

Pozzo's arrival is made to seem at first like the expected Saviour's. (We might note that he enters, if not on a donkey, at least with one. However, neither he nor the donkey prove genuine, and no one is talking about Jerusalem.) It

turns out that he is Pozzo, and the nearest Vladimir can come to identifying even Pozzo is to remark that he once knew a family called Gozzo whose mother had the clap (p. 15). The entrance of Pozzo and Lucky which at first promised so much has rapidly deteriorated.

Lucky's relationship to Pozzo interests them. Vladimir finally bursts out, "To treat a man . . . like that" "A disgrace!", adds Estragon (pp. 18-19). Lucky, on the end of a rope, suffers no end of apparent humiliation and beating from his master. But Vladimir and Estragon are similarly on a rope to Godot. In a sense, Lucky is luckier than Vladimir and Estragon, for he has his Godot. However, is it worth it? Lucky simply acts out a different role than Vladimir and Estragon: it is merely one ritual in place of another.

Further, he does not want even his misery to change. He is enacting his own ritual on the end of Pozzo's rope, a ritual that Pozzo takes great pains to describe accurately. Lucky will not put down his bags (p. 21), and Pozzo tries to pinpoint his servant's exact reasoning. He says that Lucky does not want to put down the bags because he wishes to impress Pozzo, that he will keep him. However, Pozzo still is not satisfied with his description of the situation, and tries again: "He wants to mollify me, so that I'll give up the idea of parting with him. No, that's not exactly it either." Again he re-describes the pattern of Lucky's behavior: "He wants to cod me, but he won't"; "He imagines that when I see how well he carries I'll be tempted to keep him on in that

capacity"; and "He imagines that when I see him indefatigable I'll regret my decision." Pozzo has been striving for accuracy in describing Lucky's predicament, and in each of his five attempts, he uses slightly different words, with slightly differing logical connections between the clauses:

He wants to impress	-so that I'll keep
. . . to mollify	-so I'll give up the idea of parting
. . . to cod me	-but he won't
. . . how well he carries	-I'll keep him on
. . . him indefatigable	-I'll regret my decision

All are intricate variations on the subject of the slave's relation to his master, a credo of devotion that builds up like a religious chant, with the voice of questioning droning on between the lines:

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

ESTRAGON: You've had enough of him?

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

VLADIMIR: You waagerrim?

VLADIMIR: You want to get rid of him?

(p. 21)

It is this kind of passage about which Kenner can write, "This is worthy of Bach."²⁸ Finally Pozzo moves from his position of pompous divine, who reads the minds of his followers, to answer, "I do." The spell of the service is broken, but an aura of omnipotence has been built around the intruder. Pozzo

²⁸ Hugh Kenner, Samuel Beckett, New York, Grove Press, 1961, p. 113.

decides to sell Lucky (a reversal of the Christ-Judas relationship) and Lucky weeps. Lucky's life has been made up of a series of loving acts in the service of a master who will betray him. The ritual of his life becomes sham.

However, quite suddenly a bit later, Pozzo collapses on the ground groaning, "I can't bear it . . . any longer . . . the way he goes on . . . you've no idea . . . it's terrible . . . he must go . . . I'm going mad" (p. 22). Vladimir turns on Lucky to declare,

How dare you! It's abominable! Such a good master!
Crucify him like that! After so many years! Really!
(p. 23)

The Christ-Judas relationship is reversed again back to its original, where we find an old, sick donkey-servant betraying a pompous little master. Of course, there has been no real betrayal: in a world where nobody trusts anybody else, the word "betrayal" can mean nothing. Where there is no loyalty, there can be nothing to betray. There becomes no point to Pozzo's crucifixion.

The devotion of Lucky to Pozzo is echoed by the feigned tender friendship of Estragon and Vladimir. Lucky, we infer, is at an earlier stage of awareness; perhaps he has only recently discovered Pozzo's heartless intentions, which make of his own life a farce. Estragon and Vladimir are far past believing in anything, though they will happily act parts. When Estragon gets kicked by Lucky and cries that he will "never walk again", Vladimir is immediately solicitous: "(TENDERLY). I'll carry you. (PAUSE.) If necessary." (p. 22) "I'll carry

you" — the words of the friend-beyond-death who makes life worthwhile and warm, full of human compassion; "If necessary" — the skeptic for whom any part in life is only a part, to be doffed when the cue has been answered.

Estragon and Vladimir, meanwhile, are only too aware that what they are watching is a mime-play. They remark that the evening is only just beginning, and promises to be awful:

VLADIMIR: Worse than the pantomime.

ESTRAGON: The circus.

VLADIMIR: The music-hall.

ESTRAGON: The circus.

(p. 23)

Vladimir exits for a moment with the words, "I'll be back." "End of the corridor, on the left", calls out Estragon. "Keep my seat", says Vladimir as he leaves. Suddenly Estragon and Vladimir are properly at the theatre, watching Pozzo act out what appears to them a ritual of memorized lines and movements, as the audience itself watches Estragon and Vladimir (and as someone is watching the audience?). For an instant, the entire playhouse merges together to become a giant stage, each person playing a dual role of actor and audience. To pass away some of the time between waking and sleeping, the audience has come to watch a play wherein the main characters are trying to pass away some of the time between waking and sleeping by watching a second strange couple who manage to spend their time enacting reversals and variations of the Christ-Judas relationship. Moreover, Pozzo too is acting and aware of it. He and Estragon act out a minute mime-play concerning being asked to sit down. Pozzo takes the part of leading

actor and director, telling Estragon precisely how to invite him to sit down. He asks Estragon to ask him to sit down:

ESTRAGON: Would that be a help?

POZZO: I fancy so.

ESTRAGON: Here we go. Be seated, Sir, I beg of you.

(How easily Estragon, that poseur without equal, slips into the Sir Walter Raleigh posture.)

POZZO: No no, I wouldn't think of it! (PAUSE. ASIDE.)
Ask me again.

ESTRAGON: Come come, take a seat I beseech you, you'll get pneumonia.

(p. 24)

With the word "pneumonia", Estragon relinquishes his part. The non sequitur snaps both him and us out of one act and into another, a rather ill-defined one. He becomes a type of solicitous male-nurse, but when we think it through, how will sitting on a campstool stave off pneumonia?

Of course, it will not, but because Estragon has shown himself willing to accept nonsense as sense, he can move up to take his place with the clowns and jesters of history. In summing up the main points in Hermann Reich's Der Mimus (1903), Esslin notes that, "In the mimeplay of antiquity, the clown appears as the moros or stupidus; his absurd behavior arises from his inability to understand the simplest logical relations."²⁹ With the clowns of the Absurd Theatre, the question has really become one of refusing to understand logical relations. And, continues Esslin, "In trying to burst the bounds of logic and language, it [verbal nonsense] batters at

²⁹ Esslin, p. 232.

the enclosing walls of the human condition itself."³⁰ Non-sense shakes us into new ways of perception. Every time we begin to settle in to some general tone or atmosphere, every time we think we have finally attuned ourselves to the mood of the theatre, the playwright snaps us out of it with a joke, imbecilic like as not, but always disrupting. We have noted earlier that Beckett seems quite concerned that we lose our bearings. Much of the straight vaudeville in his plays is used with this purpose in mind. Vladimir buttons his fly: "Never neglect the little things of life" (p. 8). The audience laughs. Its normal rational composure is lost for the moment, and Beckett is freed again to catch it in his snare, to carry it along into the realms of illogic, unopposed. Freud's analysis of jokes can lend authority. He wrote,

A joke will allow us to exploit something ridiculous in our enemy which we could not . . . bring forward openly or consciously; once again, then, the joke will evade restrictions and open sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible.³¹

In the case of Absurd Theatre, the enemy is rationality; and, we might add, the sources that the joke opens up to us here are not always ones of pleasure. However, the operation of the joke as a general liberating agent is the same.

For the most part in this study, what will concern us will not be the fact that vaudeville comedy frees us: our

³⁰ Esslin, p. 241.

³¹ Sigmund Freud, The Complete Psychological Works, James Strachey, trans., London, The Hogarth Press, 1960, vol. VIII, p. 103.

interest will lie in what the comedy frees us for. In losing our ties with this world, what other world beneath faces us? We will be concerned with the peculiar emphasis that is given to certain techniques of vaudeville, such as repetition of words or actions, only insofar as they are ritualistic in their effects, that is, only as they open to us a new world.

In the meantime, Pozzo has turned quasi-poet, to indulge in a lyrical description of the sky and its changes during the course of a day. He affects the poetic stance, dramatic gesture of "the two hands lapsing by stages" (p. 25). After his performance is over, he asks Vladimir and Estragon if they were well entertained, and they act out their reactions; Vladimir, "Oh very good, very very good", and Estragon, "Oh tray bong, tray tray bong." Like Tweedledee and Dum, their answers are the same, with Estragon simply adding an inner variety by speaking in French. They talk woodenly, like puppets. Pozzo, continuing his role of thick-skinned poet, asks for more praise, "I weakened a little towards the end, you didn't notice?"

VLADIMIR: Oh perhaps just a teeny weeny little bit.

ESTRAGON: I thought it was intentional.
(p. 25)

The series of convolutions set up by Estragon's last remark are endless. Pretending to be an audience listening to a real poet, he flatters the poet by pretending to think that the weak ending was intentional, when it was simply poetic incapability. Actually, to the real Estragon (if there is one), the weak ending of the poetic fantasy spouted by the

real Pozzo was intentional, because the real Pozzo is mocking the lyrical. He himself does mean it when he concludes, "(GLOOMILY.) That's how it is on this bitch of an earth." And yet, who are "the real" Pozzo and Estragon? We do not know them any more than they know each other. We only know them when they are acting out a ritual, when they are not being themselves. In the unreal — the play — we are as close to the real as we can come. This use of ritual to open doors to reality will be more evident in Genet.

With Lucky's speech, we apparently have a chance to examine how a person thinks. Of prime importance is the hat. Pozzo, Vladimir and Estragon remove their hats in order to think, and they think silently. Lucky cannot think unless his hat is on, and his thoughts are loud. If this is an example of the inner processes of one's everyday mind, it is a disturbing spectacle. Unfinished thoughts whirl in random circles, half-formed ideas clash, to go off together as grotesque hybrids, "who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue still and calm so calm" (p. 28). Eventually the words take hold of the speaker who appears only the mouthpiece of some other power that invests the nonsense with a bristling poetic magic — "it appears what is more much more grave than in the light the light the light of the labors lost" (p. 29). After a grand mêlée and "final vociferations", Vladimir seizes the hat. At once, Lucky is silent. (He will never speak again.) It is as if he has been visited by powers which use him, and leave

him spent, a kind of divine visitation from a spirit who resides, no less, in his hat. Pozzo, peculiarly furious, tramples the hat into the ground with the cry, "There's an end to his thinking!" (p. 30). Something dies.

Needless to say, there is more behind the phenomenon of Lucky's speech than the author's desire to show processes of thought. We can examine chaotic thought in many of Shakespeare's soliloquies, and must admit that Beckett here is achieving something else, other than what the Bard was concerned with. Macbeth's thoughts derive from Macbeth, from his memory and experience, emotions and intellect, and from his immediate situation. Lucky's words come from none of these sources: they are not a product of human nature, as we like to think of it. They come from somewhere else, and our only choice is to connect them with the hat. This is an illogical connection, but the only one we can make, and it leads us into magic. The putting on of a hat becomes as a magical charm that can invoke from an unknown spiritual world the words Lucky gives us. Because there is no logical connection between putting on a hat and pouring forth a torrent of words, we begin to feel there must be a supernatural connection (for a connection there is). The mere action of putting on a hat takes on the powers of the rituals of medicine men which ward off evil, or cause rain to fall. In the same way as Lucky himself bears no relation to the words he speaks, so does one word bear no relation to the one which follows. Each word becomes an entity in itself, a being that

is found where it is only because it seemingly has wished to be there. Each word assumes a presence of its own that is frightening because not understood. To look at the stage as a whole, we note that Lucky, as a figure if not a person, has no relation to the others around him. His presence, too, becomes a mystery to us. What we see and hear, then, is magic in operation. We watch the performance of a little ritual — the putting on of a hat — and see it bring into meaningful order the unconnected figures and things and words on the stage. When the hat is removed, the spell is broken: Lucky becomes mute and empty, the hat is trampled underfoot, the words disappear. A multitude of entities is murdered before us.

Shortly after the exit of Pozzo with Lucky, a messenger arrives from M. Godot, a small boy. The Boy is unfamiliar with them; it is his "first time" to be messenger; and it was not he who came yesterday. With the word "yesterday", it suddenly becomes apparent that the play is only a repetition of events that occurred in almost exactly the same way the day before. And how many yesterdays have there been? A few pages back, Estragon calls himself "Adam". And Vladimir, now answering to "Mister Albert", is still waiting. The message is as expected: "Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won't come this evening but surely to-morrow" (p. 33). There is just enough hope to give credence to their ritual of waiting, so the game goes on.

The divine logic of this Godot, imaginary or not, is

shown in his treatment of the boy. He has two boys as servants, brothers they are, and one he determines to beat, as earlier he saved one of the two thieves. The percentage is the same. For no obvious reason, Godot beats the boy who minds the sheep, and favours the minder of the goats. He is indeed an absurd master, and a master of the absurd. He separates the keepers of the sheep from the keepers of the goats on the basis alone of what they keep, and always beats the former. Otherwise, the boys are identical. The mathematics is formidable: fifty percent. of two is one, and only fifty percent. may be spared. Is Godot, too, indulging in a ritual game to pass his time? If so, it is a ritual pared to its most precise: the number. Nothing is more formal, more devoid of humanity, in short, more ritualistic, than the ceremonious equation, each side of which exactly balances the other. Godot has Boy I and Boy II, and one of them must be beaten. It does not matter, of course, which one is beaten, for they are identical. Therefore we can see Godot flipping a coin. "Heads" is Boy I; "Tails" is Boy II. (He could put it the other way around, "Tails" is Boy I; however, "Heads" comes first in the alphabet, so it may as well correspond to Boy I. This is the kind of thought-process we can legitimately imagine Godot to be following.) He flips the coin. "Heads" is up. The vagaries of human choice have been eliminated; the result is as close to pure chance as anyone could devise. The only caprice is Godot's decision in the first place to play the game.

