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**Verbal violence in modern drama: A study of language as  
aggression**

**Malkin, Jeanette Rosenzweig, Ph.D.**

**New York University, 1988**

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VERBAL VIOLENCE IN MODERN DRAMA  
A Study of Language as Aggression

Jeanette Rosenzweig Malkin

A Dissertation in the Department of Comparative Literature  
submitted to the faculty of  
The Graduate School of Arts and Science  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

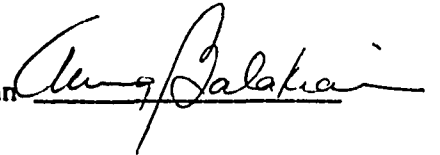
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

at

NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

1988

Adviser: Professor Anna Balakian



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Dedicated

To the Memory of my Father

Samuel Rosenzweig

זכרונו לברכה

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## INTRODUCTION

Verbal violence designates the violence perpetuated upon us by language.

The term implies, most obviously, language which is used to express aggression--through vituperation, invective, oaths, insult, threat, and obscenity--and as a consequence of which aggression is in turn created. This use of language is hardly peculiar to modern drama. Indeed, verbal altercation with its stock of accusation, insinuation, and abuse is a commonplace throughout the history of drama. Tragedy thrives on it. Comedy draws on it. A whole range of human nature is expressed through it.

But verbal violence as I will be using this term, and applying it to a diverse group of postwar plays, is different in nature as well as in form from this obvious connotation. It will not refer to language which is used to *express* aggression, but rather to language which is portrayed--by an international group of postwar playwrights--as being *itself* an aggression, and an aggressor. Two traits define the plays which put forth this thesis: *thematically*, they are all concerned with man's subjugation, victimization, and imprisonment through imposed or inherited verbal structures;



*dramatically*, they all demonstrate concrete actions of language which are violent, coercive, and domineering. Language is either metamorphosed into a dramatic antagonist which destroys the characters or forces them into conformity to its pre-given structures and precepts; or it is portrayed as an inescapable prison which determines the characters' fate and defines the limits of their world--conceptual and moral. This double axis--thematic concern and dramatic demonstration--is the criterion according to which the more than a dozen postwar plays to be studied here have been chosen.

Dramatic inquiry into the relationship between man and his language is not a uniquely postwar phenomenon. Jarry's *Ubu Roi* (1896), Hofmannsthal's *Der Schwierige* (1921), some Dada theatre evenings, the *Volksstücke* of Ödön von Horváth and Marieluise Fleisser all suggest, in varying ways, a concern with this issue. That which, however, distinguishes the plays to be studied here is their elevation of language to the central action, and actor; their pessimistic vision of man's ability to remain free and humane in the face of verbal coercion; and their warning that man has become a prisoner of his speech: "Instead of men using language to think, we have language thinking for men." The violent action of language is directed both against the audience and against the characters. In either case language is on trial: it stands accused of usurping and molding reality, of replacing critical thought with fossilized and automatic verbiage, of violating man's autonomy, of destroying his individuality. The plays that demonstrate these views are varied; they vary in genre, in idiom, and in subject matter. There is the abstract thesis drama of Handke's *Kaspar* (alternate title

"Sprachfolterung": language torture)--in which language is demonstrated to be the antagonist, the force which shapes and reduces man into mindless obedience; the absurdity of Ionesco's *La Leçon*--in which language is a tyrannical weapon of dominance and destruction; the neo-naturalism of Mamet's *American Buffalo* or Kroetz's *Stallerhof*--in which a painfully limited, obscene and cliché-ridden language imprisons and brutalizes. There is the menacing torture/interrogation of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*--in which clichés of speech and thought brainwash a social outcast into clean-shaven conformity; the exposure of dogma and jargon in Havel's *The Garden Party*--in which language is shown to embody and control political power; the unceasing vituperation and reality-replacement of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*--in which verbal cruelty defines human relationships. The reason that these and other related plays need to be studied together is that each focuses on the relationship between man and his language, and all contain a distinctive usage of language as a form of aggression. Moreover, they illuminate a new connection between dramatic language and dramatic violence.

The plays to be examined all focus on the action of language. Language is either the explicit subject or it is implicit to a degree which makes it impossible to analyze the play's thematics without dealing, explicitly, with its language. In this sense I am dealing with a theatre of language.

In 1956 Jean Vannier published an article in *Théâtre Populaire* titled "Langages de l'Avant-Garde". It was translated and printed in 1963 in the *Tulane Drama Review* as "A Theatre of Language".<sup>2</sup> In this influential article Vannier distinguishes three different types of dramatic languages: "traditional" dramatic language which represents the passions and thoughts of its characters, their "'psychological' relationships which language only translates." This language is always close to that of the public for whom it was written and therefore doesn't call unusual attention to itself. The second type of dramatic language is one that acts physically upon its audience, "disturbing (its) rapport with the world" by provoking it and forcing it to enter the exaggerated world of the theatre. Vannier places this language within the "poetic avant-garde" of the period between the wars, under the aegis of Artaud's influence and through which language becomes "a vocal form of gesture". This language, Vannier claims, revolutionized the *nature* of dramatic language but not its function, for "this language always remains absorbed in its theatrical finality". That is: the language functions as an element of the theatrical event, not as the focal subject at which the drama is aimed. The third type of dramatic language emerged after the second World War and is what Vannier terms "a theatre of language", in which the *function* of language is radically altered, effecting a "revolution in the *relationship* between theatre and language" (my emphasis). Language which till now had functioned to translate psychological states or as theatrical gesture here becomes "the very content of the drama itself" existing before us "as a dramatic reality". Language is thus moved to the forefront of the stage reflecting,

not the world of the drama, but itself. For the first time language finds itself "literally *exposed* upon the stage, promoted to the dignity of a theatrical object" (Vannier's emphasis). Language has become the very subject and object of the drama and with it comes "a dramaturgy of human relations at the level of language itself".

Vannier limits his study of this new function of language to the plays of Beckett, Adamov, and Ionesco and thus claims that this language creates a "drama of absurdity", an anti-theatre. Most of the plays which I will show to partake of this dramaturgy "at the level of language itself" were written after Vannier's article; thus his limited scope becomes understandable. While I accept this analysis of a postwar drama in which language reflects back upon itself, becomes the central action of the play and the focus of its content, I will expand this idea to demonstrate that critical language-consciousness functions far beyond mere dramatic absurdity. The problem with such a limited definition is its implication of an equally limited philosophical conclusion. Martin Esslin, whose analysis of language in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) concurs with many of Vannier's insights,<sup>3</sup> rightly draws our attention to the fact that the non-sensical, devalued language of the Absurd assumes and reveals an experienced "insufficiency" of speech, a metaphysical gap between man's need to *mean* and the incapacity of inauthentic, mechanical language to bear or convey the anguish of reality. Alienation from language, language's "failure to communicate" is depicted in much of Absurdist drama as an expression of both social and existential isolation.<sup>4</sup> As Ionesco

paradigmatically shows in his *La Cantatrice chauve*, we can no longer understand our own words which have been "stripped" of meaning, and are thus forever separated from verbal communion and authentic communication. According to Ionesco: "Words are only noise stripped of all meaning. These houses, the sky are only facades of nothingness; people seem to evaporate, everything is threatened, including myself by an imminent, silent sinking into I know not what abyss."<sup>6</sup> This Existentialist perspective develops the intuitions of a turn-of-the-century language *malaise* which was especially strong in central Europe. From Kafka through Hofmannsthal, Broch, Kraus, and up to Ionesco a sense of verbal despair, of "a crisis experienced by many a serious writer of the period,"<sup>6</sup> is apparent. In 1904 Yeats wondered whether it were any longer possible to create a play that will live "out of a dying, or at any rate a very ailing language."<sup>7</sup> Hofmannsthal gave this crisis especially cogent expression in his 'Lord Chandos' Letter--*Ein Brief* (1902). Not unlike Sartre's Roquentin, Lord Chandos suffers nausea when faced with words which once had flowed "wie durch nie verstopften Röhren" with "tiefen, wahren, inneren Form,"<sup>8</sup> and had now turned into "Wirbel...in die hinabzusehen mich schwindelt, die sich unaufhaltsam drehen und durch die hindurch man ins Leere kommt."<sup>9</sup> Sickened by the fluid abstraction of words and their slippery inadequacy, Lord Chandos chooses silence. Hofmannsthal later translated this pessimistic view of language into dramatic form in his play *Der Schwierige*. The 'difficult man' of the title is Hans Karl Bühl who, momentarily buried alive in the trenches of World War I, realizes the impossibility of describing experience, "das Letzte, Unaussprechlich" through "wohlgesetzte Wörter".

Allerdings, es ist ein bissl lächerlich, wenn man sich einbildet, durch wohlgesetzte Wörter eine weiss Gott wie grosse Wirkung auszuüben, in einem Leben, wo doch schliesslich alles auf das Letzte, Unausprechliche ankommt. Das Redn basiert auf einer indezenten Selbstüberschätzung.<sup>10</sup>

Surrounded by the trivial social banter of his friends and servants, watching meaning recede with each attempt to put it into words--Bühl concludes that speech is an *indecenty*, a profanation of the final "Unausprechliche" truth of Experience. Like Lord Chandos, he rejects language. This separation from meaning, the gap felt between language and experience, is one of the essential themes of Absurdist drama (and will be discussed in the context of Chapter III). It is *not* the theme of this study. Alienation has, in the plays I will discuss, transmuted into aggression. Language is no longer depicted as absurd or isolated; rather it is shown to be a domineering and dangerous force which controls and manipulates man, becoming the essence of his being and the limit of his world. Thus my focus will be rather different than Vannier's: the verbal activity which I will identify functions not only to elevate language into focal attention, but also as a comment on its nature: language as an aggression. This aggression which--in many of the plays under consideration--culminates in acts of language-motivated violence, signals a disturbed and threatening relationship between contemporary man and his language. One of the questions which these plays implicitly pose is: do we control language, or does it control us? Does language speak *through* us--or *for* us?

*Der Schwierige* was published in book form in 1921. That same year another Viennese, Ludwig Wittgenstein, published his *Tractatus logico-philosophicus*, a work which confronted similar questions in a rather different form. Wittgenstein was concerned with the logical limits of the 'sayable', the boundaries of philosophically legitimate and thus truthful utterances. Through a strict, almost mathematical procedure Wittgenstein attempted to combat "the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language."<sup>11</sup> Seeking the relationship between the word and the fact, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* finds reality eternally clouded by the infinite regression of words. Language, which "verkleidet den Gedanken"<sup>12</sup> can only truthfully picture a narrow portion of reality: for the rest, its validity is put in question. Wittgenstein believed that if we could only learn to use language correctly and not burden words with "meanings"--metaphysical, aesthetic, ethical--which they cannot hold, then clarity would replace chaos. Wittgenstein (who will be discussed in Chapter II) was fighting "word superstition" as had a fellow Viennese, Fritz Mauthner, twenty years earlier. Mauthner's epistemological scepticism was born of a deep distrust of words which, he claimed, are always at a remove from experience and thus can never really speak about reality--but only about themselves. In his *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*<sup>13</sup> Mauthner argues that language cannot convey truth but only emotive equivalencies, imprecisions, and ambiguities. Like Leibnitz, Herder, or Humboldt before him, Sapir or Whorf after him, Mauthner makes a case for the inevitable relativity and deterministic power of language which traps us each within our individual linguistic skin, determining our view of the world and of

ourselves (I will discuss this in Chapter IV). Both Mauthner and Wittgenstein were practicing *Sprachkritik*--a critique of language. Motivated by the same awareness of a "crisis" of language which had paralyzed Hofmannsthal, they hoped to make us more critical in our attitude toward language and more aware of the danger which uncontrolled and unconscious use posed. As such they join a long row of philosophers, linguists and critics who through language scepticism sought to escape the threatening spiral of language, and to encourage a critical reassessment of our means of speech. From Leibnitz to Whorf there thus runs a common theme of the "tyranny" of words and man's subjugation through that which is supposed to be the crowning achievement of his humanity: language.

The 'subjugation' of man through language and language-systems takes a somewhat different, though no less dangerous form in the influential contemporary movement, Structuralism. Centered in linguistic theory, Structuralism studies the internal functioning of systems divorced from their historical context, and by "bracketing off" both the real (historical) object of its analysis and the human subject through whom the systems operate.<sup>14</sup> Inverting the humanist perspective which finds the source of meaning in the individual, structural analysis focuses on systems of conventions, generative rules which function *through* the individual but neither originate in, nor are controlled by him. As Jonathan Culler puts it in his study of *Structuralist Poetics*:

...once the conscious subject is deprived of its role as source of meaning--once meaning is explained in terms of conventional systems which may escape the grasp of the conscious subject--



the self can no longer be identified with consciousness. It is 'dissolved' as its functions are taken up by a variety of interpersonal systems that operate through it. The human sciences, which begin by making man an object of knowledge, find, as their work advances, that 'man' disappears under structural analysis. 'The goal of the human sciences', writes Lévi-Strauss, 'is not to constitute man but to dissolve him' (*La Pensée sauvage*, p. 326).<sup>15</sup>

Whatever its philosophic value, or its importance as a tool for cultural analysis, Structuralism in its various forms has certainly deprived the functioning self of free will and thus reaffirmed the deterministic hold of sign-systems--foremost among which is language--over man. The 'aggression' which my study addresses, centers to a great extent on the dramatization of man's loss of autonomy and selfhood through the normative pressures, reductive tendencies, or pre-determination of language. Thus all of the above mentioned philosophers and linguists, among others, have a direct bearing on my subject. They underlie, and sometimes directly inform, the concerns of the playwrights to be studied, and will be discussed in a variety of relevant contexts.

There have been a number of books in recent years dealing with the modern dramatist and his language. The increased interest in this subject stems, undoubtedly, from "the heightened critical consciousness about language in drama, which is already *there*...in the achieved work of our representative dramatists."<sup>16</sup> My study draws first of all on the "achieved work" of a multi-national group of representative postwar dramatists. It differs from the previous work done in this area by focusing on the

violence which language embodies and engenders; a violence contrived and heightened by the playwrights as a conscious comment and warning against the threat which language poses to man's autonomy and freedom. I, however, profited greatly from previous studies of dramatic language in modern drama, which offered a general context for my specific inquiry. Of major interest among those studies, in scope and imagination, is Andrew Kennedy's *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language*, an in-depth analysis of language-functions in the plays of Shaw, Eliot, Beckett, Pinter, Osborne, and Arden. Kennedy's assumption is that the language of modern drama tends to be both critical and self-conscious, reflecting back upon itself, commenting on its own limitations while also forging new idioms, and thus expanding the definitions of verbal expressiveness. Born of a perceived crisis of dramatic language, it incorporates both an awareness of that crisis and a willingness to confront it dramatically. By contrasting a "critical" language (self-reflective innovation) to a "limited" one (the "pull" of mimetic dialogue),<sup>17</sup> Kennedy comes to the optimistic conclusion that the crisis of dramatic language in this century has led to a rejuvenation from within.<sup>18</sup> Kennedy's study expands Vannier's intuition that for the first time language finds itself "literally *exposed* upon the stage", becoming both the subject and the object of drama. These perceptions of language's critical self-consciousness underlie my study without being its main theme. I continue from there to show how dramatic language is used to attack language itself; and the conclusions reached in the plays to be studied here vis-à-vis language, are anything but optimistic.

Until recently, books dedicated to the study of dramatic language have been few. As Kennedy attests: "Out of nearly a hundred critical works I have read on drama in recent years, only a dozen or so had anything to say on dramatic language"--and that not as their main concern.<sup>19</sup> Since then a number of studies have appeared, all giving evidence to "the heightened critical consciousness about language already there" in the plays discussed. John Russell Brown approaches *Theatre Language* (1972) a bit differently than Kennedy, treating the use of both verbal and gestural 'language' in the plays of Pinter, Osborne, Wesker, and Arden. This broadening of perspective results in a lessening of interest in linguistic sources, and an emphasis on the relationship between word and gesture. Ruby Cohn, in her study of *Dialogue in American Drama* (1971) chooses "the few American playwrights who seem to me to have written original and distinctive dramatic dialogue"--i.e.: O'Neill, Miller, Williams, and Albee--and re-examines their plays in terms of language, and the function of dialogue in terms of theatre. Gareth Lloyd Evans offers a more general study of language in the English-speaking drama since Shaw, in his *The Language of Modern Drama* (1977). An interesting re-evaluation of the theory and critical method of dramatic language can be found in Pierre Larthomas' *Le Langage dramatique* (1972). More recently, Keir Elam applied structural methodology to dramatic analysis in his *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (1980). He dedicates a chapter to "Dramatic Discourse" which sets out "to investigate those linguistic functions most characteristically 'dramatic'. The semantic, rhetorical and, above all, pragmatic principles of dramatic dialogue...".<sup>20</sup> The growing interest in dramatic language is also evidenced by the growing

number of monographs with a language-centered perspective now in print.<sup>21</sup> These will be discussed, when relevant, in the following chapters.

Another work that needs to be mentioned here, if only because of the similarity of our titles, is Linda M. Hill's *Language as Aggression*.<sup>22</sup> This book is essentially a linguistically-oriented textual analysis of six postwar plays which have little in common except for a prominent use of language. Hill's stated goal is to test "what language accomplishes" in those plays and "to what extent each play reproduces the idiom of a region or an epoch and what the reception shows about the works and their audience."<sup>23</sup> The term "language as aggression" is never defined, nor is any generalization of the functions and implications of this use of language offered. Hill's approach is to subject each play to an empirical and self-contained verbal analysis which stresses the corruption of standard speech forms, the misuse of idiomatic speech, grammatical distortions, and the place of regional dialect. She fails to distinguish between language which *embodies* aggression and thus reflects back upon itself, and language which merely *conveys* it; thus the difference between language as aggression, and language used for aggression, remains unclear. While Hill's readings of the plays she chose--only one of which, Handke's *Kaspar*, coincides with my choice of texts--is detailed and often perceptive, the questions which are implicitly posed, her criterion for the choice of texts, and her methodology are quite different from my own.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Hill is not clearly concerned with the conscious effort of postwar playwrights to portray *through* language a perception of language as a threat and danger to

personal autonomy and identity. Thus, despite a similarity of title, our studies have little in common.

Violence has always been a commonplace in the drama. Theatre is traditionally built around conflict, and this conflict--especially in tragedy and the 'serious' drama--often leads to acts of aggression. "There is certainly an enormous element of violence in drama," writes Martin Esslin in his article on "Violence in Modern Drama", "and it is not, as in some other arts, extraneous, but something that is inherent in the form itself."<sup>25</sup> From Oedipus's self-blinding to Macbeth's mass murders, Hedda Gabler's suicide, or the brutal shooting of Mutter Courage's heroic daughter Katrin, acts of violence have been accepted as belonging on the stage, as emerging naturally from the 'conflict' around which drama evolves.

The use of *language* as a tool of aggression is equally common in the history of drama; language is used to rage, attack and injure, and thus express the feelings of its characters. But traditional verbal aggression differs essentially from its contemporary counterpart. It is always motivated and--like the physical violence it encourages--contained within a firm context, psychological and plot-furthering. Verbal explosions, mainly in the form of invective or altercation, add information to what we know about the characters and about how the story is progressing. Language

accentuates, gives nuance and depth of thought, but it is always a partner--and usually a subordinate one--to the development of plot-action and character.

The traditional view of dramatic language is based on Aristotle's discussion in his *Poetics*. Francis Fergusson, in his Aristotelian study *The Idea of a Theatre*, represents this position when he claims that:

a drama, as distinguished from a lyric, is not primarily a composition in the verbal medium; the words result, as one might put it, from the underlying structure of incident and character. As Aristotle remarks, "the poet, or 'maker' should be the maker of plots rather than verses; since he is a poet because he imitates, and what he imitates are actions".<sup>26</sup>

Thus drama as an art "eventuates in words" but imitates action, and this action "in all real plays, underlies the more highly evolved arts of language".<sup>27</sup> Fergusson locates this action in a conjunction of incident, character, and author's intention. This idea of theatre is attested to by the use of language--including violent language--in most traditional drama. Violent language is found in isolated scenes in all periods of dramatic writing, but never as a *sustained* usage, never as the center of the play. Even in the most violent of plays--Seneca's *Medea* or Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*--the language is only intermittently aggressive and always directs our focus to the raging character. I will illustrate with a few examples the function of aggressive language in pre-modern drama in order to clarify how it differs from modern verbal violence.

The most common form of verbal abuse is vituperation, name-calling, which usually takes place within verbal altercation. A good example of this is found in that most classic of plays, Sophocles' *King Oedipus* in which language violently mirrors the clash of two wills.

Oedipus has beseeched the prophet Teiresias to tell him and the people of Thebes what he knows about the slayer of the late King Laius. Unwilling to reveal the painful truth Teiresias refuses to speak and Oedipus, taking this as a sign of disobedience and disloyalty to the state at best, of complicity at worst, lashes out:

**Oedipus:** Nothing? Insolent scoundrel, you would rouse  
A stone to fury! Will you never speak?  
You are determined to obstinate to the end?...  
Such words - such insults to the State  
Would move a saint to anger...  
**Teiresias:** I tell no more. Rage with what wrath you will.  
**Oedipus:** I shall; and speak my mind unflinchingly.  
I tell you I do believe you had a hand  
In plotting, and all but doing, this very act.  
If you had eyes to see with, I would have said  
Your hand, and yours alone, had done it all.<sup>29</sup>

Later, after Teiresias accuses Oedipus himself of being Laius's slayer, Oedipus calls him a "shameless and brainless, sightless, senseless sot!"--hardly kind words to throw at a blind prophet.<sup>29</sup>

In the following scene, even more intense abuse is exchanged between Oedipus and his brother-in-law Creon, whom Oedipus has accused of plotting with Teiresias against him. The motivations for these attacks--anger and suspicion--are continuously acknowledged in the text. The leader of the

Chorus insists that the taunts "were spoken in the stress of anger, ill-considered."<sup>30</sup> Thus, the attacks serve to demonstrate a facet of Oedipus' character--rashness and easy anger--which is key to our understanding of his tragic downfall. The language of attack, that which Jocasta puts down to a "quarrelsome" nature,<sup>31</sup> is only important because of what it tells us about Oedipus himself. As Creon prophetically says: "In mercy obdurate, as harsh in anger--such natures earn self-torture."<sup>32</sup> The verbal attack is completely within character, and within context; motivated both psychologically and by the incidents of plot, it becomes a demonstration of that character and a factor in furthering the plot.

Another example of verbal rage which acts as both a demonstration of character and a factor in the plot, is found in the figure of Coriolanus. That haughty though noble General with his outspoken contempt for "the mutable rank-scented many"<sup>33</sup> is a man of action rather than speech whose greatest fault is his pride and inflexible sense of honor. Coriolanus' first appearance in the play shows him answering a rebelling mob which Menenius Agrippa, a fellow patrician, had been trying to placate:

**Coriolanus:** What's the matter, you dissentious rogues  
That, rubbing the poor itch of your opinion,  
Make yourselves scabs?

**1st Citizen:** We have ever your good word.

**Coriolanus:** He that will give good words to thee will flatter  
Beneath abhorring. What would you have, you curs,  
That like nor peace nor war? The one affrights you,  
The other makes you proud....<sup>34</sup>



Coriolanus, "ill-schooled in bolted language",<sup>35</sup> differs from Oedipus in that his violent outbursts, insults and railings are not limited to a few scenes, but typify much of his public dealings. This use of language, in part, defines his character and mirrors the violent contempt which he feels. The result of this behavior and the stubborn pride it reflects, is that Coliolanus becomes increasingly unpopular both among the masses and within the elite circles. Again language is an extension of character, reflecting a nature, rather than itself.

Extended invective is another form which aggressive language takes. This form differs from the violent altercation by being more language-conscious. It allows the author to invent a catalogue of insults or vitriolic images and thus the language wavers between expressing the character's emotions and the author's delight in words. A good example of this is found in Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Kent, disguised in order to serve the King who has banished him, meets Oswalt, Goneril's steward, "a serviceable villain", with the following abuse:

Oswald: Why dost thou use me thus? I know thee not.

Kent: Fellow, I know thee.

Oswald: What dost thou know me for?

Kent: A knave, a rascal, an eater of broken meats; a base, proud, shallow, beggarly, three-suited, hundred-pound, filthy, worsted-stocking knave; a lily-liver'd, action-taking knave; a whoreson, glass-gazing, superseviceable, finical rogue; one-trunk-inheriting slave; one that wouldst be a bawd, in way of good service, and art nothing but the composition of a knave, beggar, coward, pandar, and the son and heir of a mongrel bitch: one whom I will beat into clamorous whining if thou deniest the least syllable of thy addition.<sup>36</sup>

There can be little doubt as to the aggressiveness of Kent's language, but the very richness of the slander draws attention from the insulted to the insultor, and from the insultor to the author and his language. Perhaps the purest example of such self-reflecting invective is found in that master of insult, Rabelais. In the great quarrel which arose between the cake-bakers of Lerne and those of Gargantua's country, we read the following impressive abuse:

Les fouaciers ne consentirent nullement à satisfaire leur demande et, ce qui est pire, les outragèrent gravement en les traitant de mauvaise graine, de brèche-dents, de jolis rouquins, de coquins, de chie-en-lit, de vilains drôles, de faux-jetons, de fainéants, de goinfres, de ventrus, de vantards, de vauriens, de rustres, de casse-pieds, de pique-assiette, de matamores, de fines braguettes, de copieurs, de tire-flemme, de malotrus, de lourdauds, de nigauds, de marauds, de corniauds, de faceurs, de farauds, de bouviers d'étrons, de bergers de merde, et autres épithètes diffamatoires de même farine.<sup>37</sup>

This massive onslaught does not, as in Shakespeare, reflect the character's inner rage, but only the author's delight in verbal invention. As such it ceases to be really aggressive and becomes a demonstration of biting wit. This use of obscenity to shock and delight, and to force the reader to confront language, is echoed over 360 years later by Alfred Jarry, in his vulgar, abusive creation, *Ubu Roi*. Ubu's snarls of speech are punctuated by such epitaphs as "Oh! merdre, jarnicotonbleu, de par ma chandelle verte...hélas! hélas!", and such lively inventions as "Bougre de merdre, merdre de bougre", which did more to shock than to delight his audience.<sup>38</sup> This self-reflecting form of verbal vulgarity will be examined in Chapter V.

Other, more subtle forms of traditional aggressive language include using language to insinuate, slander, dissemble, order, brow-beat, cower, denounce, calumniate, disparage, threaten and lie. Here language is usually an extension of ill-will, a tool in achieving a desired end. Such language is used consciously, with planned effect, and although it may lead to a violent end, need not in itself appear violent at all. It need not, precisely because the language itself is of little importance; it is the motivation and intention behind the words which is the focus of the dramatist. In most pre-modern drama, aggressive language is an incident of plot, part of the dramatic situation, or a demonstration of character. It always explodes from a personality and has both intent and sub-text which unite the character and his violence with the action on stage. From the most subtle threats to the wildest rage, this language rarely appears to us as gratuitous or out of context. Here lies the major difference between traditional verbal aggression and modern verbal violence. Psychology and plot-motivation are of little help in understanding, e.g., Handke's actors who stand on stage and shout at their (hopefully) uncomfortable audience:

ihr Milchgesichter, ihr Heckenschützen, ihr Versager, ihr  
Katzbuckler, ihr Leisetreter, ihr Nullen, ihr Dutzendwaren, ihr  
Tausendfüßler, ihr Überzähligen, ihr lebensunwerten Leben, ihr  
Geschmeiß, ihr Scheißbudenfiguren, ihr indiskutablen  
Elemente...<sup>39</sup>

and the like, as an evenings' entertainment. Nor will they explain the repeated use of obscenities and threatening non-sequiturs which form the fabric of Mamet's *American Buffalo*; or Ionesco's Professor who murders his student by repeatedly shouting "couteau, couteau, couteau..." at her; or

Pinter's Goldberg and McCann who destroy Stanley through a litany of clichés. Even Albee's George and Martha, whose verbal excesses are clearly motivated, bypass their immediate situation and personalities through the sheer mass of verbal cruelties which unceasingly fill three acts. In these and other plays we are directed away from the *context* of the language, towards the language *itself*; and it is this preoccupation with language as not merely the expressor of violence but as its creator and embodiment which will be the focus of this study.

The use of language to express violence, expose a character's aggression, complicate a plot, can also be found in modern drama. There are numerous instances of violent altercation, vulgar abuse and angry recrimination. However, verbal violence as a term which defines a specific verbal phenomenon would be unable to maintain any central cohesion if all occurrences of abusive language were filed under that heading. The term will be put to very specific use in this dissertation and that means excluding many modern plays in which language may express violence, but it is not the focus of that violence.

In the following paragraphs I would like to set up some boundaries, some limiting cases in modern drama, beyond which this term will not be taken. By delimiting I hope to sharpen the focus and the scope of this term, while also pointing out the foggy edges which surround all attempts at precise definition.

Ruby Cohn, in her study of *Currents in Contemporary Drama*, devotes a chapter to what she calls "Dialogue of Cruelty". The term is never really defined and is used quite broadly to cover almost any type of abuse which is verbally expressed. Her assumption is that modern drama seems to comply with its audiences' intensified wish "to hear lively and deadly verbal cruelties".<sup>40</sup> She cites two men as the modern sources for this dramatic tendency: August Strindberg, and Antonin Artaud. Strindberg, Cohn claims, was "the first dramatist to base whole plays upon dialogues of cruelty".<sup>41</sup> Artaud, an admirer of Strindberg, envisioned a "Theatre of Cruelty" in which de-verbalized, theatrical, ritual stage action, would revitalize and purge its audience.

For all his devaluation of language, Artaud's evocation of dramatic conflict describes Strindberg's dialogue as it does that of subsequent playwrights, much of whose significance lies in their cruelty, and whose cruelty reflects a vision of the world--ethical and metaphysical.<sup>42</sup>

Having suggested a union between Strindbergian dialogue and Artaudian metaphysics as a category through which to view modern dramatic dialogue, Cohn proceeds to furnish widely diverse examples. These examples cover almost every major modern dramatist from Brecht to O'Neill, Sartre, Beckett, and Arrabal, but fail to distinguish between plays in which language conveys cruel meaning and those in which the cruelty of language is the meaning. Cruelty is loosely used to cover language which paints a cruel vision of life, takes pleasure in its own viciousness, as well as language which conveys cruel communications. Clearly, Cohn does not intend either a close analysis of the term "Dialogue of Cruelty" or a strict

selection of plays. On the contrary, the chapter is intended as a broad overview of spoken cruelty and as such is quite suggestive. Some of her examples, however, can serve as good limiting cases for what I do *not* mean by verbal violence.

Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, like all of his plays, portrays men who are isolated, deformed, restricted, and placed in an inhuman situation. In *Endgame* Hamm, old, blind, crippled, is the cruel lord of the space he inhabits, a room, perhaps the last to contain life, in a dying or dead world. He, as well as Clov and his parents, are dying, "something is taking its course", and the play is 'about' that slow unending dying. Clov, younger, Hamm's servant and caretaker, cannot sit. Hamm cannot stand. Clov will die without the food which Hamm metes out; Hamm cannot live without Clov to care for him. Clov is constantly trying to leave the master he hates, but by leaving would not only kill Hamm--he would also be committing suicide.

Hamm: Why do you stay with me?  
Clov: Why do you keep me?  
Hamm: There's no one else.  
Clov: There's nowhere else.<sup>43</sup>

The vision portrayed in these images is a terribly cruel one. Yet the question is whether the language of the play is equally cruel.