If one were to describe the characteristics of ritual, its lack of spontaneity would be the first thing noted, for indeed, spontaneity is the antithesis of ritual. All that is spontaneous, effervescent, informal and unappointed, belongs to life, to the human. A ritual is basically inhuman in its perfection and formality. It seems that any definition of art acknowledges that it organizes slipshod life into a form. However, though every artistic work organizes, not every work is formal. As an extreme example, we think of the novels of Thomas Wolfe, which are in large part unpremeditated, uncalculated, and enormously human. True, the many loose episodes are knit up into a large form that has unity (Look Homeward, Angel, at any rate). In ritualistic art, however, the smallest detail is calculated. While a pun is not altogether intended, it can be seen that this argument is leading ritual into a comparison with the formality of calculus, where every detail is important and manipulable. The system of higher mathematics is based on one symbol, the equal sign. Provided it is always respected, and that the quantities on one side always equal the quantities on the other, many things may be discovered. Symmetry yields solution: the spontaneous element can only confuse. In the same way, balance is essential to ritual. To lessen the chance of confusion by the spontaneous element, human nature is eliminated. Thus Estragon and Vladimir are not "characters" (like Falstaff and Bottom, or even like Antony and Cleopatra) — they are deliberately made flat. It is on purpose that one of the messenger-boys is not

slothful and the other avaricious, for then Godot's choice would bring with it a moral standard and all the other peculiarities of opinion and motive that accompany humanity. Formality is sought that one might discover a neat formula for life, a Golden Mean; and in the interest of formality, personality is removed. (This way of thinking is illogical, in that any formula for life that excludes personality is ignoring the essence of life. However, this is a fault common to many people; Lawrence's Gerald in Women in Love is an example.) This explains some of the reasons why Beckett's characters, rightly or wrongly, desire formality. However, Beckett the artist seeks formality because it makes possible perfect repetition. The nearer the ritual approximates mathematical formula, the more perfectly it can be repeated. While it is true that repetition gives a feeling of continuity to life ("This will go onward the same Though Dynasties pass"), Beckett is experimenting with that kind of repetition which becomes frightening, in that it cannot be stopped. A Beckett character seeks the repetition of ritual that it give a mold to his aimless existence; but when the mold hardens about him and begins to dictate, he becomes possessed by something even worse than emptiness. When Godot works, as Estragon and Vladimir assume he does, with numbers themselves, he reaches the ultimate in formal ritual; but it is a ritual that his victims can no longer escape. There is nothing to say that there is a Godot behind the scenes setting the game in motion. The horrifying thing is that this does not matter. We can

fall into ritual, Godot or not; and the ritual can destroy of its own.

Beckett's interest in equation is most explicit in his novels. In Murphy, the hero faces a delicious problem daily, or at least whenever he has tuppence for biscuits with his tea — which is the best order in which to consume the flavours? Kenner abbreviates the description:

Murphy considers with agitation that his assortment of five biscuits will not 'spring to life before him, dancing the radiant measure of its total permutability, edible in a hundred and twenty ways!' until he can learn not to prefer any one to any other. His preference for the Ginger, which he saves for the last, leaves only four to permute in twenty-four ways; and his distaste for the Anonymous biscuit, which he therefore wolfs immediately, further reduces the number of ways in which he can consume the remainder to 'a paltry six'.³²

This kind of arithmetic problem constantly engages the imaginations of Beckett's characters, even those who, like Godot, never appear. For one thing, to put life into numerical patterns is the purest way of ordering it. A number is pure symbol, symbolic of nothing or of everything. Making everyday problems into mathematical problems somehow lifts the burden onto other shoulders than one's own. Molloy, faced with the problem of how to carry sixteen sucking stones in four pockets, and yet never suck the same one twice until the circle has been completed, resorts to mathematics. At the time, this was much easier on him than having to decide which ones to throw away, which would have involved choice (free will).

³² Kenner, pp. 111-112.

Thus in the same way as the ritual games of Estragon and Vladimir serve to keep them from facing the formlessness of life, the rituals built around number serve as structures in the void. Again, the arithmetic rules governing combination and permutation give us the (false) assurance that there are only so many possibilities, and we have only to determine, by mathematical formulae, how many there are and what they are, to foresee the future. In this way, we can feel we have a control over our lives. The equation is reassuring. As Kenner summarizes, "Over the Beckett landscape . . . there hovers an inaccessible world of number and relation, to which his people fitfully try to approximate their actions."³³

In a chaotic world, it is comforting to think that there is pattern somewhere. Beckett as playwright brings the comfort of this numerical world right into the structure of his so-called "formless" plays. There are two tramps and two visitors, which makes two pairs, and the idea of two pairs is endlessly fascinating in its possibilities. Further, there are two messengers, who may or may not be the same person, who enter, one in the first act, the second in the second. Both Act I and Act II end the same way, with Estragon opening the couplet at the end of the first, and Vladimir opening the couplet at the close of the second. All is mathematically symmetrical, and this world of numbers offers the security of immutable scientific ritual. One may not know where infinity

³³ Kenner, p. 111.

is, but two, six, eight, two hundred and fifty-six thousand (or better still, 2, 6, 8, 256,000) — these can be worked with and known. They are the absolutes that can be juggled into indestructible, hence immortal, sacrosanct patterns.

VLADIMIR: And why doesn't he beat you?

BOY: I don't know, Sir.

VLADIMIR: He must be fond of you.

BOY: I don't know, Sir.

(pp. 33-34)

There is no emotion, no affection, directing Godot's choice, because he seems to have decided to let the game of simple percentage be his guide.

However, if Godot has chosen, by caprice or whatever, to make numbers out of people and juggle them according to formulae, then he can just as easily stop making numbers out of them. If it is only a game with him (and this we cannot know for certain), there is always the chance that he will put it aside. Perhaps some day he will beat both boys. He could even begin on Estragon and Vladimir. The point is that one cannot depend upon the ritual of number to organize everything. The world of mathematics is not totally inclusive, nor is there any reason to believe that it is permanent. It is as dangerous to rely on percentages for salvation, as to rely on the ritual games to ward off the fearful emptiness of life. Furthermore, while Murphy is thinking about his biscuits, and the many ways to enjoy them, a dog happens along, to snaffle all but the Ginger. When Estragon and Vladimir discuss their 50-50 chances of salvation, certitude likewise is snubbed, for only one of the four Evangelists speaks of one of the

two thieves being saved. In spite of the odds being against him, "Everybody", as Vladimir asserts, believes the lone voice: "It's the only version they know." "People are bloody ignorant apes" (p. 9), retorts Estragon. As simply as this, the edifice of reassuring numerical ritual is knocked down. Always there is this tension of ambivalence in the rituals. Just as arbitrarily as they are set up, they are destroyed.

The whole of Act II becomes a ritualistic re-enactment of the events of Act I. The heavy repetition of one ritual inside another, inside another, leads one to feel that every day would bring but a further repetition. Life becomes a ritual of waiting and organizing oneself for a Saviour who never comes. Yet the ritual gives structure for existence, and Estragon and Vladimir continue. The basis of their friendship is examined. They explore the possibilities of each being happier alone, but cannot get too far because Estragon does not know why he comes crawling back. It is not because he feels particularly any happier. Tossing the word "happy" back and forth is only a little game with them anyway; they might just as well discuss boots. As a matter of fact, they often do; but this particular ritual concerns "happy", and the pair have to bring the ceremony to completion:

VLADIMIR: You must be happy, too, deep down, if you only knew it.

ESTRAGON: Happy about what?

VLADIMIR: To be back with me again.

ESTRAGON: Would you say so?

VLADIMIR: Say you are, even if it's not true.

ESTRAGON: What am I to say?

VLADIMIR: Say, I am happy.
 ESTRAGON: I am happy.
 VLADIMIR: So am I.
 ESTRAGON: So am I.
 VLADIMIR: We are happy.
 ESTRAGON: We are happy. (SILENCE.) What do we do
 now, now that we are happy?
 VLADIMIR: Wait for Godot.
 (pp. 38-39)

One ritual finished, and they must slip into another. They can not be without. Sometimes their rituals are private unto themselves; sometimes they are familiar. In either case, the audience can share in the enactment as a witness, whether or not the writ be strange. Although the ritual is only a game, it is a pleasurable game, for ceremony is soothing. Again, we note the ambivalent nature of Beckett's ritual, which soothes the senses while crucifying our wits.

Every man carries a "little cross" until he dies, philosophizes Vladimir. "In the meantime", answers Estragon (that is, while we have to be alive), "let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent It's so we won't think." (p. 40) So to fill up the gap of life, they talk about why they have to talk:

ESTRAGON: It's so we won't hear.
 VLADIMIR: We have our reasons.
 ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.
 VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.
 ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
 VLADIMIR: Like sand.
 ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
 SILENCE.

And during the silence, the audience is forced to participate with them in listening to the dead voices of life. Silence fills the theatre with wings, leaves and sand. Finally,

sound resumes:

VLADIMIR: They all speak at once.
 ESTRAGON: Each one to itself.
 SILENCE.

We listen to a dead leaf conversing with itself. At our breaking point, Vladimir continues:

VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.
 ESTRAGON: They rustle.
 VLADIMIR: They murmur.
 ESTRAGON: They rustle.
 SILENCE.

The hush that descends on the playhouse is one of mute irritation, discomfort, fear. The silence and the spectacle force one to remain quiet and stationary. The trapped audience is made to listen to the workings of life, and it hears a noise worse than silence, a murmur of sand, not even the throbbing of its own temples. The terrifying confrontation concludes:

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.
 ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
 VLADIMIR: Like ashes.
 ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
 LONG SILENCE.

From this moment, one can remain in the rational world only by effort of will, by determining not to enter the anguished fantasy world created by the stage. It is hard not to abandon the rational as irrelevant, and give oneself over to the disturbing poetry of the theatre. We succumb, and permit painful areas of our being to be probed in an experience akin to hypnotism. The poetry effects our reaction. It is a poem constructed around symmetry and repetition that takes on the aura of a chant, with two voices answering and echoing each other. Their indifference to what they are saying — and

they are only dully filling in the gap between birth and death — lends the feeling of impersonality essential to ritual. It is as if the words will their own patterns, and rise up to take their places of their own accord. Whisper, rustle, murmur, rustle — Vladimir and Estragon are not responsible for this breathless ordering of sound. As each word moves into its place, so do the larger word-patterns group themselves, rising in recitation to universal liturgies.

This long lyric passage about the leaves and dead voices has been examined philosophically, when we discovered the irony that the poetry, too, only fills in the gap between birth and death; and the anguished beauty of the lines has been analyzed, in reference to the rational value of the words. It is possible with Beckett to go much deeper than this, into the subtleties of sound patterns. As music can be scored around the basis of the bar, and the dance can be notated according to position against the plane of the "wall", and architecture around the module, so we can notate Beckett's poetry (and even some of his prose) almost without reference to words. This could be based primarily on the length of the basic sound. This module would vary considerably throughout a play, depending on the mood of certain passages and scenes. The play would be set down as a symphony, then, with an Adagio, an Allegro, and so on, although the classic form of a Beethoven symphony would not be seen. A classic five-act play, moving through to climax and dénouement, would correspond. The Absurd play generally comprises a series of small climaxes and

dénouements (nothing being very grand these days), so there is no use looking for an overall development of a sound pattern or theme. Instead of one long important Adagio passage, we will find several brief ones. The ashes and leaves passage is unusually sustained, giving us the chance to examine carefully Beckett's definite awareness of modulation. We will find a basic pattern in the following passage:

VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.
 ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
 VLADIMIR: Like ashes.
 ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
 LONG SILENCE.

It could be suggested that the module, or basis of division, is the two-word unit: They make/a noise/like feathers. The way the word, "feathers", flutters off at the end of the line is beautifully incomplete and suggestive. There are three modules in the first statement, which are answered by three more, Like leaves/Like ashes/Like leaves. Altogether there are six bars or modules here, each one of which contains two beats, except the third ("like feathers"), which provides the variety of one full beat ("like"), and two half-beats ("feathers"). The rest of the modules are divided identically into two equally strong beats. We note that the last four modules start with the same sound ("like"), as a piece of music might start with the same note. The second beat of the fourth and sixth modules is repeated, which gives firmness to the whole structure. A careful director should be aware of this pattern and counterpoint, and would, moreover, have to give some thought to the precise length of the "long silence". "Long"

would seem to carry the value of two modules, like one note in music that is tied over two bars; "silence" would be the same. That way, the length of the silence would be four-sixths, or two-thirds, that of the voiced modules. This might be too short, in which case it should be lengthened to cover six modules, making equal the proportion of silence to sound. Then again, if the director sees silence between every line, the precise length of each pause should be considered, and worked into the notation.

This extremely subtle balancing of sound-lengths, into which is worked a symmetrical balancing of sound-values through repetition ("leaves" appearing in the fourth and sixth modules), acts as a powerful, hidden rhythmical drug. This detailed patterning of rhythms and repetition acts on our senses at a primitive level, pulling us deep into the intricate inner structure of the play's ritual. This inner structure, it might be emphasized again, is based strongly on the concept of beat, a beat always organized by the module.

T.S. Eliot has written of the need for poetry in drama. He notes that, "There is a fringe of indefinite extent, of feeling, which we can only detect, so to speak, out of the corner of the eye and can never completely focus."³⁴ It is this fringe that prose is "wholly inadequate to express". The converse is not true, that all poetry locates this fringe area; but when prose changes into poetry because it wishes to

³⁴ T.S. Eliot, Poetry and Drama, Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1951, p. 42.

say something that cannot be handled in prose, then we can be certain that we are being brought face to face with usually inaccessible areas of our being. The method of poetry, its insistence on building up single images out of rhythm and repetition, leads us beyond rational, conscious perception. Eliot talks of the "unconscious effect of the verse upon us", which would apply to all poetry. But when attempting analysis of Beckett's poetry above, we are best to twist the words about and speak of "the effect of the verse upon our unconscious"; for his poetry affects not only us, but our unconscious, and insofar as we have little control over our unconscious, the two are quite separate. The ritual duet of Estragon and Vladimir is calculated to affect our hidden selves, whether we will or no. Making full use of the hypnotic effect of pattern and repetition, the poem gathers force on the stage until it looms up to assume the properties of tribal incantation.

In "A Dialogue on Dramatic Poetry", Eliot has someone ask the categorical question, "And is not the question of verse drama versus prose drama a question of degree of form?"³⁵ If verse drama is more formal than prose, then ritual drama, as a particular kind of verse drama, is yet more formal than either. As we have discovered earlier, the more formal the verse, the more concentrated (the equation being the most concentrated of all). Part of the power of ritual lies in this

³⁵ T.S. Eliot, Selected Essays, London, Faber and Faber Limited, 1932, p. 46.

concentration, for warring elements packed into a small mold are more likely to explode than the same elements loosely scattered over a large terrain.

Estragon and Vladimir, in the meantime, are demonstrating the utter meaninglessness of the previous evening, which is to us represented by Act I. What we recall as a ritualistic enactment of life in poetry, interspersed with devastating metaphysical wit, Estragon cannot even remember at all. "I suppose we blathered", he says vacantly. But suddenly it comes to him. He remembers, "with assurance", that "yesterday evening we spent blathering about nothing in particular. That's been going on now for half a century." (p. 42) The private rituals that he and Vladimir have invented to help pass the time of life are empty and meaningless to him, hollow shells of ceremony. (By implication, Beckett reduces his own work to "blather". However, it fills the time, man's main object.)

By happily leaving his boots behind the previous evening, Estragon ensures for himself the busy-ness of trying them on again the next day, in the pretext that they are different ones that someone else has left behind. The fiction of the boots is filled out into a little story. Someone happened along, saw Estragon's black boots lying on the ground (actually, they were "a kind of gray"), and, finding them better fitting than his own, exchanged them, leaving his own brown (actually "a kind of green") in their place. It makes a charming episode. Vladimir and Estragon can even stretch out the conversation further by formulating the stranger's rea-

soning:

VLADIMIR: His were too tight for him, so he took yours.

ESTRAGON: But mine were too tight.

VLADIMIR: For you. Not for him.

(p. 43)

By incredible illogic, these substituted boots fit Estragon to perfection, when of course they ought to have been sizes too small. This whole boot episode fills in about ten minutes of their time quite satisfactorily. Provided each follows the rules of the game, which declare that neither may recognize that the two pairs of boots are one and the same pair, they are granted an entertainment,

VLADIMIR: . . . an occupation.

ESTRAGON: A relaxation.

VLADIMIR: A recreation.

ESTRAGON: A relaxation.

(p. 44)

As they run out of boots to entertain themselves with, so too do they run out of words to describe their entertainment. Estragon has to pretend that one pair of boots is two in order to occupy himself with trying them on; in the same way, he is driven to repeat "relaxation" in the above exchange, as he has no other words, yet needs one more to complete the set of two couplets. They continue to discuss the boots, and even get on to the infinitely more preoccupying subject of finding socks to put on his feet in the boots, when Estragon can no longer pretend. "That's enough about these boots", he cries (p. 45). The subject dies as quickly, for it has been openly exposed as only a game. That state of "willing suspension of disbelief" has been abandoned.

Then Estragon decides he will pass away some time by sleeping, although, as Vladimir points out, "Yesterday you slept." Repetition never bothers Estragon, and he gives sleeping a short try. Vladimir sings him a "song" that looks on the printed page like a square of knitting incompleated at one corner:

Bye bye bye bye
 Bye bye bye bye
 Bye bye bye bye
 Bye bye . . .
 (p. 45)

With this formal little lullaby, Estragon dozes off to another world. Soon he is back in this one, shouting and casting about "wildly". Vladimir, who becomes Didi in Estragon's childish need, refuses to let him tell the story of his dream. All we know is that it is one of free-floating terror, "I was falling — I was on top of a —" It is in fact Estragon being confronted with the unknown that lies between the ritual games. The games are basically intellectual, contrived by the rational mind to hide and keep in check the unexplained drives of the subconscious mind. There is a lifting of rational controls during the dream, and the subconscious can push its demands through to the conscious. We cannot know exactly what Estragon discovered in himself, but our own nightmares are likely to be similar. Didi calms his companion, and soon they are back to the old familiar, safe ritual, that they both know and trust so well:

ESTRAGON: Let's go.
 VLADIMIR: We can't.
 ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We're waiting for Godot.
 ESTRAGON: Ah!

The pattern is becoming an incantatory refrain, reappearing at certain intervals in the structure of the play to become an anchoring bass-note to the crescendos of hysteria. The pattern of beats within each module above is a steady, regular "short-long": Let's go / We can't / Why not?. The answering modules have variety, but again finish on the heavy beat, Godot. The final indefinite "Ah!" will be long and querulous, the call of a lone marsh-bird at night. Yet again, the pattern is symmetrical. Each sound is answered; the form is complete. Though it would appear steadying, the refrain actually succeeds in adding to the hysteria, for it seems to calm us only that we will have wits enough left to appreciate the terror implicit in its rational meaning.

Only a chance accident stops Estragon from leaving, if indeed we believe him when he asserts, "Farewell" and "You'll never see me again." It is that Vladimir discovers Lucky's hat on the ground. To try it on, he must get Estragon to hold his own. This is the beginning of an elaborate parody of man, whose most significant action becomes the taking off and the putting on of his hat. Stage directions begin:

ESTRAGON TAKES VLADIMIR'S HAT. VLADIMIR ADJUSTS LUCKY'S HAT ON HIS HEAD. ESTRAGON PUTS ON VLADIMIR'S HAT IN PLACE OF HIS OWN WHICH HE HANDS TO VLADIMIR. VLADIMIR TAKES ESTRAGON'S HAT. ESTRAGON ADJUSTS VLADIMIR'S HAT ON HIS HEAD. VLADIMIR PUTS ON ESTRAGON'S HAT IN PLACE OF LUCKY'S WHICH HE HANDS TO ESTRAGON. ESTRAGON TAKES LUCKY'S HAT . . .

(p. 46)

and so on until all the permutations and combinations possible

between two men, and three hats, and four movements (taking a hat, adjusting a hat, putting a hat on, and handing a hat back) have been explored. There is a slapstick humour when Vladimir and Estragon try on so furiously the three hats. The emphasis, however, is not on vaudeville fun, but on frenzy. An element of fear is added, in that we cannot understand the relation of the hats to the men, and these seemingly pointless actions take on the properties of a rite. We are also back to the formal purity of mathematical permutability. Everyday living again is worked out on the basis of numerical possibility. However, the numbers they play with are a bit fractious. We recall that Lucky's hat is the one that made him think. Will it likewise possess its new owner? Its spirit seems to have departed. Nothing untoward occurs, even when Vladimir takes it off, "peers into it, shakes it, knocks on the crown, puts it on again." (p. 46) One learns not to count on the constancy of even the most animate of inanimate objects. Or possibly they are the ones we should least count on. We remember Pozzo's earlier anger with his whip. It cracks but feebly, and he cries, "What's the matter with this whip? . . . Worn out, this whip." (pp. 24-25) Possibly the whip had just become bored with him.

The episode completed, Estragon decides to leave again. (As he never leaves, the implication is that there is nowhere to go; at least, there would be no more to do there than here.) However, even leaving would be a change from not leaving, and Estragon is willing to try it. Vladimir is disappointed:

VLADIMIR: Will you not play?
ESTRAGON: Play at what?
VLADIMIR: We could play at Pozzo and Lucky.
ESTRAGON: Never heard of it. [There is about Estragon
a very endearing quality.]
VLADIMIR: I'll do Lucky, you do Pozzo.
(p. 47)

So they act out a new game, Vladimir giving Estragon his cues, and then answering him as he has seen Lucky do. Estragon is in the strange position of playing a part that he does not know, of sharing a re-enactment that is new to him, and therefore not a re-enactment. It is ritual deprived of its driving force, which seems to make no difference to its effect on us:

VLADIMIR: Tell me to think.
ESTRAGON: What?
VLADIMIR: Say, Think, pig!
ESTRAGON: Think, pig!
SILENCE.
VLADIMIR: I can't!
(p. 47)

Pretending, for the moment, to be Pozzo, Vladimir tells himself to dance, then turns himself into Lucky and tries to dance. Suddenly discovering that Estragon is not there, he collapses in all his roles at once, "moves wildly about the stage." Even if Estragon did not know his role, he was better than nobody; his very presence lent credibility to the Lucky-Pozzo game. The structure of their rituals demanded one other person, that the audience-actor tension exist. With Estragon gone, Vladimir becomes a boat without anchor.

As quickly as he disappeared, Estragon appears again, bringing in a brand new entertainment, "They're coming!" The long period of devoted waiting is over. "It's Godot! At last! Gogo! It's Godot! We're saved! Let's go and meet

him!" cries Vladimir (p. 47). A new pastime rescues them. Now they can wait and watch while their saviour comes the last few paces of his journey towards them. They can try hiding behind the tree ("Decidedly this tree will not have been the slightest use to us", Vladimir can announce, with scholarly turn of phrase). The tedium of standing on guard can lead them into a fight:

VLADIMIR: Moron!
ESTRAGON: Vermin!
VLADIMIR: Abortion!
ESTRAGON: Morpion!
VLADIMIR: Sewer-rat!
ESTRAGON: Curate! As remarked earlier, Estragon
has a certain quaintness.
VLADIMIR: Cretin!
ESTRAGON: . . . Crrritic!
VLADIMIR: Oh!

(p. 48)

Their battle over, the tramps can make up. That takes nine lines, and, as Vladimir concludes, "How time flies when one has fun" (p. 49). They run out of ideas, and Vladimir's suggestion that they "do the tree" does not fill in too much of the gap. Again they are saved at what must be the last moment. Pozzo and Lucky stagger on stage to crash into Estragon, who is hopping about on one leg, doing the tree, with his eyes closed in hopes that God will see him. How full their life has become. Vladimir is overjoyed:

We are no longer alone, waiting for the night,
waiting for Godot, waiting for . . . waiting.
All evening we have struggled, unassisted. Now
it's over. It's already tomorrow Time
flows again already. The sun will set, the
moon rise, and we away . . . from here.

(p. 50)

With all the excitement, with the sudden plenitude of life,

even if it only be life-in-ritual, the pace becomes very fast. The silences and pauses cease appearing in stage directions as long as Pozzo and Lucky remain on stage. With a problem before him, Vladimir is galvanized into action, or at least into talking about action. In any case, it is far better than having nothing better to do than imitate trees. He assumes the role of General Vladimir, brilliant strategist, to deliver a page-long speech, second in length only to Lucky's in Act I, punctuated by frequent cries of help from the ground. We see what Vladimir is doing — stretching the new entertainment, this new game, out as long as he possibly can, for as soon as Pozzo is actually helped, he might leave and the game would be over. He justifies himself in this, and in all his other little amusements, in what is a key passage of the play. He orates,

All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions, and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which — how shall I say — which may at first sight seem reasonable, until they become a habit.

(p. 51)

"Under these conditions": that is, the absurd condition humaine; the "proceedings": the actions of everyday life which begin rationally, but end up as habit, that is, "irrationally". Habit, then, becomes a basis of the absurd, in its very blindness. Reversing the suggestion, to blind themselves, Vladimir and Estragon, and all the rest of us, slip into habits. And exalted habit rises to ritual. The "precarious, painful, mysterious, fertile" zones can be excluded by

the mold of ritual, and life may go on progressing neatly and busily towards death. However, as we have seen, there is a danger inherent in the ritual itself, that it become meaningful, for then it will evoke from the vitality of its own modular structure the peril and mystery that it is supposed to exclude. What happens is that we begin to enjoy the modulation pattern for its own sake. Why does an ordering of sound-lengths affect us in this way? Perhaps one should not answer such a question, except to mention the rhythmical structure of daily life. Our lives, after all, are broken into the module of the twenty-four hours, day and night forming together one unit. The reflection of this repetition through the module of word-lengths in a play could give reinforcement to our conception of living as a steady process which, too, has its bad side. We think of Chaucer's Troilus, who wished the night were at least ten. At any rate, a difficult balance must be maintained. Ritual is necessary as a protection against the horrors of spontaneous life, yet it must constantly be kept in check. Such delicate symmetry is truly only possible in the world of pure mathematics. Here the forces of life constantly threaten to upset the scales. Even the tree, which ought to have remained the same for the second act, has managed to sprout four or five leaves in defiance. No sooner have we attuned our ears to a modular pattern, than it is shattered by an obstreperous word that will not quite fit. It is the constant precariousness of his symmetry that renders Beckett's drama spell-binding.

Endgame

In a plea for the continuance of Absurd Theatre, Ionesco wrote about Endgame, "'That work has found again, across the gulf of time, across the ephemeral phenomena of history, a less ephemeral archetypal situation, a primordial subject from which all others spring.'"³⁶ It is one thing to claim the elemental and the archetypal; it is quite another to point it out specifically in the play. Esslin brings up the question of myth by saying that it "has almost entirely ceased to be effective on a collective plane in most rationally organized Western societies."³⁷ He then quotes from Mircea Eliade's book, Myths, Dreams and Mysteries, where it is pointed out that "'at the level of individual experience it [myth] has never completely disappeared; it makes itself felt in the dreams, the fantasies and the longings of modern man.'"³⁸ If Endgame³⁹ can be said to express the longings of modern man, it would seem that very strange myths indeed sustain our psychic life. Furthermore, is it entirely accurate to equate mythical and psychological roots? Myth carries connotations of the sacred, the inexplicable, that psychology is not always concerned with. In fact, to dispel mystery in as scientific

³⁶ Esslin, p. 248.

³⁷ Esslin, p. 248.

³⁸ Esslin, p. 248.

³⁹ All page references to Endgame will be to the Grove Press edition, 1958.

a manner as possible is the aim of many schools of psychological thought. However, the following few pages will proceed under the assumption that Eliade is correct, and that a world of myth lies behind the fantasies and longings of Hamm and Clov, Nagg and Nell.

Certainly there is every reason for fantasy. Endgame presents a grim world. Hamm, his face covered some of the time with a blood-stained handkerchief, is going blind and cannot walk; he lives for his pain-killer, which runs out during the course of the play. Clov, his foster-son and/or servant, cannot sit down; he waits hand and foot on Hamm, whom he hates and cannot leave; Nagg and Nell are Hamm's legless old parents who live each in a separate ashcan, and whom Hamm despises. It is a loveless group, a dying foursome, forced to exist in this room until the world outside finally dies. A colour theme is worked into the set. All is black or grey, relieved by two splashes of red: Clov's "very red" face, and Hamm's blooded handkerchief (which discloses a "very red" face also). Nagg and Nell have "very white" faces. The world outside, we are told, is "Light black. From pole to pole" (p. 32), that is, grey. Stage directions, as in Godot, call for the same mechanical movements. The play opens on a long period of silence, during which Clov acts out a pattern of busy-ness:

. . . HE GETS DOWN, TAKES THREE STEPS TOWARDS WINDOW LEFT, GOES BACK FOR LADDER, CARRIES IT OVER AND SETS IT DOWN UNDER WINDOW LEFT, GETS UP ON IT, LOOKS OUT OF WINDOW. BRIEF LAUGH. HE GETS DOWN, TAKES ONE STEP TOWARDS WINDOW RIGHT, GOES BACK FOR LADDER,

CARRIES IT OVER AND SETS IT DOWN UNDER WINDOW RIGHT,
GETS UP ON IT, LOOKS OUT OF WINDOW. BRIEF LAUGH.
(p. 1)

Little is more chilling than a command-performance "brief laugh", and five are ordered by Beckett to complete this mise en scène before the first words are spoken. The little rituals that made up the texture of Godot are repeated for the same reasons in Endgame, but without the alleviation of humour. Like Hamm's painkiller, laughter also has been used up. Hamm says, "Outside of here it's death" (p. 9), and there is little illusion about what is inside.

"Me — (HE YAWNS) — to play" is Hamm's opening gambit to himself, the fiction of his endless chronicle that will somehow keep him going until the very end. For this is Hamm's endgame, a game to fill in time until the end; and it is imperative that the world end before his chronicle. Like Estragon, who always wants to go because he can no longer bear waiting, Clov cannot bear the chronicle:

CLOV (IMPLORINGLY): Let's stop playing!
HAMM: Never!