It is important to distinguish between language used to convey a cruel or violent vision, and language which partakes of, or embodies, that

cruelty. The difference lies both in the tenor of the language--the way in which a vision is formed in language--and in its focus: does language dominate? is the world of the playwright found in the rhetorical structure of the play? or does it accompany stage images and actions? In *Endgame* language is clearly focal but, like in so much of Beckett's work, the voice which speaks through the language does not coincide with the images and actions of the stage reality. Cohn claims that in *Endgame* "mutual recriminations are pervasive and insidious":<sup>44</sup> in a sense, but the tone of those recriminations belies the mutual aggression they are meant to express:

Hamm: You're leaving me all the same.  
Clov: I'm trying.  
Hamm: You don't love me.  
Clov: No.  
Hamm: You loved me once.  
Clov: Once!  
Hamm: I've made you suffer too much. (Pause) Haven't I?  
Clov: It's not that.  
Hamm: (Shocked) I haven't made you suffer too much?  
Clov: Yes!  
Hamm: (Relieved) Ah you gave me a fright!  
(Pause. Coldly) Forgive me. (Pause. Louder)  
I said, forgive me.  
Clov: I heard you.

(p. 14)

It is precisely in the succinct expressiveness of the language that the horror of the play's vision is softened by compassion--not only through what is said, but in the poignancy of how the vision is expressed. Even the ultimate horror of life devoid of all meaning is captured in moving, disturbing, language:

Hamm: (Anguished) Clov!  
Clov: Yes.  
Hamm: What's happening?  
Clov: Something is taking its course.  
(Pause.)  
Hamm: Clov!  
Clov: (Impatiently) What is it?  
Hamm: We're not beginning to...to...mean something?  
Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something!  
(Brief laugh) Ah that's a good one!  
(pp. 26-7)

Beckett exercises much violence against his characters. But the *language* of the play is precisely the opposite of verbal violence. While the situation--the central image--is devastatingly cruel, the language is almost consistently poetic, compassionate, and so beautifully formed as to transcend and often contradict the images seen. In one of the play's few direct references to language, Clov, in anguish, shouts at Hamm: "I use the words you taught me. If they don't mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent" (p. 32). The implication of loss is clear; but, again, the poignancy stems from the well-formedness and clarity of its expression. Verbal violence implies an aggressive tendency in the rhetorical structure of the drama, which defines and focuses the events of the play within, and towards, the language itself. *Endgame* sets up a cruel situation--master and slave, mutual hate and dependence. It creates a world of death and duress. But the language which accompanies, which counterpoints this situation, is of a totally different tenor: and the tenor of the language belies its contents. This may be because, as one critic put it, "Beckett's heroes never stoop to the creation of a poorly formed cry of despair".<sup>45</sup>



Beckett's *Endgame* can for these reasons not be considered an instance of verbal violence. Another example of a "Dialogue of Cruelty" which Cohn suggests, and which I will reject in the context of this study is Sartre's *Huis Clos*. *Huis Clos*, much like *Endgame*, portrays a single, static, extremely cruel situation or basic metaphor. Also like *Endgame*, it presents a small group of characters incapable of separating from each other and violently unhappy together. But *Huis Clos*, unlike *Endgame*, is a "discussion" play, a drama of ideas, in which through cogent, realistic language the tragedy of existence is dramatized. "L'enfer c'est les Autres",<sup>46</sup> and people torture each other through what they are. Cohn writes that "torture is as basic to Sartre's Hell as it was to Dante's, but it is more insistently linguistic".<sup>47</sup> It is linguistic, however, only in the sense that the presence of the three damned souls makes itself felt mainly through what they say, and what they say arouses envy, rejection, self-doubt, loneliness and disgust. Language conveys personality, it is itself neither focal nor elevated, but merely one more tool in the inevitable mutual need to wound. At one point, all of the characters realize that each of them has been placed there in order to torture the other two, and a desperate truce is attempted:

Garcin: ...C'est tout à fait simple. Alors voilà: chacun dans son coin; c'est la parade. Vous ici, vous ici, moi là. Et du silence. Pas un mot: ce n'est pas difficile, n'est-ce pas? Chacun de nous a assez à faire avec lui-même... Se taire. Regarder en soi, ne jamais lever la tête. C'est d'accord?<sup>48</sup>

The solution of silence is not an attempt to put an end to *language*-- but to *presence*. They will not move from their separate corners, not touch, not talk. Language is rejected along with all other means of interaction, since it is that which has become infernal. Of course the solution fails. Contact, even painful contact, is imperative, and with it the speech which allows interaction but can bring no communion, is resumed. In this play language is used to convey contents. The contents conveyed are infernally painful, but the language itself does not partake of that pain. The language does not embody the cruelty which it expresses: it is no more than a tool. There is neither the obsessive and self-reflective verbal torture of Albee's *Virginia Woolf*, nor the desperate clichés and obscenities of Mamet's *American Buffalo*. Words, language itself, is simply not at stake in Sartre's *Huis Clos*. It is not because of language that they are in Hell, nor is it merely as a result of language that they will suffer. Although Sartre's vision, like Beckett's in *Endgame*, is a cruel one, his language is not the bearer of that vision: merely the conveyer. The vision has little to do with language; and the language does little more than translate it.

This study consists of four central chapters each of which examines one or a group of representative plays. The axis of each chapter is different, suggesting four general contexts within which the various devices and implications of verbal aggression can be focused. The division is as follows:

- "Language Torture" (Chapter II): concentrates on the theoretical or formal context. In it I examine Peter Handke's *Kaspar*, which provides a model for the study of man's *Versprachlichung*: his 'speechification' or being rendered a speech object. *Kaspar*, who begins the play as a virtual *tabula rasa*, a puppet figure, is created and destroyed through disembodied 'voices' (called *Einsager*) which force him to assimilate an abstraction of public language--"model" sentences which induce "model" behavior--and thus become, like language itself, well-formed and orderly. *Kaspar* unfolds less as a person than as a process, the process of man's forced incorporation into Procrustean language systems. These systems become the scaffolding of his consciousness, determine his thoughts, his values, and thus the limits of his humanity; and it is against this that *Kaspar*, and Handke, rebel. The implications of Handke's play will be discussed alongside various philosophic and linguistic theories.

- "Gagged by Language" (Chapter III): views language through a political, or power context. The six plays by Ionesco, Pinter, and Havel which I discuss, all demonstrate forms of man's domination and subjugation through language. In them, characters are 'overtaken' by language and are either destroyed (as in *La Leçon*), or are 'converted' (as in *The Birthday Party* or *The Garden Party*)--forced into pre-existing verbal molds which, implicitly or explicitly, implicate a ruling ideology. Coercion to conformity and uniformity operates through a number of recurrent devices in these plays: verbal automatism; the ritualization of language into magical formulas; the use of extended clichés and jargon which control meaning and

preclude its development. Applying George Orwell's article "Politics and the English Language", and Herbert Marcuse's "The Closing of the Universe of Discourse", from his book *One-Dimensional Man*, to these plays, I try to demonstrate the playwrights' concern that the automatic and ritualized repetition of prefabricated and self-validating language, is a real threat to personal autonomy and an inducement to political conformity.

- "Language as a Prison" (Chapter IV): centers on social deprivation and characters who are imprisoned within crippling verbal debris. Kroetz, Bond, and Mamet all recreate the fragmented and radically restricted language of fringe or debased social groups. Rooted in three different nationalities, their plays nevertheless share in uncommunicative banalities, "unowned" language, and excessive obscenity; and demonstrate the relationship between inarticulacy and brutality. Deprived of free verbal options, their characters show an alarming lack of personal morality and all seem pre-determined by the verbal poverty which shapes their limited desires, and informs their violent behavior. Drawing on various socio-linguistic theories (e.g. Basil Bernstein's 'Restricted' and 'Elaborated' Codes, and B.L. Whorf's cultural relativism), I examine the implications of this social and verbal determination.

- "Person to Person: the Verbal Battlefield" (Chapter V): focuses on the personal, or inter-personal, context of verbal aggression. Albee's obsessively obscene *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is the central text used to examine the connection between language and relationship struggles.

Language here is shown to be both a sickness, which destroys authentic contact; and a form of rebellion against the deadening banality of verbal and social conformity. The abundance of self-conscious and self-referential language--which subvert the generic expectations of psychological realism--alerts us to the destructive power which language exercises. The implied potency of a creative use of language as a source of vitality, forces a re-evaluation of the language of inter-personal communication. I discuss Albee's play within the opposing contexts of Strindberg's psychological realism and Jarry's verbal shock tactics in order to demonstrate the play's contradictory, and mutually illuminating, impulses. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* will also be viewed through communication theory and compared with other related plays, especially John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*.

## II

## LANGUAGE TORTURE: ON PETER HANDKE

"Die Sprache spricht, nicht der Mensch. Der Mensch spricht nur, indem er geschicklich der Sprache entspricht."<sup>1</sup>

This quote from Martin Heidegger might have been written by Peter Handke about his play *Kaspar*. It concisely sums up Handke's view, or rather critique, of language and in a voice--controlled, aphoristic, sensitive to the texture and cadence of a well-formed sentence--which is an echo of Handke's own. *Kaspar*, Handke's first full-length play, is about language and the ways in which the form of language shapes the lives of man. The 'story' of the play is that of one speechless man--Kaspar--and how he is created and destroyed through his forced acquisition of language. "Das Stück könnte auch 'Sprechfolterung' heissen" Handke writes<sup>2</sup>, thereby making explicit his view of the relationship between language and man: it is a relationship of torture, pain and coercion. The play shows, Handke explains, "was MÖGLICH IST mit jemandem...wie jemand durch Sprechen zum Sprechen gebracht werden kann".<sup>3</sup> This is then the central "action" of the play: Speech, (represented by 3 disembodied voices, "Einsager"), creating the Speechless (Kaspar) in its own image. These are also the two main "characters" of the play: Kaspar, a clown figure, a human abstraction whom Handke ironically calls "den HELDEN"<sup>4</sup>; and Speech, voices heard over

loudspeakers, voices to which Kaspar reacts and with which he is in conflict, voices which teach and finally coerce Kaspar into becoming like speech itself: well-formed and orderly.

It is of course a misuse of dramatic terminology to speak, as I have, of "story", "action", and "character" in connection with *Kaspar*. Those are the terms of an illusionistic theatre which Handke rejects. Handke doesn't tell a story through the action of characters--he shows the action of words on a stage: a theatrical event.

Die Zuschauer...erkennen sofort, dass sie einem Vorgang zusehen werden, der nicht in irgendeiner Wirklichkeit, sondern auf der Bühne spielt. Sie werden keine Geschichte miterleben, sondern einen theatralischen Vorgang sehen...weil keine Geschichte vor sich gehen wird, können sich die Zuschauer auch keine Nachgeschichte vorstellen, höchstens ihre eigene...<sup>5</sup>

Like the playwright Brecht (about whom Handke has expressed ambivalent feelings)<sup>6</sup> Handke takes pains to alienate the audience from the stage event, to confront the audience with the stage event, and ultimately hopes to "make us aware", more sensitive, more conscious, through the stage event.<sup>7</sup> In his earlier audience provoking anti-illusionistic '*Sprechstück*' *Publikumsbeschimpfung* the audience is turned into the "action" and becomes the subject of the play. The audience is verbally addressed--and attacked--frontally. *Kaspar* still contains elements of this, but the verbal aggression is more sophisticated, attacking not only the audience (especially through the irritating insistence of the intermission text), but also destroying the character Kaspar and, most importantly, exposing

the viciousness of language itself. "The only thing that preoccupies me as a writer...is nausea at stupid speechification (*Versprachlichung*) and the resulting brutalization of people", Handke told an interviewer.<sup>6</sup> This connection between speech and brutality, the claim that speech is a brutality, is the theme of most of Handke's plays, but is most forcefully and coherently demonstrated in his first full-length play, *Kaspar*.<sup>7</sup> *Kaspar* established Handke's reputation internationally as one of the most original and important postwar dramatists.<sup>10</sup>

Thematically Handke's plays have two major thrusts: they attack the conventions of the illusionistic theatre tradition and its complacent audience, and thus continue a theatrical "rejectionist" tradition which runs from Jarry through Dada, Artaud, Pirandello, Brecht, and includes contemporary experimental theatre in most of its forms. This theme is particularly pronounced in Handke's *Sprechstücke*--his "speech-plays"--especially *Publikumsbeschimpfung*, but is also important in *Kaspar*, *Quodlibet*, and *Der Ritt über den Bodensee*. In *Der Ritt* the "characters" (in the printed text) are named for prominent German actors, thus signifying that there are no characters, only actors on a stage who play themselves.<sup>11</sup> Handke's second theme is even more obsessively present in his plays. It deals with the dramatization of the nature of language--the relationship between language and reality, the creation and domination of reality by language. As Richard Gilman put it, Handke's plays "demonstrate how we operate with words and are operated upon by them... Handke's dramaturgy



comes directly out of his 'nausea', the sickness induced by the sight of language escaped from our control, the feeling of helplessness in the face of its perverse and independent life".<sup>12</sup> This nausea is both the result of "stupid speechification" and the beginning of its cure. "One should learn to be nauseated by language, as the hero of Sartre's *Nausea* is by things", Handke has said, "At least that would be a beginning of consciousness".<sup>13</sup> This nausea is akin to the sickness and vertigo which Ionesco experienced while writing *La Cantatrice chauve*. Language "had gone mad"; rather than serve it had become master to the speaker.<sup>14</sup> For Handke--as for Ionesco, Pinter, Havel, Albee, and other post-war dramatists--language seems to have taken on a life of its own, and with this life a power, a demonic control of reality which has in fact made of language a *danger*.

Handke's stated aim of "encircling" his audience with words<sup>15</sup> is a dramatization of how language functions upon us: closing us in within its own laws and restrictions, coercing our obedience to its forms, rules, limitations. Handke has repeatedly said that the goal of his plays is not to revolutionize, but to make us aware, "aufmerksam machen"<sup>16</sup> and through awareness hopes "andere ändern zu können".<sup>17</sup> What we are to be made aware of is precisely the danger of our subservience to inherited verbal forms, forms which condition our consciousness and determine our thoughts, feeling, and actions. Handke is, then, actually involved in what Fritz Mauthner termed a "Critique of Language", and like Mauthner he would make us critical in our attitude towards language and lead us away from "word-superstition".<sup>18</sup> In this concern for language and its abuses Handke becomes

part of a tradition with a peculiarly strong hold in his homeland, Austria. Language scepticism and a crisis of faith in language's potency and benevolence has been voiced in this century by many Austrian writers and philosophers. Hugo von Hofmannsthal's despairing "Lord Chandos Letter" (1902) expresses the same nausea at the sight of words as Handke experiences. Words, cut off from humanly felt meaning, become threatening objects: "sie gerannen zu Augen, die mich anstarrten und in die ich wieder hineinstarren muss: Wirbel sind sie...durch die hindurch man ins Leere kommt."<sup>19</sup> Lord Chandos is overtaken by verbal paralysis, a paralysis which will later characterize Hofmannsthal's Count Bühl of *Der Schwierige* who, having been buried alive in the trenches of World War I, loses faith in the efficacy and integrity of the slippery words which surround him. Karl Kraus' mistrust of language and his concern with the abuse of language by cliché and rhetoric is a recurrent theme in his essays. He warned that we should "learn to see an abyss where platitudes abound"<sup>20</sup> and demonstrated the danger of mindless language in his enormous "drama"--it doesn't quite fit into any one genre--*Die letzten Tage der Menschheit* (1922).<sup>21</sup> Ödön von Horváth's *Bildungsjargon*, his critical recreation of a language of clichés, platitudes, and sentimental idioms which characterized the post-Hapsburgian Austrian middle-class, condemn a society by exposing it through its language. Hermann Broch's *Der Tod des Vergil* (1945) contains some of the longest sentences in literature, sentences which repeat, restate, roll on and on in a search for some precision of expression which escapes him and obsesses Handke. From Ingeborg Bachmann to Thomas Bernhard to Handke, the

obsessive "Critique of Language" is carried over into post-World War II Austria.

Echoes of this century's accelerated philosophic and linguistic inquiry into the nature of language abound in *Kaspar*. The language philosophers Fritz Mauthner and Ludwig Wittgenstein, in their attempts to define the uses and limits of language, can both be found in Handke's plays, and foremost among them are the reverberations of the latter. Handke shares "a common ground and atmosphere" with Wittgenstein; as Richard Gilman claims: his plays constitute "the aesthetic counterpart of Wittgenstein's thought".<sup>22</sup> Both the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (1920) and the *Philosophical Investigations* (1951) suggest that all philosophical problems are created by linguistic confusion. Handke seems to believe, with Wittgenstein, that our problems can only be solved by:

looking into the workings of our language, and that in such a way as to make us recognize those workings: in despite of an urge to misunderstand them. The problems are solved not by giving new information, but by arranging what we have always known. Philosophy is a battle against the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.<sup>23</sup>

Although *Kaspar* is certainly not a philosophic treatise nor even a dramatization of Wittgenstein's philosophy, it does draw on some of the same premises. Wittgenstein in his *Tractatus* attempts an inference from the logical structure of language to the world, and assumes that a definite relation must exist between the two. Language is a mirror that reflects the world in its logical form; the world comes to be for us only through and

within language:<sup>24</sup> "The limits of my language mean the limits of my world."<sup>25</sup> Similarly, Handke seems to be implying that only through language, which forms and is the limits of our consciousness, can existential as well as social problems be attacked. *Kaspar* is meant to make us aware that our intelligence is being "bewitched" by the clichés and self-perpetuating forms of a language which we no longer control. Handke also seems to adopt Wittgenstein's proposed method of not giving new information but only "arranging what we have always known". As Handke has said "my words are not descriptions, only quotations,"<sup>26</sup> i.e. rearrangements of what is known and said, quotes from a variety of sources, "found language" as it were, not verbal invention. Furthermore, language itself is used to awaken the audience to the danger of language: it is not only the subject but also the vehicle. "The crux will always be the gradual encirclement, the spectator's encirclement in language, for this is a dramatic action."<sup>27</sup> Thus Handke's project and spirit can be seen as parallel to Wittgenstein's without implying that his philosophy of language is identical.

*Kaspar* was inspired by the life of Kaspar Hauser, that strange sixteen year old youth who one day in 1828 appeared in Nurenberg, emaciated and terrified, with a letter in his hand and one sentence--"Ich möcht a sochener Reiter warn, wie mei Vater aner gween is" (i.e. "I want to be a Horseman (or Rider) like my father was.")--at his disposal.<sup>28</sup> He had apparently lived in almost total isolation until his appearance and was

subsequently taken in and educated by a guardian. Some years later he was mysteriously attacked and died of stab wounds. The image of a grown man with the innocent and blank mind of a child, suddenly thrust into the world and confronted with the need to learn the speech and ways of society, sparked the imagination of many writers before Handke. Verlaine, Hofmannsthal, and Trakl used Kasper as a symbol of the Poet or the Stranger "without country and without king" who, as Verlaine saw it, "does not know what he is to do in this world." Other writers--Hans Arp, Jakob Wasserman, Ernst Jandl--were also intrigued by this strange figure and used him in their work.<sup>29</sup> Handke of course does not write about the historical Kaspar Hauser: "Das Stück *Kaspar* zeigt nicht, wie ES WIRKLICH IST oder WIRKLICH WAR mit Kaspar Hauser. Es zeigt, was MÖGLICH IST mit jemandem."<sup>30</sup> He finds in the life of that man "the model of a sort of linguistic myth"<sup>31</sup> which came to represent for Handke the isolation and estrangement of men "at odds with themselves and their environment."<sup>32</sup> Handke abstracts from Kaspar Hauser the essence both of that estrangement and of the process of social integration through linguistic assimilation. *Kaspar* is in a sense the study of an attempted--and failed--socialization process.<sup>33</sup>

The text of *Kaspar* is divided into 65 numbered units or "scenes". This division is however not apparent in production and the viewing audience would experience the play as consisting of two acts or parts, separated by an intermission. Within each act moments of sudden darkness further divide up the action.<sup>34</sup> The play begins with an empty stage on which random domestic objects stand in disarray. The back curtain is seen to move as

someone seeks the slit through which to enter; after a few futile attempts, Kaspar finally succeeds and is "born" on the stage. Kaspar's face is a mask which expresses astonishment and confusion, he is "die verkörperte Verwunderung" (2). His clothes--large hat, wide pants, untied clumsy shoes: are those of a clown. The other connotation of his name is immediately obvious; Kasper (Kasperl) is the name of a German clown figure, similar to the English Punch.<sup>35</sup> Kaspar is at first barely capable of walking. Like an infant he is a stranger to his own body and to the objects which surround him; he has no coordination and moves like a puppet on strings. The Kaspar we see at the start of the play is a virtual *tabula rasa*. The point of the play is to demonstrate the imprinting of the forms of language on a blank mind and the coercive effect they have.<sup>36</sup> Kaspar possesses one sentence which he repeats over and over, without comprehension: "Ich möchte ein solcher werden wie einmal ein anderer gewesen ist." This sentence is taken from the historical Kaspar Hauser but made by Handke more general, and more vague. It is a grammatically correct though pre-conscious sentence and Kaspar uses it to try to communicate with the objects over which he stumbles with little control.

In section 8 the "Einsager" (Promoters) begin to speak.<sup>37</sup> With their first sentence the process of Kaspar's education, his "reconstruction" through language,<sup>38</sup> begins. Handke is very precise in describing the voices (he suggests three) of the unseen Promoters. These voices, which speak "from all sides" of the stage, are to be devoid of all warmth, humor or irony; lacking overtones or undertones. Since they speak without nuance

the Prompters remain formal--never personal--teachers: i.e. they embody a *principle*, not a personality. The voices must sound as though they were speaking over a telephone, a megaphone, a radio or TV set, some technical medium which sets the voices at an even further remove and also implicates the instruments of mass language transportation. The voices are to sound automatic, conventionalized, like--Handke suggests--the voice of sports' commentators, or the telephone voice which gives the correct time, or the precise voices on language course records. They are *corporate* voices: they speak comprehensibly ("sie sprechen verständlich"). These instructions are included in the rather long opening stage directions which Handke stipulates should be read over a loudspeaker, over and over, as the audience enters the theatre and waits for the play to begin. Thus Handke's intensions are meant to be explicitly understood by the audience from the start. In the stage directions of section 8 Handke comments that the text which the Prompters speak is not theirs ("einen Text, der nicht der ihre ist"). This comment is a clarification, a footnote to the text--and comments of this sort repeatedly occur within the stage directions. There is no reason not to believe these stage directions--as there *is* reason not to believe the Prompters; i.e., the Prompter's do not speak for Handke, they speak about themes which he is examining, not endorsing. The stage directions are, however, direct lines between Handke and his reading audience. Thus the comment that the text "is not theirs" explains that we are not going to read spontaneous dialogue, thoughts which emerge from the psyche and personality of some unseen individuals. Rather we will read a text which is taken, borrowed, "quoted" from the stock of social language

which--like the Prompters' voices--surrounds us "from all sides" with a life of its own, no longer belonging to anyone, but directed "from above" against everyone.<sup>39</sup> The Prompters' text is an abstraction and condensation of the forms of social language. It builds Kaspar into "society's course of conduct by language, by giving him words to repeat".<sup>40</sup>

In the first phase of Kaspar's education he is commended on the possession of a sentence with which he can make himself noticeable in the dark; with a sentence "kannst du es dir gemütlich machen" (9), a sentence is the beginning of comfort, shelter, belonging. A sentence is awareness, it is memory. But more importantly for the Prompters: a sentence is the beginning of order. "Du hast einen Satz, mit dem du jede Unordnung in Ordnung bringen kannst" (12). The Prompters begin by trying to teach Kaspar to master objects. An object which has no name is a threat, a source of chaos and pain he is told. By naming it Kaspar can gain mastery, he can protect himself against the arbitrariness of the phenomenal world. But to achieve this, one sentence is not enough. Kaspar must learn many sentences and the relation between sentences: he must acquire language. The Prompters' first task is therefore to rid Kaspar of his one automatic, pre-conscious sentence--to which he stubbornly clings--and to replace it with their sentences. They do this through an unrelenting barrage of words which confuse and torture Kaspar, depriving him of his verbal innocence. In section 17 Kaspar's sentence is finally exorcised. The Prompters first speak in chopped up, rhythmic lines; "Du fangst, bei dir, an du, bist ein, Satz du, könntest von, dir unzählige, Sätze bilden...". Kaspar tries to



defend himself against this onslaught with his one already fading possession: his sentence. Although the meaning of the Prompters' words is at this stage subordinated to the sound pattern of an almost ritual exorcism, it is significant that Kaspar is being told that he *is* a sentence, but that he could (if his education succeeds, that is) spin out of himself innumerable sentences. Kaspar grows more confused, but still he resists. His sentence twists into disorder despite his efforts and finally even the single words disintegrate under the Prompters' will. He can only utter letters and then sputter sounds. In the end he is silenced, his resistance broken: "Der Satz ist ihm ausgetrieben" (17). The first phase of his reconstruction has ended in success.

It has been suggested that Kaspar's meager original sentence contains his potential for individuality and autonomy. With its loss Kaspar is defenseless and open to the pressures of social conformity which is the goal of his education.<sup>41</sup> Only at the very end of the play will Kaspar again display resistance to the process of acquiring orderly speech, and with it an ordered existence. The paradox of Kaspar's desire to cling to his one sentence is that his sentence can only acquire meaning through its relation to other sentences. Yet in learning that relation Kaspar must also learn other sentences and thus the formal order and logic of speech which consequently robs his one sentence of its uniqueness, and places it within the accepted order--and meaning--of public speech. Sentences are of great importance to Handke. All of his early plays are collections, almost litanies, of (usually) well-formed sentences, grammatical specimens. Handke

goes so far as to claim that "in *Kaspar*, history is conceived as a story of sentences".<sup>42</sup> *Kaspar* is never taught words, only sentences, verbal structures which become the scaffolding of his consciousness. "Nur mit dem Satz, nicht mit einem Wort, kannst du dich zu Wort melden" the Prompters tell him (9). A sentence is a unit of order and the progression from 'right-speaking' to right-thinking and right-acting is assumed by the Prompters to be inevitable. "We are delivered to the sentence," claims Roland Barthes; "The Sentence is hierarchical: it implies subjections, subordinations, internal reactions...The Sentence is complete: it is precisely that language which is complete...it is the power of completion which defines sentence mastery and marks...the agents of the Sentence."<sup>43</sup> "Sentences, not words, are the essence of speech", writes the linguist Benjamin Lee Whorf.<sup>44</sup> A language, he claims, "is a *system*, not just an assemblage of norms"<sup>45</sup> and the basic unit of that system, its building block, is the sentence. Handke shows that this system, this hierarchy, is self-generating and selfhood-annihilating. "Ein Satz (ist) ein Ungeheuer" *Kaspar* will later realize; "bei jedem neuen Satz wird mir übel...man hat mich in der Hand" (65). The "monstrosity" of sentences is that to speak one is to be already integrated, subsumed, subordinated within the larger system of language. *Kaspar* will finally speak in the same voice as the Prompters, he will become like them and realize that: "Schon mit meinem ersten Satz bin ich in die Falle gegangen" (64). He will learn that to accept any pre-given system is to be controlled by that system.

After losing his original sentence Kaspar begins to acquire speech. He begins by uttering individual, disconnected words, words which will recur and echo throughout the play: words which conjure up visions of coercion, torture, terror.

Augen geschlagen...  
Wie finster...  
Totgerufen...  
Nie gestanden. Schreist.  
Schneller. Eiter. Haue.  
Wimmerst. Das Knie.  
Zurück. Kriechst. (18)

Finally Kaspar utters his first complete normal sentence: "Damals, als ich noch weg war, habe ich niemals so viele Schmerzen im Kopf gehabt, und man hat mich nicht so gequält wie jetzt, seit ich hier bin" (18).

The stage goes dark. Kaspar has been taught to speak.

With Kaspar's first gropings for speech and his first conscious sentence, the thematic center of the play is established: order=torture. The images of brutal torture, of beatings and screams, of pus and fear, of being "gequält", grow more graphic and insistent as the play develops and Kaspar's coercion into a speech mold becomes firmer. The root image is that of the interrogation room where the reluctant victim is "brought to speech",<sup>46</sup> where the desired answers and confessions are tortured out of the interrogated. This image appears in other of Handke's works. *Hörspiel* No. 1 is a nightmarish transcription of an interrogation in which the questions and responses are not synchronized, and the terror of manipulation, all verbal, becomes physically painful.

Sie haben mich dermassen mit Wörtern verfolgt, dass ich sogar im Schlaf nicht mir selber, sondern den Wörtern überlassen war: sie haben mich bis in den Schlaf hinein mit ihren Wörtern verfolgt.<sup>47</sup>

The interrogated is overtaken by the words, just as is Kaspar. *Selbstbeziehung* (1966), a "speech-piece" which prefigures *Kaspar*, is basically a confession by the speaker of his sins against the order of language and the social norms they imply: the "sin" of deviation, of asserting, even inadvertently, individuality. "Sprechfolterung", Handke's alternate title for *Kaspar*, refers to the torture which language exercises on the individual, the torture of the loss of self, the alienation from felt and original speech in the name of public order. One of the Prompters' recurrent messages is the connection between public *order* (i.e. the norms of behavior), and public *speech* (i.e. the forms of language).

Kaspar is taught that he lives within sentences, inhabits them; and a man of good taste, of order and responsibility will surround himself with sentences which--like furniture--make him feel at home.

Es kommt darauf an, dass du Sätze bildest, bei denen du dich zumindest wie zuhause fühlen kannst...Du brauchst häusliche Sätze: Sätze als Einrichtungsgegenstände: Sätze, die du dir eigentlich sparen konntest: Sätze, die Luxus sind. (22)

Language is often compared by the Prompters with housekeeping since both of these are processes which maintain order and contain the individual. Moreover, it is only through the order of the one that the other can be achieved, since both--an orderly house and an orderly sentence--are

determined and demanded by social norms. The order which the Prompters demand, which is their one guiding and consistent ideology, is all-encompassing. The order of language, of objects, of morals, of thought, of desires: this is a middle-class, sound, structured, firm order within which one set of reality implicates all other sets of reality. A sentence, therefore, is more than just a collection of words; it is a model structure, a paradigm, and it is with it that everything else must be compared. "Seit du einen ordentlichen Satz sprechen kannst, beginnst du alles, was du wahrnimmst, mit diesem ordentlichen Satz zu vergleichen, so dass der Satz ein Beispiel wird" (20).

In section 25, which marks a peak in Kaspar's education, Kaspar begins to assimilate the Prompters' order. This section consists entirely of a row of aphorisms which the Prompters speak at Kaspar while he, gradually adjusting his movements to the movement of their sentences, puts the stage in order. The aphorisms begin with dictums or order:

Jede Neuordnung erzeugt Unordnung.  
Jeder fühlt sich verantwortlich für das kleinste Stäubchen  
auf dem Boden...  
Der Raum sagt über den Bewohner aus.  
Die Wohnung ist die Voraussetzung für ein geordnetes Leben...  
Unordnung bewirkt die Empörung aller anständig denkenden  
Menschen.

These platitudes of middle-class order are presented as the basic norms of "aller anständig denkenden Menschen". Cleanliness, neatness, politeness, submissiveness, the clichés of the right-thinking and right-living are Kaspar's models of speech and axioms of thought. The truth of these

sententious statements, and a certain emotional power is implied as the aphorisms become rhythmic poems which promise a happiness that only order can bring:

Die Ordnung  
der Gegenstände  
schafft  
alle  
Voraussetzungen  
für  
das  
Glück.

While the Prompters have been reciting their truisms of order Kasper has been transforming the stage--which until now had contained a haphazard collection of domestic objects--into a perfectly arranged room, a home, the "picture" of the dictums of housely order which he is being taught. The stage becomes a meticulously tidy bourgeois salon, almost a parody, with the requisite vase of flowers and bowl of fruit, even a painting which matches the decor. And Kaspar exchanges his motley clothes for a suit which fits in with the setting. "Alles auf der Bühne passt zu allem."