(p. 77)

Occasionally he allows himself to drop the pretense. He indulges in a flight of fancy, "But beyond the hills? Eh? Perhaps it's still green. Eh? . . . Floral! Pomona! . . . Ceres!" (p. 39) And he has a few longings left, "If I could sleep I might make love. I'd go into the woods. My eyes would see . . . the sky, the earth. I'd run, run, they wouldn't catch me." (p. 18) His dreams lead him back to the natural world, perhaps even to a pastoral world, but as soon as he says

"they", a hint of neurosis appears. Who are "they"? Probably figments of imagination born of vague fears of persecution. He is happier telling his story, which is vaguely about a little boy that Hamm might have to take care of. Possibly the boy is Clov, and later, when Clov claims to be seeing "a small boy" through the telescope, we never discover whether he is adding to Hamm's story, recalling his own, or actually seeing a child.

Clov himself subsists on the small fiction of an ordered universe. "I love order", he claims, while trying to tidy up the room. "It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still and each thing is its last place, under the last dust." (p. 57) This is the order of death, each thing in its "last" place. Clov wants above all to make ready for the order of death. He also longs to leave, but this is an impossible dream:

HAMM: Why do you stay with me?

CLOV: Why do you keep me?

HAMM: There's no one else.

CLOV: There's nowhere else.

(p. 6)

Nagg and Nell no longer seem capable even of dreaming, except in a casual, indifferent way. They recall in hearty laughter the past when "we crashed on our tandem and lost our shanks" (p. 16), and the happier day of rowing on Lake Como. However, they neither abhor the past, nor long for it. Nagg mainly longs for a sugarplum, and when he cries in his ashcan, it is for no apparent reason. They are back to the basics of scratching each other's backs.

The longings of man in Endgame express a peculiar myth, be it individual or collective. Hamm in spirit roams a great stage, wishing for death to hurry, begging Clov to finish him. Clov agrees with Hamm when he says, "This has gone on long enough." (p. 45) Nell apparently passes away quietly during the course of the play, and Nagg has a desperate desire for a sugarplum, a psychological substitute for something.

Caught between the reality of the wheel-chair and ashcans, and a dream of green hills, Hamm acts out his end as the last great clown on earth. His is the final show, and his audience, a world of spectres; yet the show will go on. He tries to turn his last acts into dramatic ritual, to approximate a myth that does not exist. In fact, nothing exists, not even Turkish delight, or the tide, or bicycle wheels, or pap, seagulls, or God ("The bastard! He doesn't exist!" cries Hamm. p. 55). The myth of existence is a myth, and so the question of reality swallows its tail. Ritual becomes a parody of ritual. The problem is crucial to Beckett: on what does he base the ritual then?

In an early (1896) essay, "The Return of Ulysses", Yeats wrote,

The more a poet rids his verse of heterogeneous knowledge and irrelevant analysis, and purifies his mind with elaborate art, the more does the little ritual of his verse resemble the great ritual of Nature, and become mysterious and inscrutable.⁴⁰

⁴⁰ W.B. Yeats, Essays and Introductions, London, Macmillan, 1961, pp. 201-202.

Beckett assuredly has removed all the heterogeneous knowledge and irrelevant analysis; and he has concentrated on the ritualistic symmetry that would have satisfied Yeats' ideas of "elaborate art", but how far is the result from even vaguely resembling nature! In fact, Beckett allows Clov to be quite specific, "There's no more nature." (p. 11) Nature is nearly dead, and there is "Nothing on the horizon" (p. 31). Death is inside and outside. The ritualistic rhythms of Godot and Endgame are mocking parodies of the seasonal rhythms of a nature that is no more. The seeds that Clov planted have not sprouted, and now it is too late, "They'll never sprout!" (p. 13)

In Godot, nature has become unnecessary, irrelevant. Vladimir asks, "The sun. The moon. Do you not remember?" Estragon answers dully, "They must have been there, as usual." (p. 43) Vladimir is no more concerned than his companion. When Estragon suggests, "We should turn resolutely towards Nature", he simply replies, "We've tried that." (p. 41) The seasons come and go at will, it does not really matter when; it is not overly strange that spring (such as it was) should have come in one night.

However, by the time of Endgame, Nature has ended, finished, a fait almost accompli. She has only to run down, like the alarm on the clock. When Hamm asks in anguish, "What's happening, what's happening?", Clov's answer is only too true, "Something is taking its course." (p. 13) Nature, in fact, is taking her last course. She will not begin any-

thing new, but will allow the old just to die off gradually. "We breathe, we change! We lose our hair, our teeth! Our bloom! Our ideals!" (p. 11): this is Hamm's awareness of nature. He has become like the madman painter-engraver he knew, who looked out upon fields of corn and the sails of the herring fleet only to see ashes. On page thirty-three we see, rather, hear tell of, the last crablouse. Clov goes out to get the powder. The last rat is dying in the kitchen by page fifty-four. The last dog — only a toy at that — lacks a leg, and has not had the sex and the ribbon put on yet (pp. 39-40). So often Absurd theatre is compared to the Japanese Noh play, and indeed the similarities are striking. The prime difference is in their attitudes to nature. In the Noh, the processes of life form an integral and non-ironic part of the structure and texture. The five or six scenarios are so ordered that they present "a complete service of life",⁴¹ and an awareness of the rhythms of a bountiful nature permeate every thought and image. In Sobota Komachi, two priests pass a beggarwoman who is resting on a small wooden roadside shrine (sobota) that has weathered to look like a stump. They are shocked by her impiety, but she calls out with aplomb, "Oh well, then, I'm a stump, too, and well buried, with a flower at my heart."⁴² How different is her ready

⁴¹ Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, The Classic Noh Theatre of Japan, New York, New Directions, 1959, p. 11.

⁴² Pound and Fenollosa, p. 13.

acceptance of the facts of living and dying from Hamm's; and Nagg and Nell, two stumps, have no flowers at their hearts.

As nature runs down, so does Hamm. However, to the end he will enact what Kenner calls, in another connection, "the clown's endlessly resourceful ritual of incapacity."⁴³ His ceremony will become slower and slower, but at least it will continue, until a gentle scrunch will indicate that all has come to a final halt. Until then, Hamm reviews an empty catechism,

HAMM: Do you remember when you came here?

CLOV: No. Too small, you told me.

HAMM: Do you remember your father.

CLOV: (WEARILY): Same answer. (PAUSE.) You've asked me these questions millions of times.
(p. 38)

There is no Act II, for no worse is possible.

Something catastrophic has happened to myth. In other cultures, and in ours in earlier days, myth, with its accompanying rituals, was built up around the growth processes. In the Absurd world of Beckett, man's fantasies (and even his longings) cannot go outward healthily to the regenerative forces. Instead, they creep backwards upon themselves with the neurotic energy born of isolation, where regeneration is impossible. Eliade, then, can hardly be correct in assuming the presence of a healthy myth in the fantasies of modern man (at least, of Beckett's modern man). Through his rituals, Hamm is actually making celebration of the mysteries of death. Further, we think of Murphy, who saw the possibilities for

⁴³ Kenner, p. 56.

perfect happiness in the padded cell:

The pads surpassed by far all he had ever been able to imagine in the way of indoor bowers of bliss The tender luminous oyster-grey of the pneumatic upholstery, cushioning every square inch of ceiling, walls, floor and door, lent colour to the truth, that one was a prisoner of air. The temperature was such that only total nudity could do it justice. No system of ventilation appeared to dispel the illusion of respirable vacuum⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Samuel Beckett, Murphy, New York, Grove Press, n.d., p. 181.

Happy Days

If Hamm's is a ritual of clowning incapacity, Winnie's is the ritual performance of happiness. Happiness consists in smiling brightly most of the time, in never failing to appreciate the small things which make "living worthwhile" (to fall into the Old Style), in humming little tunes for no apparent reason other than an inner joy; and, in fact, in not being unhappy. One can be happy or unhappy — it is a simple matter of decision, or stage direction ("HAPPY EXPRESSION HAPPY EXPRESSION OFF." (p. 15)).⁴⁵ One makes one's choice, and constructs around it a ceremony. Winnie's service begins in familiar vein as she gazes for the first time that day at the zenith, "Another heavenly day. (PAUSE. HEAD BACK LEVEL, EYES FRONT, PAUSE LIPS MOVE IN IN-AUDIBLE PRAYER, SAY TEN SECONDS) For Jesus Christ sake Amen World without end Amen." (p. 8)

Winnie has few props to aid her performance, few vestments to lend variety to the service. She is buried to her waist in the centre of a mound (the "exact centre"), so that she cannot of course move about, nor even turn around. She has a black shopping bag which contains a nice variety of things — mirror, spectacles, toothpaste, toothbrush (which has the interesting components of handle, brush, and an endlessly fascinating guarantee), handkerchief, lipstick, an

⁴⁵ All page references to Happy Days will be to the Grove Press edition, 1961.

alarm clock, a revolver, a hat with crumpled feather, magnifying glass, brush and comb, musical-box, nail file, and a bottle of red medicine; a "collapsible collapsed" parasol; a husband, Willie, who lives behind the mound, wears a bowler hat, reads her bits from Reynolds' News on extra-specially happy days, and hands back her parasol when she drops it out of reach; and the comfort of hearing her own voice.

It is her voice that really keeps her going, for there are always so many things to talk about. There are her memories, of old Charlie Hunter, on whose knees she used to sit; and of her first ball; and of her second ball and first kiss ("Within a toolshed", p. 16); and of the last humans she saw — endless fragments of the past to be mulled over again and again. Her innumerable little possessions, including her husband, provide many opportunities for talk, even if she sometimes confuses them. Willie and the toothpaste seem to merge,

Poor Willie — (EXAMINES TUBE, SMILE OFF) — running out — (LOOKS FOR CAP) — ah well — (FINDS CAP) — can't be helped — (SCREWS ON CAP) — just one of those old things . . . another of those old things . . . poor dear Willie — (TESTING UPPER FRONT TEETH WITH THUMB, INDISTINCTLY) — good Lord!
(p. 9)

The label on the medicine bottle too is worthy of comment:

"Loss of spirits . . . lack of keenness . . . want of appetite . . . infants . . . children . . . adults . . . six level . . . tablespoonfuls daily — . . . the old style!" (p. 13)

In short, there is nearly always something for Winnie to talk about, and she nearly always talks. Her virtual monologue

becomes spiritual sustenance to her. It is a ritual of verbosity that fills in the chunks of silence. How rapidly her conversations reduce themselves to pure sound, divorced from rational meaning — the steady, subtly rhythmic disturbance of air currents by a human voice. Once her talk begins to reach us as sound, we can perceive that it is formed of cadence, and patterns of cadences. It becomes a ritual of sound that plays like a Bach fugue for voice. And within her own created ritual are remembered snatches of other's poetry, "small rituals of the sensibility",⁴⁶ Kenner so well describes them. He writes,

Quotation is a mode of ceremony 'Go forget me why should something o'er that something shadow fling'⁴⁷

However, when words fail, and, she claims, "there are times when even they fail", (p. 24) Willie always reappears to keep her going. His non sequitur comments — "Wanted bright boy" (p. 17) — are not too cheering, but Winnie insists that she could not carry on without him, for at least:

Something of this is being heard, I am not merely talking to myself, that is in the wilderness, a thing I could never bear to do — for any length of time. (PAUSE.) That is what enables me to go on, go on talking that is Whereas if you were to die — (SMILE) — to speak in the old style — (SMILE OFF) — or go away and leave me, then what would I do, what could I do, all day long, I mean between the bell for waking and the bell for sleeping?

(p. 21)

⁴⁶ Kenner, p. 102.

⁴⁷ Kenner, p. 102.

Of course, Winnie is alone already, for Willie has become an animal. Nevertheless, as some people talk to their dogs, Winnie talks to her husband. An uncomprehending ear is better than no ear.

In her heart, Winnie doubts she will ever come to the end of her resources, for "There is of course the bag." (p. 27) She has enough things to busy her each day (to write in the old style). She can polish her spectacles, brush her teeth, rummage in the bag, fold and re-fold the handkerchief, examine her gums, wipe the handle of the toothbrush, hit Willie with the butt of the parasol, drink the medicine (this she can only do once), pluck grass, enumerate the contents of the bag, sing a song (though "to sing too soon is a great mistake, I find," (p. 32); everything must occur at the proper time), unfurl her parasol and trim her nails. Indeed it is a full life. Willie begins to look positively superfluous.

There is a further result of Winnie's rituals. At times even she begins to appear superfluous. Like the boots and hats of Godot, which seem possessed by spirits quite their own, Winnie's "properties" too are bumptious. The parasol, as if purposely misunderstanding her harmless comment, "My two lamps, when one goes out the other burns brighter" (pp. 36-37), bursts of its own impudent accord into flames. Further, there is a frightening spark of independence in the bag. "There will always be the bag", Winnie repeats (p. 27), and one begins to feel as if in the beginning was the bag (as Beckett said earlier in Murphy, "In the beginning was

the pun.").⁴⁸ At any rate, the bag does assume a real presence. It, and the things in it, have become complete in themselves; it is as if they have no need of the old familiar relationships, when they belonged to someone. That would be the old style. Now they allow isolation and remoteness to build up around them an aura of magical power, much as a hermit on the mountain, because of his aloneness, becomes a sorcerer to the villagers below. Far from the bag depending on Winnie, she now depends on it, and fears this dependence:

But something tells me, Do not overdo the bag,
Winnie, make use of it, of course, let it help
you [*italics mine*] along, when stuck, by all
means, but cast your mind forward, Winnie, to
the time when words must fail — . . . and do
not overdo the bag.

(p. 32)

Later on she confides to an absent Willie, "Ah yes, things have their life, that is what I always say, things have a life Take my looking-glass, it doesn't need me."

(p. 54)

Winnie is still happy in Act II, although covered now up to the neck, for there are left enough things and sounds for her to organize into a pattern of happiness. "There always remains something", she says happily. (p. 52) She finds that "Sounds are a boon" (p. 53), she has something of her "classics", and the long life-story of Mildred to get on with. And then there is her face to observe:

⁴⁸ Beckett, Murphy, p. 65.

The nose. (SHE SQUINTS DOWN.) I can see it . . .
 the tip . . . the nostrils . . . breath of life . . .
 that curve you so admired . . . (POUTS) . . . a
 hint of lip . . . (POUTS AGAIN) . . . if I pout
 them out

(p. 52)

Always she manages a ceremony, even if only the ceremony of observing one's face with, probably, crossed eyes. We note that she has not used the revolver (as Vladimir and Estragon do not hang themselves), although it has always remained "uppermost" in the bag (p. 33).

. . . suspicion of brow . . . eyebrow . . . imagin-
 ation possibly . . . (EYES LEFT) . . . cheek . . .
 no . . . (EYES RIGHT) . . . no . . . (DISTEND
 CHEEKS) . . . even if I puff them out

The pattern rises to chant, and we leave Winnie, high priest-ess in her altar, conducting for us the ritual of staying happy. There will always be just enough to help her through the happy day, until eventually an even happier day will dawn (at zenith) to find the earth covering even her head.