During Kaspar's transformation from clown into conformity, into the "picture" of a right-thinking member of society, echoes of the philosophy of Wittgenstein are heard. The vocabulary of his language philosophy is perverted by the Prompters and used insistently. The core of Wittgenstein's widely influential *Tractatus* is his "picture theory" of language. Wittgenstein suggests that propositions--sentences--are logical "pictures" of reality. "The proposition is a picture of reality. The proposition is a

model of the reality as we think it is."<sup>49</sup> A sentence shows the form of a possible "fact" (i.e. element of reality) through its structure and the relation of its parts. "The elements of the picture stand, in the picture, for the objects...In order to be a picture a fact must have something in common with what it pictures."<sup>49</sup> The sentence *corresponds* to reality (the world) and mirrors it; and we may infer from the image in the mirror to that which it reflects. Wittgenstein's picture theory aims at clarifying the way in which language functions and what we can empirically know and say through language. It attempts to demarcate the limits of language and thus prevent our speaking non-sense. "Everything that can be thought at all can be thought clearly. Everything that can be said can be said clearly."<sup>50</sup> The Prompters use, and abuse, Wittgenstein by borrowing his vocabulary of thought and perverting it to their own ends.<sup>51</sup> At the height of Kaspar's indoctrination he is told:

Jeder Gegenstand muss ein *Bild* von einem Gegenstand sein: jeder rechte Tisch ist ein *Bild* von einem Tisch. Jedes Haus muss ein *Bild* von einem Haus sein...

(23, my emphasis)

Moreover:

Ein Tisch ist ein *wahrer* Tisch, wenn das *Bild* vom Tisch mit dem Tisch übereinstimmt...Wenn der Tisch schon ein *Bild* von einem Tisch ist, kannst du ihn nicht ändern: wenn du den Tisch nicht ändern kannst, musst du dich selber ändern: *du musst ein Bild von dir werden*, wie du den Tisch zu einem *Bild* von einem Tisch machen musst und *jeden möglichen Satz zu einem Bild von einem möglichen Satz*.

(24, my emphasis)

For the Prompters the "picture" of an object is not its *correspondence* to the object, but its *ideal* form. Almost like a Platonic Idea, the picture is

said to exist *before* the object: language *creates* reality. Thus, language ceases to be a mirror, a logical model of the world in Wittgenstein's sense, rather it becomes its determining factor.<sup>52</sup> "Jeder Gegenstand kann der sein, als den du ihm bezeichnest" Kaspar is told (28). For Wittgenstein a proposition can only picture empirical reality with meaning; i.e., it can share its logical form. The Prompters, on the contrary, insist that Kaspar reject empirical reality and the results of sense experience in favour of the dictates of language: "Wenn du den Gegenstand anders *siehst* als du von ihm *sprichst*, musst du dich irren" (28). The Prompters are teaching Kaspar to see reality through the inherited forms of language. Not only must objects fit their "picture", their verbal form, but Kaspar too much change *himself* in order to become a "picture" of himself; i.e., in order to fit the verbal mold into which he is being forced.

The well-dressed Kaspar, by becoming a "picture" of himself, demonstrates his adjustment to the form of language and the necessary connection between speech, thought, and behavior. Kaspar, who in the beginning was attacked by the strangeness of the phenomenal world, has now learned to master objects by subjecting them to a verbal order. But while learning to create order through language Kaspar has also *been* ordered himself. He has become just one more object, the object of language, and the proof of his subjugation is in his movements and behavior which perfectly reproduce not only the *contents* of the Prompters' dictums of order--Kaspar has been arranging the stage in accordance with the Prompters' words--but also the *form* of their sentences: he begins to move



in perfect rhythm to their speech. Quite contrary to Wittgenstein's aims, Kaspar has been "bewitched" by means of language. "People act about situations in ways which are like the ways they talk about them" wrote the relativist Whorf.<sup>53</sup> The phenomenal world is only an extension of our linguistic world; and we experience objects and nature through the conceptual grid imposed upon us by our language:

We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages...We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significances as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way--an agreement that holds throughout our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language. The agreement is, of course, an implicit and unstated one, *but its terms are absolutely obligatory*; we cannot talk at all except by subscribing to the organization and classification of data which the agreement decrees.<sup>54</sup>

We tend to hold on to the illusion that through speech we "express" ourselves spontaneously and without restrictions, but in fact "This illusory appearance results from the fact that the obligatory phenomena within the apparently free flow of talk are so completely *autocratic* that speaker and listener are bound unconsciously as though in the grip of a law of nature."<sup>55</sup> Whorf uses words like "autocratic" to describe the power of language, and this power term is very much in accord with Handke's depiction of language. Autocratic means absolute rule and literally means self-might: i.e. language has an independent power which, as Whorf claims, *determines* the framework of the thought and behavior of the speaker. It is this independence of language which Handke demonstrates in the floating voices of the Prompters, voices which have a life of their own and take on

in *Kaspar* the role of a dramatic Character. In Handke's extension of Whorf, language not only determines the limits of thought, it victimizes the speaker by robbing him of his autonomy, by, moreover, compelling him to pre-formed speech. Barthes, in his "Inaugural Lecture" at the Collège de France, addressed precisely this point:

Language is legislation, speech is its code. We do not see the power which is in speech because we forget that all speech is a classification, and that all classifications are oppressive: *ordo* means both distribution and commination. Jakobson has shown that a speech-system is defined less by what it permits us to say than by what it compels us to say... To speak, and, with even greater reason, to utter a discourse is not, as is too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate... In speech, then, servility and power are inescapably intermingled. If we call freedom not only the capacity to escape power but also and especially the capacity to subjugate no one, then freedom can exist only outside language. Unfortunately, human language has no exterior: there is no exit.<sup>56</sup>

This subjugation through the power of language now becomes even more explicit as the Prompters, not yet satisfied with Kaspar's achievements, proceed to ensure his conformity by driving out any remains of individuality.

After Kaspar's transformation into the picture of a right-thinking, orderly citizen of the speech-world, a double process of higher education ensues. Kaspar is taught model sentences "mit denen sich ein ordentlicher Mensch durchs Leben schlägt" (27), while also being subjected to verbal torture and threats of terror which are, perhaps, meant to ensure his compliance with his new reality--while also exposing the nature of that

reality. In the following sections (26-7) the relationship between order (language) and terror (subjugation) becomes ever more deeply entwined. The Prompters' model sentences draw on images of fear and violent pain; and the orderly form of speech is shown to correspond to this terror, to shape it. While Kaspar recites a semi-logical sequence which leads him to the conclusion that "alles, was ordentlich ist, ist schön" and "alles, was in Ordnung ist, ist in Ordnung, weil ich mir sage, dass es in Ordnung ist" (26), the Prompters whisper (twice) repetitious images which conjure up the torture chamber or the interrogation room.

...Die Tür zugeschlagen. Die Ärmel aufgekrempt. Auf die Stühle geschlagen. Windelweich geprügelt. Auf den Tisch geschlagen. Hart geblieben. In die Nesseln gesetzt. Zu Boden geschlagen. Den Antrag niedergeschlagen. Die Fäuste gezeigt. Windelweich geprügelt. Auf den Magen geschlagen. Mit Stumpf und Stiel ausgerottet. Den Boden zerschlagen...Die Kulissen zerschlagen. Die Tür zerschlagen. Den Zwischenrufer niedergeschlagen. Hart geblieben. Vorurteile zerschlagen. (26)

These are "model" sentences in that they are all idiomatic expressions, correct forms of speech, common conjugations of common verbs. Note the variety of usages of the verb "schlagen" (to beat), the numerous idioms of which it is a part: from beating up a person, to "beating" shut the door, beating off a proposition, beating down cat-calls, and beating out prejudice. The extremely idiomatic and rather picturesque "windelweich geprügelt" is a good example of what Handke is doing here. This expression is quite common in German. Its English equivalent is "beaten to a pulp", but the connotations in German are different. "Windelweich" means literally: soft as a baby's diaper. This positive image of infancy and

great softness, security, care, is combined with "geprügelt" to form a horrifying if incongruous image. It implies that the victim is beaten into the soft compliance of a baby's diaper. This is an idiom and of course we rarely think of the literal implications of our idiomatic speech. It is precisely the automatic combinations of words, of verbal forms and formulas, which is here equated with terror. The terror is not merely in the meaning of the words, but in the form, the fact of their grammatical correctness, their idiomatic expressiveness. The physical domination which they express is being equated with the verbal domination which their common, unthinking usage implies. The horror of these sentences of physical abuse is perhaps that the terror which they express, is well expressed: these are indeed "model" forms of speech.

Now Kaspar is finally taught the crucial lesson of speech, the lesson which will rid him of any last traces of individuality: speech--which is always public, pre-formed, and inherited--is *prior* to thought. When you have begun to speak: you will *think what you are saying*:

Sag, was du denkst. Sag, was du nicht denkst. Wenn du zu *sprechen* angefangen hast, wirst du *denken*, was du sagst. Du denkst, was du sagst, das heisst, du *kannst* denken, was du sagst, das heisst, es ist *gut*, dass du denkst, was du sagst, das heisst, du *sollst* denken, was du sagst, das heisst sowohl, dass du denken *darfst*, was du sagst, als auch, dass du denken *musst*, was du sagst, weil du nichts *anderes* denken darfst als das, was du sagst. (27, Handke's emphasis)

Language, as Whorf wrote, "is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the *shaper* of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity...".<sup>57</sup> Taken to an extreme this indeed implies that we cannot help but think that which we speak. In a poem, "Einige Alternativen in der indirekten Rede", Handke wrote: "Worte wieder, sagt man, seien die Alternative zum DENKEN", and that the only choices which words allow us are: "PARIER oder KREPIER!".<sup>58</sup> This ironic battle-cry which ends the poem--obey or die--is precisely the situation of Kaspar. Until now he has obeyed the dictates of language; but forced to completely adjust thought to speech and thus robbed both of individuality and the potential for creativity, he finally breaks down and sputters a long and incoherent list of variations on the verb "to be", ending with the thrice repeated statement (echoing the Biblical God's definition of himself) "Ich bin, der ich bin". This breakdown under the strain of verbal torture is not so much a mental collapse (Kaspar has no real psychological dimension) as a disintegration of Kaspar's selfhood. "Sprache, die befreien sollte," writes Uwe Schultz, "befreit nur von Individualität."<sup>59</sup> His existence (represented by the verb "to be") has been displaced and replaced by his *Versprachlichung*, i.e. the reduction of his being to words.<sup>60</sup> Kaspar's last sentence as an individual is one of bewildered and very human pain: "Warum fliegen da lauter so schwarze Würmer herum?"<sup>61</sup> With this inward looking cry, the stage blackens.

After the breakdown of Kaspar's individuality, newly acquired through speech and also lost to the constraints of public language and the coercion

towards order, other Kaspars begin to appear on stage. They are exact duplicates, mirror-images of the original Kaspar: but they don't speak, they only perform actions prescribed by the Prompters. The first part of Kaspar ends with a cowed and brainwashed Kaspar reciting a self-descriptive list of attributes which perfectly fit the non-descript though well-adjusted personality which the Prompters have been trying to create. He goes so far as to declare, in rhymed verse, his acceptance of sentences and the rationality which they require.

Früher war mir jeder vernünftige Satz eine Last  
und jede vernünftige Ordnung verhasst  
doch künftig  
bin ich vernünftig. (58)

He has become the master of objects and the servant of language; the world no longer frightens him, for it is now an orderly world: the orderly world of language.

Ich weiss jetzt, was ich will:  
ich will  
still  
sein  
und jeden Gegenstand  
der mir unheimlich ist  
bezeichne ich als mein  
damit er aufhört  
mir unheimlich zu sein. (58)

Following an intermission (to which I will return) the play resumes with two Kaspars on stage. Their masks are no longer the incarnation of astonishment, rather, the masks portray contentment. While other Kaspars

join them the Prompters give a long and detailed lecture on the methods of torture used in the process of "In-Ordnung-Bringen" (61). This is not the first time that physical torture is described by the Prompters as the logical extension of verbal order, but here in the opening words of Act II, torture takes on a new, sinister significance.

Ein regelmässiger Wassertropfen  
auf den Kopf  
ist kein Grund  
über Mangel an ordnung zu klagen  
ein Schluck Säure in den Mund  
oder ein Tritt in den Magen  
oder einen Stab  
in die Nasenlöcher und weiter zu  
bohren  
oder etwas dergleichen  
nur spitzer  
ohne sich zu zieren  
in die Ohren  
einzuführen  
jemanden mit allen Mitteln  
vor allen Dingen  
ohne an den Mitteln zu kritteln  
auf Trab  
und in Ordnung zu bringen  
das ist kein Grund  
über Mangel an Ordnung ein Wort  
zu verleiren:  
denn  
beim In-Ordnung-Bringen  
bringt man wohl oder übel  
andre zum Singen... (61)

This poem, with its soft rhymes, is another almost grotesque example of the contrast between the well-formedness of language, its smooth, correct surface, and the terror it harbors. Handke has chosen to place the most repulsive, graphic descriptions of torture into a soothing, poetic form. Like the "regelmässiger Wassertropfen" which the Prompters invoke,

their words drip and poison Kaspar's mind. The torture which they propose is presented as a rational and justifiable process, a guard to order. Force, as Kaspar was previously told, "ist zwar fragwürdig, aber er kann nützlich sein" (27). And the *usefulness* of torture is that "die in Ordnung Gebrachten" through the torture (of language) can best implement "(die) für alle gültigen Sätzen" (61, my emphasis). Torture, like the Prompters' language, is *reductive*. It reduces the individual to a common level of compliance with order. This is precisely the process which Kaspar is undergoing: he is being tortured into embracing, and endorsing "(die) für alle gültigen Sätzen". While the Prompters describe torture in rhythmic, seductive language, their words act as torture on Kaspar, and the result is as they predicted: total integration. When Kaspar now speaks his voice resembles the voices of the Prompters. Kaspar recounts, in verse like that of the Prompters, his history from unconsciousness to speech; advocating order and speech-order.

. . .  
Ich lernte alles was leer war  
mit Wörtern zu füllen  
und lernte wer wer war  
und alles was schrie  
mit Sätzen zu stillen. (62)

It is now Kaspar who recites the dictums of order, of social integration, obedience, cleanliness, firmness, compliance, which the Prompters had previously taught him. He has indeed become a product of language, a "montage of linguistic banalities: commands, definitions, prohibitions and all the familiar verbal restrictions of a repressive society".<sup>52</sup> During



this recital the five duplicate Kaspars sitting on the couch begin to make strange noises: sounds of sobbing and giggling, croaking, lamenting, hissing, sounds of nature--wind, leaves, sea--screams, groans. The noise becomes overwhelming and Kaspar is forced to shout his mechanical and unending litany of order. Thus, while the ultimate rules of order are expounded by Kaspar himself, the elemental sounds of disorder--both in man and in nature--puncture and drown him out.

Kaspar persists, he sings a hymn to order, joined by the Prompters to create a canon of faith. The words of the hymn continue the detailed trivia of order, a long list of table manners and personal hygiene. The duplicate Kaspars create an ever growing din, with grating, filing, snorting, clapping, churning noises like those, perhaps, of madness. If there is any psychological dimension to this play, it is in these externalized reactions of the duplicate Kaspars to the mental and physical regimentation of the original Kaspar. It is unclear whether these duplicate Kaspars represent "others", i.e. society, of which Kaspar has become an undifferentiated part; or splinters of the inner original Kaspar. Both suggestions have been put forth in the critical literature. I believe that both possibilities--which are so immediately obvious as possible explanations--are equally obvious precisely because they are equally valid. Visually, the appearance on stage of precise copies of Kaspar can't help but evoke the equation--already fairly explicit in the spoken text itself--that verbal conformity, the unquestioning acceptance of the structure of language and thus of thought and behavior, is social conformity and the loss of individuality.

The multiplication of Kaspars on stage is a correlative of this basic theme of the play. On the other hand, the multiple Kaspars do not act merely as reflections of the original Kaspar but also--increasingly as Kaspar becomes more like the Prompters--act as rejections of the conformity which Kaspar has accepted. And indeed, Kaspar's second mental collapse, following his declaration of faith in the dictums and structures of order, is caused by the reactions of the duplicate Kaspars. Kaspar must strain against a growing tide of noise which is non-verbal, chaotic, elemental. This noise--which is actually parallel to the "noise" of the truisms which he sputters forth and endorses--is also the noise of consciousness or, more basically, of a sub-conscious self in rebellion against the imposed restrictions of social regimentation. As containers of multiple connotations, society and splinter selves, the duplicate Kaspars thus function as symbolic correlatives for the process which Kaspar undergoes. It is significant that the duplicates appear after Kaspar's first breakdown (27) in which he questions his very mode of being through the wild combinations of the verb "to be" and his sudden inward looking question about the "black worms" which he sees flying about. Moreover, their appearance follows directly upon the Prompters' statement that Kaspar has been "aufgeknackt"--cracked open (31), which clearly allows for the interpretation of the duplicate Kaspars as emanations from his cracked open mind. These duplicates remain on stage until the end of the play and are all destroyed together with the original Kaspar.

The cacophony of sound--Kaspar's recitation of norms, the Prompters' accompanying singing of these same utterances, and the squeaking, barking, blowing, grating noises of the duplicate Kaspars--suddenly comes to a halt: and a disoriented Kaspar asks, in eight slight variations:

Was habe  
ich doch  
gerade  
gesagt? (64)

He has lost his train of thought; his barrage of normative truisms, the learned code of order seem to have been wiped out by the duplicate Kaspars' chaotic noises.

All of the Kaspars begin to giggle and laugh, and Kaspar, in final rebellion against the orderly language he has become, says--in rhyme:

Jeder Satz  
ist für die Katz  
jeder Satz ist für  
die Katz  
jeder Satz ist für die Katz. (64)

(Nicely rendered by N. Hern as "All words are for the birds".)<sup>63</sup>

After this rejection of the logic of language, and before his final destruction, two further sections of speech occur. Both are recapitulations and confessions by Kaspar. The first (64) begins calmly and in coherent sentences, although the tone is now personal, subjective, an autobiography. It differs from the previous self-history (62) in that prose rather than

verse is spoken; and Kaspar uses his own, rather than the Prompters' voice. Further, whereas the previous self-history follows the Prompters' torture sentences and leads to Kaspar's acceptance of order, this confession follows Kaspar's rejection of orderly language and leads to his realization that language had trapped him: "Schon mit meinem ersten Satz bin ich in die Falle gegangen".

The last section of the play shows the final rebellion of Kaspar and his destruction by the stage curtain, thus returning the "story" to the theatre reality to which it belongs. That scene is totally chaotic. Kaspar speaks a non-sensical text which Handke has called "deranged",<sup>64</sup> interspersed with tortured insights into what he now perceives to be the true nature of language:

...ein Satz (ist) ein Ungeheuer...bei jedem neuen Satz wird mir  
übel: bildlich: ich bin durcheinandergebracht: man hat mich in  
der Hand...ich werde meiner nicht mehr los... (65)

Kaspar's last words are "Ziegen und Affen" (repeated five times). These words are taken directly from Shakespeare's Othello who, having been called back to Venice and maddened by the world's hypocrisy, calls out in contempt "Goats and monkeys!" (*Othello*, IV, i, 274). Against whom is Kaspar's cry directed? The Prompters? The audience? All of those who with the docility of "goats and monkeys", of the "herd", conform to language uncritically and have thus contributed to his destruction? With these words the curtain jolts forward, each time moving closer to the screeching, wriggling Kaspar

until it knocks them over. "Sie fallen, aber hinter den Vorhang, der jetzt zu ist. Zugleich wird es still, und das Stück ist aus."

In the original version of the text one significant sentence follows "Ziegen und Affen".<sup>65</sup> It reads:

Ich:  
bin:  
nur:  
zufällig:  
ich:

Handke later cut this sentence out, perhaps because of its too great clarity. That sentence, which tells that Kaspar is what he is only by chance, reflects the deterministic power of language--"our linguistically determined thought world"<sup>66</sup>--which has been apparent throughout. It is against this determinism and the arbitrariness of individual existence which Kaspar rebels. To exist "zufällig" is to live without control over our lives or fate. And if perception and expression do not stem from a personality but from socially imposed linguistic structures and norms, then the Kaspar created by the Prompters is indeed "zufällig" and interchangeable with all other products of that system. This sentence contains the basic conflict of the play: the individual versus normative language. It also confirms the defeat of the individual through the process of conformity.

Yet it is difficult, or at least problematic, to speak of Kaspar as of an individual. Kaspar is conceived and presented not as a "character" but

as a contrivance. While not quite as seamlessly artificial as Ionesco's Smiths and Martins, he is equally unreal. The theatre for Handke is always an "artifact",<sup>67</sup> a contrived and artificial space; and within this space Kaspar is placed as an invention, a theatrical device. Kaspar is never allowed to appear quite human. He is from the start distanced from the audience through his mask-face and the mechanical movements of his puppet-like body. Kaspar unfolds less as a person than as a process, the process of man's construction and destruction through language. This process brings Kaspar closer to the audience when moments of personality and struggle break through the speech-object he is becoming; it however also distances Kaspar, for as speech systems displace him he becomes increasingly inhuman. Kaspar is in many ways like the Subject in Structuralist analysis who is rejected and dissolved by systems which operate through him. Kaspar too is subjected to systems, viewed through generative rules of speech and thought. He is "displaced from (his) function as center or source" and thus, "the self comes to appear more and more as a construct, the result of systems of convention".<sup>68</sup> These systems--and foremost among them is the system of language--generate rules, constantly expand as autonomous entities, and make "even the creation of new sentences a process governed by rules which escape the subject".<sup>69</sup> The Structuralists endorse this process of the "decentering" of the subject (to use Foucault's term) and see the individual as assimilating the rules of his culture, incorporating them, but not as originating or controlling them. Meaning for the Structuralists resides in systems of convention which are prior to the individual and escape his conscious grasp. "The goal of the human sciences"

writes Lévi-Strauss, "is not to constitute but to dissolve (man)."<sup>70</sup> Man is "dissolved" into the systems which constitute him and operate through him. *Kaspar* fits well into this Structuralist perspective, but with an essential difference: Handke is not writing from the point of view of knowledge as interpersonal systems of convention (as are the Structuralists), but from the point of view of *man* who is subjugated through these systems and victimized through the repression--or disavowal--of his individual "self". The "conflict" in *Kaspar* is between language--perversely presented though it is by the Prompters--as the ultimate system of order, and Kaspar who, although a product of this order, rebels against his absolute displacement by it. By the end of the play, Handke claims, Kaspar's language "is suddenly deranged--until complete schizophrenia sets in".<sup>71</sup> This psychological terminology does not necessarily refer to Kaspar's "mind" which, like himself, is only a construct. It refers to a possible course of revenge available to the individual who through "derangement" rebels against the system by refusing to allow it to operate through him.<sup>72</sup> Thus when Kaspar finally rejects the ideas of his Prompters, he also rejects their grammar (and vice versa) and speaks deranged nonsense as a rebellion.

Martin Esslin wrote of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve* (1948) that "What he deplores is the levelling of individuality, the acceptance of slogans by the masses, of ready-made ideas which increasingly turn our mass societies into collections of centrally directed automata."<sup>73</sup> These words apply just as well to *Kaspar*. *Kaspar's* underlying assumption, like that of Ionesco's early plays, is that language can depersonalize and oppress, that

language can be a tool of conformity and coercion, a leveler rather than a prod to creativity and individuality. Ionesco dramatizes this theme through the creation of an ultra-typical product of such language stereotyping: the Smiths and Martins. Handke, on the other hand, abstracts the theme, creates a blank central "character" and achieves not satire and wit--as with Ionesco--but a formal, conceptual exposé of language structures.<sup>74</sup> Ionesco couches his verbal stereotypes and trivia in a non-sensical, absurd world of clocks which strike 17, of husband and wife who don't recognize each other, of families in which all the members are named Bobby Watson. Language of idiocy has produced idiots. Although Handke too protests against "the idiocy of language",<sup>75</sup> the language of *Kaspar* is not absurd; it is threatening, stifling, damaging, and ultimately deadly. *Sprechfolterung*, the theme of the play, is shown to be both an inherent function of language, and of the power structure of which language control is a part. Language has not 'lost' its meaning, as in Ionesco, it has not even gone mad: language is inherently, insidiously dangerous. As Rainer Nägele put it:

Handke's self-reflective texts, like those of many experimental authors, are not merely neutral demonstrations of linguistic elements, but critical deconstructions based on the experience of language as real and potential violence. Wherever somebody speaks, wherever signs exist and act, there is violence, domination and force.<sup>76</sup>

Or, to again quote Barthes: "Once uttered...speech enters the service of power...in each sign sleeps that monster: a stereotype. I can speak only by



picking up what *loiters* around in speech. Once I speak...I am both master and slave."77

Ionesco's next play, *La Leçon* (1951), is closer to this vision of the danger of language, and, as I will discuss in the next chapter, even more clearly (or at least more obviously) than Handke connects the autocratic power of language with repressive political power. This socio-political dimension is, however, clear enough in *Kaspar*. The Prompters are not only representatives of language but of the societal forces, the system which controls language. The language which they speak, and teach Kaspar, consists of an abstraction of social norms: but it is grounded in a reality which is concrete and particular. This is the reality of a middle-class well-formedness: the smooth language of the TV newsreel, the radio speech, the fully grammatical, persuasively structured verbal patterns of the ruling organization, patterns which contain and perpetuate a system of beliefs. It is a familiar language: but it is outside of Kaspar's subjective reality. It does not--cannot--absorb the quirks of individuality and thus individuality becomes a threat to the system and must be quashed. Ultimately, the clash between the individual need for freedom from abstraction and systems, and the inability of rigid verbal structures to bend to that need, will lead to Kaspar's destruction. The structures cannot bend because they are part of a system, and the system is both self-maintaining and self-perpetuating.

Language is conceived by Handke in *Kaspar* as a system for creating order and then, by extension, for maintaining order through insistence on adherence to its forms. This is undoubtedly a power structure and the parallels between it and the power structures of the tyrannical state or system of thought are, I think, undeniable. *Kaspar's* progress from creation to destruction through language is, in a sense, a parable of the nature--not only of language--but of power.<sup>79</sup> Without structures there could be no language, no state, no morality. But when the structures become an end in themselves, when they become autonomous, gain a life of their own, then man no longer creates order, he only serves it: and to serve order is, as *Kaspar* shows, to be destroyed by it. The order, and power, of language, naturally lead to the order of thought and then, of behavior.

Whorf too was troubled by the relationship between language and society. How do they interact? Which precedes and forms the other? He concluded that they co-exist in an uneasy partnership:

...But in this partnership the nature of language is the factor that limits free plasticity and rigidifies channels of development in the more autocratic way. This is because a language is a *system*, not just an assemblage of norms. Large systematic outlines can change only very slowly, while many other cultural innovations are made with comparative quickness.<sup>79</sup>

Thus language represents the "mass mind" which has a rigid and inhibiting influence on development. Handke goes further than Whorf. He sees in language not only rigidity and autocratic tendencies but the potential for the manipulation of the individual. Handke rejects the humanist concept of

language as the apex of culture, the mark of man's humanity. He insists that we need to rethink our very means of thought, must penetrate "die tückische Sprache...und, wenn man sie durchschaut hat, zeigen, wie viele Dinge mit der Sprach gedreht werden können. Diese stilistische Aufgabe wäre durchaus, dadurch, dass sie aufzeigte, auch eine gesellschaftliche;"<sup>e0</sup> i.e., the stylistic and operational examination of language will, and must, lead to the questioning of the relationship between "insidious language" ("die tückische Sprache") and the society which it warps ("mit der Sprach gedreht werden"). Others have sounded the same warning. Mauthner believed that language is an instrument of the "herd"<sup>e1</sup> which, like Whorf's "mass mind" traps the individual and twists him into mass conformity and depersonalization.<sup>e2</sup> The prophet of this bleak vision is of course George Orwell who in *Nineteen Eighty-Four* demonstrates all too vividly the inextricable connection between power structures, verbal manipulation, and the herd mentality. The horror of *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is, above all, the meticulous and gapless order which the state has imposed, an order which is perfected through its language--Newspeak--and reflected in every detail of personal and communal life. Newspeak has two principles: cutting language down to a bare and basic minimum; and imposing on words forms which can only express linear, simplistic and unambiguous concepts. Language thus restricted awakens no connotations, no emotional response; and thought too becomes unambiguously structured and easy to manipulate.

Don't you see that the whole aim of Newspeak is to narrow the range of thought? In the end we shall make thought-crime literally impossible, because there will be no words in which to express it.<sup>e3</sup>

This is precisely what the Prompters are doing through their "model" sentences and axioms of thought which are reductive, simplistic, and force an unambiguous acceptance of the norms of order. "...Wenn du zu *sprechen* anfängst, wirst du zu *denken* anfangen, was du *sprichst*, auch wenn du etwas anderes *denken willst*" (27). Orwell's point, precisely.

"Because no story will take place, the audience will not be in a position to imagine that there is a sequel to the story, other than their own," Handke writes in the opening directions to the play.<sup>64</sup> There is no continuation to Kaspar the "character" although there is a continuation of the theme of Kaspar outside of the theatre. At the end of the *Tractatus* Wittgenstein makes this comment about his philosophical work:

...he who understands me finally recognizes...he must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it...he must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly.<sup>65</sup>

Handke seems to be suggesting a similar task for his audience. *Kaspar* is almost a heuristic device, a "ladder" to that awareness which Handke constantly stresses is the goal of all of his writing. Within *Kaspar* there is one short although very important section which is the link between the play and its sequel in reality. This is the "Intermission Text", spoken during the intermission between the two acts of the play.<sup>65</sup> It is to be piped through loudspeakers into the auditorium, lobby, even out onto the street if possible: wherever the audience may be trying to take a break

from the play. The text is to be pre-recorded and consist of fragments of the Prompters' speeches, a variety of noises, and actual taped speeches by real political leaders, Presidents, Popes, commentators, writers, poets who lectured on public occasions--any public figure who seeks to influence us through his or her words. The voices sound familiar, the phrases are recognizable although we hear only fragments of speeches which tumble over each other in an acoustic barrage. All of the words are delivered in formal, persuasive voices, corporate voices, like those of the Prompters. Cheers and boos respond and blend with electric drills, waterfalls, a variety of sounds. Sirens and laughter interrupt sentences about war and life. The final section of this text returns us directly to the play: in coherent sentences we hear the description of a dinner party, with an exquisitely set table and perfect decorum. But the description includes "off" sentences, like warps in a record.

Die Suppe wird von rechts gereicht. Die Getränke werden von rechts gereicht. Alles, was du dir selbst nimmst, wird von links gereicht. *Der Stich kommt von rechts.* Du sitzt in der Mitte. Der Salzstreuer steht links. Der Löffel liegt rechts aussen neben dem Messer. Die Mulde des Löffels liegt nach oben. *Der Würgegriff kommt von beiden Seiten...* Du trinkst in kleinen Schlucken. *Der Schlag ist wirksamer von unten...* Du suchst immer nach freundlichen Worten. *Das Opfer eines Attentats liegt in der Mitte jedes Platzes...* (59, my emphasis)

Again, as so often in the play, housely order and the order of terror are equated. The well-set table becomes the bier for assassinated corpses. The table, that epitome of social culture, of bourgeois order..."Zu den schönsten Erscheinungen im Leben gehört ein gedeckter Tisch" (25)--is for Handke the direct counterpart of verbal order. Handke's text ends with the

sounds of bombs falling, of houses (and probably dinner tables) crumbling, of chimes, bells, gongs, and finally the buzzer calling the audience back for the second act of the play.