CHAPTER III

Harold Pinter: The Infernal Room

The Caretaker⁴⁹ has been seen by some critics⁵⁰ as a modern re-enactment of Satan's fall from heaven, represented by Davies' being ousted from the comfort of the room. Certainly there is the suggestion of epic rejection in the play, but it seems a little unfair to Satan to have him shamble onto the contemporary scene in such guise. If The Caretaker represents a Satanic fall, it is a very shabby imitation. It is easy to understand why the outside world has been seen as hell, filled as it is with nameless thugs, with tobacco tins that get knocked off on the Great West Road, with Scotch gits and electro-shock therapists, with garbage buckets and hard roads and heavy rains and monks who kick the humble all the way to the gate. However, to equate heaven with Aston's incredible room bespeaks a certain unorthodoxy in religious belief. Davies even speaks of it as "a lousy filthy hole" (p. 67). Yet he does trouble to fight his way into the room which, though not a haven, is at least a temporary harbour. One thinks, then, not of Satan in heaven, but of Satan in hell, when he calls to his companions,

' . . . Thither let us stand
From off the tossing of these fiery waves,
There rest, if any rest can harbour there.'
(Paradise Lost, I, 183-185)

⁴⁹ All page references to The Caretaker will be to the Methuen edition, 1962.

⁵⁰ Esslin, p. 211.

The fallen angels move off to a spot in "the pit of Hell" where they build Pandaemonium Palace, their high capitol. There they find some relief from the fiery waters around them. If there are any mythical suggestions in The Caretaker, then, they are rather unusual, for what really happens is that Satan (Davies) is rejected from Pandaemonium Palace and pushed back into the burning lake. Pinter's play is even more complex than this, for in some ways his room is more hellish than the chaos outside. The room, like the Palace, offered rest, but at the same time, as Satan noted, it was located in "the heart of Hell", (I, 151) the very core of anguish. The ambivalent nature of this infernal room will become clearer as we explore Pinter's use of ritual.

In Pinter's room, everyone waits, but not for Godot. Everyone waits against Godot. Lives are structured not around hope, but around fear. The menace will still come, but at least it is, for the moment, outside. Gen and Gus in The Dumbwaiter wait in their exitless basement room for the next instructions. They make a good deal of fun out of their waiting, arguing about lighting the kettle and lighting the gas, and trying to create macaroni pastitsio out of nothing; but the moment the final instructions arrive, to turn man against man, each acts out his fate. Ultimately, one must face the outside world, where one is alone. To know that one is safe only temporarily is small comfort, and always, in Pinter's world, the characters must face the menace of the intruder, and the fear of their own exit. Flora, in A Slight Ache, in-

vites the menace in in an attempt to dispel fear by facing it. The flower-imagery that is made apparent at first by the heroine's name, runs through the play in conversation to suggest a vegetative myth in which the Matchman appears as a ritualistic, Dionysiac saviour-figure. The myth is mocked, as it is in The Caretaker, for Flora as a biological force is frustrated and barren in her isolation; and the Matchman, around whom all the terror of the unknown is made to cluster, is linked with the sadistic rapist-poacher of Flora's memory. When Flora decides to leave her limbo of existence with Edward, to go off with the Matchman, one can only expect the very worst. Edward is left behind to cope with his own fate, whatever it might turn out to be. Stanley's birthday, in The Birthday Party, is also the day of torture and death. The intruders arrive from the outer world, to carry Stanley back with them.

There can be fun in the room, but only up to a point. Pinter wrote that, "'The point about tragedy is that it is no longer funny. It is funny, and then it becomes no longer funny.'"⁵¹ It is funny when the menace is at bay, for then, as Pinter says, "'Everything is funny; the greatest earnestness is funny; even tragedy is funny.'"⁵² Once the menace looms larger than the funniness, we know only the menace. No longer is it a question of comedy or tragedy; it is funny or

⁵¹ Esslin, p. 205.

⁵² Esslin, p. 205.

fearful. That a monk gave Davies no shoes and threatened to kick him to the end of the garden, is funny. But to watch the fright and consequent disintegration of Stanley under the interrogation of Goldberg and McCann, is not.

We can expect that Davies, Mick and Aston, existing under the shadow of fear, will fill in their time differently from Vladimir and Estragon, who simply exist. Vladimir tries to pretend he is waiting, for this will entertain him; Aston, Davies, Stanley, try to pretend they are not waiting. In Beckett's universe, people play little games. In Pinter's, people are in-between games, in a state "at the extreme edge of their being where they are living pretty much alone",⁵³ as he puts it, in a place where no rules have yet been drawn up, and anyway, it takes two to play. Menace has made impossible even a communication through mime.

The Caretaker unfolds itself in a series of sounding-outs. Each man has been kicked by the outside world, and brings a trepidation, or at least a wariness, into the room. Rather than snatching at anything interesting or provocative, as Winnie does in Happy Days, Aston is careful to ignore it. Anything to keep things running smoothly:

ASTON: I saw him have a go at you.

DAVIES: Go at me? You wouldn't grumble. The filthy skate an old man like me, I've had dinner with the best.
PAUSE.

ASTON: Yes, I saw him have a go at you.

(p. 9)

⁵³ Esslin, p. 216.

Davies tosses out the business of having dinner "with the best" in order to provoke Aston, who pretends to have heard nothing unusual. He picks the one sentence in Davies' account with which he can agree, and agrees with it, "Yes, I saw him have a go at you." This is not enough of a reaction to suit Davies, so he goes on, laying his cleanliness on thick:

. . . All them toe-rags, mate, got the manners of pigs. I might have been on the road a few years but you can take it from me I'm clean. I keep myself up. That's why I left my wife . . . I've eaten my dinner off the best of plates. . .

(p. 9)

Still there is no argument to come from Aston, who wants to preserve the peace regardless of cost. The sanctity of the room must be respected, so he will not encourage Davies to bring in the problems of the outer world with him. He does not even want to discuss the rest of the house, for it is still "outer world". Aston has brought his own room to a kind of familiarity, but beyond the threshold is a wilderness of unfriendly rooms that are "out of commission", in need of "a lot of doing to" and "seeing to", "closed up" (p. 12). Davies is fearful of the someone who is living in the house next door, but again Aston affects unconcern, offering as little information as possible:

DAVIES: . . . I noticed there was someone living in the house next door.

ASTON: What?

DAVIES: I noticed them heavy curtains pulled across the window next door as we come along.

ASTON: Yes.

DAVIES: I thought there must be someone living there.

ASTON: Family of Indians live there.

(p. 12)

Only when absolutely pressed into it, only when to avoid answering would cause more trouble than to answer, will Aston meet Davies' question directly. Further evasion would have irritated Davies. At this point, it becomes more peace-making to answer. There is certainly no question of building up with Davies enough of a friendship that would allow any little rituals of habit, for as often as Aston shies from direct conversation, so does Davies:

DAVIES: . . . I had to go all the way to Luton in these.

ASTON: What happened when you got there, then?

DAVIES: I used to know a bootmaker in Acton.

(p. 14)

Davies cannot even thank Aston outright for the shoes, but must be unpleasant. The shoes "don't fit", they are "too pointed", they would "cripple me in a week", but "thanks anyway" (p. 16). At first he refuses Aston's invitation to sleep in the room. He notes that the lawn outside is "a bit thick", and criticizes the pond silently for not having any fish. With his words, the room becomes suddenly at odds, rickety, as disjointed as the conversations we hear in it. Davies thanks Aston for the money:

DAVIES: I just happen to find myself a bit short
. . . . That's the position, that's
what it is.

PAUSE.

ASTON: I went into a pub the other day. Ordered
a Guinness. They gave it to me in a thick
mug I can't drink Guinness from a
thick mug. I only like it out of a tin
glass

DAVIES: If only the weather would break!

(p. 19)

Pozzo and Estragon could at least communicate through ritual. Davies and Aston can find no structure to carry their comments. Davies obviously plays roles in the outer world, but he cannot find one to play in the room. Outside, all is clear enough to him:

DAVIES: You see, what it is, you see, I changed my name! Years ago. I been going around under an assumed name! That's not my real name.

ASTON: What name you been going under?

DAVIES: Jenkins. Bernard Jenkins. That's my name. That's the name I'm known, anyway

.

ASTON: What's your real name, then?

DAVIES: Davies. Mac Davies. That was before I changed my name.

ASTON: It looks as though you want to sort all that out.

(p. 21)

Davies thinks that he knew who he was, and when, when outside. Inside the room, partly because of Aston's enigmatic indifference, it does not matter whether he is Davies or Jenkins. That is what is so upsetting. Davies loses his bearings, and the next day, he wakes up in a terror of the unknown, "What? What's this? What's this?" (p. 22). The haven has become as frightening as the outside world. He does not know where he is; he is upset to discover that he was groaning and jabbering in his sleep; and he does not know what it is that Aston is going out to get. "A jig saw, mate? . . . What's that then, exactly, then?" If Davies is lost in the unfamiliar, Aston is so lost that he has become used to it:

ASTON: A jigsaw? Well, it comes from the same family as the fret saw. But it's an appliance, you see. You have to fix it on to a portable drill.

DAVIES: Ah, that's right. They're very handy.

(p. 25)

Aston asks if he is Welsh, and Davies asserts, "Well, I been around, you know" (p. 26) Davies is rapidly succumbing to the room's lack of definition, so that he no longer quite remembers what is outside the room:

ASTON: Where were you born?
 DAVIES: I was . . . uh . . . oh, it's a bit hard,
 like, to set your mind back . . . see what
 I mean . . . going back . . . a good way
 . . . lose a bit of track, like . . . you
 know
 (p. 26)

As soon as he is left alone in the room, Davies tries to regain his bearings by getting a knowledge of all the things in it. He looks at a box of screws, some paint buckets, a blow-lamp, the Buddha, a great wobbling pile of papers. A kind of composure settles on him, and on us, as together we explore the room and its boxes and cases. The old man creeps around like a timid animal in a new cage. We note he is wearing only his long underwear, man at his most vulnerable, the accoutrements of civilization, his trousers, lying on the bed. Mick enters in stealth, to stalk the trapped figure down to the kill. The new menace shocks us as well as Davies. A struggle ensues, all the more terrifying for being silent. For a long time, Mick sits on a chair watching Davies who cowers on the ground. Finally, the line we have been waiting for, "What's the game?", closes Act I.

We are left during the intermission to ponder the question. What is Davies' game? On the literal level, he wants to gain permanent access to the room. On a thematic level, his game is only that of living, of playing at being part of

mankind, the game of existence. From day to day, however, he has developed no rituals. He does not know what game to play yet. What is Mick's game? We discover later that he does not really have one. He wants to fix up the room, but he does not bother. He wants to "expand" his "other" interests, but, as he puts it, he wants to expand "in all directions" (p. 74). Mick, like Davies, has no definite game. We might compare here Estragon's absolute surety of action. When he does the tree, he does the tree, and knows it. When Vladimir undertakes to play the game of Lucky and Pozzo, he does so with single-minded purpose. Mick and his crew have no such purpose. Aston, admittedly, hopes to build a shed in the garden, but he never quite finishes tinkering with the toaster, and there is nothing to indicate that he ever will.

The point is that these men play no games. The ritual of the play-within-the-play is a comfort not available in their fear-ridden environment. They can hardly be expected to answer cues in a word-game when they can hardly follow each other's thoughts in ordinary conversation. "If only I could get down there", says Davies about a Wembley "caff"; "Mmmn", answers Aston, "Well, I'll be seeing you then." (p. 27) Whenever they appear to be settling into a pattern, an alien arrives, an intruding person, or idea, or thing. Just when one expects his continued (and justified) hostility, Mick asserts to Davies, still on the floor, "I'm awfully glad. It's awfully nice to meet you." (p. 30) It has become impossible to follow one train of thought for more than half a minute, or to share

a mood, indeed, in any way to feel a familiarity with the people or objects on stage. No one knows his own name, or anyone else's, or where he comes from, or where he is going, or why he is there, or where he is, or what else is in the house, or who the neighbours are, or what a jig-saw is. Furthermore, the gas-stove will not make tea, and the sink is unattached. All that is certain is uncertainty. The truest words of the play are Davies' to Mick: "This ain't your room. I don't know who you are. I ain't never seen you before." (p. 32)

Even the last great stand-by has disappeared — time. By adopting the conventional method of marking life off into years, months, days, minutes and seconds, man can have at his disposal a ready-made ritual, a custom-built pattern for his action. Of course, time in the Absurd world is an illusion, like everything else. Moreover, it is no longer based on seasonal change, that, too, having ceased to function in a meaningful way.⁵⁴ We noted that spring, in the land of Godot, arrived overnight. In non-Absurd drama, such as O'Casey's Within the Gates, the seasonal cycle establishes the ritual of the play. In an Absurd play, the necessity for ritual (for other reasons) is answered only by the pretense that the

⁵⁴ The failure of nature, as perceived by the Absurdists by implication, is the fallacy of the philosophy. Of course, they are not to be taken literally, for what they find most absurd is the fact that biological life does carry on, even in the face of spiritual death. And what Clov really means is that there is no more nature for him. The dauntless innocent simply must ask, "Why not?"

seasons pass, and the hours tick by, or by a parody of this passing and ticking that we see in Hamm's alarm-clock. Hamm has the clock, to be sure, but there is little for it to tell:

HAMM: What time is it?

CLOV: The same as usual . . . zero.

(Endgame, p. 4)

For Winnie, too, time has become a thing of the past: "Not a day goes by", she muses, " . . . to speak in the old style —" (Happy Days, p. 18)

In Godot, Beckett explores the validity of time as a measuring-stick, and the twenty-four hours of the day, the sixty minutes of the hour, and the seconds of those minutes, are found to be illusory markers. The quality of the experience determines the length of the time:

VLADIMIR: That passed the time.

ESTRAGON: It would have passed in any case.

VLADIMIR: Yes, but not so rapidly.

(Waiting for Godot, p. 31)

Nevertheless, they still continue to mark time off, for it gives the impression of existence. As Estragon says, "We always find something, eh Didi, to give us the impression we exist?" (Waiting for Godot, p. 44)

When we come to The Caretaker, all pretenses are gone. Pinter has simply removed the whole framework of conventional time from the play, as he has removed the structure of logic from conversation, as he has removed all the little mime-games that gave some inner structure to the vacancy of life in Beckett's plays. There is no clock in the room. Davies, moreover, wants one. He wants to be able to see time passing.