This text is undoubtedly a source of irritation for the audience. The "Niagra of words" to use Hayakawa's phrase,<sup>87</sup> is a continuation of the grating, endless words of the play itself: only now the text is drawn from the public words and noises which surround us in life, not in the theatre. The *Versprachlichung* of existence--the reduction of reality to words--is thrown at the audience precisely when they have left the suspended time of the theatre for the "real" time of intermission. What is happening is that the audience is in fact being subjected to "language torture" not unlike Kaspar. This torture is however not meant to educate or to bring the audience "into order", but rather to expose the sources of language which have *already* formed the audience in Kaspar's image. Kaspar is only a model case of a common reality: the reality of language domination. This section combines the character Kaspar and the audience into one: the audience is drawn directly into the play. But not only is the audience shown to suffer the same fate as Kaspar, it is also accused of participating in Kaspar's destruction: "goats and monkeys". The words which destroy Kaspar are their words, our words; and the value of order which necessitates Kaspar's torture is lifted from the world of the audience, not invented by Handke. *Kaspar* is a call for awareness not only of the dangers inherent in language, but of "how we operate with words and are operated upon by them".<sup>88</sup> Herbert Gamper wrote of *Kaspar* that it is:

...ein Stück radikaler Gesellschaftskritik...indem es Denkmodelle und Denkwänge entlarvt, indem es Sprachmodelle und Sprach-zwänge aufzeigt. Er schärft dadurch das Bewusstsein der Zuschauers, durch Terror treibt er ihn aus seiner Lethargie auf und fordert ihn zugleich zum Widerstand heraus. <sup>es</sup>

This activation of the audience through "terror" differs from the type attempted in, for example, *Publikumsbeschimpfung*. There the role of the audience in the theatre as passive receiver is called into question, and the audience is shamed through its submission to ridicule and vulgar verbal attack. In *Kaspar* the accusation of submissiveness is taken further, it is taken out of the theatre into the living world of the audience's language, and this "radical social critique" is, according to Gamper, meant to move the audience to resistance.

Handke has been accused of "formalism", of an exclusive interest in language "in itself" without any social meaning or implications.<sup>90</sup> It would be fair to say that Handke's drama is "formal" in that it carefully and consciously creates structures, forms, which are both vehicle and content. These forms are indeed the theme of his plays. Handke's *Sprechstücke* and *Kaspar* are not only formal, they are theoretical, almost cerebral. Handke has said that in writing his plays "I was thinking only of the formal, dramaturgical, side of the forms of thought and expression."<sup>91</sup> There is little concession in these plays to emotion, except for what he calls the "joy" that accompanies "a new insight, a new view that is based on Reason."<sup>92</sup> Handke's plays are "formal" in the same sense as are Beckett's and Ionesco's, in that it is difficult to say what they are "about" without describing the *form* which their subject takes. Handke lacks the poetic

poignancy of Beckett and the wit of Ionesco, his writing is far more cerebral than either; yet, I would reject the idea that his plays are "formalistic", i.e. merely self-referential without relevance to any social or existential reality. To quote Nägele: "Handke's 'textualization' of the world is...not simply an escape into sterile formalism, as some have criticized, but rather the product of an increasing awareness of the inevitable inscription of the world in the text and the text in the world."<sup>93</sup> In one of his earliest statements about the meaning of language Handke wrote "dass die Sprache eine Realität für sich ist und ihre Realität nicht geprüft werden kann an den Dingen, die sie *beschreibt*, sondern an den Dingen, die sie *bewirkt*."<sup>94</sup> *Kaspar* is in fact a dramatization of this claim: in *Kaspar* language does not *describe* (beschreiben), it *activates* (bewirken), creating a reality through the force of its own nature. This reality is formal, as is language, and Handke's critique is directed against those very forms and the power which they possess. Handke indeed claims that "formal Fragen eigentlich moralische Fragen sind".<sup>95</sup> What Handke does is "die herrschende Sprache dazu zu bringen dass sie *selber* ihren verborgenen totalitären Character, ihren Despotismus und ihre Stupidität enthülle".<sup>96</sup> This self-exposure of the domineering nature of language is intimately linked to the power-structure of a '*Sprachgemeinschaft*' "die einem gesellschaftlich-politischen System ihre Existenz verdankt und dessen Erhaltung garantieren soll."<sup>97</sup> The language which the Prompters teach *Kaspar* not only *is* an ideology (to them) but also *has* an ideology: the ideology of a perfectly structured and maintained order. This order is inherent in the sentences they speak, the repetitive,



rhythmic platitudes which serve to deaden consciousness and reduce it to servitude.<sup>99</sup> But it also reflects a social order from which the language is abstracted and which it is in turn meant to maintain. Ernst Wendt, in an unequivocal reply to the critics who accuse Handke of having no social consciousness, wrote:

...der Schriftsteller Peter Handke, der vielen als ein Formalist, als ein Sprach-Jongleur, als ein Mann im Elfenbeinturm einer neuen Innerlichkeit erscheint, in Wirklichkeit in seinen Arbeiten der letzten fünf Jahre fortlaufend die gesellschaftlichen Entwicklungen um ihn, um uns herum registriert und dort, wo sie verschleiert sind, anderen wahrnehmbar zu machen sucht--und auch erkennbar, durchschaubar...Wenn ein Schriftsteller das leistet, verdient er--denke ich--ein *politischer* genannt zu werden, auch wenn in seinen Texten sehr selten von Politik ausdrücklich die Rede ist und keine politischen Stoffe direkt verarbeitet werden.<sup>99</sup>

*Kaspar* is political in its implicated exposure of the functioning of power-structures in and through language. The Prompters are representatives both of language and of those who wield and abuse language for power.

*Kaspar's* originality lies not only in its concentrated thematization of the inherent dangers of language, but in its elevation of language to the status of a *character*. Language is imbued with the traits of a dramatic antagonist. Represented through the disembodied voices of the Prompters, language both develops and acts: its nature unfolds and grows more ominous as language engages in a struggle for dominion with *Kaspar*. In *Kaspar* Handke goes further than in his *Sprechstücke* and achieves a truly contemporary insight and effect by showing the *destruction of a character*--even so theoretical a character as *Kaspar*--*through language*. This concrete

demonstration of the danger of reductive, dehumanized speech, of the repetitive platitudes and slogans of language which has gone, as Ionesco claims, "out of control", is unique to postwar drama. Only in postwar drama does language become the active antagonist, the locus of social coercion and conformity. Language is presented as possessing a will of its own, outside of the control of the individual and to which the unaware individual can only bend or break--"PARIER oder KREPIER!". We are thus called to awareness, warned of the potential danger to autonomy and meaning which lurks in an uncontrolled use of language. The following chapters will expand on Handke's insights and will study a variety of plays by other postwar dramatists which expose, often in more overtly political and less theoretical terms, this postwar dramatic concern with the dangers of language aggression and language domination.

## III

## GAGGED BY LANGUAGE: ON VERBAL DOMINATION AND SUBJUGATION

The elevation of language to the status of a dramatic antagonist can be achieved through a number of techniques. Handke's solution in *Kaspar* is in keeping with the abstract minimalism of that play: language is returned to its purely aural source. Disembodied voices surround Kaspar with a language which actively functions as a character. Since language in *Kaspar* is not represented through a physical figure, and since Handke takes pains to strip even those voices of any personality traits, we are directed towards the reductive forms of language itself, as used in a reductive social context. Handke's achievement is to assert a total identification between the Prompters' "model" sentences, i.e. correct grammatical forms, and the forms of "model" behavior which they induce. The invisible Prompters mold Kaspar and coerce him towards prescribed obedience, solely through their use of language.

The plays to which we turn here are written in the Absurdist idiom. They present a variety of characters who struggle against language domination: and lose. Like Handke, these playwrights assign to language the role of dramatic antagonist and, as in *Kaspar*, language is identified with

power, aggression, and victimization. The techniques, however, differ. In each of these plays language is embodied in a physical character who becomes a "medium" for language's aggression. All of the plays are clearly concerned with this verbal aggression and with its power to destroy personality, eradicate individuality, and even kill. Moreover, verbal assault is identified, at least implicitly and sometimes explicitly, with ideological and political power structures. The major plays which we will examine are: Eugène Ionesco's *La Leçon* and sections of *Jacques, ou la soumission*; Harold Pinter's *The Birthday Party* and *The Dwarfs*; and Václav Havel's *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*.

Ionesco, Pinter, and Havel stem from three different countries and write in three different languages. All three are highly acclaimed and internationally known authors whose plays, despite certain similarities, are independent personal statements. They were first studied together by Martin Esslin in his revised edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1968).<sup>1</sup> Since the term "Absurdist" is often invoked in discussions of all three playwrights it may be useful to begin by asking to what extent Esslin's analysis of the language of Absurd theatre is relevant to the plays we are examining, and to the theme of this study.

A few basic concepts--by now themselves platitudes--characterize language in Esslin's discussion. First, as a theatre of "concrete imagery of the stage", Absurd theatre subordinates logic, discursive thought, and language to visual imagery, movement, light, etc. Thus language is merely

one component of a "multidimensional poetic imagery."<sup>2</sup> Language, when used, emerges as devalued, dissolved, disintegrated, nonsensical, insufficient, and ultimately "fails to communicate."<sup>3</sup> Devalued language implies a lack of efficacy and alienation from meaning whose source is the experienced insufficiency of words to encompass existential bewilderment. The dramatic product of this verbal deterioration takes the form of inarticulate noises, empty clichés, verbal inversions, distortions, and a general failure of communication.<sup>4</sup> Esslin uses these as generally descriptive terms, but they form the basis for his analysis of Absurdist language.

We can distinguish here between the devices--devalued, nonsensical language; and their philosophical implications--language is "insufficient" and thus there exists a failure of communication. *La Leçon*, *Jacques*, *The Birthday Party*, *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* all employ the devices of Absurdity to one degree or another: verbal inversions, mechanical clichés, extensive banality, meaningless sound patterns, are all common to these plays. But the *implications*, I will contend, are different. As we shall see, language in these plays does not fail to communicate; in fact, it communicates all too well its aggressive, leveling tendencies. The relationship which is stressed by the authors is precisely *between* man and language. Language is shown to be not insufficient but rather ominously powerful, wielding the characters rather than being wielded by them. In this context of the danger and power of language, the above mentioned verbal devices also take on a different significance: they become the forms through which language gains dominance over the characters. Esslin is not

unaware of the struggle which exists between man and language, but for him its source is existential and resides in man's absurd separation from linguistic communion. I will attempt to show, on the contrary, that the power which language displays in the plays studied here is concrete and part of the potential nature of language itself. These playwrights are leveling accusations *against* language, against its capacity to manipulate and dominate, to control man's life and destroy his individuality. Most importantly: while Esslin views language in Absurdist drama as subordinate to images and visual stage effects, these plays elevate language to a central position. Language is the theme and the target of each play, it is the dominant threat in them all.

How can language "dominate and subjugate"? As we shall see, Ionesco, Pinter, and Havel all employ a number of recurrent verbal devices through which language domination operates. The three broadest and most significant are: the ritualization of language and a resultant verbal hypnotism; the use of extended clichés and jargon as forms of coercion; and verbal mechanization in which language speaks through man without recourse to the speaker's intent or control. All of these elements have been discussed in two outstanding essays on language domination: George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language",<sup>5</sup> and Herbert Marcuse's "The Closing of the Universe of Discourse" from his book *One-Dimensional Man*.<sup>6</sup> These essays will be discussed in detail in the latter part of this chapter (in the section on "The Devices of Verbal Domination") but briefly: both Orwell and Marcuse denounce the corruption of free thought through the mechanical

acceptance of preformed verbalizations, the "gumming together (of) long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else"<sup>7</sup> and which preclude the development, differentiation, or contradiction of meaning. Marcuse claims that such closed, self-validating language is ruled by "operationalism," i.e. the tendency to identify and reduce things and concepts to their function, so that "the concept is absorbed by the word."<sup>8</sup> Concepts thus absorbed induce automatic, single-faceted connotations which are no longer open to criticism or revision. Such language is often identified with dogma or propaganda but is also found in the slogans of advertising or the reduced lingo of journalism. These usages constitute a hallowed and magical form of speech, authoritarian, threatening, and dangerous. "Hammered and re-hammered into the recipient's mind, they produce the effect of enclosing it within the circle of the conditions prescribed by the formula."<sup>9</sup>

The ensuing discussion will begin with a detailed analysis of each of the model plays in question. My goal is to prove 1) that the theme of each of these plays is: the danger which a decadent and corrupt language poses to personal autonomy; and 2) that the devices which these playwrights employ expose the nature of such verbal corruption. Specific usages will be examined in context. After these claims have been established, there will follow two sections: one which will synthesize the multiple devices of language domination, analyse their functions and implications, and expand their context; and another which will study the political dimension of language domination as revealed in the plays themselves.

EUGENE IONESCO: *La Leçon and Jacques, ou la soumission*

We discover not without dismay that, for thought, words are not simply a frame of reference or a support, but the whole of reality. *A prisoner of his speech*, man thinks himself protected by his own psittacism... (Ionesco's) accumulation of puns, spoonerisms, equivocations, misunderstandings and a thousand and one other nonsensical drolleries, down to outright disintegration of articulate language into onomatopoeias, brayings and belchings... is a perpetually renewed act of *accusation against language*... Instead of men using language to think, *we have language thinking for men*.

J. S. Doubrovsky (my emphasis)<sup>10</sup>

This passage from Doubrovsky's article pinpoints a few of the essential themes of Ionesco's early plays: the accusation--and warning--against language as the jailhouse of reality; the claim that man has lost control of language; and the conclusion that robbed of verbal autonomy, man has been rendered incapable of independent thought, since thought has been usurped by language. To this we can add that the usurping language is not only absurdly comical, as Doubrovsky's list of "nonsensical drolleries" implies, but also dangerous, even deadly. The language has an almost magical power to wound and destroy; and the victims of this language are not only those against whom it is directed--but also those through whom it is uttered.

Ionesco's first play, *La Cantatrice chauve* (1948) was mainly concerned with the mechanical, fossilized nature of social speech, but lacks the more ominous note of language as an existential threat. It is an aggressive spoof and ends in verbal anarchy which was intended to spill over into the



audience. Its circular structure reflects the mechanism which it attacks, and tends towards the comic. *La Leçon* (1950), Ionesco's second one-act play, is also circular in structure, but here, in keeping with its more ominous tone, the circularity tends towards the grotesque. The language of *La Leçon* shares some characteristics with that of *La Cantatrice chauve*, but is essentially different. In *La Cantatrice chauve* language is single-faceted and parodic. Clichés, formulae, mechanical trivia, and mindless inanities are sustained on one plane, throughout. All of the characters speak the same interchangeable language, and they are thus all leveled to one-dimensional insignificance. There is no protagonist or antagonist among the characters: language alone is on heightened display. *La Leçon* is a more muted play; it probes deeper into the relationship between man and language, and is multi-faceted. Language here also eventually explodes, but it explodes into real violence, not only into chaos. *La Leçon* is more than a parody: it is a parable, with personal and political implications, of the dangers of language domination.

The three characters--the Student, the Professor, and Marie the maid--relate to each other in terms of dominance/weakness. Only one character is at any given time in a position of dominance, and that character then also possesses verbal superiority. The Student begins in the superior position: she is confident, lively, and fluent. The Professor, by contrast, is weak and stammering: "Je ne sais comment m'excuser de vous avoir fait attendre...Je finissais justement...n'est-ce pas de...Je m'excuse...Vous m'excuserez...."<sup>5</sup> The action of the play charts a gradual power shift, the

Student's loss of vigor, her reduction to verbal parrotry and repetitive cries of pain, and the Professor's rise to verbal and physical dominance.

As its title implies, *La Leçon* depicts a lesson. The Student has come for instruction in order to qualify for her "total doctorate." Ionesco explains in a long opening stage direction that the Student, who is at first gay and dynamic, will grow depressed, numbed and near paralysis by the end. She goes from determined and "presque agressive", to passive "qu'un objet mou et inerte, semblant inanimée, entre les mains du professeur" (pp. 72-3). We are told from the start that by the time the Professor stabs her she can no longer react, she is already deadened. This total domination of one person by another is achieved through strictly verbal means. *La Leçon* shows a Strindbergian battle of wills, but without any psychological dimension. The image which best describes this domination is verbal vampirism: the Student is drained through the Professor's mass of hypnotic, self-perpetuating language and sound, of her capacity for speech and of her vitality. Her weakness is his strength.<sup>12</sup> Vampirism is a theme which, like the struggle of opposed wills, obsessed the Expressionist Strindberg. But whereas Strindberg's "vampires"--in *To Damascus* or *The Ghost Sonata*--drain his heroes' vitality through a mystical, subjective dominance of the spirit, in *La Leçon* vampirism is objectified and comes to define the play's true antagonist: uncontrollable language.

The lesson begins with banal questions about geography and mathematics. The Professor is diffident and the Student retains her

position of strength until they begin subtraction, which she cannot conceptualize. The Professor's explanation of that process includes technical terms--elements, figures, units, numbers--which confuse the Student, and with these terms the Professor's shift from weakness to power begins. The center of the lesson, however, concerns "the elements of linguistics and of comparative philology," and it is in speaking about language that the Professor gains complete control. Marie, the maid, warns the Professor against teaching philology, begging him to stop before it's too late: "Non, Monsieur, non!... Il ne faut pas!... (...) Monsieur, surtout pas de philologie, la philologie mène au pire..." (p. 89). The Professor however rejects her warning and in his opening lecture on the philology of the "neo-Spanish languages" speaks for the first time "avec autorité" (p. 90).

With the introduction of language as a subject within the plot--and not only a dramatic device--the complexities and implications multiply. Had Ionesco merely depicted the verbal aggressions of the Professor without using the discussion of language itself as the direct impetus for accelerating violence, the connection between language and power would still have been apparent. But the injection of linguistics as an overt subject--it is indeed the major portion of the lesson, taking up half the length of the play--gives Ionesco the opportunity to *comment* on the verbal domination which he is demonstrating. Thus a double process ensues: the Professor's use of language gathers momentum, lengthens, and grows

increasingly vicious in a linear progression; while his *discussion* of language both partakes of that progression and comments on its mechanism.

From the moment the Professor begins his lecture on linguistics the Student's energy begins to wane. Her voice grows dull and her responses are either an acquiescent "Oui, Monsieur!" or a mechanical repetition of his words. A marked contrast between her originally vital personality and her subsequent loss of individuality is indicated. This loss of energy and her weakening resistance are directly related to the two controlling devices of the Professor's speech: a barrage of academic jargon leading to opaque, senseless abstractions; and a rhythmic, incantatory repetition of sounds which, denuded of sense, have an hypnotic effect. In speaking of the differences between the various neo-Spanish languages, for example, the Professor begins with the details and syntax of an academic lecture, but soon slips into a nonsensical, circular argument with a recurrent "dis" sound:

**Le Professeur:** Ce qui distingue les langues néo-espagnoles entre elles et leurs idiomes des autres groupes linguistiques, tels que le groupe des langues autrichiennes et néo-autrichiennes ou habsbourgiques, aussi bien que des groupes espérantiste, helvétique, monégasque, suisse, andorrien, basque, pelote, aussi bien encore que des groupes des langues diplomatique et technique--ce qui les distingue, dis-je, c'est leur ressemblance frappante qui fait qu'on a bien du mal à les distinguer l'une de l'autre--je parle des langues néo-espagnoles entre elles, que l'on arrive à distinguer, cependant, grâce à leurs caractères distinctifs, preuves absolument indiscutables de l'extraordinaire ressemblance, qui rend indiscutable leur communauté d'origine, et qui, en même temps, les différencie profondément--par le maintien des traits distinctifs dont je viens de parler. (p. 91)

The Student's answer is "Ooh! ouuui, Monsieur!" She is "regrettant, séduite" (p. 91). The accelerating "dis" sound and the growing meaninglessness of the jargon are not mere parodies but a form of verbal hypnotism. Sense disintegrates into aural patterning, seductive sound. The alternating technical/academic jargon of the professor figure, and the ritual/incantatory chants of the verbal vampire, act as intimidating and oppressive spells. The Student develops a toothache, a pain which the maid declares is "le symptôme final" (p. 103), and which increases in intensity in proportion to her increased subjugation by the Professor. Her cries of pain--"J'ai mal aux dents!"--are a mechanical refrain which punctuate his lecture: it is the one form of resistance of which she becomes capable.

L'Eleve: J'ai mal aux dents, Monsieur.

Le Professeur: Ça n'a pas d'importance. (...) Continuons...

L'Eleve (qui aura l'air de souffrir de plus en plus): Oui, Monsieur.

Le Professeur: J'attire au passage votre attention sur les consonnes qui changent de nature en liaisons. Les f deviennent en ce cas des v, les d des t, les g des k et vice versa (...)

L'Eleve: J'ai mal aux dents.

Le Professeur: Continuons.

L'Eleve: Oui.

Le Professeur: Résumons: pour apprendre à prononcer, il faut des années et des années. Grâce à la science, nous pouvons y arriver en quelques minutes. Pour faire donc sortir les mots, les sons et tout ce que vous voudrez, sachez qu'il faut chasser impitoyablement l'air des poumons, ensuite le faire délicatement passer, en les effleurant, sur les cordes vocales qui, soudain comme des harpes ou des feuillages sous le vent, frémissent, s'agitent, vibrent, vibrent, vibrent ou grasseyent, ou chuintent ou se froissent, ou sifflent, sifflent mettant tout en mouvement: lulette, langue, palais, dents...

L'Eleve: J'ai mal aux dents.

Le Professeur: ...lèvres (...)

L'Eleve: Oui, Monsieur, j'ai mal aux dents.

Le Professeur: Continuons, continuons. (pp. 93-4)

Note the Professor's switch from the "scientific" details of consonant changes, to the rhythmically repeated "ent" sound. The Professor "possesses" the Student through words which she cannot comprehend, ideas which are forced on her without the option of discussion, and through sounds which entice and numb the mind. His is a magical form of rhetoric, which, as I will later show, bullies and seduces in a totalitarian fashion.

In a revealing passage, the Professor describes the mechanism of such language.

**Le Professeur:** ...ceci est encore un principe fondamental, toute langue n'est en somme qu'un langage, ce qui implique nécessairement qu'elle se compose de sons, (...) Si vous émettez plusieurs sons à une vitesse accélérée, ceux-ci s'agripperont les uns aux autres automatiquement, constituant, ainsi des syllabes, des mots, à la rigueur des phrases, c'est-à-dire des groupements plus ou moins importants, des assemblages purement irrationnels de sons, dénués de tout sens, mais justement pour cela capables de se maintenir sans danger à une altitude élevée dans les airs. Seuls, tombent les mots chargés de signification, alourdis par leur sens, qui finissent toujours par succomber." (pp. 92-3)

This precisely describes the Professor's accelerated use of sounds and automatic language to replace and destroy meaning. It is almost a defense of irrational language as a tool of power; words are shown to have a life of their own, an automatism which is outside of the control of the speaker. George Orwell in his essay on "Politics and the English Language" makes a similar point about language. He claims that language becomes a *danger* when words form automatic groups, "phrases tacked together like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house."<sup>13</sup> Such words and phrases "automatically cling

to each other", as the Professor says, and create sound patterns: familiar, seductive, but stripped of all real meaning. Orwell's point, like Ionesco's, is that such language, such automatic utterances, produce a reduced state of consciousness which "if not indispensable, is at any rate favorable to political conformity."<sup>14</sup> I will return to this later.

The Professor's domination of the Student climaxes in her murder/rape. The murder only culminates with the knife stab, which is also the symbolic act of sexual penetration, but it is in fact a *verbal* murder, as is the rape. The long ritual-death passage has the rhythm of sexual intercourse and the brutality of physical assault. Ostensibly teaching the Student how to say "knife" in each of the neo-Spanish languages, the Professor performs a ritual dance around her, brandishing his knife (real or imaginary) and openly chanting. He forces her to repeat the word "knife" after him and with each repetition the pain in her teeth spreads to another part of her body. The invaded part is wounded by the word, and as the bodily organs which the Student names grow more intimate--thighs, hips, breast, stomach--so the violation takes on an additional sexual connotation. The power to destroy resides in the word: it is the *word* "couteau", rather than the *object* it names, which stabs the Student to death.

**Le Professeur** (saccadé): Couteau... Regardez... couteau...

Regardez... couteau... Regardez...

**L'Eleve:** Vous me faites mal aux oreilles, aussi. Vous avez une voix! Oh, qu'elle est stridente!

**Le Professeur:** Dites: couteau... cou... teau...

**L'Eleve:** Non! J'ai mal aux oreilles, j'ai mal partout...

**Le Professeur:** Je vais te les arracher, moi, tes oreilles, comme ça elles ne te feront plus mal, ma mignonne!

**L'Eleve:** Ah... c'est vous qui me faites mal... (...)

Le Professeur: Répétez, répétez: couteau... couteau... couteau...  
 L'Eleve: J'ai mal... ma gorge, cou... ah... mes épaules... mes  
 seins... couteau...  
 Le Professeur: Couteau... couteau... couteau...  
 L'Eleve: Mes hanches... couteau... couteau...  
 Le Professeur: Prononcez bien... couteau... couteau...  
 L'Eleve: Couteau... ma gorge...  
 Le Professeur: Couteau... couteau...  
 L'Eleve: Couteau... mes épaules... mes bras, mes seins, mes  
 hanches... couteau... couteau... (pp. 105-6)

Language is concretized into action. The final knife plunge which splits the Student open only serves to emphasize the violation; language has already murdered her. The Student falls in an obscene position while the Professor, shaking with a spasm of relief, mumbles some "incomprehensible words."

Ionesco writes that the Professor utters the word "couteau"--"comme le coucou" (p. 105). He is "presque hors de lui" (p. 106), overtaken by the hypnotic spell no less than is the Student. This explosion of language in *La Leçon* shares with the final sequence of *La Cantatrice chauve* a sense of language taking over; but the differences between the two passages are marked. In *La Cantatrice chauve* the rhyming rhythmic nonsense of Mr. and Mrs. Smith demonstrates the disintegration of language into letters, sound, and pure noise. Language is committing suicide, dissolving; the characters, however, remain untouched. The sight of mechanically sputtering characters tends to produce a comic effect which Henri Bergson describes as "laughable in exact proportion as that body reminds us of a mere machine."<sup>15</sup> In *La Leçon* language doesn't destroy *itself*, it destroys its utterer. Language remains intact and in control: it is the Student who is killed, the



Professor who is "presque hors de lui". Thus the effect produced is not comic but grotesque; language is not to be laughed at, but feared.

The Student is destroyed by submitting and repeating the word "couteau"; the Professor, however, is also transformed. He loses complete control of himself, becomes sub-human "comme le coucou." Language has gone "out of control",<sup>16</sup> it has taken over. As Coe writes: "...in the absence of meaning, the words themselves take absolute control, and drive their unfortunate victim whithersoever their blind and dangerous energies may choose to direct."<sup>17</sup> It is a case of words "destroying their own utterer."<sup>18</sup> The Professor becomes both victim and victimizer. He falls into a trance, and after the violent murder/rape rises in a panic "comme s'il se réveillait" (p. 107), awakening from the spell of his own incantations. Marie indicates a number of times in the play that the Professor is a victim of his own deranged rhetoric. When she begs the Professor to "remain calm" ("je vous recommande le calme" (p. 78)), protests that "la philologie mène au pire!" (p. 90), and warns that "ça vous mènera loin tout ça" (p. 103), she is implying that the danger in the language is beyond his control: that he too will fall victim to it. The oppressive tyranny of the Professor's words, once unshackled, feeds on itself and cannot be stopped; it is a self-perpetuating mechanism. As Ionesco himself has claimed, words proliferate in *La Leçon*,<sup>19</sup> become a mushrooming mass which engulf not only the Student, but the Professor too. Not only does the Professor use words as a weapon, but the words, as they proliferate, overtake the Professor-- and use *him* as an instrument. There is a growing strain between the

Professor and his language; he seems to lose control of it the more he gains control of the Student. What began as a lecture turns into open, hysterical brutalization. This unrestrainable mechanism of growth has both a comic and a tragic aspect, begins in the comic but leads to the tragic-- as is well described by Yves Bonnefoy, in conversation with Ionesco:

In most of your plays the mechanical aspect is very important...there's the mechanical nature of language, the automatism of behavior, the proliferation of objects, the acceleration and chaotic disintegration of the action... In the classical theatre there are two basic dramatic mechanisms: a tragic mechanism which corresponds to the fate that leads the hero to his death; and a comic mechanism which involves the repetition of phrases or situations, the tangling up of the plot...usually these mechanisms are extraneous to the characters, they constitute a mesh or several meshes which the characters cannot escape... In your work, on the other hand, the mechanical aspect starts out as something comic and ludicrous that appears to derive from the actual behavior of the characters; it gradually increases, until suddenly, *because of its very excessiveness, of the fact that it's quite out of control*, it becomes tragic.<sup>20</sup> (my emphasis)

Such, precisely, is the Professor's situation. He loses control of his behavior, his actions, and his language; and what had begun as a comical, or at least ludicrous use of nonsense and jargon, degenerates into frenzied abdication, and brutality.

The murder/rape is not the end of the play; one further shift of power follows. Marie, who until now had only appeared in order to give warning, comment, and predict the consequences of the Professor's lecture, almost like a dramatic *raisonneur*, now enters to find the whimpering Professor and the defiled corpse. She begins to take charge, scolding the Professor as a

mother would a naughty child. The Professor is horrified by what he has done, Marie is merely disgusted. As she explains: it is the fortieth time that day that a Student has fallen victim to his aggression; "Et tous les jours c'est la même chose! Tous les jours!" (p. 108). The Professor tries to stab her but she is the stronger, striking him to the floor as he begs for forgiveness. Marie's strength is reflected in her use and control of language. The Professor is reduced to childish whimpering but Marie speaks, in turns, sarcastically, harshly or with critical efficiency.

**La Bonne** (sarcastique): Alors, vous êtes content de votre élève, elle a bien profité de votre leçon?

**Le Professeur** (Il cache son couteau derrière son dos.): Oui, la leçon est finie...mais...elle...elle est encore là...elle ne veut pas partir...

**La Bonne** (très dure): En effet!... (...) Petit assassin! Salaud! Petit dégoûtant! (...) Et je vous avais bien averti, pourtant, tout à l'heure encore: l'arithmétique mène à la philologie, et la philologie mène au crime...

**Le Professeur**: Vous aviez dit: "au pire"!

**La Bonne**: C'est pareil.

**Le Professeur**: J'avais mal compris. Je croyais que "Pire" c'est une ville et que vous vouliez dire que la philologie menait à la ville de Pire...

**La Bonne**: menteur! Vieux renard! Un savant comme vous ne se méprend pas sur le sens des mots. (pp. 107-9)

The last line is obviously an ironic wink by Ionesco and ties in with the final gesture of the play. Marie, to allay the Professor's fears, takes out an armband imprinted with an insignia, "perhaps the Nazi swastika," and puts it on his arm.

**Marie**: Tenez, si vous avez peur, mettez ceci, vous n'aurez plus rien à craindre...C'est politique.

**Le Professeur**: Merci, ma petite Marie; comme ça je suis tranquille... (p. 110)

The play ends as it began, with the doorbell ringing and a new student entering for her lesson. The cycle continues.

*La Leçon* is marred structurally by its ending: the donning of the armband emblazoned with a Nazi swastika, overt symbol of repression and totalitarian power. This final gesture seems out of place; but my objection to it is not the same as e.g. Ronald Hayman's who claims:

So suddenly, gratuitously, perversely, an anti-didactic play is given a didactic twist and the invisible knife, which was already under severe strain, being partly phallic and partly a symbol of language made solid, is made to bear the weight of extra associations with fascism. Ionesco may have been wanting to make the point that fascism distorted the language and made it into a weapon but this idea is not organically integrated and there is too much logic in the illogic of the play's structure for a new idea to be introduced so late.<sup>21</sup>

A distinction needs to be made: injecting a concrete political symbol of repression into this unrealistic and abstract attack against authoritarianism is clumsy, even embarrassing. The solution is too strident: but the idea it represents is neither "gratuitous" nor "unorganic" to the play. Nor is it a "new" idea. The relation between verbal and political domination which it concretizes is elemental to the play's thematics. *La Leçon* is not really concerned with the student-teacher relationship: that relationship, even at its worst, is certainly too trivial to support the violence with which Ionesco invests it. There is, however, in the student-teacher relationship a kernel of authority and acquiescence, of dominance and submission, in short: there is an element of power relations. It is this kernel which is abstracted and exaggerated,

expanded into a broader exposure of power and domination which has clearly political and ideological implications.<sup>22</sup>

An audience viewing the play in 1951, when it was first performed, would have easily identified the ranting, tyrannical Professor with the Nazi rhetorics and regime, so recently overcome. It is not so much the content of the Professor's speech which acts as victimizer, as the authority of its tone, its prescriptive tendency, and its manic, manipulative energy. The Student is brutally restrained from asking questions or interrupting. She is continuously silenced and threatened, told to listen and take note without being allowed to think or respond. In short: she is being indoctrinated. The Professor, as Esslin puts it, "derives his progressive increase of power from his role as giver, a very arbitrary prescriber of meanings."<sup>23</sup> His language from the start is in the totalitarian mold. He is the creator of language and meaning, and the Student's verbal world shrinks to the imposed confines of his will. Words and meanings are invented and forced on the Student, and in this lies the Professor's strength. He rejects completely the possibility of true objective communication, which for him is an illusion stemming from "l'empirisme grossier du peuple (...) une des bizarreries de la nature humaine" (p. 102). He inverts Wittgenstein's theory that meaning in language can only be derived from empirical situations and usurps language to fit his own definitions.<sup>24</sup> Since he controls the shifting meaning of the words, he also controls the Student and reality. This process can be seen as parallel to the degeneration of the German language under the Nazi

regime, and shows the intimate connection between language control and political domination.

A number of dictionaries of Nazi word usage have been compiled, demonstrating precisely this point. Cornelia Berning's *Vom "Abstammungsnachweis" zum "Zuchtwart"* shows how within the space of a dozen years words were removed from the German language and, more frightening still, others were given totally new meanings which replaced earlier denotations and created a new realm of connotations.<sup>26</sup> For example: the 1924 edition of the popular *Meyers Lexicon* explained the term "Abstammungsnachweis" ("proof of origin or descent") with the note "s. Viehzucht" (see: "cattle-breeding"). The Nazi endorsed 1936 edition of that dictionary defined that same word as "Genealogischer Nachweis der deutschen oder artverwandten Abstammung...heute von jedem deutschen Volksgenossen verlangt" ("Genealogical proof of German or related origin...today required of every German citizen").<sup>26</sup> A word that had previously connoted animal stock control, now became a term for racial purity. Meanings were often completely reversed. Words like "barbarisch" ("barbarian") and "rücksichtslos" ("ruthless"), which had previously contained negative connotations of degenerate, unsocial behavior, now connoted positive values. For example, this quote from Hitler's "government program" printed in the *Völkischer Beobachter* in 1933: "Landes und Volksverrat soll künftig mit barbarischer Rücksichtslosigkeit verfolgt werden" ("State and National treason should in the future be persecuted with barbarian ruthlessness").<sup>27</sup> Such shifts in meaning may be consciously inaugurated; Ionesco has indeed

claimed that "it is quite possible--deliberately--to deflect language from its normal course."<sup>28</sup> But as Dolf Sternberger and Victor Klemperer have shown,<sup>29</sup> once set loose, the words take on a life of their own which expands and inflates, much like the corpse in *Amédée*, finally not only expressing an attitude: but creating one. "Wörter sind nicht unschuldig" wrote Sternberger in the introduction to his study of Nazi language *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen*, "sondern die Schuld der Sprecher wächst der Sprache selber zu, fleischt sich ihr gleichsam ein."<sup>30</sup>

The Professor deflects language from its original meaning in a similarly authoritarian manner. Language ceases to function through commonly accepted denotative meaning, nor is language allowed to awaken new connotations within the Student. Its only function is to stifle, to bully the Student into silence and then hypnotize her into obedience to the Professor's will. The once forceful personality of the Student is reduced to inert acquiescence.

For Ionesco the true tragedy of communication resides in the systemization of thought through language: the public system defeats private creativity and originality. As the Professor explains to the Student, all of the neo-Spanish languages are identical, they all use "toujours le même mot, invariablement avec même racine, même suffixe, même préfixe (...) vous avez toujours le même signification, la même composition, la même structure sonore non seulement pour ce mot, mais pour tous les mots concevables dans toutes les langues" (p. 96). This vision of

total identity in all languages is a pessimistic statement of the coercive conformism of public speech to schematized thought. And yet, the Professor insists that despite apparent identity, differences do exist, subtle differences which reside in a certain vague experience: "C'est une chose ineffable. Un ineffable que l'on n'arrive à percevoir qu'au bout de très longtemps, avec beaucoup de peine et après une très longue expérience..." (p. 99). The difference is *subjective* and not given to formulation in language. This personal experience cannot carry over into the schematic generality of conceptual language; it finds expression only in non-public forms of language such as poetry. Thus, Ionesco claims, language tends towards two poles: platitude and cliché, or literature. Both themes appear in his plays. Conformity is an overriding concern and underlies *La Cantatrice chauve*, *La Leçon*, and *Jacques*. Its political consequences are demonstrated in *Rhinocéros* (1958). But literary language is shown to be equally barren. Bérenger's fifteen page monologue at the end of *Tueur sans gages* (1957) uses every rhetorical device, verbal ploy, literary and philosophical formulation to convince the killer--death--to refrain; but words are of no avail. "Je meurs," cries the King in *Le Roi se meurt* (1961), "vous entendez, je veux dire que je meurs, je n'arrive pas à le dire, je ne fais que de la littérature." To which the doctor replies: "On en fait jusqu'au dernier moment. Tant qu'on est vivant, tout est prétexte à littérature."<sup>31</sup> Living experience, that "chose ineffable," is lost in language. Words become either literary structures or, worse, slogans and ideologies which manipulate the individual, "make the relative absolute and try to make an objective reality out of subjectivity...In logic, in



dialectics, in systematologies, all the mechanisms come into play, (and) all types of madness are possible."<sup>32</sup>

It is to the danger of ideological "madness" that Ionesco is referring when Jacques says: "O paroles, que de crimes on commet en votre nom!"<sup>33</sup> Like *La Leçon, Jacques, ou la soumission* (1950) shows the submission and conformity of a lively, spirited person, to the will and language of others. Language is again on trial and is shown as a reductive and dangerous threat to personal autonomy. There are two passages in which language actively coerces or seduces Jacques into conformity. The rebellious Jacques refuses to recite the family creed "J'adore les pommes de terre au lard." This ridiculous slogan only epitomizes the totally clichéd mode of speech which characterizes the Jacques family, and to which he will have to succumb if he accepts the slogan. This is apparent in his mother's plea for obedience:

**Jacques mère:** Fils! fils! écoute-moi. Je t'en supplie, ne réponds pas à mon brave coeur de mère, mais parle-moi, sans réfléchir à ce que tu dis. C'est la meilleure façon de penser correctement, en intellectuel et en bon fils. (Elle attend vainement une réponse; Jacques, obstinément, se tait.) Mais tu n'es pas un bon fils. Viens, Jacqueline, toi qui, seule, a suffisamment de bon sens pour ne pas te frapper dans les mains.

**Jacqueline:** Oh! mère, tous les chemins mènent à Rome. (p.119)

Jacques' resistance is eventually overcome by his sister Jacqueline, who attacks him with the word "Chronométrable." This verbal invention, implying that he too is subject to the working of "Chronos"--time, fills him with anguish. Defeated, he declares in a mechanical voice, "comme un automate"

(p. 122), the slogan he had rejected. He submits, and this submission to verbal parrotry is enough to rob him of his autonomy. By pledging verbal allegiance he has subjected himself to the control of his family; he has conformed to their language and the behavior which it represents.

When his family decides to marry him off, he again rebels. This time he is won over through verbal seduction. Robert II, his three-nosed, nine-fingered fiancée, seduces Jacques with lyrical, erotic words and dream images which translate into hypnotic sounds, not unlike the Professor's rhythmic language: "...han! han! se rapprochant han! han! han! (...) clic clac, clic clac, au galop, jettent des étincelles. Clic...clac...clac...clac...vrr..." (p. 143). Language melts into pure subjective sensuality; Jacques is enticed, enveloped, hypnotized. By the end of the play conceptual language completely disintegrates into the word "chat" which transforms into a dozen different words, finally coming to mean everything, and revealing, Ionesco claims, "an absence of language, non-differentiation; everything is on the same level, it's the abdication of lucidity and liberty."<sup>32</sup>

**Jacques:** Tout est chat.

**Roberte:** Pour y désigner les choses, un seul mot: chat. Les chats s'appellent chat, les aliments: chat, les insectes: chat, les chaises: chat, toi: chat, moi: chat, le toit: chat, le nombre un: chat, le nombre deux: chat, trois: chat, vingt: chat, trente: chat, tous les adverbes: chat, toutes les prépositions: chat. Il y devient facile de parler... (...)

**Roberte 2:** Chat, chat, chat, chat, chat, chat, chat, chat.

**Jacques:** Et Jacques, et Roberte?

**Roberte 2:** Chat, chat. (...)

**Jacques:** Oh oui! C'est facile de parler.... Ce n'est même plus la peine.... (p.147)

Thus defeating Derridian "différance" in favor of uncritical identity, all meaning melts into undifferentiated, selfhood-annihilating unity.

In the final tableau the entire family performs a grotesque, obscene dance which, Ionesco claims, "must produce in the audience a feeling of embarrassment, awkwardness, and shame" (p. 148). They utter no word but crawl on the stage making miaou sounds, animal moans and croakings. This sensual ending and the disintegration of language which it displays is the opposite extreme of ideological coercion. The disintegration of language into animal noises has something in common with the ending of Handke's *Kaspar*. The noises which the duplicate Kaspars produce to counter the verbal automatism, the litany of slogans to which Kaspar has succumbed, is very like the grunts and moans in *Jacques*: they are elemental, combining human noises with the sounds of animals and nature. Both Jacques and Kaspar had been won over by the cliché and turned into automatized conformists; and both are released from this role through a return to chaos. The duplicate Kaspars draw Kaspar back into his original unformed state. The same takes place in *Jacques* with Jacques' melting into an animal state of formless passion. In both plays the alternative to verbal mechanization is chaotic disintegration.

It is also interesting to compare the grotesque dance in *Jacques* with the Professor's scalp-dance in *La Leçon*: both are types of frenzy and both lead to a destruction of individuality and personal autonomy. But a difference does exist: the Student is brutally murdered and raped through

the Professor's dominance; Jacques, however, has found an alternative form of communication--sensual, non-verbal communication. Ionesco condemns both forms, ideological conformity and the "abdication of consciousness" through non-spiritual eroticism.<sup>35</sup> It must, however, be noted that the beauty and power of the surrealistic language and images of the last part of *Jacques*--from Roberta's delirious dream through to the grotesque family dance--comes across not so much as a critique of the "abdication of consciousness", but rather as a subjective, instinctive alternative to verbal and emotional mechanization. The question which Yves Bonnefoy asks Ionesco: "Can we not see in this (use of the word 'puss') a desire for a sort of universal language?"<sup>36</sup> is justified and refers to the possibility of emotional communion in place of verbal/conceptual domination.

HAROLD PINTER: *The Birthday Party* and *The Dwarfs*

Pinter's *The Birthday Party*, like Ionesco's *La Leçon*, shows the destruction of an apparently innocent character through violent verbal assault; a destruction which, however, results not in death, but rather in an implied rebirth, a "conversion" similar to that in *Jacques, ou la soumission*. *The Birthday Party* is a complex and mystifying play containing two parallel plots and two verbal torture scenes of unusual density and power. It was Pinter's first full-length play (first version: 1958), and

has received much and varied critical attention. It has been diversely interpreted: as expressing nostalgia for the loss of childhood security;<sup>37</sup> as an externalized study of anxiety and the fear of death;<sup>38</sup> as showing the pressures towards conformity brought to bear on the artist "who has opted out of material success and responsibility";<sup>39</sup> and, more generally, as exposing how society coerces us all into a relentless mold of conformity.<sup>40</sup> All of these interpretations are possible for this complex, ambiguous play; but only the latter ties the diverse elements of the play together and allows for a reading which explains not only the *plot* of the play but also Pinter's central dramatic device: the extensive use of verbal violence. Despite the centrality of verbal violence in *The Birthday Party*, the question of its significance, its functions, and the role which language *itself* plays in this parable of forced social conformity, has been largely skirted by the critics. It is my intention to focus in on these questions, to correlate the action of the play and its unusual, almost aberrant language, and to show how the theme and the meaning of the play are directly contained in the function of its language.

The play centers around Stanley Webber, a slovenly, unemployed pianist, "a bit of a washout" as Lulu puts it, who for some years has been living in idle seclusion as lodger and substitute-son in the seaside boarding-house of Meg and Petey Boles. We know little about him, and what we do learn is ambiguous. He claims to have been a concert pianist whose career ended due to bad reviews; "They carved me up. Carved me up. It was all arranged, it was all worked out."<sup>41</sup> What is certain is Stanley's

current idleness and indifferent squalor. Lulu describes him best: "Do you want to have a look at your face? (...) You could do with a shave, do you know that? (...) Don't you ever go out? (...) I mean, what do you do, just sit around the house like this all day long? (...) Why don't you have a wash? You look terrible (...) You depress me, looking like that" (p. 25-6).

Stanley's relationship with the Boles is one of easy familiarity. Act one begins in the closed, trivial world of the family, eating breakfast, and discussing cornflakes and "nice bits" from the morning newspaper.

**Meg:** ...Did you sleep well?

**Stanley:** I didn't sleep at all.

**Meg:** You didn't sleep at all? Did you hear that, Petey? Too tired to eat your breakfast, I suppose? Now you eat up those cornflakes like a good boy. Go on.  
(He begins to eat.)

**Stanley:** What's it like out today?

**Petey:** Very nice.

**Stanley:** Warm?

**Petey:** Well, there's a good breeze blowing.

**Stanley:** Cold?

**Petey:** No, no, I wouldn't say it was cold.

**Meg:** What are the cornflakes like, Stan?

**Stanley:** Horrible.

**Meg:** Those flakes? Those lovely flakes? You're a liar, a little liar. They're refreshing. It says so. For people when they get up late. (p. 14)

The extreme banality of the conversation characterizes the family group. Meg and Petey are caricatures of domestic banality whose conversation never breaks out of the confines of their insulated world. Note the conversational pattern of petty questions and answers: from the start an interrogative verbal mood is established. Of the first 100 lines of the play, thirty-five are questions; trivial questions, certainly, but it is a

verbal pattern which is sustained and heightened, climaxing in the torture/interrogation scene of Act II.

The cozy domesticity is shattered by the arrival of two new lodgers, well-dressed men on a visit from the city. Their arrival fills Stanley with unexplained fear; they are intruders, emissaries from an outside world with which Stanley has for years had no contact. From the first it is clear that the visitors, Goldberg and McCann, are not innocent transients. They have been sent to the Boles' house to do a "job": "This job", McCann asks his boss Goldberg, "...is it going to be like anything we've ever done before?" (p. 29). The nature of the job, its goal, and the previous relationship between Stanley and the intruders, remain purposely obscure.

With the entrance of Goldberg and McCann a switch in idiom is immediately apparent: their language is a sophisticated mixture of corporate jargon, gangster slang, and social pieties which contrasts sharply with the Boles' verbal banality. Goldberg, the more verbose of the two, tends towards long, evasive speeches. When McCann asks him, for example, about the nature of their "job", his reply is a tissue of evasive bureaucratic terminology:

**Goldberg:** The main issue is a singular issue and quite distinct from your previous work. Certain elements, however, might well approximate in points of procedure to some of your other activities. All is dependent on the attitude of our subject. At all events, McCann, I can assure you that the assignment will be carried out and the mission accomplished with no excessive aggravation to you or myself. (p. 30)

Pinter draws the two intruders with careful detail, and much depends on their characterization. Goldberg is a self-satisfied, successful businessman of dangerous charm who speaks abundantly and with devious facility in Jewish intonations, uses Yiddish idioms, and dwells at length on various--contradictory--stories of his youth and family. He is a man of authority and "position":

**Goldberg:** Well, I've got a position, I won't deny it.

**McCann:** You certainly have.

**Goldberg:** I would never deny that I had a position.

**McCann:** And what a position!

**Goldberg:** It's not a thing I would deny. (p. 30)

His conversation is fraught with paternalistic advice delivered in a highly clichéd style. As he tells McCann:

**Goldberg:** ...Learn to relax McCann, or you'll never get anywhere.

(...) The secret is breathing. Take my tip. It's a well-known fact. Breathe in, breathe out, take a chance, let yourself go, what can you lose? Look at me (...) Pull yourself together. Everywhere you go these days it's like a funeral.

**McCann:** That's true.

**Goldberg:** True? Of course it's true. It's more than true. It's a fact. (pp. 27-8)

I will return to the significance of Goldberg's style of speech later. McCann, Goldberg's strongman, is a stage Irishman; a Catholic--Goldberg claims he's a defrocked priest--who drinks only Irish whiskey (never Scotch), sings sentimental ballads, and talks little. Although the two men are quite different they must be viewed as a team, and they rarely appear separately.



By the end of the first act we can clearly discern two groups of characters who comprise the two plot lines: Meg, Petey, and their silly neighbor Lulu, on the one hand; and Goldberg and McCann on the other. Stanley stands poised between the two, and the play charts his transition from the hub of the family into the complete control of the intruders. Richard Schechner has suggested that in *The Birthday Party* Pinter merges two actions, two levels of reality, and represents them in varying, disparate rhythms.<sup>42</sup> The "outer" action is a naturalistic family comedy exploiting a cast of familiar comic types: a lower-class couple: Petey, a deck-chair attendant and Meg, a landlady; their lodger, Stanley; and Lulu, a tart. Into this group intrude two additional comic types, the stage-Jew and stage-Irishman, Goldberg and McCann, who, however, reverse the mood and comprise a threatening "inner" action.<sup>43</sup>

This "inner" action comes to the fore in Act II, and with it the play's interpretative problems begin. Act II opens with a meeting between Stanley and McCann during which Stanley tries to convince the unresponsive McCann of his "innocence." His references to his past are, typically for Pinter, elliptic and do more to mystify than to clarify. Stanley speaks of his home town, of the quiet life he had led, and of his plans to return there; "I'll stay there too, this time. No place like home" (p. 40). McCann makes no accusations and we are never told of what crime Stanley thinks himself accused; but obviously he feels endangered. "I mean, you wouldn't think, to look at me, really...I mean, not really, that I was the sort of

bloke to--to cause any trouble, would you?" (p. 40). McCann's indifference enrages him and he grows more aggressive.

**Stanley:** It's a mistake! Do you understand?

**McCann:** You're in a bad state, man.

**Stanley** (whispering, advancing): Has he told you anything? Do you know what you're here for? Tell me. You needn't be frightened of me. Or hasn't he told you?

**McCann:** Told me what?

**Stanley** (hissing): I've explained to you, damn you, that all those years I lived in Basingstoke I never stepped outside the door.

**McCann:** You know, I'm flabbergasted with you. (p. 42)

The tone and mysterious hints belong to the genre of the detective or mystery story. An expectation is built that soon we will discover both the nature of Stanley's "crime" and the goal of Goldberg and McCann's mission. John Russel Brown attributes this expectation to Pinter's "two-pronged tactic of awakening the audience's desire for verification and repeatedly disappointing this desire."<sup>44</sup> And indeed we are disappointed. Instead of clarification, the mystification deepens. Goldberg enters; he and McCann surround Stanley and with gangster tactics force Stanley to sit down, taking up positions on either side of his chair. What ensues is six pages of massive, totally unrealistic verbal assault.

The switch from conversation to interrogation is abrupt. Again there is a shift in genre: we are now in a Kafka-esque world of secret, incomprehensible mental torture. Goldberg and McCann speak in a quick, gapless rhythm, a totalitarian style which allows no space for response and no option for self-defence.

**Goldberg:** Webber, what were you doing yesterday?  
**Stanley:** Yesterday?  
**Goldberg:** And the day before. What did you do the day before that?  
**Stanley:** What do you mean?  
**Goldberg:** Why are you wasting everybody's time, Webber? Why are you getting in everybody's way?  
**Stanley:** Me? What are you--  
**Goldberg:** I'm telling you, Webber. You're a washout. (p. 47)

The questions sound familiar; they are the opening ploys of an almost stereotyped interrogation. As the assault continues, the questions retain their familiar note, so that despite their absurdity and contradictory quality we have a sense of having heard all of this before.

**McCann:** Why did you leave the organization?  
**Goldberg:** What would your old mum say, Webber?  
**McCann:** Why did you betray us?  
**Goldberg:** You hurt me, Webber. You're playing a dirty game.  
**McCann:** That's a Black and Tan fact.  
**Goldberg:** Who does he think he is?  
**McCann:** Who do you think you are?  
**Stanley:** You're on the wrong horse. (...)  
**Goldberg:** Where is your lechery leading you?  
**McCann:** You'll pay for this.  
**Goldberg:** You stuff yourself with dry toast.  
**McCann:** You contaminate womankind.  
**Goldberg:** Why don't you pay the rent?  
**McCann:** Mother defiler! (...)  
**Goldberg:** No society would touch you. Not even a building society.  
**McCann:** You're a traitor to the cloth.  
**Goldberg:** What do you use for pyjamas?  
**Stanley:** Nothing.  
**Goldberg:** You verminate the sheet of your birth.  
**McCann:** What about the Albigensenist heresy?  
**Goldberg:** Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?  
**McCann:** What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett? (pp. 48, 51)

The torrent of irrational, contradictory accusations grows in intensity and viciousness. Stanley is accused, among other things, of betraying the

"organizational", of murdering his wife, of never having married, of not recognizing an external force, of being unable to distinguish the possible from the necessary. Philosophical and theological jargon are massed together and thrown at him in a gapless confusion. As we shall see below, the seemingly absurd mixture of jargonized language ("What about the Albigenist heresy?"), cliché cuts ("You're on the wrong horse."), and trivialities ("You stuff yourself with dry toast.") are not mere haphazard non-sense. As accusation piles upon accusation, echoes of familiar speech-styles begin to emerge. We become aware that the assault is actually a melting-pot of distorted idioms and clichés. The torture climaxes in outright threats of violence as Stanley's very existence is put into question.

**Goldberg:** Speak up Webber. Why did the chicken cross the road?

**Stanley:** He wanted to--he wanted to--he wanted to...

**McCann:** He doesn't know!

**Goldberg:** Why did the chicken cross the road?

**Stanley:** He wanted to--he wanted to....

**Goldberg:** Why did the chicken cross the road?

**Stanley:** He wanted....

**McCann:** He doesn't know. He doesn't know which came first!

**Goldberg:** Which came first?

**McCann:** Chicken? Egg? Which came first?

**Goldberg and McCann:** Which came first? Which came first? Which came first?

(Stanley screams.)

**Goldberg:** He doesn't know. Do you know your own face?

**McCann:** Wake him up. Stick a needle in his eye.

**Goldberg:** You're a plague, Webber. You're an overthrow.

**McCann:** You're what's left!

**Goldberg:** But we've got the answer to you. We can sterilize you.

**McCann:** What about Drogheda?

**Goldberg:** Your bite is dead. Only your pong is left.

**McCann:** You betrayed our land.

**Goldberg:** You betray our breed.

**McCann:** Who are you, Webber?

**Goldberg:** What makes you think you exist?

**McCann:** You're dead.

Goldberg: You're dead. You can't live, you can't think, you can't love. You're dead. You're a plague gone bad. There's no juice in you. You're nothing but an odour! (pp. 51-2)

Stanley ends up screaming and striking out in anger and pain.

A number of things need to be noted about this torture/interrogation. The accusations themselves are too diverse and contradictory to comprise a sustained argument; but I do not agree that their power resides merely in their mass or in their "weirdness", as some critics have claimed. Esslin, describing the torture scene of Act II, writes, almost in passing: "Stanley...had been subjected to a weird surrealist cross-examination by his tormentors before the party got under way..."<sup>45</sup> Austin E. Quigley, in his very interesting book *The Pinter Problem* writes: "In *The Birthday Party* conflict is waged not in terms of quality of usage but by the sheer weight, variety, and quantity of usage. Stanley is confronted by two visitors, who...verbally bludgeon him into submission and silence by the sheer number and variety of their accusations."<sup>46</sup> Both of these glosses seem to discount the centrality of the torture scene--through which Stanley is rendered dumb and seemingly deranged. Nor do these critiques probe the possibility that the weirdness and variety may have a deeper and integral place in the play's overall meaning. Evans' reading of this scene suggests that "the language seems to express nothing but itself, as if a computer had become half-demented in a staccato way."<sup>47</sup> This implies that the language has no meaning other than a "half-demented" exposure of its own forms, an interpretation which does not go far enough. It seems to me that something more, and more significant, is at work here. The questions and accusations

share a common ground, evoke a common source despite their diversity. What we have here is in fact a collage of recognizable jargon "styles" drawn by Pinter from the verbal stereotypes of the gangster movie, the spy novel, the theological sermon, the philosophy lecture, the political rally, the history textbook, the T.V. advertisement, the childrens' rhyme-- interspersed with the most common insults and clichés.

Why did you leave the organization?  
Why did you betray us?  
Who do you think you are?  
You're on the wrong horse.  
That's a Black and Tan fact.  
What have you done with your wife?  
You skedaddled from the wedding.  
He left her in the lurch.  
You stink of sin.  
Do you recognize an external force?  
When did you last pray?  
Is the number 846 possible or necessary?  
Mother defiler!  
What about Ireland?  
You're a traitor to the cloth.  
What about the Albigensienist heresy?  
Why did the chicken cross the road?  
Which came first? Chicken? Egg?

The attack is comprised of jargon intellectualism, genre imitations and clichés, a heap of common and commonly used verbal debris all the more frightening for its familiarity. From this mass there emerges a fragmented and distorted view of the platitudinal values held by, as Handke would put it, "aller anständig denkenden Menschen"<sup>4a</sup>--"right-thinking" man. The juxtaposition of these rhetorical styles and their pointedly clichéic, jargonized nature, make it abundantly clear that Pinter's indictment is not against the "messengers" whom the "organization" has sent, but against the

*message*; i.e. an indictment of those all too common coins of mechanical speech which have become the replacement for thought and the hall-mark of conformity. Stanley is being attacked by the moral and intellectual clichés which he, in his seclusion and rejection of society, has rejected. The aim of the attack is to reimmerse Stanley in those values by re-aligning him with the *language* of those values. This is accomplished by Goldberg and McCann who act not in their own names, but as "agents" of the "organization" which endorses these values and speech-forms.

An interesting precedent exists for this form of attack through jargon--interesting in its incongruity to Pinter. J. B. Priestley in his 1939 play *Johnson Over Jordan*, a play which takes place in a dream dimension between life and death, has a scene in which the dead Johnson, forced to account for his life, is assaulted by two Examiners. The two identically well-dressed men pose a series of technical questions which, like Goldberg and McCann, leave no space for reply and are drawn from a range of jargon intellectualism:

**Second Examiner:** How far have you tried to acquaint yourself with the findings of chemistry, physics, biology, geology, astronomy, mathematics?

**First Examiner:** Ask yourself what you know about the Mendelian Law, the Quantum Theory, Spectral Analysis, or the behaviour of Electrons and Neutrons.

**Second Examiner:** Could you explain Freud's theory of the Id, Marx's Surplus Value, Neo-Realism, Non-representational Art, Polyphonic Music?

**First Examiner:** Or--give an exact account of the sequence of events leading up to the outbreak of war in 1914?... What account of any value could you give of the political significance of minorities in Central Europe, the importance of the Ukraine in European affairs, the success or failure of Stalin's second Five Year Plan?

Second Examiner: Could you define accurately Fascism?

First Examiner: National Socialism?

Second Examiner: Russian Communism? <sup>49</sup>

Their language is badgering and torrential, like Goldberg's and McCann's, but unlike the latter's language it remains in the realistic and parodic idiom, rings inflated but not impossible, and serves only to outrage Johnson--who finally answers after the last query: "No. Could you?"--not to destroy him. Johnson's level-headed: "No. Could you?" acts to deflate the bombast and is a fitting ending to a parodic passage. The difference between Johnson's ordeal and Stanley's is that while Johnson is asked questions of *content*, Stanley is bludgeoned by the *styles* of the questions. Johnson might conceivably know the answers to his questions; Stanley's knowledge is irrelevant to his attackers. Goldberg and McCann are not examining the content of Stanley's mind: they are replacing it. Thus the two examiners disappear once Johnson has deflated them, while the two "agents" will not leave Stanley until they have converted him.

Bernard Dukore, writing about Goldberg as an agent, puts forth the amusing conjecture that Goldberg--whose first name is Nat--might perhaps be compared with his biblical namesake Nathan the Prophet who "commanded directly by God, rebuked King David for having sinned against the Lord and brought him back to the paths of righteousness; so does Nat, commanded directly by his organization, bring Stanley back to the paths of conformity."<sup>50</sup> It is not really necessary to go back to the bible in order to see that Goldberg and McCann are acting under orders and are actually only "mediums" for the verbal torture which they dispense. If we again look



at the accusations hurled at Stanley we note that he is repeatedly accused of betraying the "organizaton." It is this "organization" which Goldberg and McCann represent; their jargonized speech and executive style of dress only too clearly expose them as "organization men." It is an "organizaton" in which Goldberg holds a high "position", a position which was attained, as Goldberg later explicitly states, through his total submission and conformity to the rules of the "organization", through playing the "game", following the "line." "Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong. What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball" (p. 77). Goldberg and McCann are products of an "organization" for which Stanley too is now being molded. The language of the interrogation scene and the de-realization of Goldberg and McCann as characters in that scene, clearly indicate Goldberg and McCann's subordination to the function which they fulfill.

Despite their fully drawn and rather colorful personalities, Goldberg and McCann undergo a peculiar change as soon as they enter their "inner" roles, i.e. when they are alone with Stanley in Acts II and III. They are gradually overtaken by the verbal terrorism which is the source of their power, and become instruments of that verbal power rather than speaking individuals. Their speech accelerates in speed and rhythm; it takes on the tone and threatening curtness of public prosecutors. A ritualized pattern of stichomythic dialogue de-realizes them as individuals and gives increased emphasis to their language, a language consisting of terms and idioms culled from a stratum of speech beyond their own experience. Their

personalities recede and are replaced by a mechanical and manic explosion of language: Stanley is not so much being tortured by Goldberg and McCann, as *through* them. Pinter's intentional break with realism in this and the following verbal-torture scene, and the abrupt change of idiom and stage mood, are significant indicators that interpretation can no longer be rooted mainly in plot. Any reading of this scene must look to the language, to its massive and disjointed idioms and the power which they exercise. Goldberg and McCann function here very like the Prompters in *Kaspar*: they are *mediums* for socially prescribed speech, vessels for the manipulative power of language rather than autonomous characters. In the two verbal-torture scenes language itself becomes the dramatic antagonist, and the form which this language takes is that of the interrogation.