He is used to ordering his life in some fashion around time, and without a clock, he is forced into viewing the terrifying spectacle of wild, pointless, circling life. In a room of unsequential conversations, Davies must at least be steadied by the ritual of time. This is why Pinter eliminates a clock from the collection of objects that is in the room. For now, when in the room, the old man is faced with the prospect of the company of his own mind. Only in the outer world is the familiar comfort of space and time (though the accompanying discomforts of thieves, thugs and therapists makes the comfort of time small compensation). Davies mourns,

. . . . You see, it's not so bad when I'm coming in. I can see the clock on the corner, the moment I'm stepping into the house I know what the time is, but when I'm in! It's when I'm in . . . that I haven't the foggiest idea what time it is!
(p. 62)

The clock is a crutch to Davies, as it is with Winnie, who admits that "Sounds are a boon, they help us . . . through the day." (Happy Days, p. 53) Vagueness is a fearful commodity, and it is the absolute, around which we can build rituals, that help to give us the impression that our lives are orderly and meaningful. Pozzo is only too aware of the necessity of the illusion of time, for when Vladimir announces that time has stopped, he says, "Don't you believe it, Sir, don't you believe it Whatever you like, but not that." (Waiting for Godot, p. 24) How unhappy would he be to discover

himself in a Pinter play.⁵⁵

If there is a deliberate lack of ritual in the content and structure of The Caretaker, there will be found just as deliberate an exploiting of ritual in the texture of the play. The poetry of Pinter's theatre is calculated to hit us with the power of incantation. Aston's chilling soliloquy, a ten-minute crescendo, lights lowered, plays on our nerves and emotions until we wish to cry out, "Stop!" By the end, we feel that we have suffered the pincers along with Aston, that our thoughts will become forever slower, that we may "never quite get it . . . together" again. If he can no longer think . . . too fast, how did he manage such sustained effort in this soul-bearing? Where did the words come from, what force guided them to pour forth in such torrents of awesome lucidity? Or does one powerful word breed of its own the

⁵⁵ It is just as frightening when the concept of time is retained, but distorted. Beckett often uses this technique to make us lose our normal bearings. He magnifies moments to eternities, that we do not recognize our own actions. By stretching out a moment of dialogue, he lets us examine for aeons one instant to discover something about it. Pozzo forgets what he is saying:

POZZO: . . . What was I saying. (HE PONDERES.) Wait.
(PONDERES.) Well now isn't that . . . (HE
RAISES HIS HEAD.) Help me!

ESTRAGON: Wait!

VLADIMIR: Wait!

POZZO: Wait! (Waiting for Godot, p. 27)

They all pause to help Pozzo think. In normal conversation, we telescope such a painful moment, and anyway, the pause would be only a second or two long. Here the fleeting moment is arrested. We observe Pozzo when he is in-between thoughts, and the moment becomes invested with such importance that his thoughts, when they come, are irrelevant.

next one, and so on, in a great process of verbal productivity that is nothing to do with the man?

Davies appears as adept as Aston at a verbal numbing of our rational senses, although the techniques are different. He explains to Aston,

Can't wear shoes that don't fit. Nothing worse. I said to this monk, here, I said, look here, mister, he opened the door, big door, he opened it, look here, mister, I said, I come all the way down here, look, I said, I showed him these, I said, you haven't got a pair of shoes, have you, a pair of shoes, I said, enough to keep me on my way

(p. 14)

The power of Aston's speech resides in the combination of setting — low lights, one spotlight, a single bland voice — and story — a tale of physical terror in a hospital that builds up to a plotted climax, the application of the pincers. Davies' account is not as conventional. He is telling us nothing of import: simply that he went to a monastery to ask for a pair of shoes because his were worn out. It is not even especially interesting. The fascination does not lie in the meaning, but in the words themselves as abstractions, and in the patchwork quilt built up by them: Shoes, I said, mister, door; door, mister, I said, I said; a pair of shoes, a pair of shoes, I said. Through the repetition we catch Davies' mounting panic and urgency. He had counted on these shoes for so long, had travelled a long way to get them, and was thwarted at the last. Because he is likewise frustrated in his attempt to find accurate words to move Aston to pity, he is forced to repeat the few he does know. Pair of shoes,

pair of shoes, pair of shoes, pair of shoes, pair of shoes — soon they will arise and walk. The constant hammering repetition seems eventually to cause the word to lose its rational meaning. A pair of shoes becomes pure sound, meaningful only because repeated.

In a most interesting little book, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, that comes to us from 1912, Wassily Kandinsky wrote:

The apt use of a word (in its poetical sense), its repetition, twice, three times, or even more frequently, according to the need of the poem, will not only tend to intensify the internal structure, but also bring out unsuspected spiritual properties in the word itself. Further, frequent repetition of a word (a favorite game of children, forgotten in later life) deprives the word of its external reference. Similarly, the symbolic reference of a designated object tends to be forgotten, and only the sound is retained. But in the latter case pure sound exercises a direct impression on the soul . . . In this direction lie great possibilities for the literature of the future.⁵⁶

With Pinter, the ritual of repetition is not a soothing one, but one designed to impress us with anguish and fear. Beckett has used the technique to gain quite differing effects. In Murphy, he describes a piece of cloth that "felt like felt."⁵⁷ There is logical meaning here, but the repetition comes along to jar us out of such easy reading. Surely there are several ways to read this, we puzzle, stopping to figure if he could mean that the cloth felt like felt because it was felt, in

⁵⁶ Wassily Kandinsky, Concerning the Spiritual in Art, New York, George Wittenborn, Inc., 1963, p. 34.

⁵⁷ Beckett, Murphy, p. 72.

which case, the felt felt like felt, or, the cloth was not felt, although it felt like it, for it only felt like felt. By this point, there is little meaning at all left in the word. A similar pun occurs in Happy Days when Winnie says that she is sure her prayers are "not for naught." (p. 12) Or is it naught for not; no, that's not it, either. Anyway, the same process is in action: we lose our bearings for the moment. The sound-value of the words themselves, combined with the energy of a pun, force us into a new awareness.

Beckett does not always rely on literal meaning to make his point. In a passage from Watt, we discover his ability to play with words just for the sake of their particular and peculiar combination of letters:

For Watt now found himself in the midst of things which, if they consented to be named, did so as it were with reluctance Looking at a pot, for example, or thinking of a pot, one of Mr Knott's pots, it was in vain that Watt said, Pot, pot. Well, perhaps not quite in vain, but very nearly. For it was not a pot, the more he looked, the more he reflected, the more he felt sure of that, that it was not a pot at all. It resembled a pot, it was almost a pot, but it was not a pot of which one could say, Pot, pot, and be comforted.⁵⁸

Beckett truly loves these words just for what they are, and they ought to be comforted. An important distinction should be made between Pinter's use of repetition and Beckett's. Both take on the aura of chant, but Beckett's is a friendly chant, a well tried and tested Home-Sweet-Home kind of affair. Pinter's is not, for his chant is born and bred in a room

⁵⁸ Samuel Beckett, Watt, New York, Grove Press, 1959, p. 81.

where men move and talk almost despite themselves. Mick spends several minutes telling Davies how to go about renting the "unfurnished" flat, a whirl of instructions that takes us far beyond the question (which is not at hand anyway), into the terrifying world of rules and regulations that the old man has spent much of his life trying to avoid:

No strings attached, open and above board, untarnished record; twenty per cent interest, fifty per cent deposit; down payments, back payments, family allowances, bonus schemes, . . . yearly examination of the relevant archives, tea laid on, disposal of shares, benefit extension, compensation on cessation
(p. 36)

It is a veritable mud-slide of nonsensical verbiage, clichés and abstractions having no relation to the situation (to slip myself into hypnotic repetition). Davies is panic-stricken at the thought of what these terrible-sounding words are going to do to him. He has struggled to keep himself in the safety of this room, but he finds to his horror that the terror of the outside has been brought in, unleashed from its verbal prison by the magical combination of sounds. " . . . Comprehensive indemnity against Riot, Civil Commotion, Labour Disturbance, Storm, Tempest, Thunderbolt, Larceny, or Cattle all subject to a daily check and double check" A puff of smoke, a roar from the vacuum, and the genie will appear, curling out of the gas-stove.

If independent words can become alive with an impelling force all their own, one can imagine the power of a group of similarly independent words that have come together in a pattern, and the power of a group of groups. The play opens

ordinarily enough, and we have no suggestion, for a few pages at least, of the holocaust of revolving conversations that is going to suck up all around it like a giant vacuum-cleaner. Gradually the words begin their slow circle, "You the landlord, are you?" . . . "I noticed them heavy curtains" . . . "I noticed there was someone was living in the house next door" . . . "Yes, I noticed the curtains" . . . "You the landlord here?" . . . "Yes, I noticed them heavy curtains" . . . "Blacks, eh?" . . . "You haven't got a spare pair of shoes?" . . . "they give away shoes" . . . "How many more Blacks you got around here then?" . . . "Can't wear shoes that don't fit." As Davies recites his list of needs and fears, they rise up to take possession of the stage. The dialogue makes a poetry of hallucination, compulsion and persecution, a ritual celebration of madness. Further on, we are made to share one madman's fear of another's madness.

. . . I wake up in the morning and he's smiling at me! He's standing there, looking at me, smiling! I can see him, you see, I can see him through the blanket. He puts on his coat, he turns himself round, he looks down at my bed, there's a smile on his face! What the hell's he smiling at? What he don't know is that I'm watching him through that blanket. He don't know that! He don't know I can see him, he thinks I'm asleep, but I got my eye on him all the time through that blanket, see? But he don't know that! He just looks at me and he smiles, but he don't know that I can see him doing it!

(p. 63)

The junk in the room rises up to dwindle the characters into insignificance. By the end of the play, everyone has touched the Buddha, until finally its hidden forces, its manas, are

released and spread out through the room. Mick has to smash the touch-piece, but too late: its powers have already possessed. The long trunk of the vacuum cleaner reaches out for Davies in the darkness. Teal-blue, copper and parchment linoleum squares, charcoal-grey worktops, cupboards for crockery, revolving shelves, venetian blinds, cork tiles, off-white pile linen rug, afromosia teak veneer, matt black drawers, oatmeal tweed, beech frame, sea-grass seat, mahogany, rosewood, deep-azure blue, small blue roses, plastic tray, white raffia: all are swept into the sanctuary until it becomes as chaotic as the outside world. The room fills with furniture, real and feigned, like the pack of cards that filled Alice's courtroom. The new invaders point invisible fingers at the caretaker, who can do nothing but leave. The room has indeed become the very "heart of Hell".

The point of the play, that the above luxuries of exaggeration do reveal, is that the room cannot be kept inviolable. It is constantly being invaded, from the outside, by Davies, and from the inside, where words and objects have become so magically animate. In these infernal rooms, one can find no bearings at all, nothing on which to hang one's hat. Hats have become too precocious these days, anyway. They tend to hang up by themselves. The ceremony of the words used inside the room does not build it into an inner sanctum after all, for the ritualistic patterns invest the words with a life of their own. "I mean, if you can't tell what time you're at you don't know where you are, you understand my meaning? . . .

No, what I need is a clock in here, in this room, and then I stand a bit of a chance." (p. 62) No Pinter hero stands much of a chance, especially when he seeks asylum in a room that is soon occupied by a group of ranting words.

CHAPTER IV

Jean Genet: The Death Game

"And I was frightened. Frightened, Solange. Through her, it was me you were aiming at. I'm the one who's in danger. When we finish the ceremony, I'll protect my neck", says Claire in The Maids⁵⁹ (p. 55). Something strange has happened in the theatre. The ritual has become explicit not only as a pastime, but as a safeguard. What is it that they fear so greatly? "Invent not love, but hatred, and thereby make poetry", says Archibald in The Blacks (p. 26). The poetry of Genet's theatre indeed is not a product of love, though whether, as he suggests, love is impossible in any poetry is another question. The poetry of The Maids is a poetry of hatred, demonstrated by the omnipresent death-wish. In The Blacks, it is murder outright:

VILLAGE: So it's always murder that we dream about?
ARCHIBALD: Always, and get going!
(p. 41)

In his plays, Pinter liberates a sense of impending violence with which his characters never come to grips. They are merely left to suffer their nebulous fears. Genet, however, locates what for him are the sources of these fears. He sees love and hate as complementary components of the same destructive force, and is able to bring us dangerously near this force by exploring it through a structure of ritual. Some of

⁵⁹ All page references to The Maids will be to the Grove Press edition, 1954; and to The Blacks, the Grove Press edition, 1960. Both are translated by Bernard Frechtman.

the ritual games in Beckett's plays, which were primarily intended to fill in time, threatened to generate a destructive power. The same phenomenon will be evident with Genet, for while the ritual acts as a safeguard, a mold, to contain these powerful elements, it also tends to increase their force.

The Blacks is the performance of a performance of a performance that threatens at bottom to be only of a performance. A white (Genet) writes a play for blacks, some of whom are obliged to wear white masks. "Let Negroes negrify themselves", instructs Archibald (p. 52), and in donning white masks, the Negroes behind them become even more black. These pseudo-whites, wearing elaborate costumes of stylized court and courtroom, sit in a fairly low gallery to watch the blacks below demonstrate how they murdered a white woman (who is later played by a black man). Wherever he is (and mainly he appears in the dialogue), God is white. Further,

. . . . He eats on a white tablecloth. He wipes his white mouth with a white napkin. He picks at white meat with a white fork He watches the snow fall.

(p. 24)

By contrast, and this is a play of contrast, a black Host will be provided for the blacks who worship the white God. "And what will it be made of? Gingerbread, you say? That's brown", (p. 32) continues the Missionary, underlining again the enormity of the problems that can be raised because some people are black and some white.

More important than the problems of black person versus white person, is the image created by the warring of the

colours, BLACK and WHITE. Scenery, props, lighting and costume, make an abstraction of colour. Areas of black vie with areas of white. The people become patterns, abstractions, moving about the stage, as blocks of colour lift themselves up and down, back and forth, on a Mondrian canvas, or as words under Pinter's organization leap around the page in wilful, abstract abandon. The series of ramps and galleries going up the back stage wall give dimension to Genet's cubistic theatre. The tension produced by these non-verbal poeties becomes so great that occasionally it is actually mitigated by the dialogue. Diouf pleads with the stage director concerning Village and his attempts to portray the murderer: "If his suffering is too intense, let him use language to ease the strain." (p. 37) Such a remark is a little contrived by someone (possibly we can go back to Genet), for of course the verbal poetry usually underlines and heightens the black-white contrast. There is some mention of these negative colours at least every two lines:

VILLAGE: Her feet were getting soaked . . .

BOBO: Her black feet. Black feet!
(p. 37)

VILLAGE: You were wearing a black silk dress,
black stockings, patent leather pumps and
were carrying a black umbrella.

(p. 35)

He is describing the white woman.

VILLAGE: As everyone knows, the Whites can
hardly distinguish one Negro from another.

(p. 53)

SNOW: I, too, greet you, Tower of Ivory, Gate of
Heaven flung wide open so that the Negro
can enter, majestic and smelly

Wondrous, indeed, the malady that makes
 you ever whiter and that leads you to
 ultimate whiteness.
 (p. 57)

The snow of her name, the ivory, the "malady" of whiteness,
 conspire against the black of the face that speaks.