Interrogation, the art of extracting confession and converting belief through force of the word, is the root metaphor of Handke's *Kaspar* as well as of his *Hörspiel No. 1*. Stanley's torture, like *Kaspar's*, is mental torture; its goal is to control and shape his mind, to gain power over his thoughts. In all of these plays interrogation becomes a projection of the tactics of terror, terror conceived of as the usurpation of an individual's capacity to speak, and thus think, freely. Language is shown to be an instrument of power, the very embodiment of power.<sup>51</sup> Stanley's torture and ultimate conversion recalls another, more horrible, but distinctly parallel scene from post-war literature: Winston and O'Brien, tortured and torturer, in George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. In the torture/interrogation scene in that book O'Brien tries to convert Winston into saying--and believing--

words and thoughts approved by the party. Winston is tortured horribly, but the physical torture is not the point. O'Brien is not interested in merely harming Winston physically, nor is Winston broken through the pain of physical torture. O'Brien seeks a conversion--similar to the conversion of Kaspar from speechlessness into socially accepted speech--a conversion through which O'Brien, like the Prompters, like Mère Jacques, and like Goldberg and McCann, would gain total control over the mind of his victim. Like in *Kaspar* the trick, the essence of the conversion, lies in the total identification of "model" sentences--i.e. correct grammatical forms; and molds of thought--i.e. socially or politically endorsed axioms of order. Kaspar reaches successful integration when he finally speaks in the Prompter's voice. Stanley's conversion is imaged in his final appearance in the play, dressed in suit and tie, the very reflection of his torturers. In Orwell's book, O'Brien seeks to force Winston into a similar mold of unswerving conformity; Winston must be made to say "War is Peace", "Freedom is Slavery", "Ignorance is Strength", and to believe these axioms as true and unquestionable. To do this O'Brien must rid Winston of "Oldspeak," of the words and grammatical forms which pre-date Big Brother's control and allow for humanistic thought. He must rearrange Winston's mind in the form of a new, in fact *opposed*, language. "Power", O'Brien tells Winston, "is in tearing human minds to pieces and putting them together again in new shapes of your own choosing."<sup>52</sup> It is the "shape" of Stanley's mind which--like Winston's--is under attack; a mind which has rejected the solid clichés, the orderly behavior, the regulated mores of the controlling society.

O'Brien's prophecy of Winston's future after the interrogation and torture is very similar to Stanley's fate after his brainwashing:

What happens to you here is forever. Understand that in advance. We shall crush you down to the point from which there is no coming back.... You will be hollow. We shall squeeze you empty, and then we shall fill you with ourselves.<sup>53</sup>

In the torture/interrogation scene of Act II Stanley too is squeezed empty; in the ensuing torture/reconstruction scene of Act III he is recreated, "filled" by Goldberg and McCann with themselves, just as Winston is filled with O'Brien.

My claim that Pinter is consciously indicting the terrorism of forced verbal conformity--and the subsequent loss of personal autonomy--can be further substantiated by reference to another Pinter play: *The Dwarfs*.<sup>54</sup> Originally a novel written before *The Birthday Party* and containing many similar themes, it was later reworked into a radio play and finally into a stage play. It contains three characters, Len, Pete, and Mark, young men in their twenties who have been friends since childhood. Len seems to be in the midst of a personal, perhaps a mental crisis; he cannot communicate with his friends who are preoccupied with trivia, indulge in copious inconsequential speech, are back-biting and manipulative. He escapes their (to his mind) attempts to control him--to turn him into a "ventriloquist's dummy" (p. 97)--by fleeing into an imaginary world populated by dirty, gluttonous dwarfs who don't speak: only eat and play.

Just as there are two levels of action in *The Birthday Party*, so there are two levels of speech in *The Dwarfs*: "public" or conversational speech, and "private" or interior speech. Both of these levels refer to Len, in whose mind much of the action takes place. Len experiences great difficulty with public speech; the words of others seem to cause him pain, he calls this outside speech "voices" and claims that these voices pierce him, make "a hole in (his) side." Not only spoken words, but also the name-tags of objects appear alien to him. During his first interior monologue--many of the play's sections must be viewed as such--we hear Len rehearsing the names of the objects in his room in short, basic sentences which recall Kaspar's elementary attempts to learn public speech.

**Len:** There is my table. That is a table. There is my chair. There is my table. That is a bowl of fruit. There is my chair. There are my curtains... This is my room. This is a room. There is the wall-paper, on the walls. There are six walls. Eight walls. An octagon...  
I have my compartment. All is ordered, in its place, no error has been made. I am wedged. Here is my arrangement, and my kingdom. There are no voices. They make no hole in my side. (Whispering.) They make a hole, in my side. (pp. 87-8)

To escape from these "voices" Len creates a private fantasy world in which tactile contact is the main form of communication. The dwarfs who occupy this world are very physical creatures and spend all of their time either eating or playing. They never speak, they possess no "voices" and thus Len feels comfortable with them. We never see these creatures, we only learn of them through Len's descriptions, and it is interesting that in his private world Len's language is not only fluent but highly evocative, even

poetic. There is a marked discrepancy between Len's stifled public language and the richness of his described fantasy.

They nod, they yawn, they gobble, they spew. They don't know the difference. In truth, I sit and stir the stumps, the skins, the bristle. I tell them I've slaved like a martyr, I've skivvied till I was black in the face, what about a tip, what about the promise of a bonus, what about a little something? They yawn, they show the blood stuck between their teeth, they play their scratching game, they tongue their chops, they bring in their nets, their webs, their traps, they make monsters of their innocent catch, they gorge... (p. 96-7)

*The Dwarfs* consists of a series of disjointed dialogues and monologues. It is a "rough" play, not totally consistent, and not easy to interpret. There are sections of dialogue in which Len appears quite normal, and then suddenly we watch him react with anguish to the conversation of his friends. At one point, while Pete describes a nightmare he's had, Len "begins to grunt spasmodically, to whimper, hiss, and by the end of the speech, to groan" (p. 92). This extreme physical reaction to the "speech" of his friends recurs a number of times. The center of the play is built around a comparison between two types of relationships: that which Len has with Pete and Mark, and that which he imagines with the dwarfs. Len feels threatened by Pete and Mark, feels they are dishonest, cunning, have stolen his identity and are trying to manipulate him. He fantasizes about them as killers and spiders arranging their web, a web in which he will be caught. Both Pete and Mark try to win him over, warning him against the influence of the other. Len is frightened by their duplicity, their attempts to mold his attitudes through their words--for the only contact between them is verbal. He feels their manipulation in even the most

trivial situations and reacts with anguish. In the following conversation, for example, Len tries to discuss Mark's new suit but quickly finds himself repeating Mark's words in almost hypnotic parrotry.

**Len:** ... What's this, a suit? Where's your carnation?

**Mark:** What do you think of it?

**Len:** It's not a schmutta.

**Mark:** It's got a zip at the hips.

**Len:** A zip at the hips? What for?

**Mark:** Instead of a buckle. It's neat.

**Len:** Neat? I should say it's neat...

**Mark:** I didn't want it double-breasted.

**Len:** Double-breasted? Of course you couldn't have it double-breasted.

**Mark:** What do you think of the cloth?

**Len:** The cloth?...What a piece of cloth. What a piece of cloth.

What a piece of cloth. What a piece of cloth. What a piece of cloth.

**Mark:** You like the cloth?

**Len:** WHAT A PIECE OF CLOTH!

**Mark:** What do you think of the cut?

**Len:** What do I think of the cut? The cut? The cut? What a cut!  
What a cut! I've never seen such a cut! (Pause. He groans.)

(p. 88)

The dwarfs, on the other hand, are "a brotherhood. A true community" (p. 99). Although they are dirty, self-centered creatures whose only activities are eating and pleasure, Len feels safe with them. In a beautiful sentence, Len describes the dwarf's eating-sounds as "a chuckle of fingers. Backchat of bone, crosstalk of bristled skin" (p. 95). Note the speech metaphors--chuckle, backchat, crosstalk--used here to describe not verbal activity but the sensual sounds of oral pleasure. Len watches with envy as they "yowl...pinch, dribble, chew, whimper, gouge, then soothe each other's orifices with a local ointment, and then, all gone, all forgotten, they lark about, each with his buddy" (p. 99). This wordless, if grotesque

communion is contrasted with the poetryless, banal speech-world which Len finds so threatening.

Finally Len tries to break away completely from the overbearing and demanding friendship of Mark and Pete, and in a telling passage, he turns on them:

Len: You're trying to buy and sell me. You think I'm a ventriloquist's dummy. You've got me pinned to the wall before I open my mouth. You've got a tab on me, you're buying me out of house and home, you're a calculating bastard. (Pause.) Answer me. Say something. (Pause.) Do you understand? (Pause.) You don't agree? (Pause.) You disagree? (Pause.) You think I'm mistaken? (Pause.) But am I? (Pause.)...Both of you bastards, you've made a hole in my side, I can't plug it! (p. 97)

The play ends with Len in hospital suffering, according to Pete, from "kidney trouble" (analogous to the "hole in my side"?). He has lost Mark and Pete's friendship, they too have fought with each other, and now, alone, Len sees that he has also lost his dwarfs. Deprived of his inner world, Len returns to his attempt to grasp outer reality. The last line of the play returns us to the language of Len's first monologue: "Now all is bare. All is clean. All is scrubbed. There is a lawn. There is a shrub. There is a flower." (p. 108).

*The Dwarfs* is generally considered a difficult and unsuccessful play.<sup>55</sup> It is full of mysteries, little is known of the characters except that which is given through Len's unstable mind, and the lack of verifiability is clearly one of its main themes. Len cannot grasp the world



around him, he never knows whether what he perceives is "the scum or the essence" (p. 104). Nor can he respond to the world, since socially he is all but linguistically incapacitated. Austin E. Quigley in an excellent essay "*The Dwarfs: A Study in Linguistic Dwarfism*" suggests that Len's basic problem is "processing input (perceived complexity) into output (verbal patterns)."<sup>56</sup> This "perceived complexity" always pertains to the objective world, and his stunted "output" is always in terms of "public" language. "What vitally concerns Len" Quigley writes, "is not only his inability to do things with language but also his growing fears about what might be done to him through language."<sup>57</sup> Len feels himself "pinned to the wall" by the manipulative powers of others. This phrase obviously refers to T. S. Eliot's line in "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock":

And I have known the eyes already, known them all--  
The eyes that fix you in a formulated phrase,  
And when I am formulated, sprawling on a pin,  
When I am pinned and wriggling on the wall,  
Then how should I begin...

Like Prufrock, Len feels that he has been formulated "in a formulated phrase", that words outside of himself have robbed him of his identity, have left him "pinned and wriggling on the wall". In his one outright attack on those he accuses of "formulating" him, Len says that he is being treated like a "ventriloquist's dummy", that is, of course, like a lifeless object which mouths the words of others. As we saw in the passage quoted above concerning Mark's new suit, Len does indeed react like a dummy, numbly repeating phrases put into his mouth by Mark. At one point, developing this "mouthing" metaphor, Len says:

**Len:** You're frightened that any moment I'm liable to put a red hot burning coal in your mouth.

**Mark:** Am I?

**Len:** But when the time comes, you see, what I shall do is place the red hot burning coal in my own mouth. (p. 90)

Quigley's conclusion as to the basic theme of *The Dwarfs* is equally true of *The Birthday Party*. "Linguistic control, it seems, is the ultimate power in this play. To control what someone is *able to say* is to control to a considerable extent what they are *able to be*" (emphasis mine).<sup>58</sup> This conclusion is in line with Quigley's major thesis on Pinter's plays, as expressed in his book *The Pinter Problem*. There, Quigley contends that language has an "interrelational function" in Pinter's plays, i.e. that it functions "primarily as a means of dictating and reinforcing relationships."<sup>59</sup> Characters negotiate their relationships through language, and their "language moves" become the maneuvers of a complex power game. "Pinter has constructed a new dynamic of dialogue in which the coercive power of social conversation becomes the focus of character confrontation."<sup>60</sup> This perceptive linguistic analysis is fruitful for many of Pinter's plays, but does not go far enough to explain the unusual verbal violence in *The Birthday Party*. Quigley claims that Pinter's characters function and relate through language; he however doesn't question whether language is not also functioning through them--i.e.: whether language isn't sometimes more than a maneuver, doesn't itself become the theme and source in his plays. This second question would shift the perspective from an analysis of the *inter-relationship* of characters through language, to an analysis of the relationship between the characters *and* their language. It is true that not all of Pinter's plays warrant such a shift in focus, but

where the question of the relationship between character and language does become crucial--notable in *The Birthday Party*--Quigley merely avoids the issue. It is noteworthy that despite the centrality of verbal coercion in *The Birthday Party*--and verbal coercion is after all the subject of Quigley's book--it is not among the plays which he chooses to analyze. In fact he comments on it only in passing and concludes that Stanley is tortured through the "mass" of accusations, not through the quality of the language itself. Such a reading turns a totally unrealistic passage into mere failed realism, and as such renders the passage unworthy of further scrutiny.

Len and Stanley have much in common. Both are alienated characters, outsiders, escapees from the world of ambition and manipulation. Both choose cop-out lives: Len in his silent and poetic fantasy world, Stanley in his passive seclusion. Both feel threatened, almost physically endangered by those who endorse or represent the values and language of the "organization", of social norms. And both must finally relearn the language which they have rejected; Len from his hospital bed, Stanley through the torture and rehabilitation of Goldberg and McCann. After Stanley's torture/interrogation he is rendered silent: he will no longer speak for the remainder of the play. Like Handke's Kaspar, whose one original sentence is "exorcised" by the Prompters through a massive assault of scrambled, vaguely familiar phrases, and who is thus neutralized, silenced, and made ready to be reshaped by socially acceptable language: so Stanley too is emptied of his own language, rendered speechless, and will soon be

reshaped into social acceptability by the very language which has destroyed him.

In order to complete my analysis of the "inner" structure of *The Birthday Party* and to tie the two verbal assault scenes together, I will for the moment skip over the pivotal birthday party scene, in which physical violence erupts, and continue with the final "reconstruction" of Stanley through language.

On the morning after the birthday party we learn, through vague hints, that Stanley had spent a horrendous night "...talking" with Goldberg and McCann, an experience which has left even the hardened McCann shaken and weary. McCann: "He's quiet now. He stopped all that..talking a while ago" (p. 73). The fact that Stanley has not spoken since his torture, uttered not a word during the party, and doesn't speak once he reappears, puts a threatening point on McCann's vague, perhaps euphemistic use of "...talking". When Stanley finally appears, he looks transformed; his previous slovenly, unshaven, pajama-clad appearance is replaced by a well-cut dark suit with a white collar; he is neat and clean-shaven. Again he is seated and surrounded by Goldberg and McCann who, in a long stichomythic exchange, bombard Stanley with words which parallel the previous interrogation but reverse its intention. Stanley does not interrupt their liturgy. In fact, he "shows no reaction," sits still "with no movement," as the stage directions tell us (p. 82). The entire scene has an incantatory

quality and the stichomythic form--i.e. the alternating speeches of a single line each--creates a soothing rhythm, is almost hypnotic.

Goldberg: ...You've gone from bad to worse.  
McCann: Worse than worse.  
Goldberg: You need a long convalescence.  
McCann: A change of air.  
Goldberg: Somewhere over the rainbow.  
McCann: Where angels fear to tread.  
Goldberg: Exactly.  
McCann: You're in a rut.  
Goldberg: You look anaemic.  
McCann: Rheumatic.  
Goldberg: Myopic.  
McCann: Epileptic.  
Goldberg: You're on the verge.  
McCann: You're a dead duck.  
Goldberg: But we can save you.  
McCann: From a worse fate... (p. 82)

It is interesting that this is precisely the form of speech which Handke uses in *Kaspar* in the passage right before Kaspar is "cracked open", i.e. before multiple Kaspars appear on the stage and Kaspar finally speaks like the Prompters who have reconstructed him.

Kaspar: I am quieting myself.  
Prompters: You were already making a fist.  
Kaspar: I was still screaming.  
Prompters: You still took a deep breath.  
Kaspar: I was already there.  
Prompters: The chair still stands in its place.  
Kaspar: I was still standing.  
Prompters: Nothing has changed yet.  
Kaspar: I was already awake.  
Prompters: The door is already shut tight.  
Kaspar: I was already kicking.  
Prompters: Some were still sleeping...<sup>51</sup>

After this Kaspar is told by the Prompters:

When you begin to speak you will begin to think what you speak even when you want to think something different...you must think what you are saying, because you are not allowed to think anything *different* from what you are saying.<sup>62</sup>

Like Kaspar, Stanley too is being molded into someone who is "not allowed to think anything *different*" from what he will say; and what he will in the future say is being fed to him in this section. The use of stichomythia has a similar purpose in both plays: it transposes the dialogue from the conversational mold into a de-realized chant. It's hypnotic effect acts in both cases as a prelude to conversion.

Stanley now no longer stands accused; rather, he is wooed, courted, promised a new life, new heath, and a new conformity.

Goldberg: We'll make a man of you.  
McCann: And a woman.  
Goldberg: You'll be re-orientated.  
McCann: You'll be rich.  
Goldberg: You'll be adjusted.  
McCann: You'll be our pride and joy.  
Goldberg: You'll be a mensch.  
McCann: You'll be a success.  
Goldberg: You'll be integrated.  
McCann: You'll give orders.  
Goldberg: You'll make decisions.  
McCann: You'll be a magnate.  
Goldberg: A statesman. (pp. 83-4)

Towards what is he being "re-orientated"? Goldberg and McCann make their plans quite clear not only through the contents of their promises ("rich", "a mensch", "a success") but, more importantly, through the type of language which they use: a language cluttered with the most hackneyed idioms and socially acceptable banalities.

Goldberg: From now on, we'll be the hub of your wheel.  
McCann: We'll renew your season ticket.  
Goldberg: We'll take tuppence off your morning tea.  
McCann: We'll give you a discount on all inflammable goods.  
Goldberg: We'll watch over you.  
McCann: Advise you.  
Goldberg: Give you proper care and treatment.  
McCann: Let you use the club bar.  
Goldberg: Keep a table reserved.  
McCann: Help you acknowledge the fast days.  
Goldberg: Bake you cakes.  
McCann: Help you kneel on kneeling days.  
Goldberg: Give you a free pass.  
McCann: Take you for constitutionals.  
Goldberg: Give you hot tips.  
McCann: We'll provide the skipping rope.... The stomach pump.  
Goldberg: The oxygen tent.  
McCann: The prayer wheel.  
Goldberg: The plaster of Paris.  
McCann: The crash helmet.  
Goldberg: The crutches.  
McCann: A day and night service.  
Goldberg: All on the house. (pp. 82-3)

Goldberg and McCann promise to save Stanley "from a worse fate" by filling him with cliché desires, consumer banalities, and the hallmarks of an orderly middle-class existence: all "on the house". There is hardly a phrase in their litany which contains spontaneous or original language. The life which Stanley is being promised is composed of banal materialistic advantages--discounts, a season ticket, use of the club car, reserved tables, a free pass, hot tips. Stanley will be cared for, watched over, advised. There is no attempt to expand the description of these temptations, to whet his appetite through decorative or inflated rhetoric. On the contrary: these banalities are left in their purely clichéic form. It is, in fact, the cliché which is being offered as the "model" structure through which Stanley will be re-born a new man. He is "filled" with platitudes, force-fed a diet of pre-formed images which are to replace his

wayward individuality, his drop-out reclusiveness, and recreate him: in the mold of his torturers.

The language and content of Stanley's reconstruction can be best understood by comparison with the odd, almost parodic language which Goldberg uses in the "outer" scenes. There is a direct connection between what Goldberg represents, his mode of expression, and Stanley's promised future. In Goldberg we find a perfect union between idea and expression, between moral values and their verbal formulations. Goldberg stands for respectful ties to family, country, and tradition; for the values of work, order, and health; and above all for the necessity of *obedience*, following the "line", playing the "game", in short: for total and unquestioning conformity. The language in which he expresses these values, the language which has in part composed these values, is a seamless web of sententiousness, proverbial wisdom, and social clichés, as we see in the following:

**Goldberg:** You know what? I've never lost a tooth. Not since the day I was born. Nothing's changed. (He gets up.) That's why I've reached my position, McCann. Because I've always been as fit as a fiddle. All my life I've said the same. Play up, play up, and play the game. Honour thy father and thy mother. All along the line. Follow the line, the line, McCann, and you can't go wrong. What do you think, I'm a self-made man? No! I sat where I was told to sit. I kept my eye on the ball. School? Don't talk to me about school. Top in all subjects. And for why? Because I'm telling you, I'm telling you, follow my line? Follow my mental? Learn by heart. Never write down a thing. And don't go too near the water... (p. 77)



Goldberg--who is "fit as a fiddle", always plays the game, keeps his eye on the ball, learns by heart, doesn't go too near the water, and whose motto is "work hard and play hard"--is a model for the new Stanley. Like the Prompters, whose language shapes Kaspar's values, so Goldberg's language too is a blue-print for the new "integrated" Stanley. Stanley's integration, like Winston's and Kaspar's, will entail his total conversion into the mold--verbal, moral, and behavioral--of his torturers. He can no longer fight against verbal domination;<sup>63</sup> he has already been brutalized into a straight-jacket of clichés;<sup>64</sup> coerced into his role as ventriloquist's dummy. The play ends with a scrubbed and respectably dressed Stanley--in Pinter's 1964 direction of the play, Stanley is dressed in a suit identical to those of Goldberg and McCann<sup>65</sup>--being taken away in Goldberg's black limosine; and a broken, finally comprehending Petey calling after him "Stan, don't let them tell you what to do!" (p. 86). But it is too late; he has already been told.

The central event of the play, that which gives the play its title, is of course Stanley's "birthday" party. It belongs to the "outer" action, the seemingly objective level of the play, and involves all of the characters, except Petey. The status of Stanley's birthday is itself quite uncertain. Meg insists that today marks the event--despite Stanley's stout denial--and, following Goldberg's suggestion, plans a family party. The beginning of the party overlaps with the end of Stanley's first torture/interrogation. In fact, the torture scene is interrupted by the sound of a drumbeat as Meg enters, all dressed up and carrying Stanley's

birthday gift: a toy drum. Stanley remains silent and isolated while the others chat and sing and grow ever more intimate with each other. The climax of the party involves a game of blind-mans's-buff during which Stanley, helpless under his blindfold, tries to strangle Meg and then, during a sudden black-out, to rape Lulu. All of this occurs amid a chorus of banal exclamations, the emphasis being not on the dialogue but on the chaotic action. Stanley's violent behavior is totally incompatible with the harmless, ineffectual character we met before his interrogation. His sudden violence is obviously a sign of derangement, as the stage directions make clear.

...Lulu is lying spread-eagled on the table, Stanley bent over her. Stanley, as soon as the torchlight hits him, begins to giggle. Goldberg and McCann move towards him. He backs, giggling, the torch on his face...The torch draws closer. His giggle rises and grows as he flattens himself against the wall. Their figures converge upon him. (pp. 65-6)

Not only has Stanley become a giggling idiot but, as we can discern in the stage tableau which closes Act II, he is also a trapped and dehumanized figure who is "cornered" and flattened, "pinned to the wall" far more literally than is Len, overtaken by the same two figures who originally broke him mentally.

Thus we have two images of Stanley's destruction: verbal assault, which leads to Stanley's becoming speechless; and physical assault of which Stanley is the deranged and giggling perpetrator. If there is a connection between these two images--and I feel that a connection must be assumed--it

can perhaps be found in the correlation of the two levels of the plot. In the "inner" or subjective action Stanley suffers mental violence through verbal attack; this action is introverted, unrealistic, seems to take place out of time, is unknown to the family members, and cannot be interpreted merely on the level of plot. In the "outer" or objective action, Stanley's subjective ordeal receives a psychological, plot-oriented translation: he emerges as deranged and physically out of control. It does not seem to me metaphorically too far-fetched to interpret Stanley's attempts to strangle and rape others as a direct outcome of his own experienced verbal strangulation and rape through verbal assault.<sup>66</sup> This violent action merges the "outer" and "inner" levels of the play both in terms of plot and of metaphor, and marks Stanley's complete rupture from the family into the control of Goldberg and McCann. Thus the birthday party serves as a controlling image which integrates the two divergent levels of action. Meg may be mistaken in her well-meant assumption that today is Stanley's birthday--Stanley certainly claims that she is--but the image of rebirth, recreation, and transformation guides the development of the plot and is central to its meaning.

What is Stanley being re-born into? Some critics have suggested that Stanley's abduction is a birth-into-death.<sup>67</sup> The reappearance of Stanley in formal dress, dumb and sightless with his broken glasses, does suggest a corpse "decked out for his own funeral."<sup>68</sup> Goldberg's waiting, black, hearse-like limosine adds to this image. But it seems to me that to see these signs as pointing to Stanley's real death is taking them too

literally. Such an interpretation ignores too much and renders the entire verbal reconstruction scene senseless. If a funeral awaits Stanley it is the funeral of his individuality; if death awaits him, it is a death-in-life, a death through conventionality, through order and conformity. Moreover, if indeed by the end of the play Stanley *looks* like a corpse, he *acts* more like an infant. Following his second verbal attack, Goldberg and McCann ask him what he thinks of his new "prospect." Stanley for the first time tries to speak--but all he can emit are the broken cooing sounds of a baby, a new-born not yet educated in language: "Uh-gug...uh-gug... eeehh-gag.... (...) Caahh...caahh...." (p. 84). Stanley is now being taken to Monty who is "the best there is" for "special treatment" (p. 85). The meaning of this is purposely obscure but having accomplished Stanley's abduction and the destruction of his individuality, it can be assumed that Goldberg and McCann's mission will culminate in total success. Stanley's new "birth" into shaven and suited respectability augurs the fulfillment of Goldberg and McCann's promises: he will surely emerge "re-oriented...adjusted...integrated."

Part of *The Birthday Party's* mystification lies in Pinter's characterization of Goldberg and McCann as gansters, hit-men with the power to destroy and abduct who, however, carry no weapon other than language. The violence of their attitude towards Stanley and the success of their brutalization only deepen the mystification. The mystery, however, disappears once we realize that Pinter's characterization of Goldberg and McCann is parallel to his characterization of language. The brutality and

potency of these stereotyped figures, their manipulative and coercive manner, are projections not only of their personalities but equally of the language for which they are a medium, and of which they are themselves composed. Their power to destroy and recreate Stanley is, in a sense, a concrete demonstration of the power which language exercises on us all. For Pinter language poses a double threat. Not only do words--their jargonized, prescriptive form and torrential mass--invade the individuality of man; they moreover then proceed to mold man in the cast of their socially sanctioned clichés. Like Stanley, we are surrounded and attacked by the normative and socially coercive forms of inherited speech. Our uniformity and conformity are assured through language. The Polish critic Gregorz Sinko notes that Kafka informs the frightening mood of social and verbal conformity dramatized by Pinter, referring to Pinter's use of "typically Kafka-esque official language." He points out that "the two executioners, Goldberg and McCann, stand for all the principles of state and social conformism."<sup>69</sup> It is a point to which I will return in a later section.

VACLAV HAVEL: *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*

Of all the post-war Czechoslovakian playwrights still living and writing in their native country, Václav Havel is one of the best known in the West.<sup>70</sup> His double career as political activist for human rights and man of the theatre have found dramatic expression in his plays, in a

variety of idioms and styles each of which shows an individual's reaction to stifling outside constraints.<sup>71</sup> Havel's theatre career began in 1960 when he joined Jan Grossman--director, critic, and theoretician--at the small Prague avant-garde "Theatre on the Balustrade," as dramaturg and resident playwright.<sup>72</sup> The post-Stalinist political and cultural "thaw" of the mid 1960's made possible the writing and directing of plays which would previously have proved dangerous.<sup>73</sup> The years 1963-68 were culturally very active and it was during this period that Havel wrote his major plays: *The Garden Party* (*Zahradní slovnost*, 1963), *The Memorandum* (*Vyrozemení*, 1965), and *The Increased Difficulty of Concentration* (*Ztížená možnost soustředění*, 1968).<sup>74</sup>

The fact that Havel writes in a communist country adds a dimension to his critique of language. The political aspect is more pronounced than in the plays of Ionesco and Pinter, indeed the socio-political and the personal traits of his characters are almost totally merged. This however in no way limits his critique to only local interest. While more blunt in his parody of the establishment than either Ionesco or Pinter, language is similarly treated as a form of aggression, a prod to uniformity, and a threat to personal identity and autonomy. Jan Grossman, in his article "A Preface to Havel," notes that Havel's "key concern is the mechanization of man"<sup>75</sup>--a concern he shares with Ionesco, Pinter, Handke, and others--and which implies the interpenetration of political and personal language.

In both *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*, the protagonist is the mechanism which controls the human characters. The mechanism of cliché dominates the former play:

*man does not use cliché, cliché uses man.* Cliché is the hero, it causes, advances, and complicates the plot, determines human action, and, deviating further and further from our given reality, creates its own.

(my emphasis) <sup>76</sup>

Compare Grossman's remark about Havel's play--"man does not use cliché, cliché uses man"--with Doubrovsky's comment on Ionesco's play: "Instead of men using language to think, we have language thinking for men,"<sup>77</sup> and Pinter's insight that language makes of us "a ventriloquist's dummy." With Havel we again meet a post-war playwright who exposes language as contriving to control us. Verbal domination, man's subjugation through language, is his central theme. Grossman continues:

In *The Memorandum*, the protagonist also comes from human speech: man makes an artificial language which is intended to render communication perfect and objective, but which actually leads to constant deepening alienation and disturbance in human relations.... Abstract speech is the subject: it is projected onto the mechanism of cowardice, the mechanism of power, the mechanism of indifference, and each of these in itself--as well as all of them in harmony--creates a stratified, complex picture of human depersonalization.<sup>78</sup>

These themes are as common in the West as in communist East Block countries, and Havel's accessibility to Western audiences is well demonstrated by his success. During the three years following *The Garden Party's* first performance in Prague, it was staged in eighteen West German theatres, in Austria, Switzerland, Sweden, and Finland, as well as in Hungary and Yugoslavia. It was almost immediately translated into all major European languages as well as into Arabic and Japanese.<sup>79</sup> When staged in New York in 1968, *The Memorandum* received a prestigious Obie Award. Martin

Esslin has called Havel "undoubtedly one of the most promising European playwrights of his generation."<sup>80</sup>

Both *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* are studies of the inhuman absurdities of a centralist bureaucratic system. The system, a tangle of self-perpetuating rules and restrictions, displaces the individual, or rather transforms him into an extension of its mechanism stripped of individuality. Language in both plays resides in a dimension between the system and the character. It exists independently, as a level of reality which continuously threatens, and ultimately succeeds, in "overtaking" the characters and reducing them into compliance. Both plays center around this encroaching, dehumanizing language. In *The Garden Party* it is the play's only mode of operation; in *The Memorandum* it is in addition the subject of the plot. In both, the dramatic functions through the verbal matrix. As Havel wrote:

In my own work...language...isn't or doesn't care to be merely a means of communication by which the characters express themselves, but a sphere in which drama, as it were, realizes itself directly.<sup>81</sup>

*The Garden Party*, Havel's first play,<sup>82</sup> exposes most explicitly the connection between language and power. All of the action resides within the language; language moves the plot, defines the characters, and is the thematic center of the play. The plot tells of the overnight rise to power of Hugo Pludek who, like Handke's Kaspar, begins as a "blank" nobody, barely speaking, and is recreated through his acquisition of language into a



powerful, although faceless, human cliché. The play opens in the Pludeks' home where Hugo spends his time playing chess against himself, constantly putting himself into "check", and leading to the conclusion that "when I lose here, I win here."<sup>33</sup> Hugo's parents are portrayed as absurd examples of middle-class mentality, "The middle classes are the backbone of the nation" (p. 10), as they put it, and have much in common with the Jacques' parents. They speak, like the Jacques, in extended clichés and confused aphorisms which also owe much to Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*.<sup>34</sup> "He who fusses about a mosquito net can never hope to dance with a goat" (p. 10-11) says Pludek-father, typically. His repeated aphorisms, like Ionesco's, have the form of proverbs but their content is non-sensical. Inverted proverbs, false syllogisms, absurd deductions, and meaningless verbal noises are used constantly, automatically, and constitute a speech-style which will later be contrasted with other, equally automatic speech-styles. Hugo is his parents' one hope since their other son, Peter, "the black sheep of the family" (p. 40), not only looks like an intellectual but insists on being bourgeois as well. Hugo, on the other hand, is compliant, parrots his parents' words, and imitates their warped proverbs. These two images: the chess-player who always both wins and loses thus inspiring his parents' admiration since "such a player will always stay in the game" (p. 14); and the verbal parrot who stays in the social game by appropriating the words of others, distinguish Hugo and mark him for success. Like Kaspar, Hugo absorbs the speech of others, repeats and expands upon borrowed sentences, and finally treats them as his own. The people whom he parrots are very like Kaspar's Prompters: they are representatives of a society and language

which is conservative, reductive, and intent on maintaining the social and speech order of which they are a product. Hugo, unlike Kaspar, does not rebel against his "speechification" ("Versprachlichung"); on the contrary: he so completely appropriates the language of *his* "Prompters" that by the end of the play he is no longer recognizable. Even his parents cannot discern their son Hugo under the recreated speech-object, personification of jargon and double-talk, which he becomes.