Genet creates a tableau against which will be re-enacted the ritual murder of a white woman, a timeless, virtually plotless, character-less exploration of the fact of hatred. That the ritual be effective, all must be aware of the fact that it is a ritual. "I'm asking you, madam, to bow — it's a performance", says Archibald to Snow (p. 10). Snow then bows her way into a new role, and in Snow bows Ethel Ayler (in the New York production). The Governor, who is played by a black, who is played by Jay J. Riley (in this play of many parts, it is useful to have some substantial personality at the bottom with which to work), has never learned his lines properly, and gets away with reading them out. (Rather, it is the black who plays the Governor who was shaky in his part.) We, the audience (the real audience), are not the only ones to become confused. Even Archibald is baffled by Diouf, "But — is he acting or is he speaking for himself?" (p. 114) The Valet asks where "the Negro went with his revolver just before?", and receives the answer, "Backstage" (p. 32). We must distinguish between going backstage in actuality, and going backstage from the set that the blacks have created for the pseudo-whites. To bring in the final confusion, Archibald tells his cast, "Now, this evening — but this evening only —

we cease to be performers, since we are Negroes. On this stage, we're like guilty prisoners who play at being guilty." (p. 39) But the New York actors are Negroes, too, so the people we see on stage are performing. After a while, the question of identity ceases to matter: only the ritual (on whichever level it happens to be at any given moment) has meaning. This must be the playwright's purpose. He has dressed the set in blacks and whites that become a pattern of abstraction. His characters are only costumes and masks over other costumes and masks, over costumes and makeup, over (eventually) bare flesh, which still means little in this age of lost identity of self. D.H. Lawrence understood this phenomenon well. In Sea and Sardinia, he describes a puppet show:

'At first one is all engaged watching the figures: their brilliance, their blank martial stare, their sudden angular gestures. There is something extremely suggestive in them. How much better they fit the old legend-tales than living people would do. Nay, if we are going to have human beings on the stage, they should be masked and disguised. For in fact drama is enacted by symbolic creatures formed out of human consciousness: puppets if you like: but not human individuals. Our stage is all wrong, so boring in its personality.⁶⁰

In The Blacks, a white woman is hanging up at the back of the stage. She consists of "a blond wig, a crude cardboard carnival mask representing a laughing white woman with big cheeks, a piece of pink knitting, two balls of wool, a knitting needle and white gloves." (p. 53-54) This is all that is needed to

⁶⁰ Raymond Williams, Drama from Ibsen to Eliot, London, Chatto and Windus, 1954, p. 18.

turn Diouf into the white woman. (It does not say too much for white woman, either. But that is beside the point.)

Self disappears, to leave us with ritual, or at least with ritual drama, and the running comments and directions of Archibald and the rest of the cast form a manifesto on the use of ritual in theatre. Archibald grows furious — "My anger isn't make-believe" — at Diouf for acting too delicately:

Politeness must be raised to such a pitch that it becomes monstrous. It must arouse fear. We're being observed by spectators. Sir, if you have any intention of presenting even the most trivial of their ideas without caricaturing it, then get out! Beat it!

(p. 33)

Unreality must permeate the stage in word, movement, and gesture, until each of these things rises to become a symbol of all its species. All the politeness there is in the world must be packed into Diouf's words, if he intends to be polite to the Court above. His politeness must rise to such a universality of politeness that it is rude, as well. To be sincere is to be nothing (as there is no self to be sincere in relation to). Only parody is meaningful, and it becomes meaningful in terms of what it is parodying and its opposite, that is, in politeness and in rudeness. Unreality is the only reality.

THE JUDGE: It's better to maintain a formal tone.

VILLAGE: Do you really want me to?

THE JUDGE: Yes, it's better. Don't be afraid to establish distance.

(p. 69)

In terms of a ritual play, formality works better than intimacy. Intimacy (between actor and audience) weakens the tension of the drama by bringing it down to our everyday level of comprehension. Genet is playing with the mysterious forces inherent in ritual death, forces that can be dispelled, or at least weakened, by familiarity. What he wishes is to build them up to such a peak of tension that they eventually purge themselves. Only thus can the destructive impulses be exorcised. So the play must be played right. "Don't leave the stage unless I tell you to. Let the spectators behold you", instructs Felicity, "A deep, almost invisible somnolence emanates from you, spreads all about, hypnotizes them." (p. 77)

To observe the most intimate effects of such potent ritual on its actors, it is better to move to a more simply structured play. In The Maids, Solange and Claire act out, discuss, change, perfect, act again, criticize and discuss the ritual that they have devised for themselves as an outlet for their love-hate feelings toward Madame, their young mistress. Here we can see ritual in the process of being created, as it is being written by these two masters of simulated and ceremonious feeling.

Basic to the setting is a large dressing-table and mirror, in which Claire and Solange can look to see Madame. The use of the mirror in Genet, as symbol and theatrical technique, has been treated well by Esslin, who sees Genet's work in total as "A Hall of Mirrors" (the title of his chapter). He writes,

This image of man caught in a maze of mirrors, trapped by the reflections of his own distorted image, trying to find the way to make contact with the others he can see around him but being rudely stopped by barriers of glass . . . , sums up the essence of Genet's theatre.⁶¹

Thus it is that The Maids opens. Claire, her back to the mirror, is berating Solange for leaving the ugly rubber gloves of the kitchen in the perfumed sanctity of the boudoir. "When will you understand that this room is not to be sullied", (p. 35) she cries. The room is being sullied, of course, by their very presence. We note that Solange calls Claire "Madame"; and Claire refers to Solange as "Claire". At this moment, Claire is everyone. She plays Madame to someone who represents herself. Solange is nowhere. "Ah!" says Claire (Madame) to Solange (Claire), "You are hideous. Lean forward and look at yourself in my shoes." (p. 37) Thus Claire manoeuvres the scene that she can watch a ritual enactment of her own humility before the real Madame. A black mirror is made of the patent leather shoes, and in this mockery of a dressing-table, Solange looks to see the dark reflection of the Claire she is playing at being. Solange sits on the rug, polishing the shoes of the mistress for whom this ritual of adoration-hatred has been constructed. Claire can partake of this ritual as an observer, and purge her feelings for Madame more effectively than if she were in actuality on the floor before the mistress. More is achieved through the ritual than through reality. In fact, the relationship of Claire

⁶¹ Esslin, p. 140.

and Solange may be explored at the same time, for Solange is making Claire perform tasks that perhaps Claire in real life would not stoop to do. "I wish Madame to be lovely", (p. 37) says Solange (Claire), having spat on Madame's shoes to make them shine. The relationship of the two (real) maids is as peculiar as that of the maids to the absent mistress. They are jealous of each other with Madame, whom they both love and hate; and they both love and hate each other. Claire (still as Madame) refers to the garret room where "two sisters fall asleep dreaming of one another." (p. 40) "You hate me, don't you?" asks the mistress of her maid, "You crush me with your attentions and your humbleness; you smother me with gladioli and mimosa." (p. 37) Claire underlines for us her own feelings towards Madame, a cloying sickness of love the very expression of which turns it into hatred. And Solange, in the part of Claire, asserts, "I'll follow you everywhere. I love you." (p. 39) Through each other, Claire and Solange can praise Madame as they have long wanted to: "It's impossible to forget Madame's bosom under the velvet folds", (p. 38) and they can assert their hatred, for Claire as Madame says, "I can see in your eyes that you loathe me." (p. 39)

The constant suggestion and often plain reference to sexual perversion (or at least the desire for it) would receive further emphasis if, as Genet wished, the two maids were played by made-up boys. More attention would be drawn to the problem of reality, when no line is seen to divide male from female, as no line divides love and hate. Sartre

finds that the phenomenon would tend to create the image of a "make-believe" woman, both more and less real than any actual woman. In his introduction to the play, he writes,

The roughness of a breaking voice, the dry hardness of male muscles and the bluish luster of a budding beard will make the de-feminized and spiritualized female appear as an invention of man, as a pale and wasting shadow which cannot sustain itself unaided, as the evanescent result of an extreme and momentary exertion, as the impossible dream of man in a world without women.

(p. 9)

He goes on to explain that what we really see is Genet "living out the impossibility of being a woman". If this is the case, Louis Jouvet was correct in using women in his (the first) production of the play. The extra touch of male actors is only a luxury to please Genet himself, and the personal quandary of a homosexual is here best explored off-stage, to leave The Maids free to explore the quandary of reality.

"Here, in my bedroom, I will have only noble tears", (p. 42) declares the false Madame, having just kicked Solange in the temple (as she would want Madame to kick her). "Get my necklace!" she cries, slipping back to become Claire, "But hurry, we won't have time." (p. 42) Then she moves back into Madame with a fearful intensity, recoiling from Solange's fingers. "Keep your hands off mine! I can't stand your touching me." She recoils from the touch of fingers that represent her own, in a blaze of anger that shocks Solange out of her role: "There's no need to overdo it. Your eyes are ablaze." Passion through the ritual is far more disturbing

and powerful than ordinary, spontaneous passion. The ritual caresses emotions into a heat of seething primitive energy.

Meanwhile, Claire continues to build herself up, through Solange, into a grand power. Talking to herself in Solange, she chants, "You feel the time coming when, no longer a maid . . . you become vengeance itself, but, Claire, don't forget — Claire, are you listening?" (p. 43) By pretending to feel her mistress's love for Monsieur, Claire can take nourishment from that passion, too. "I am beautiful, am I not? And the desperation of my love makes me even more so, but you have no idea of the strength I need! My unhappy lover heightens my nobility." (p. 43) Become a queen, Claire can look down at her old self and say, "All that you'll ever know is your own baseness." Thus Claire leads in a ritual that dispels her lowliness and invests her with grandeur.

Solange has to receive some satisfaction as well, and reluctantly Claire moves along to the next part of the ceremony, the maid's rebellion. As Claire, Solange can tell stories about Solange to the mistress. She confides that Solange has said, "To hell with you!" (p. 44) In this way, Solange can express her own feelings for Claire, as well as Madame. Says Solange from the ritual, "Solange says: to hell with you!" Claire answers as Madame, to express amazement, "Claire! Claire!" She expresses the amazement to herself, who is amazed at Solange's real hatred. They exchange words. Mistress tells maid to get out. Just when the latter is advancing "threateningly" towards the former, the alarm-

clock goes off. The real Madame is returning; Claire must take off the gown; the gloves have to go back to the kitchen. The ceremony has not been completed, and the powers of love and hate are left unexorcised for the moment. Solange says sadly, "The same thing happens every time. And it's all your fault, you're never ready. I can't finish you off." (p. 46) "We waste too much time with the preliminaries", agrees Claire. Yet the "preliminaries" are an integral part of the ritual. All the subtleties and nuances in the maids' relationship with Madame must be recreated first, that they be purged with the climactic ritual death, which they have never yet had time for. We wonder what would happen if the ritual did achieve completion. Would Claire and Solange, thus cleansed, become happy maids, free from the destructive powers of love and hate? Would affection replace the horrors of love-hate? Or would they explode into showers of incandescence, to leave a heap of spent ashes as remembrance of their ritual existence? One has the feeling that their life-energy is as unreal as the situations they conjure up, and that when this energy finally achieves release through ritual, they will exist no more. We note that once Madame returns to end their game, the maids become drab and dispirited. Claire, who had played at being Marie Antoinette, "strolling about the apartment at night", (p. 50) becomes, in Madame's words, "an odd little girl" (p. 73). All her (fake) substance vanished with the close of the ceremony. There seems to be some connection with Wilde's Dorian Gray. Once the painting is stabbed, the man must die.

The image is more real than its subject, as the rituals of the maids contain the essence of their vitality.

After the ritual has ceased, Claire is duly exhausted. "Come on Claire, be my sister again", pleads Solange (p. 48), but Claire has no energy left for the role of reality. "I'm finished", she mutters. Solange is not tired, however, and annoyingly begins to question her sister's role as Madame. Claire had berated herself for allowing the milkman's intimacies. Thus Solange, also interested in the milkman, discovers her sister's duplicity. There are many old scores to settle in real life after the ceremony is over. Later on, Solange admits, "Nobody loves me! Nobody loves us!" (p. 51), and it appears that the milkman's affections are only fictitious. The many mirrors of Genet's imagination are beginning to flash images back and forth; reflections of reflections fill the stage. As with The Blacks, it ceases to matter where ultimate reality lies.

On the level of the Solange-Claire relationship, reality becomes filth and, as Solange concludes, so bitterly, "Filth . . . doesn't love filth." (p. 52) Bound together in loneliness and in need, Solange and Claire can only know the most sordid realities of their mutual hatred. Solange fears only one thing, that they will not be able to keep up the ceremony. "The game! Will we even be able to go on with it? And if I have to stop spitting on someone who calls me Claire, I'll simply choke!" She could not live without the ceremony, but it is just as difficult to live with it. Always it is best

when living within the ceremony, for there, all is sacrosanct. It is only when back on the level of filth that Claire can throw at Solange all the venom raised during a performance:

You don't dare accuse me of the worst: my letters. Pages and pages of them. The garret was littered with them. I invented the most fantastic stories and you used them for your own purposes. You frittered away my frenzy.

(p. 53)

Claire acknowledges in the lines that opened this chapter, the fear that Solange is trying to murder her through Madame. Solange insists that she would certainly have killed Madame, because:

It made me suffocate to see you suffocating, to see you turning red and green, rotting away in that woman's bitter-sweetness. Blame me for it, you're right. I loved you too much.

(p. 55)

Hatred, murder and love are desperately linked all in the ritual figure of Claire. And had Solange, in the personage of Claire, succeeded in killing Madame, Claire would have ceased, by accident, as it were, because she was playing Madame. Solange, having killed Madame, would still be faced with the real Madame, and the game that she so piteously needs, would be destroyed.

Such a conclusion would lead to reality, and Genet is more subtle. Instead of permitting either Solange or Claire to get the better of the game, he lets the game become more powerful than both. "Even the game is dangerous", says Claire (p. 58), alluding to the traces they leave behind, the hairs in the roses. Their game is like the dream that leaves

real flowers around the room in the morning, one's dream of a dream, that is, for a real dream cannot bring real flowers. Further, they are tiring of the game, and this can lead to dangerous extravagances of variety. "I'm sick of seeing my image thrown back at me by a mirror, like a bad smell. You're my bad smell. Well, I'm ready. Ready to bite", asserts Claire (p. 61).. A new hatred, hatred of the game of hatred itself, has been bred, that possibly can never be assimilated into the ritual.

Meanwhile, Madame returns home elated at the thought of the wonderful ritual of mourning that she is to move into. "How can I lead a worldly life when Monsieur is in prison?" she asks happily (p. 69); "I'm through with finery." We can imagine the maids' faces falling, for if the Madame gives up finery, they would have to give it up in the game. Or would they? In any case, the structure of the ritual is beginning to show. Madame finds the alarm-clock from the kitchen in her room. The table is not dusted, and she remarks of her maids, "Their housekeeping is the most extraordinary combination of luxury and filth." (p. 76) The ritual, which gives them their only luxury, is the cause of the filth that Madame notices. Also, Madame is curious about the authorship of the condemnatory letters, and further, she will not drink the poisoned tea. Claire has to resort to unwieldy tactics in trying to persuade her to sip, until the mistress cries, "You're trying to kill me with your tea" (p. 78). Ritual and reality (which may be only another ritual, of course)

meet in the cup of tea — "Au fond d'une tasse de thé." The cup is no less significant in Genet than in Proust.

Madame departs in safety, and Claire and Solange rush to get "right into the transformation" (p. 85). Claire, wearing imperious white this last time, insists on playing Madame. This time, of course, the ritual progresses to its end, until Claire takes the poisoned tea, thus committing suicide in order that the image of Madame may be destroyed. She kills the object of her love by killing herself.

In Genet's four plays, The Maids, Deathwatch, The Balcony, The Blacks, ritual acts as a mold to contain the violence of the death-wish and the love-hate pattern of emotions. These impulses are so strong in Genet characters that the only way they can be lived with is to have them organized into the prison of ritual, where they may be explored and gradually purged, without danger. The tightness of the mold, moreover, is essential to the purgation. In The Blacks, Village is always breaking into naturalness. He wants to marry Virtue, and is tired of all the play-acting. Quickly he is pushed back into a role. Of what use is a prison when the inmates escape? The prison of Genet's theatrical ritual contains all the crime and violence of the actual prisons of his memory. His becomes a gospel of crime that comes to expression, for example, in the Litany of the Livid. Evil becomes a new religion. The Judge declares by the Act of July 18th, Article 1, that "God being dead, the color black ceases to be a sin; it becomes a crime" (p. 119). If there is to be religious

ritual — and Genet would say that this is necessary — it will have to be a ritual of crime.

Ritual does more than contain the evil, unfortunately. As well, it tends, in its duration, to lift responsibility. Newport News, in The Blacks, recognizes the problem when he says,

But though we can put on an act in front of them
(POINTING TO THE AUDIENCE), we've got to stop act-
ing when we're among ourselves. We'll have to get
used to taking responsibility
(p. 82)

In The Maids, we have seen that Solange and Claire, during the game, expose areas of each other's weakness and frailty, a cruelty for which they are incapable of taking responsibility afterwards. This is the most disturbing effect of Genet's theatre. Genet has lived his own life, evidently, as a chosen ritual of thieving and prostitution, for which he need not admit responsibility, as he is only acting a part. While one would not wish to tamper with a discussion of the ethics of Genet's life, we can talk about the ethics of his theatre. What happens to the evil? Sartre's long study, Saint Genet, comes to the conclusion that, "By infecting us with his evil, Genet delivers himself from it."⁶² If this is the case, theatre-goers receive much more than they paid for when they attend a Genet play.

Behind the ritual lies a myth of crime that is surprisingly impotent in its theatrical impact. Instead of culminating

⁶² Jean-Paul Sartre, Saint Genet, trans. Bernard Frechtman, London, W.H. Allen, 1964, p. 544.

in an efficacious ritual death, The Maids finishes in paltry suicide. In Deathwatch, Lefranc strangles young Maurice falsely. He wanted to move up in the inverted society of the prison, so he murdered. His heart was not truly in the crime. He lacked a kind of divine grace, as Green Eyes tries to explain to him angrily:

You don't know the first thing about misfortune if you think you can choose it. I didn't want mine. It chose me I've only just barely accepted it. It had to be total It's only now that I'm settling down completely in misfortune and making it my heaven. And you, you cheat to get there
(p. 162-63)

Lefranc's crime, though only too brutally real, was, in a sense, not real enough. Instead of a satisfying release through the death-ritual, there is only vacuity.⁶³ The death was wasted. In The Balcony, rather than truly murdering the Chief of Police, Roger emasculates himself in the belief that his identification with the Chief will carry this destruction of sexual power (hence political power, in Genet's world) over from him to the other. This is hardly what occurs, and the Chief comments that, "A low mass will be said to my glory" (p. 113). The Blacks, as we have discussed, is the ritual enactment of an unreal murder, and is this enough to earn the blacks their name? As Archibald has admonished, the colour, black, "must be earned." (p. 17)

⁶³ Yet we must not fail to remind ourselves that a man has been killed. It is so easy to forget the crime under the deluge of Genet's complicated ethical system.

In this terrible world, it is hard to ascertain what, if anything, is purged. It is certain that we have travelled to the Valley of the Shadow, but is the balance in favour of our passing through to escape? Does Genet's theatre succeed in purging as the ceremonial Mass he hoped to emulate? This is a difficult question to answer directly. It might become clearer if one tries to determine what Genet's purpose was in these dramas of murder, suicide and violence. No ritual was brought to satisfying completion, therefore each must be played again, and again, with never any more peace than the first time. Genet has based his religion on crime and his dramas are made up of evil created for the relish of evil. It becomes a question of scabrous enjoyment, rather than healthy purgation. Genet's theatre taints; it does not purge. One must conclude that his theatre is breathtaking, but evil, if such a word can have meaning any more, for Genet himself may be the only one to leave the Shadow of Death. The rest of us may be left with it.

Conclusion

As suggested earlier, the names, Beckett, Pinter and Genet, can be linked together in a logical order, in that order (though it should be clear by now that logical order is an illusion). In Beckett, ritual fills up the boredom and emptiness of life. In Pinter, the ritual that filled the emptiness is found to liberate a new madness, a menace of unknown terror. Genet explores that menace, which he finds to lie in the closeness of love and hate, and in death-wishes, and puts it into a ritual which for him is the only reality.

In Beckett's work, we find that ritual, by filling in the gaps, makes of life a series of games, any one of which can be successfully repeated. Ritual also is used to alleviate the anguish of life: it makes bearable the hurt:

VLADIMIR: It hurts?

ESTRAGON: (ANGRILY). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

VLADIMIR: (ANGRILY). No one ever suffers but you. I don't count. I'd like to hear what you'd say if you had what I have.

ESTRAGON: It hurts?

VLADIMIR: (ANGRILY). Hurts! He wants to know if it hurts!

(Waiting for Godot, p. 7)

The hurt does not hurt quite so much when encased in the poetry of ritual. When Beckett's ritual builds up into incantation, we can partake of the psychic powers released. The theatre becomes a temple. His lyric treatment of the leaves and the sand, rustling and murmuring, gives a feeling of sanctity that refreshes the spirit.

In Pinter, we have found that the ritual liberates a new madness on stage. Thus Pinter is discovered to use ritual as a shock-technique to build up his concept of a Theatre of Menace. His ritual is textural, and gives life to words and objects by investing them with a mysterious power. This is not a ritual based on myth, for when Pinter supplies mythical overtones, they usually prove ironic. The vitality comes from the words themselves in their ritualistic patterns.

Whereas theatre is a temple with Beckett, it becomes a riot of religious frenzy with Genet. Ritual is not limiting, but vital and creative. When Esslin says that Absurd theatre "merely presents",⁶⁴ he is not being accurate. Genet's characters are not will-less puppets: they live deeply (if tortuously) through rituals which they choose. Furthermore, we can only hope that life is not as Genet presents. Surely he exposes more evil than there actually is. Whereas Beckett looks at the human condition and records what there is, Genet looks, discovers a little evil, likes it, and creates a bit more.

Basically, ritual organizes a life which is seen to have no order of its own. In this fundamental point, Beckett, Pinter and Genet concur, and may be called "Absurdists". In each, the prime effect of ritual is to drug the conscious mind, that the unconscious may leap into play. The symmetry of the repetition of deed or word soothes the rational into

⁶⁴ Esslin, p. xx.

oblivion, as the eye dizzies when counting up the layers of a pagoda.

There is not necessarily any less variety in Absurd theatre than in conventional theatre. The ritual can carry drama farther than ever before. Were Ellis-Fermor alive today, possibly she would consider (as this student does) that the Theatre of the Absurd has pushed forward the frontiers of drama yet again. More is possible on stage than ever before in the Western world, not less. There will never be a second Godot; but there never was a second Lear either. Why should there be, when each play can be re-enacted with a perfect efficacy at any time? There will never be another Balcony, or another Caretaker. However, it is quite possible there will be something else, a new play that will be an entity in itself, yet in this rich tradition. To continue this reply to questions brought up in the introductory pages, have we discovered that any of these dramatists actually believes in the meaninglessness of life? For Genet, ritual is meaningful (though his use of it must be subject to ethical judgment). For Beckett, that most stringent of epistemologists, nothing appears meaningful (or joyful) except, on occasion, the comedy of human futility, a comfortably large area. Pinter finds that modern life contains overwhelming vague terrors with which we must come to terms; this struggle is meaningful.

Ritual has been seen to form the essence and overtones of the theatre of Beckett, Pinter and Genet. By implication,

the tradition of Absurd theatre as a whole is based on the same structure. Ionesco, Albee, N.F. Simpson and the others, with varying degrees of success, have made deliberate use of ritual in at least one of the aforementioned ways. Ionesco's use of objects is much more startling even than Pinter's. Simpson, whose Resounding Tinkle certainly is a much slighter work than any examined in this paper, relies on the incantatory power of verbal chaos.⁶⁵ His play is not very important, though it can be seen in its small way to be within the tradition. Albee's Zoo Story builds up to a peak of primordial terror with the re-enactment of the ritual with the landlady's dog. Jarry's Ubu Roi is a monumental pile of garbage that bursts into life of its own at this distance of nearly seventy years. Nothing can kill the irrepressible vitality of its unreason.

Esslin sums up the Absurd Theatre as an effort to find:

. . . a dimension of the Ineffable; an effort to make man aware of the ultimate realities of his condition, to instill in him again the lost sense of cosmic wonder and primeval anguish, to shock him out of an existence that has become trite, mechanical, complacent, and deprived of the dignity that comes of awareness.⁶⁶

It would seem that Artaud's prayers have been answered. He had asked for men "capable of imposing this superior notion

⁶⁵ He wrote in a saucy programme note to the play that, "From time to time parts of the play may seem about to become detached from the main body. No attempt, well intentioned or not, should be made from the audience to nudge these back into position while the play is in motion. They will eventually drop off and are quite harmless." At least this is a 'celebration of life'.

⁶⁶ Esslin, p. 291.

of the theatre, men who will restore to all of us the natural and magic equivalent of the dogmas in which we no longer believe",⁶⁷ and he has been granted the dramatists of the Absurd. He has asked for a theatre that combines the poetries of music, dance, gesticulation, intonation, lighting and so on. The twenty-five years between his manifesto and us have given him Genet's The Blacks. He has asked for someone to rediscover the "sense of laughter's power of physical and anarchic dissociation",⁶⁸ and we give him Winnie at the beginning of Act 2 in Happy Days, staring out at the audience saying, "Someone is looking at me still." He called for a renewal of that "metaphysical fear", and we give him The Dumbwaiter, with all puns in the title implied. He called for an inhuman reality, and we present him with the Rhinoceros and The Chairs. He wanted the "enchanted mathematical meticulousness" of Balinese theatre, and we show him the ritual of Endgame. Finally, Artaud demanded a theatre that could teach us that "the sky can still fall on our heads", and we confront him with the terror of Pinter.

Nearly all his demands have been answered. The ritual of this new theatre has given "an equivalent of the dogmas" in the form of primitive magic. But what of the "natural . . . equivalent" for which he has asked? We have discovered that the myths have become emptied of meaning for us, as the rhythms

⁶⁷ Artaud, p. 32.

⁶⁸ Artaud, p. 42.

of nature no longer play a part in them. Guicharnaud's enumeration of modern myths points up this fact. He talks of Chaplin's Little Man as being "the only modern myth sufficiently distant and individualized",⁶⁹ though certain institutions have risen to the mythical level, and he lists "Hollywood, the Party, the middle-class American and Frenchman, the Capitalist". This is myth halted at the social level. Ritual as we have found it in the Absurd pays service to no mythical world beyond, and becomes often mere busy-ness. Esslin writes,

. . . there is a close connection between myth and dream; myths have been called the collective dream images of mankind.⁷⁰

This bespeaks a dire future for twentieth century man, if all his dreams are neurotic and rootless. The psyche seems to have lost its roots in the primeval. This is a more disturbing discovery than we ever imagined to find. The plays then become a fretwork of ritual which is celebrating nothing, only disturbing. Yet we do experience something very important through attending an Absurd play — the power of theatre itself. As Fergusson defines it, drama "is an art which eventuates in words, but which in its own essence is at once more primitive, more subtle, and more direct than either words or concept."⁷¹ Areas of our psychic sensibility are opened up and played upon. We return to the everyday world on the

⁶⁹ Guicharnaud, p. 216.

⁷⁰ Esslin, p. 248.

⁷¹ Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theatre, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1955, p. 22.

street revitalized by sharing in a celebration of ritual, through ritual. The Absurd wafer offered at the theatre may not have substance, but somehow it gives sustenance. Esslin feels that the very spectacle of disintegration creates attempts in us subconsciously to integrate. Absurd Theatre, he feels,

. . . activates psychological forces, releases and liberates hidden fears and repressed aggressions, and, above all, by confronting the audience with a picture of disintegration, it sets in motion an active process of integrative forces in the mind of each individual spectator.⁷²

Esslin's could be but wishful thinking. There might be another answer. Thinking of the mimeplay that Vladimir and Estragon enter into so consciously, one wonders how they can do it with such blasé assumption of fake feeling. How can one act with sufficient intensity when one knows one is acting in a play where one is acting in a play? The Valet says in The Blacks, "Listen to them. They're exquisitely spontaneous." (p. 19). Whence comes the will to Act? Perhaps here lies a clue to the basic vitality of the Absurd plays.

Possibly the actor is aware that though he is feigning, his acting is a part of a total image that will be destroyed if he falters. It may be false, illusory, temporary; but it is an image. Something has been made, which he, for his own sake at least, is obliged to protect. More than this, the ritual actually demands response. If Estragon does not respond to Vladimir's antics in the mimeplay, there will be no

⁷² Esslin, p. 302.

mimeplay. However, it is difficult not to respond, when a hat arrives in your left hand, by passing along the one in your right. The ritual of mime does tend to possess, and in the relationships it compels lies a delicate tension which has energy and sustains. Thus Henry in Embers finds himself inventing people to talk to; Krapp brings back through the tape-recorder persons he once knew (including his old self); and the isolated player in Beckett's Act Without Words cannot help trying to establish a relationship with the mute descending objects. Human nature is no longer a concern of the theatre, which creates a poetic image from gratuitous relationships and patterns. Divorced from the stage, such a philosophy is profoundly nihilistic, but when worked into the ritual of drama, the result is vibrant and positive.

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