Act II shows Hugo's verbal re-education and the beginning of his rise to power. Hugo enters a government bureau, the Liquidation Office, whose function is (purposely) never clearly understood and where a garden party--for which the play is named and which we never see--is taking place. In this Act we will meet an absurd and bewildering tangle of bureaucratic organizations, of which the dialectically opposed and equally mysterious Liquidation and Inauguration Offices are the most prominent. Hugo is there to meet Kalabis, a former friend of Pudek-father and now a high-ranking official, who has promised to start Hugo on his career. Kalabis never appears but this proves irrelevant; instead Hugo meets the Clerk and Secretary of the Liquidation Office and Falk, a high official at the Inauguration Service. All of these characters, like Hugo himself, are no more than stick-figures, vocal tubes who must be viewed only through their use of language: dogmatic, mechanical, and highly absurd. Hugo's education begins in earnest as he is exposed to a variety of styles of rhetoric. The Clerk and Secretary speak in mechanical, doctrinaire terms, as though reading from an official communiqué. Their sentences overlap and sound like

one long monologue delivered in two voices. For example, an argument arises when Hugo suggests that Large Dance Floor A in the party area must be larger than Small Dance Floor C, and therefore "Why not move Self-Entertainment with Aids to Amusement to Large Dance Floor A and the dance of Sections to the Small Dance Floor C?"

**Secretary:** At first glance there's logic in it--

**Clerk:** Unfortunately, this kind of logic is merely formal--

**Secretary:** Moreover, the actual content of the suggestion testifies to an ignorance of several basic principles.

**Clerk:** You mean you'd approve if the dignified course of our garden party were disrupted by some sort of dadaistic jokerism which would certainly ensue if such an important and, as it were, junctional area as the Large Dance Floor A were to be opened to unbridled intellectualities?

**Secretary:** Moreover, what makes you think that Large Dance Floor A is larger than Small Dance Floor C? Why deceive oneself? (p. 22)

Hugo is overwhelmed and silenced by their formal, textbook style of speech with its long, clausal sentences and convoluted jargon. He retreats into silence and spends most of the second act listening and absorbing.

Falk, who is more powerful than the Clerk or the Secretary, also possesses a more complex set of speech-styles. He is a pompous, self-satisfied man who combines the vulgar phraseology of the common-man--whom he claims to represent--with self-righteous, platitude-ridden slogans and ideological clichés. "I hate phrase-mongering and I resolutely reject all sterile cant" he claims (p. 23), and then expounds his fervent belief that "progress progresses" and "man lives":

**Falk:** ...At a certain stage it's really important that people

frankly say to one another that they're sort of people. However, progress progresses and we mustn't get stuck with mere abstract proclamations. You know, I always say man--man lives! And so, in the same way, you too--now let's not be afraid to open our trap and say it aloud--you too must live! You see, chums, life--life is a bloody marvellous thing. Don't you think? (...) And even a liquidation officer has a right to his slice of a really full--I mean, you know--er--full life! (...) I refuse to work with paper abstractions. You may stake your life on that! (p. 28) <sup>es</sup>

This type of pretentious banality reaches a climax when Falk, in a contemplative mood, insists that there exist "a whole damned heap of burning problems in matters of art and technology" that need discussion. He produces his learned arguments for and against both of these important areas: using virtually identical terms. This absurd discussion proves important to Hugo who begins to actively appropriate key pieties and catch-words.

**Falk:** Art--that's what I call a fighting word! I myself--sort of personally--fancy art. I think of it as the spice of life. (...) Art ought to become an organic part of the life of each one of us--

**Secretary:** Absolutely! At the very next meeting of the Delimitation Subcommittee I propose to recite a few lyrico-epical verses!

**Hugo (to himself):** Lyrico-epical verses--

**Falk:** Mind you, it's good that you're inflamed by the question of art, but at the same time you mustn't sort of one-sidedly overrate art and so sink into unhealthy aestheticism profoundly hostile to the spirit of our garden parties. As if we didn't have in technology a whole damned heap of burning problems.

**Clerk:** I was just going to change the subject and mention technology.

**Falk:** Technology--that's what I call a fighting word! You know, I maintain that we're living in the century of technology (...) Technology ought to become an organic part of the life of each one of us--

**Clerk:** Absolutely! At the very next meeting of the Liquidation Methodology Section I'll suggest that we reconsider the possibilities of the chemification of liquidation practice.

**Hugo** (to himself): The chemification of liquidation practice--

**Falk:** Mind you, it's good that you're inflamed by the question of technology, but at the same time you mustn't sort of one-sidedly overrate technology and so sink into perilous technicism which changes man into a mechanical cog in the dehumanized world of a spiritless civilization. As if we didn't have a whole damned heap of burning problems in matters of art!

**Secretary:** I was just going to change the subject and mention art--

**Falk:** Art--that's what I call a fighting word! (pp. 32-4)

Note the cascading platitudes, the hypnotic, overly-familiar phrases tacked together "like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house," as Orwell would put it.<sup>26</sup> Each repetition of these stock phrases inspires the Clerk and Secretary, eager to please, to a renewed act of verbal parrotry. The repetitions accelerate, sentences grow shorter and tumble over each other as the whole discussion takes on the mechanical aspect of an irrepressible engine running amok under its own self-produced steam. Falk, the Clerk, and the Secretary fall into a paroxysm of staccato slogan exchanges:

**Falk:** It's good that you're inflamed by the question of technology. But you shouldn't underrate art.

**Secretary:** Art--that's what I call a fighting word!

**Falk:** It's good that you're inflamed by the question of art--

**Clerk:** But you shouldn't underrate technology!

**Secretary:** Technology--that's what I call a fighting word!

**Clerk:** It's good that you're inflamed by the question of technology!

**Secretary:** But you shouldn't underrate art!

**Clerk:** Art--that's what I call a fighting word!

**Secretary:** It's good that you're inflamed by the question of art--... (p. 35)

During this exchange a number of words break away and strike Hugo and he, silent until now, begins repeating them to himself. "Lyrico-epical verses--chemification of liquidation practice--Impressionism--the periodic table of

elements--lyrico-epical verses--chemification--..." His first *coup*, in which he gains supremacy over Falk, occurs when he strings all of the jargon, the slogans, and the style he has just learned into a long and overpowering polemic on the *synthesis* of both art and technology.

**Hugo:** ...in the future art and technology will sort of harmoniously supplement each other--the lyrico-epical verses will help in the chemification of liquidation practice--the periodic table of the elements will help in the development of Impressionism--every technological product will be specially wired for the reception of aesthetic brain waves--the chimneys of the atomic power stations will be decorated by our best landscape painters--there will be public reading rooms twenty thousand leagues under the sea--differential equations will be written in verse--on the flat roofs of cyclotrons there will be small experimental theatres where differential equations will be recited in a human sort of way. Right? (p. 36-7)

Every phrase in this monologue is gleaned from the previous conversations. Hugo has conquered the phraseology and with it begins his climb to power.

The third Act shows Hugo's conquest of the Director of the Liquidation Office. In it the parody and exposure of ideological bureaucratic rhetoric reaches its peak, accelerating to the point where the speaker completely disappears behind the deadening, self-perpetuating jargon. The Director is a master of jargon and textbook ideology, but Hugo manages to assimilate his words and finally to displace him and assume his position through superior control of the rhetoric. The struggle between the two men is an almost physical power battle carried out over nine pages of text. Its rhythm is that of a boxing match: the two contestants at first carefully dance around each other, then throw out probing jabs, and finally enter

into fierce struggle. The Director begins in a superior position of control. Their first "battle" concerns the theoretical terminology of Inauguration, in which the Director poses the questions but is soon overcome by Hugo's talent for synthesizing jargon:

Director: Inaugurating, to my mind, is sort of a specific form of education, isn't it?  
Hugo: Yes. But it's also its specific method.  
Director: Well--form or method?  
Hugo: Both. It's precisely this peculiar unity which guarantees its specificity.  
Director: Stimulating!  
Hugo: Isn't it?  
Director: All right, but what is specific for the content of inauguration?  
Hugo: Its specific form.  
Director: Stimulating!  
Hugo: Isn't it?  
Director: All right, but what is specific for the form of inauguration?  
Hugo: Its specific method.  
Director: Stimulating!  
Hugo: Isn't it?  
Director: All right, but what is specific for the method of inauguration?  
Hugo: It's specific content.  
Director: Thrice stimulating!  
Hugo: Isn't it, isn't it, isn't it?  
Director: It is.  
Hugo: Yes. And this specific inter-relation might be called the basic inauguration triangle.  
Director: Oh?  
Hugo: Yes. While the specific character of this triangle is precisely its triangularity.  
Director: Oh?  
Hugo: Yes.  
Director: This is indeed a stimulating contribution to the burning problems of inauguration theory.  
Hugo: Isn't it? I'm glad we understand each other.  
Director: So am I. Very glad. (pp. 49-50)

Note the circular application of the terms "form," "method" and "content," and its dialectic synthesis into a "basic inauguration triangle" of terms,

whose specific character "is precisely its triangularity." This parody of dialectic thought and language recurs on many levels in Havel's play, and I will return to the question of its significance later. As the verbal struggle continues, sentences grow in length with certain words recurring almost ritually. Hugo and the Director alternate, often picking up the others' speech in mid-sentence and continuing it fluently until finally both wind up reciting the same stock dogmatic phrases in complete unison.

Hugo: ...nevertheless there exists a danger of sinking--

Director: Into liberal extremism--which would happen to any who failed to see these positive short-term characteristics from the perspective of the later development of the Inauguration Service--

Hugo: And who failed to see behind their possibly positive intent--from the subjective point of view--

Director: Their clearly negative impact--from the objective point of view--

Hugo and Director: Caused by the fact that as a result of an unhealthy isolation of the whole office certain positive elements in the work of the Inauguration Service were uncritically overrated... (pp. 54-5)

The language seems to churn out on its own with Hugo and the Director acting as mere vocal instruments for the pre-existing and self-contained text. The Director is finally reduced to sputtering monosyllables under Hugo's uninterrupted onslaught and, when Hugo shouts "do stop messing about! this is no time for tongue-twisters!", the Director "backs out in terror" (p. 56).

This climactic chorus of phrases raises the question: what indeed are Hugo and the Director struggling over? They consistently agree on all matters under discussion, so they certainly do not represent varying



ideologies. In fact, neither represents anything; their struggle has nothing to do with the *meaning* of their words--both say virtually the same things--but over the *possession* of the words. Power resides in the complete possession and the capacity for total identification with a pre-existing rhetorical structure. Havel's fear and disgust with the strangling power of meaningless rhetoric is brought into overt focus through such ironic comments as Falk's "I hate phrase-mongering and I resolutely reject all sterile cant" and Hugo's rejection of "tongue-twisters." At the height of Hugo's victory over the Director, Havel has him spout forth a convoluted condemnation of cliché and cant in the most fluent bureaucratic jargon. Hugo rails against "the arsenal of abstract humanist cant--which however in reality did not span the confines of the generally conventionalized types of work--and these clichés are reflected in their typical form, for example in / the hackneyed machinery / of the pseudo-familiar inauguration phraseology hiding behind the routine of professional humanism a profound dilution of opinions..." (pp. 55-6). These uses of jargon signal the total self-containment of the rhetoric which has even integrated the terms of the criticism *against* it, into its own nature. Karl Popper's critique of pseudoscientific theories (especially Marxism and Freudianism) is to the point here: scientific theories, Popper claims, must contain, indeed seek, the conditions for their own refutation in order to demarcate the limits of the theory. Dogmatic thinkers, however, are "able to interpret any conceivable event as a verification of their theories."<sup>87</sup> When a theory is thus "immunized"<sup>88</sup> against criticism, it lacks all demarcation, cannot be tested--since it cannot be refuted--and becomes totally closed and self-

referential. Hugo's harangue against cant is a grab-bag of concepts and terms which cannot be refuted since they lack all clear definition. They are sustained and validated merely by their conventionalized familiarity: they are their own criterion. Hugo's genius, and the reason for his success, is his ability to disappear completely behind the self-validating and self-perpetuating language of power. Of all the characters only Hugo is flexible enough to be able to assimilate whatever verbal style he meets. Not only does he assimilate, he *becomes* that verbal style. His personality mutates directly into the verbiage, becomes a vessel for the pre-existing rhetoric. With each "conquest" Hugo mutates into the language and personality of the character he has replaced. He defeats the Director by *becoming* the Director, by stealing his inner being--which consists of nothing more than "Director rhetorics."<sup>es</sup>

The last Act, Hugo's "homecoming," shows us the cost of such mutability. The proud Pludek parents have learned through three telegrams from the absent friend Kalabis that Hugo has been put in charge of liquidating the Liquidation Office as well as the Inauguration Service and of establishing on their ruins a Central Commission for Inauguration and Liquidation, which he is to head. The parents excitedly await his return home but when he does arrive--they don't recognize him, nor does he seem to know them. In what appears as a parody of the sentimental eulogy, Hugo speaks of himself--his old self--in the third person, praising the absent Hugo with the sentimental--and obviously untrue--cliché: "He has a friendly word for everyone, even for the simplest folk" (p. 67). He speaks in

repetitive, empty phrases, like a politician covering himself from all sides. When asked what he thinks of Hugo's new appointments, his answer is non-committal and totally self-negating:

**Hugo:** ...Well, I'd say he should have not accepted it, not turned it down, accepted it and turned it down, and at the same time turned it down, not accepted it, not turned it down and accepted it. Or the other way round. (p. 69)

The climax of the act, a long, brilliant tirade by Hugo, testifies to the extent of his mutation and essential mutability. It is also a call by the author, from behind the words, that we beware of our own reduction into mechanical speech formulas. The monologue is pseudo-philosophical in tone and is clearly directed (in intention, although not through stage action) at the audience. Moreover, it is a sharp parody and critique of Marxist dialectic and the thesis of permanent change. In this speech Havel combines his essential faith in the dignity and complexity of man--even at one point alluding to Hamlet's "What a piece of work is man! how noble in reason! how infinite in faculty..." (Hamlet, II, 2)--with scorn for the reductive, mechanical creature which man can be turned into. Hugo's parents ask him who he *is*, to which he replies:

**Hugo:** Me? you mean who am I? (...) You think one can ask in this simplified way? No matter how one answers this sort of question, one can never encompass the whole truth, but only one of its many limited parts. What a rich thing is man, how complicated, changeable, and multiform--there's no word, no sentence, no book, nothing that could describe and contain him in his whole extent. In man there's nothing permanent, eternal, absolute; man is a continuous change--a change with a proud ring to it, of course! Today that time of static and unchangeable categories is past, the time when A was only A, and B always only B is gone; today we all know very well that A

may be often B as well as A; that B may just as well be A; that B may be B, but equally it may be A and C; just as C may be not only C, but also A, B, and D; and in certain circumstances even F may become Q, Y and perhaps also H. (...) those who today understand only today are merely another version of those who yesterday understood only yesterday; while, as we all know, it's necessary today somehow to try and understand also that which was yesterday, because--who knows--it may come back again tomorrow! Truth is just as complicated and multiform as everything else in the world--the magnet, the telephone, Impressionism, the magnet--and we all are a little bit what we were yesterday and a little bit what we are today; and also a little bit we're not these things. (...) some only are, some are only, and some only are not; so that none of us entirely is and at the same time each one of us is not entirely; (...) he who is too much may soon not be at all, and he who--in a certain situation--is able to a certain extent to not-be, may in another situation be all the better for that. I don't know whether you want more to be or not to be, and when you want to be or not to be; but I know I want to be all the time and that's why all the time I must a little bit not-be. (pp. 73-5).

In this complex monologue Havel implicates two cornerstones of Marxist ideology: the dialectical thesis of permanent change which, as Trenskey notes, in communist society became a tool for proving as well as denying everything;<sup>30</sup> and the dialectic method, the basic instrument of Marxist thought. The dialectical struggle of opposites, the Hegelian thesis and antithesis which ideally lead to a synthesis which contains and is qualitatively superior to both--is persistently questioned and parodied. This point is particularly important to the language of the play, for dialectic is not only a method, it is also a thought process which is reflected and incorporated in the formulas of speech. "For all dialectical thinkers to the degree that they are genuinely dialectical," writes the Marxist critic Fredric Jameson, "thinking dialectically means nothing more or less than the writing of dialectical sentences. It is a kind of stylistic obedience analogous to that which governs the work of art itself,

where it is the shape of the sentences themselves...that determines the choice of the raw material...also the quality of the idea is judged by the type of sentence through which it comes to expression."<sup>91</sup> Ideally, such sentences reflect structures of thought which seek the integration of disparate realities much like, suggests Jameson, the surrealist image whose strength "increases proportionately as the realities linked are distant and distinct from each other."<sup>92</sup> In them, the essential interrelatedness of reality finds expression. But when the link between dialectical thought and its governing ideology is broken, when alienation between method and meaning sets in, as it does in *The Garden Party*, then all that remains are empty forms. The structure is fossilized within the language which, as mere method devoid of meaning, becomes an automatic and deadly verbal game. Everything and its opposite can be said in one breath, and synthesis is no longer qualitatively superior to thesis and antithesis, but only its mechanical agglomeration.<sup>93</sup>

In his excellent essay "On Dialectical Metaphysics" Havel wrote that "a certain type of 'dialectical synthesis' liquidate(s) two one-sided but nonetheless valuable opinions by combining them into one joint opinion which, while not one-sided, is however completely useless."<sup>94</sup> This tendency, he claims, defeats the true meaning of dialectic by becoming "fetish-ridden", a hardened mold of thought, rather than a flexible process. "A way of thinking becomes a formula for thought and the process turns into a scheme; instead of the dialectic confirming itself by serving reality, it is supposed to confirm itself by having reality serve it."<sup>95</sup>

This is precisely what happens in the language of Havel's play. Such language can only sound absurd, contrived, empty. The "fossile" principle-- i.e. the survival of dialectical structure devoid of its governing ideology and thus alienated from meaning--is found in all of the dialogues, and also the final monologue, of *The Garden Party*. It is evident, for example, in the early chess-playing Hugo who wins and loses simultaneously; in Hugo's sterile synthesis of "art and technology"; in the "basic inauguration triangle"; in Hugo's advice to simultaneously reject and accept the new positions; and most explicitly in the closing tirade. The focus of that speech is on "being", on the mode of existence of man. Its convoluted, semi-logical forms--"some only are, some are only, and some only are not" etc.--are a mad demonstration of linguistic forms as well as, poignantly, a personal statement on the impossibility of "being" under conditions in which to be is to be pre-determined by dead verbal and ideological structures. Hugo's last sentence reads: "And if at the moment I am--relatively speaking--rather not, I assure you that soon I might be much more than I've ever been--and then we can have another chat about all these things, but on an entirely different platform" (p. 75). Hugo is "rather not" in that he has dissolved into a faceless object through his rhetorical subjugation. But the hope is extended, by Havel, that "an entirely different platform" exists, a different way of viewing man, a different set of terms, a different vocabulary; and here Havel seems to be speaking for man whom "no word, no sentence, no book" can contain, man who is not reduced to the empty forms of language. This section recalls Kaspar's first "break-down" in which he recites a long list of variations on the verb "to be" just when

he has lost his "being" as an individual. Like Handke, Havel succeeds in merging a critique of language with a critique of language-engendered thought. *The Garden Party* is also reminiscent of Ionesco's *Rhinocéros*, especially in terms of the infestation of the individual by the disease of mindless and barbaric conformity to unexamined norms which lead to the loss of his individuality, as well as his humanity.

*The Memorandum*<sup>25</sup> takes place within a large organization, apparently a government bureau, although no name is given. Like Ionesco's *La Leçon* language is both the central device and the main subject of the play. Also like *La Leçon*, *The Memorandum* is a circular play. Its structure is more schematic than *The Garden Party*: there are twelve scenes divided into four units of three alternating locations--the Director's office, the Ptydepe classroom, and the Secretariat of the Translation Center. This artificial structure de-emphasizes plot and stresses process. It is a structure often used in Expressionist plays, station dramas like, e.g., Strindberg's *To Damascus*. *To Damascus I*, e.g., has seventeen scenes: the first eight descend into the Stranger's psyche; the last eight reverse the sequence and trace an ascension. *The Memorandum* follows a similar arc: the first six scenes show the fall from power of Josef Gross; the last six scenes repeat the first sequence precisely, but show his return to power. Here the similarities between Strindberg and Havel end. Strindberg's structure is a poetic, mystical vehicle well suited to the inner psychological landscape which he is exploring. Havel's "stations" are no more than mechanical repetitions of sequence, equally well suited to expose a barren, mechanical

bureaucracy. *The Memorandum* is not totally lacking in an inner "descent"-- it is however not a descent into a psyche, but rather into a mindless machine.

Gross, the protagonist, is the director of this government institution. As the play opens he is reading an indecipherable memorandum, a note written in some totally foreign language. He soon discovers that the language is a synthetic creation of his own department, initiated behind his back by his own deputy, Balas, and now to become the official language of bureaucratic communication. The thin plot of the play shows Gross' failed attempts to get this memorandum translated, an impossible task in view of the contradictory rules and red-tape which govern translations. The new language, Ptydepe, is supposed to make misunderstandings impossible. It is to replace the imprecisions and emotional connotations of natural language and thus perfect the bureaucratic machine. Everybody is involved in the perpetuation of this language except Gross who, through his refusal to support Ptydepe, loses his job, is demoted to the lowliest position, and is replaced by Balas. Gross' initial objections to Ptydepe are on humanist grounds: "I'm a humanist," he explains, "...the staff is human and must become more and more human. If we take from him his language, created by the centuries-old tradition of national culture, we shall have prevented him from becoming fully human and plunge him straight into the jaws of self-alienation. I'm not against precision in official communications, but I'm for it only in so far as it humanizes Man" (p. 20). He is a mixture of sentimental nostalgia, liberal rhetoric, and impotence. In the end his



"ideals" turn out to be as hollow as the language he opposes, and as mutable. When Gross finally does get the memorandum translated--illegally, through the aid of Marie, secretary of the Translation Center--it turns out to be a directive from "above" condemning Ptydepe and restoring Gross to power. Gross again becomes director and again takes Balas as his deputy. The ending of the play is disturbing: Marie is fired for her illegal aid in translating the memorandum and Gross refuses to help her; and Balas immediately proceeds to secretly introduce a second synthetic language, Chorukor, to which Gross again succumbs.

The fall and rise of Gross is paralleled by the rise and fall of Ptydepe; the play is divided between tracing Gross' fate and that of the new language. Some of the most interesting scenes take place in the Ptydepe classroom in which the linguist Lear lectures on the nature and function of the new language.

**Lear:** Ptydepe, as you know, is a synthetic language, built on a strictly scientific basis. Its grammar is constructed with maximum rationality, its vocabulary is unusually broad. It is a thoroughly exact language, capable of expressing with far greater precision than any current natural tongue all the minutest nuances in the formulation of important office documents. The result of this precision is of course the exceptional complexity and difficulty of Ptydepe. There are many months of intensive study ahead of you, which can be crowned by success only if it is accompanied by diligence, perseverance, discipline, talent and a good memory. And, of course, by faith. Without a steadfast faith in Ptydepe, nobody yet has ever been able to learn Ptydepe. (p. 23)

Learning Ptydepe is nearly impossible and has been mastered by only a few linguists, caricatures whose style of speech is close to the bureaucratic

jargon found in *The Garden Party*. Ptydepe is devised to attain maximum precision through maximum redundancy. Its basic method is a complex mixture of mathematical models and information theory which parody the scientific pretensions of modern structural linguistics which, after all, originated in Prague. It also has an affinity with Bertrand Russell's "logical atomism" which sought to create a mechanical, mathematical model of language which could be broken down into logical units--meanings and referents. This complex symbolic logic, like Ptydepe, exhibits a distrust of ordinary language as a precise meaning-bearing tool.<sup>37</sup> As Lear explains:

**Lear:** The significant aim of Ptydepe is to guarantee to every statement, by purposefully limiting all similarities between individual words, a degree of precision, reliability and lack of equivocation, quite unattainable in any natural language. To achieve this, Ptydepe makes use of the following postulation: if similarity between any two words is to be minimized, the words must be formed by the least probable combination of letters. This means that the creation of words must be based on such principles as would lead to the greatest possible redundancy of language. You see, a redundancy--in other words, the difference between the maximum and the real entropy, related to the maximum entropy and expressed percentually--concerns precisely that superfluity by which the expression of a particular piece of information in a given language is longer, and thus less probable (i.e. less likely to appear in this particular form), than would be the same expression in a language with maximum entropy; that is to say, in a language in which all letters have the same probability of occurrence.... (...) How does, in fact, Ptydepe achieve its high redundancy? By a consistent use of the so-called "principle of a sixty per cent dissimilarity"; which means that any Ptydepe word must differ by at least sixty per cent of its letters from any other Ptydepe word of the same length (...) Thus, for example, out of all the possible five-letter combinations of the 26 letters of our alphabet--and these are 11,881,376--only 432 combinations can be found which differ from each other by three letters, i.e. by sixty per cent of the total. From these 432 combinations only 17 fulfill the other requirements as well and thus have become Ptydepe words. (pp. 24-5)

This intricate tabulation and sophisticated scientific creation leads to a situation in which the word "wombat," for example, has 319 letters, the word "whatever" is rendered "gh," and the exclamation "Hurrah!" becomes "frnygko jefr debux altep dy savarub goz texeres."

Ptydepe is an outgrowth of the stifling, intricate, and counterproductive web of rules which characterize the play's underlying world: the rule of the Bureaucracy. It is the Bureaucracy as a system of order and control, a system which Hannah Arendt terms "rule by Nobody,"<sup>98</sup> which produces Ptydepe and is to be reinforced through it. Bureaucracy, Arendt writes, is "the rule of an intricate system of bureaus in which no men, neither one nor the best, neither the few nor the many, can be held responsible, and which could be properly called rule by Nobody." If we identify tyranny as government which is not held to give account of itself, then "rule by Nobody is clearly the most tyrannical of all, since there is no one left who could even be asked to answer for what is being done."<sup>99</sup> It is the world of Kafka's *The Trial*. Like the bureaucracy from which it stems and which it is meant to serve, Ptydepe is based on a supposedly rational ideology, but grows into a grotesque and unconquerable mass. Again as in *The Garden Party* the device of mechanical proliferation is employed. The rules of Ptydepe, like those of the bureaucracy which make attaining translations impossible, are based on the principle of endless expansion. Its complexities accelerate the more it is probed and finally threaten to stifle even those who created it. Ptydepe begins to usurp control, to *determine* expression-- not merely facilitate it. When Ptydepe is finally

outlawed, Lear gives a lecture in which he demonstrates the extent to which it had come to master its users, and "was limiting more and more the possibilities for further continuation of texts, until in some instances either they could continue in only one specific direction, so that the authors lost all influence over what they were trying to communicate, or they couldn't be continued at all" (p. 103, my emphasis).

The use of language in *The Memorandum* is less organic than in *The Garden Party*. There the natural language itself proliferates into a monstrous and dehumanizing object. The texture of "natural" speech is totally merged with the thematics and Hugo is virtually possessed by the all-encompassing rhetorics. In *The Memorandum* three languages co-exist: the characters use a banal everyday style of speech with which to discuss food, cigars and gossip. It is a realistic language which is totally lacking in *The Garden Party*. The speech-style used by Lear, Balas and the linguists, as well as, later, by Gross, is a jargonized convoluted rhetorics, much like the bureaucratic language of *The Garden Party*. Then there is Ptydepe which is used by some of the linguists and comes across as pure gibberish.

**Savant:** In Ptydepe one would say axajores. My colleagues  
sometimes yلود kaboz pady el too much, and at the same time  
they keep forgetting that etrokaj zenig ajte ge gyboz.  
**Stroll:** Abdy hez fajut gagob nyp orka?  
**Savant:** Kavej hafiz okuby ryzal.  
**Stroll:** Ryzal! Ryzal! Ryzal! Varuk bado di ryzal? Kabyzach?  
Mahog? Hajbam? (p. 35)

The use of Ptydepe also poses dramatic problems. When Jacques and Roberta II repeat the word "chat" on stage, the audience can understand the sensual

reductiveness of the word and is intrigued by its transformations. Here however the audience is confronted with a supposedly rational but in fact totally opaque language. (In the Czech the nonsense is apparently more nuanced as certain letter combinations evoke Czech words, which is lost in the translation.<sup>100</sup>) Ptydepe thus works on stage as both ludicrous and annoying, concealing meaning from the audience and forcing them into Gross's position.

*The Memorandum*, like *The Garden Party*, demonstrates man's subjugation by language. In both, language is the main "hero" and the conquerer.<sup>101</sup> For although Ptydepe is ultimately rejected, a new artificial language replaces it and with its fall, another will certainly rise. It is important to note that these artificial languages are not only forms of speech but forms of ideology. Just as Kaspar learns model sentences and axioms of thought simultaneously, and Hugo mutates into the language and thought patterns of those he replaces, so Ptydepe too conditions, indeed dictates, thought and behavior. Ptydepe has a clear affinity with Orwell's "Newspeak." Like Newspeak, it is meant to replace a natural language which does not embody the forms of a new ideology. "Oldspeak" is outlawed by the Party because of its "vagueness and its useless shades of meaning."<sup>102</sup> The linguist Syme describes Newspeak in terms totally parallel to Lear's description of Ptydepe. "Every concept that can ever be needed will be expressed by exactly *one* word, with its meaning rigidly defined," he tells Winston; "The Revolution will be complete when the language is perfect."<sup>103</sup> Orwell's appendix, "The Principles of Newspeak," puts the matter even more clearly.

The purpose of Newspeak was not only to provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc, but to make all other modes of thought impossible. It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought--that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc--should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words. Its vocabulary was so constructed as to give exact and often very subtle expression to every meaning that a Party member could properly wish to express, while excluding all other meanings and also the possibility of arriving at them by indirect methods.<sup>104</sup>

Ptydepe achieves this goal by turning language, and thus man, into a mechanical process. Thought, like in Newspeak, is created not by the mind of man, but by the determining structures of a synthetic language. Ptydepe was meant to be an expression of man's control over his environment, a language created by man in order to serve man. In fact, like Newspeak, its effect is just the opposite: it quickly takes over control, dictates mental options through its verbal constrictions, and causes men, as Lear admits, to lose "all influence over what they were trying to communicate." Ptydepe, as a dehumanizing mechanism, can enter the dictionary beside the word "Robot", invented by Havel's compatriot Capek in his play *R. U. R.*--*Rossum's Universal Robots*. Like the Robot, who is an extreme but recognizable version of modern mechanized man, so Ptydepe too is an extreme but distinctly parallel version of modern "officialese," the language of rhetorical control which turns Hugo into a faceless cog in *The Garden Party*.

Like *The Garden Party*, *The Memorandum* ends with the protagonist Gross delivering a long speech through which Havel can speak directly to the audience. Gross speaks in the flowery liberal phrases of the humanist he

still claims to be; now, however, this high-minded terminology is used to explain why he must betray Marie, accept the new synthetic language Chorukor, and succumb to the power-structure of which he is a part. The words are therefore both sincere and ironic as Havel's and Gross' voices overlap.

**Gross:** ...we are irresistibly falling apart, more and more profoundly alienated from the world, from others, from ourselves. Like Sisyphus, we roll the boulder of our life up the hill of its illusory meaning, only for it to roll down again into the valley of its own absurdity. Never before has Man lived projected so near to the very brink of the insoluble conflict between the subjective will of his moral self and the objective possibility of its ethical realization. Manipulated, automatized, made into a fetish, Man loses the experience of his own totality; horrified, he stares as a stranger at himself, unable not to be what he is not, nor to be what he is. (p. 108)

This alienation is as true of Hugo as of Gross, and their total submission to inorganic languages is the signal of their defeat.

There is a strong atmosphere in Havel's plays which derives not from the Western tradition of the Absurd, but from a closer source: Prague, the city which produced Kafka and Hasek. Prague, "that ancient, mysterious city with its dark winding streets and haunting legends of the Emperor who was an alchemist or the old Rabbi who made an artificial man, a Golem, from a lump of clay; Prague, the seat of a vast and alien bureaucracy ruling a downtrodden population that did not know the meaning and purpose of the complicated rules and regulations it had to obey," to quote Esslin.<sup>105</sup> Kafka is clearly present in Havel's plays. The bureaucracy of the

Liquidation Office and the grotesque intricacies of translating a Ptydepe memo are mechanical versions of Joseph K.'s search for the court of justice and, indeed, for the nature of his crime in Kafka's *The Trial*. The airless, oppressive inner sanctuary of Kafka's court-house, with its endless mushrooming files and the patiently, if hopelessly waiting petitioners, is the image which underlies both of Havel's plays. In addition, Hugo has much in common with Hasek's *Good Soldier Schweik* who carried out his absurd orders *ad absurdum* leading to his personal collapse. Like Schweik, Hugo and eventually Gross too submerge themselves in the oppressive logic and language of their world, succumbing to a mechanism which they cannot withstand.

Havel's own life since the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, has also shared in the atmosphere of Kafka and Hasek. He lost his position at the Balustrade Theatre in 1969 and became a "free-lance," i.e. essentially unemployed author, continuing to write plays which were not produced and have only recently been translated.<sup>106</sup> His unpopularity with the new regime resulted both from his personal views--expressed in various articles and in his plays--and from his political involvement in the Czech dissident movement and in human rights issues (he was one of three official spokesmen of the "Charta 77" human rights group). In 1975 Havel endangered himself further through the publication of a long and powerful attack against the government titled "Open Letter to President Husak."<sup>107</sup> A philosophical-political essay, "The Power of the Powerless," followed in 1978 and although it was never published, circulated among friends and



sympathizers. Its theme is directly related to *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*: it is a detailed analysis of the nature of post-totalitarian regimes and of the effects of prolonged exposure to ideological indoctrination on the moral well-being of a people, and on the psyche of the individual. Havel was arrested for the third time in May 1979, for alleged subversive activities. In October he was sentenced to a combined term of nearly six years in prison. Upon his release he returned to "freelance" writing: his recent plays, as well as those studied here, are only published and produced in the West.<sup>108</sup>

#### Devices of Verbal Domination

A number of verbal devices recur in these plays and define the mode in which language domination operates. The three broadest and most significant are: the ritualization of language and a resultant verbal hypnotism; the use of extended clichés and jargon as forms of coercion; and verbal mechanization in which language speaks through man without recourse to the speaker's intent or control. All of these elements have been discussed in two outstanding essays on language domination: George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language,"<sup>109</sup> and Herbert Marcuse's "The Closing of the Universe of Discourse" and his book *One-Dimensional Man*.<sup>110</sup> A brief

discussion of these two essays may help focus the devices, deepen their implications, and clarify their specific uses in these plays.

Orwell's essay was written in 1946, right after World War II. It looks both backwards and forward, at the devastation of Nazi rhetoric, and at its affinities with a declining English language. The goal of the essay is to expose--and try to reverse--the decline: the inflated style, imprecisions, stale imagery, euphemisms, jargonization, and especially the growing mechanical usage of prefabricated units of speech in place of original and felt expression. Orwell draws these mechanisms not from literature, but from political, journalistic, and academic styles of speech. It is interesting that the perversions of non-fictional prose which he deplors are later reflected--and unmasked as dangerous travesties--in dramatic dialogue and, moreover, expanded and given literary form in his own 1948 novel: *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Orwell's contention, a serious one, is that language both reflects and creates consciousness, and "if thought corrupts language, language can also corrupt thought."<sup>111</sup> The implications of this are far-reaching. A corrupt language indicates and promotes a reduced state of consciousness which "if not indispensable, is at any rate favorable to political conformity."<sup>112</sup> Verbal decline is not only the result of mental laziness, but--far worse--of mental capitulation. Creative thought and critical analysis give way to the mechanical acceptance and repetition of preformed verbalizations, i.e.: preformed thought. Orwell attacks a speech idiom which consists of "gumming together long strips of words which have already been set in order by someone else."<sup>113</sup> The repetition of these

phrases becomes an act of mechanical regurgitation; meaningful *words* give way to hypnotic *phrases* which are tacked together "like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house."<sup>14</sup> Meaning can no longer be differentiated or, indeed, contradicted. This automatism is born of insincerity; words do not translate thought and emotion, they merely perpetuate dogma: prescribed, uncritical formulas.

When one watches some tired hack on the platform mechanically repeating the familiar phrases...one often has a curious feeling that one is not watching a live human being but some kind of dummy...A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine. The appropriate noises are coming out of his larynx, but his brain is not involved as it would be if he were choosing his words for himself.<sup>15</sup>

The result of this automatism and ritualized repetition of a given group of jargon phrases and cliché sentiments is that man is literally "overtaken" by language, hypnotized, as it were, and forced to accept frozen formulas which can no longer express conceptual thought. It is here, he claims, that personal autonomy is most threatened. Ready-made phrases, Orwell warns, "will construct your sentences for you--even think your thoughts for you, to a certain extent--and at need they will perform the important service of partially concealing your meaning even from yourself. It is at this point that the special connection between politics and the debasement of language becomes clear."<sup>16</sup>

Marcuse's book post-dates Orwell's article by almost two decades, but his argument and warning vis-à-vis language is similar. His discussion is

aimed at technological, media-dominated industrial society, and mainly concerns the destruction of conceptual thought by a closed, self-validating language. Public language, he claims, is ruled by "operationalism," i.e. the tendency to identify and reduce things and concepts to their function, so that "the concept is absorbed by the word."<sup>117</sup> An anti-critical syntax of speech has evolved which "leaves no space for distinction, development, differentiation of meaning: it moves and lives only as a whole."<sup>118</sup> Features of this syntax are: the telescoping and abridgement of concepts into stock slogans; the use of self-validating propositions which become ritual-authoritarian formulas; the reconciliation of opposites (e.g. "clean bomb") which immunize the mind against concepts. "This language speaks in constructions which impose upon the recipient the slanted and abridged meaning, the blocked development of content, the acceptance of that which is offered in the form in which it is offered."<sup>119</sup> Thus, Marcuse warns, a magical hypnotic language has become the public norm.

Such nouns as "freedom", "equality", "democracy", and "peace" imply, analytically, a specific set of attributes which occur invariably when the noun is spoken or written...speech moves in synonyms and tautologies; actually, it never moves toward the qualitative difference. The analytic structure insulates the governing noun from those of its contents which would invalidate or at least disturb the accepted use of the noun in statements of policy and public opinion. The ritualized concept is made immune against contradiction.<sup>120</sup>

The word "freedom" in a given context will automatically evoke a single-faceted connotation, acceptable to all. Deviations from this connotation may be considered erroneous, or worse, traitorous. This reduction of content to automatic response creates an extensive vocabulary of clichés

which control meaning and preclude its development. Marcuse calls this "the new conformism."<sup>121</sup> Basically, Marcuse is arguing that concepts which are absorbed by the word are no longer open to criticism, revision, discussion. Formulas of speech are hallowed and magical, authoritarian, and ritual elements become self-validating. "Hammered and re-hammered into the recipient's mind, they produce the effect of enclosing it within the circle of the conditions prescribed by the formula."<sup>122</sup>

It is easy to recognize in these two articles the theoretical counterpart of various forms of verbal abuse which I noted in discussing the individual plays. The ritualization of language is obviously a major component of *La Leçon* as well as of the ending of *Jacques* and of the stichomythic attack scenes in *The Birthday Party*. Hypnotic, selfhood-annihilating language characterizes the tyrannical nature of the Professor's speech. His growing frenzy is accompanied by a loss of rational control over his language, so that words seem to cluster around certain sounds rather than around meaning. These sounds form chains such as: "frémissent, s'agitent, vibrent, vibrent, vibrent ou grasseyent, ou chuintent ou se froissent, ou sifflent, sifflent mettant tout en mouvement..." (pp. 93-4) which grow mechanically around the "ent" sound, but which function hypnotically. They result in the student's loss of independent speech. Like Kaspar, she is reduced to blindly repeating the Professor's words. Ionesco expressly notes in his stage directions that the student grows more and more "bewitched" ("envoûter") by the Professor's mixture of senseless jargon and rhythmic chants. His power over her derives

from this magical use of language in which, as Marcuse describes, word and concept are so completely merged that pronouncement of the word "couteau" suffices to wound and kill. Verbal hypnoticism is a form of attack against the individual's autonomy. The victim becomes an empty vessel molded through externally imposed language and thought.

That is precisely the case in the two crucial scenes of *The Birthday Party*: Stanley's destruction and reconstruction through a ritualistic verbal assault. Goldberg and McCann use a stichomythic pattern of alternating short lines, a ritualized repetition of form which continues uninterrupted for three pages, building into a mechanical, mind-numbing chant rather than into a sense-carrying dialogue. Its hypnotic and grating effect (on the audience as well as on Stanley) is due to the "spacelessness" of the dialogue, allowing no gap for thought or response. The technique of "hammering and re-hammering" of which Marcuse writes is akin to the methods of advertisement and propaganda attacks. These methods are reflected in Goldberg's and McCann's system of brain-washing: they employ repetition of short, self-validating phrases in an accelerating rhythm which coerces its victim into silence and discourages questions or reflection.

The ritual-hypnotic elements of speech in *The Garden Party* are the most subtle and insidious. They, moreover, completely coincide with the totally clichéic and jargonized nature of the language of that play. In *La Leçon* and *The Birthday Party* ritualization resides in *form*. That is: the

Professor's repetition of certain sounds and word patterns, and Goldberg and McCann's short, alternating sentences, create a ritual *pattern* of language which can, however, be separated from the words spoken, and discussed separately. In *The Garden Party* this is not the case: here hypnotism is a product of the words themselves. The extreme, unrelenting use of "prefabricated phrases" of ideological jargon and sentimental clichés which become a rhetorical norm, is inherently hypnotic. It is therefore impossible to discuss the device of verbal hypnotism without speaking of another device: the use of clichés and jargon as forms of coercion.

Cliché and jargon, while related terms, are not identical. The cliché is an often repeated and thus empty word or phrase which sounds automatic, insincere, and has a numbing effect. Beckett sees the cliché as "dead" language and writes about it in his radio-play *All That Fall* as follows:

**Mrs. Rooney:** No, no, I am agog, tell me all, then we shall press on and never pause, never pause, till we come safe to haven.  
(Pause)

**Mr. Rooney:** Never pause...safe to haven...Do you know, Maddy, sometimes one would think you were struggling with a dead language.

**Mrs. Rooney:** Yes indeed, Dan, I know full well what you mean, I often have that feeling, it is unspeakably excruciating.

**Mr. Rooney:** I confess I have it sometimes myself, when I happen to overhear what I am saying.<sup>123</sup>

Not only words, but thoughts and emotions too can fossilize into cliché. Concepts which have degenerated into dogmatic formulas, or feelings which are ruled by automatic response to stimuli, become clichés. Any banal,

predictable, overly-familiar or pre-formed response can, broadly, be termed "clichéic."

*The Concise Oxford Dictionary* (1964) defines jargon as "unintelligible words, gibberish; barbarous or debased language; mode of speech full of unfamiliar terms." Of these definitions, the third--"mode of speech full of unfamiliar words"--is responsible for the first--"gibberish." Basically jargon is a set of terminologies peculiar to a given group and not easily understood by those outside of the group--such as legal jargon, medical jargon, academic jargon, sports jargon, etc. Such jargon has two functions: it serves as a verbal short-hand whereby the initiated may communicate with each other through compact, pre-packaged terms which they, presumably, understand. When jargon is used in this way it may also be termed a "specialized" or "professional" vocabulary, and has an inclusive function. When, however, a specialized vocabulary is used on the uninitiated, out of context, or in a trivial context, it is perceived both as gibberish and as intimidating. The intimidation stems from the non-member's awareness of his own ignorance and fear of how this jargon may be used on him. In such contexts jargon becomes threatening, wields a certain authority and has an exclusive function. Jargon can be as numbing and uncreative as cliché, but it carries a greater threat and is thus potentially more manipulative.

The cliché is used to best advantage in Act III of Pinter's *The Birthday Party*: Stanley's reconstruction. Its use is significant since it is the leveling, thought-destroying cliché which coerces Stanley into



conformity. His reintegration into society depends on the controlling effect of the clichés of society which are both the tool and the goal of his torture. Stanley is being reshaped by the cliché into the *form* of the cliché, just as was Kaspar. The middle-class banalities which comprise much of Stanley's torture and characterize Goldberg's normal mode of speech, is the same deadening language which is parodied by Ionesco in *La Cantatrice chauve* and *Jacques*, and by Havel in the framing domestic scenes of *The Garden Party*. Cliché invites parody. Ionesco and Havel use the device of inverted clichés and misquoted proverbs to draw attention to the mechanical nature of the cliché and its inherent vacuity. It is however jargon words which are the more powerful and destructive in these plays. In the interrogation scene of Act II of *The Birthday Party*, Goldberg and McCann switch between personal attack and specialized jargon, finally leading to Stanley's breakdown.

**Goldberg:** Do you recognise an external force, responsible for you, suffering for you? (...) Is the number 846 possible or necessary? (...)

**McCann:** You're a traitor to the cloth. (...) What about the Albigenist heresy?

**Goldberg:** Who watered the wicket in Melbourne?

**McCann:** What about the blessed Oliver Plunkett? (...) What about Drogheda? (pp. 50-52)

Pinter uses jargon consciously as a tool for inducing threat and tipping the power balance of which his language consists. Its ominous power derives as much from its extensive use as from the context in which it appears. For example, in Act II of *The Caretaker* Mick, owner of the house in which the destitute tramp Davies has been staying, confronts the vagrant Davies with

a mock offer to sell him the house. His speech begins with a business proposition and snowballs into the convoluted jargon of high finance, leaving Davies speechless and frightened.

**Mick:** ...Here you are. Furniture and fittings, I'll take four hundred or the nearest offer. Rateable value ninety quid for the annum. You can reckon water, heating and lighting at close on fifty. That'll cost you eight hundred and ninety if you're all that keen. Say the word and I'll have my solicitors draft you out a contract...So what do you say? Eight hundred odd for this room or three thousand down for the whole upper storey. On the other hand, if you prefer to approach it in the long-term way I know an insurance firm in West Ham'll be pleased to handle the deal for you. 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, remission of term for good behaviour, six months lease, yearly examination of the relevant archives, tea laid on, disposal of shares, benefit extension, compensation on cessation, comprehensive indemnity against Riot, Civil Commotion, Labour Disturbances, Storm, Tempest, Thunderbolt, Larceny or Cattle all subject to a daily check and double check. Of course we'd need a signed declaration from your personal medical attendant as assurance that you possess the requisite fitness to carry the can, won't we? Who do you bank with? <sup>124</sup>

This same form of intimidation later recurs; this time however, Mick uses the finely nuanced jargon of interior-decorating. A long detailed plan ends with:

**Mick:** ...You could have an off-white pile linen rug, a table in...in afromosia teak veneer, sideboard with matt black drawers, curved chairs with cushioned seats, armchairs in oatmeal tweed, a beech frame settee with a woven sea-grass seat, white-topped heat-resistant coffee table, white tile surround... Deep azure-blue carpet, unglazed blue and white curtains, a bedspread with a pattern of small blue roses on a white ground, dressing-table with a lift-up top containing a plastic tray, table lamp of white raffia...<sup>125</sup>

Davies' only defense against this assault through jargon is "Now wait a minute--wait a minute--you got the wrong man."<sup>126</sup> Like Stanley, the onslaught leaves him speechless. In *The Homecoming*, the pimp Lenny confronts his brother Teddy, a Professor of Philosophy, with the question: "Do you detect a certain logical incoherence in the central affirmations of Christian theism?"<sup>127</sup> and with this gains power over the stunned and stuttering Teddy.

Two things must be noted about the uses of jargon here. Goldberg, McCann, Mick, and Lenny are all low-life gangster types whose sudden control of such specialized language is startling. All use this language suddenly and out of context and through it gain mastery over the recipients of their speeches. Such uses of language break the realism of the dialogue and draw attention not so much to *what* is being said, as to the *formulas* of speech themselves. As one critic put it: "The evocative power of jargon creates an image of the impersonal web that society weaves in order to snare the individual."<sup>128</sup> Through this out-of-context jargon the act of speech takes on a character of its own and demands our closer scrutiny. The web of pre-formed language functions in Pinter not as a mere rhetorical device but as a power move. Much like Hugo and the Director who, in *The Garden Party*, vie for possession of the ideological cant, so in Pinter's play he who commands jargon gains supremacy. Pinter's use of jargon is immaculate. It echoes with precision formulas of specialized speech which, in their proper context, would seem fully (if annoyingly) appropriate. It is precisely the smoothness of the imitation which is here the point. Its

odd familiarity is both soothing and disturbing. We are not asked to believe that thugs like Mick, Lenny, Goldberg, and McCann are capable of such language; we are asked to beware, to take note of how the familiar formulas of speech do in fact manipulate and intimidate us. As John Lahr wrote: "The hallowness of contemporary vernacular--its smooth, efficient banality--has a corporate ring.... Americans listen and read, assuming the inflections without realizing their effect on the way they see the world."<sup>129</sup> The danger lies in the unexamined familiarity of the phrases, in the inherited constructions which "impose upon the recipient the slanted and abridged meaning, the blocked development of content."<sup>130</sup> Jargon creates its own norm and buries thought within its formulas.

Another feature of Pinter's jargon is its extended form. Pinter often indicates aggression through speech-torrents, i.e. long and accelerating speeches which block response and assault through their very mass. Speech-torrents, like Mick's compulsive talk of finance and interior-decorating, point directly to language which becomes self-generating rather than directed by the speaker's will. A good--and by now classic--example of such language is Lucky's out-of-control philosophical harangue in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot*. Lucky's avalanche of words is a somber parody of academia ("...Acacacademy of Anthropopometry..."),<sup>131</sup> and beyond that, of the very *possibility* of knowledge ("...it is established beyond all doubt all other doubt than that which clings to the labors of men...").<sup>132</sup> Pinter's, by contrast, is a warning against the manipulative menace of the *forms* of knowledge, the inflated jargon which passes itself off as

knowledge while actually becoming a dead-end to thought. This device is also used by Ionesco who gives the Professor progressively longer and denser speeches as his power grows.

Ionesco's use of jargon, especially in *La Leçon*, is less convincing than Pinter's--being in fact patent nonsense--but is no less dangerous. *La Leçon* depicts a lesson in which the use of academic jargon can hardly be considered inappropriate. But the jargon is not innocent: it constantly slips into hypnotic repetitions of words and sounds which undermine the jargon's "professional" meaning, and stress its manipulative effect. Words emptied of felt content and closed to interpretation--as is the Professor's language--tend to function "magically" rather than rationally. The magic, Marcuse warns, resides in the single-faceted concept which the word has absorbed and which makes a critique of the terms themselves, impossible. Since the Professor controls the meaning of the jargon formulas which he invents, and since he uses these in a mass which repels all questioning, he has the power to enclose the student "within the circle of the conditions prescribed by the formula."<sup>133</sup> The more his power grows, the less can the student resist through questions which try to comprehend his terms. Her verbal murder is proof that she has in fact succumbed to the "conditions" of his language.

Pinter uses jargon out of context and thus calls attention to its intimidating power. Ionesco uses jargon *in* context but destroys the

context--the lesson--through the violence of the jargon. For Havel, the jargon *is* the context; it is the subject of his plays.

Havel's use of jargon and cliché in *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* is the most sustained; its implications the most explicit. We are directed constantly towards the language: there are no "neutral" lines, each utterance is a demonstration and a comment on a vampire rhetoric whose life is the death of all individuality. It is hard to separate the jargon from the rhetoric. An example of how they merge is found in Act II of *The Garden Party* in the technology-versus-art passage (discussed above). When Hugo mutters to himself: "Lyrico-epical verses--chemification of liquidation practice--Impressionism--the periodic table of the elements--lyrico-epical verses--chemification--..." (p. 36) he is sucking in the jargon out of which he will weave a closed and powerful fabric of meaningless cant. In Havel's plays jargon and cliché almost merge since it is precisely the overused ideological jargon which has degenerated into socially manipulative cliché. As Jan Grossman perceptively writes, in *The Garden Party* "cliché is the hero, it causes, advances and complicates the plot, determines human action," it creates--and imposes--its own reality. Cliché, language as fossilized form, is the heart of Havel's plays: "man does not use cliché, cliché uses man."<sup>134</sup> It is obvious in *The Garden Party* that the greater the control of the jargon, the greater the power. In fact, the absurd quality of the play derives largely from the seeming ridiculousness of the "direct leap" from word to power. A middle link--the link of *action* which is normally assumed to implement language--is totally

missing. There are no actions in these two Havel plays outside of the direct action of language: language is truly magical. It has no discursive function except of the most trivial sort (e.g. discussions of food and prices in *The Memorandum*); it embodies no emotions; and communicates little aside from itself. That is: the language does not transmit thought, it replaces thought with a stubborn net of coercive rhetoric. And this is the point of the plays: verbal control is shown to be an *action* which is as powerful as control through force of arms; he who controls the vocabulary of thought, controls thought. the "leap" is thus not at all ridiculous but inherent in the power of jargonized speech in which "the concept is absorbed by the word." Marcuse's description of self-validating language which moves in synonyms and tautologies and in which "the ritualized concept is made immune against contradiction,"<sup>135</sup> perfectly describes the language of Havel's plays. Moreover, Havel's intentionally warped syntax displays all of the demagogueries which Marcuse deplors. Note how in the following monologue--shared by Hugo and the Clerk and exactly parallel to Hugo's shared monologue with the Director--one sentence expands into a monstrosity of verbal pre-fabrications:

**Clerk:** ...nothing but sinking into a sentimental hankering after the past--

**Hugo:** And into bureaucratic conservatism--

**Clerk:** Awaits him who fails to see the work of the Liquidation Office from the perspective of its later development when thanks to many imprudent liquidational interventions against many positive elements in the work of the Inauguration Service--

**Hugo:** The Liquidation Office undoubtedly played a negative role which was the result of the activities of some liquidation officers--

**Clerk:** Who progressively superimposed--

**Hugo and Clerk:** The administrative part of liquidation practice

over its social content, with the result that the activity of the Liquidation Office assumed an unhealthy, sterile character, since it was thus wrenched from life--

**Hugo:** And drawn into the muddy waters of fossilized bureaucratism which necessarily opened the door to the irresponsible activity of a small gang of liquidational adventurers who abused--

**Clerk:** The wise endeavour--

**Hugo:** Towards the suppression of certain one-sided excesses...  
(p. 58).

The length of this sentence (it continues still for another half a page) is intentional: without punctuation there can be no "spaces" for discussion or thought. Slogans, pass-words, catch-phrases, all of the jargon of the initiated is thrown together in an almost haphazard pile of terms which neither illuminate each other, nor say anything about their meaning. The formulas are built into constructions which "impose upon the recipient the slanted and abridged meaning, the blocked development of content."<sup>136</sup> They are ritual phraseologies, magic formulas which give power through their mere recitation. The syntax is not one of development, or expansion of meaning; but of condensation and abridgment--through an expansion of rhetoric. It is a virtuoso performance and a good example of prefabricated language which corrupts thought.

It is also a good example of our third, and most revealing device: verbal mechanization. Separated from thought and emotion, and controlled by a mechanism outside of man's will, this usage of language is a direct comment by the playwrights on the violence which language can do to man's autonomy and individuality. In the previous "discussion" between Hugo and the Clerk, personal *meaning* is not at stake at all. Their total agreement



on the "issues" is given *a priori*: since the meaning is contained within the jargon which they both vie to possess. Their words spew forth automatically, almost by rote, without recourse to intent. Thought, or a point of view, is unnecessary--since thought is reduced to knowing the right jargon and using it in sufficient mass. There is a magic element to this which is akin to the Professor's capacity to kill through verbal pronouncement. As with Ionesco's "couteau" which is both word and object simultaneously, so with Havel's political jargon. The words have weight and density and can destroy; but they have no conceptual meaning, no evocative power. Hugo's strength lies in his capacity to repeat. Like a tape recorder he stores words and phrases appropriated from others, and replays them when the right verbal button is pushed. Handke's *Kaspar* contains a good example of such mechanical repetition. In section 62<sup>137</sup> a reformed and conforming Kaspar speaks *with the voice of the Prompters* and regurgitates a long list of cliché precepts which are directly culled from his previous indoctrination. Both Hugo and Kaspar pay for their parrotry with their individuality: mechanical speech formulas replace selfhood. As Orwell writes: "A speaker who uses that kind of phraseology has gone some distance towards turning himself into a machine."<sup>138</sup> The danger of such speech is that the characters don't *choose* words: the language precedes the characters, exists independently of them, and speaks *through* them. This explains how Hugo and the Director, or Hugo and the Clerk, can literally share a sentence, picking up the others' words at any point, and finally speak in complete unison. These passages show that the characters are no more than vocal instruments for a pre-existing language.

Havel uses the mechanical model extensively. Ptydepe in *The Memorandum* is a concrete illustration of it. Ptydepe is meant to facilitate bureaucratic communication, but its "scientific" nature and its removal from human connotation, backfires. Instead of a tool it becomes a manipulator "so that the authors lost all influence over what they were trying to communicate," as the teacher Lear explains (p. 103). Ptydepe is a more extreme form of dogmatism than Hugo's rhetoric, but both have the same basic nature. Both are authoritarian reductions of meaning which insist, as Marcuse puts it, on "the acceptance of that which is offered in the *form* in which it is offered."<sup>139</sup> That is: the verbal code, the prefabricated *formula*, is offered in lieu of meaning. When the Director and Hugo speak of "the hackneyed machinery / of the psuedo-familiar inaugural phraseology hiding behind the routine of professional humanism a profound dilution of opinions," (p. 56), this jumble of terms cannot be said "in other words." To rephrase would be to destroy its potency, which resides precisely in the dogmatic compression of incompatible parts into a closed, opaque whole. The *form* in which it is offered--whether it be the jingles of advertisement, or the slogans of political demagoguery--is the structure which invades our consciousness. The words slide together leaving no space for distinction, differentiation, or development of meaning: "it moves and lives only as a whole."<sup>140</sup>

Havel's obsession with man's mechanization is also evident in the form of his plays. Both *The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum* have circular constructions and *The Memorandum* also has four inner cycles as the pattern

of the scenes is continuously repeated. Moreover, almost madly, whole conversations are repeated within the plays as the speech mechanism jams and goes into automatic replay. The most pointed example of this is found in *The Garden Party*:

Director (suddenly slaps him on the back): Don't go away! Do sit down! Let's have a little chat, shall we? Now, tell me, why did you come here? What for?  
Clerk: Well, you know--just like that--to have a look around--have a little chat--oh well, I'd better be going--  
Director (again slaps him on the back): Don't go away! Do sit down! Let's have a little chat, shall we? Now, tell me, why did you come here? What for?  
Clerk: Well, you know--just like that--to have a look around--have a little chat--oh well, I'd better be going--  
Director (again slaps him on the back): Don't go away! Do sit down! Let's have a little chat, shall we? Now, tell me, why did you come here? What for?  
Clerk: Well, you know--just like that--to have a look around--have a little chat--... (p. 60)

All of these uses reinforce the central theme of the dehumanization of man to the status of a machine, which is epitomized in Hugo's transformation from chess-playing dolt to "faceless" cog, and in the endless expansion of mechanical bureaucratic rules in the world of *The Memorandum*.

In *Jacques* verbal formulas are sometimes used much like in *The Garden Party*. The family slogan "J'adore les pommes de terre au lard" must be accepted in the form in which it is offered. No alternate phrase will do. When Jacques does finally succumb he repeats the phrase "comme un automate" (p. 122). This has two effects: it reintegrates him into the family, but also puts him under the control of all of the other formulas--verbal and moral--which automatically emerge from that slogan. By submitting to that

one phrase he submits to a fixed, pre-formed concept of life which includes filial respect, marriage, and procreation. It is an automatism of values which is abridged in the unalterable and ritualized form of a slogan. Automatism of values is also the point of Stanley's torture. The speech formulas which are forced upon him entail a direct, almost mechanical acceptance of a congealed, mainstream value-system; a system which is formulated and perpetuated through language. There is a direct link between Goldberg and McCann's promises--"We'll renew your season ticket...Keep a table reserved...Help you acknowledge the fast days...Help you kneel on kneeling days..." (pp. 82-3)--and Stanley's transformation into a shaved and well-dressed burger. Like in *Kaspar*, where the Prompters' cliché proverbs of cleanliness and order are accompanied by Kaspar's mindless acts of house-keeping, so here too verbal coercion results in behavioral conformity.

Finally, although we can distinguish between devices such as verbal ritualization and mechanization, although we can isolate speech torrents, clichés, and jargon, the true power of language in these plays lies not in the isolated device but in their union. Together they characterize a form of speech which has become concrete, taken on flesh and materialized into a dramatic antagonist. In all of the plays discussed the characters are rendered helpless victims of a powerful and inhuman antagonist: coercive language. The Student, Jacques, Stanley, Len, Hugo, Gross, and we might add *Kaspar*--are all "overtaken" by language; they all lose their individuality, their autonomy, and sometimes even their lives. Are these plays then

presenting language as an independent entity which can act--maliciously or benevolently--as with a will of its own? In a sense yes, but in a very social, non-mystical sense. What these playwrights do *not* portray is the human activity of thinking and sensing which is then translated into the inter-personal medium of language. Consciousness is not shown as the container of *thought*, but as the container of *words*, pre-formed, unchosen units of speech. These words are both mechanical--i.e. outside of the will of the speaker, and clichéic--i.e. lacking in all originality or spontaneity. As such they militate against individuality, against the unique and creative, and force the characters towards a leveling conformism. If consciousness contains only clichés, then the manipulation of consciousness--and thus of man--is through control of the clichés of language; and this control takes on a political dimension.

#### The Politics of Language Domination

In a poem written about Joseph Stalin, Osip Mandelstam creates a compound image of political tyranny and verbal domination compressed into one terrible portrait.

We live. We are not sure our land is under us.  
Ten feet away, no one hears us.

But wherever there's even a half-conversation,  
We remember the Kremlin's mountaineer.

His thick fingers are fat as worms,  
His words reliable as ten-pound weights.

His boot tops shine,  
His cockroach mustache is laughing.

About him, the great, his thin-necked, drained advisors.  
He plays with them. He is happy with half-men around him.

They make touching and funny animal sounds.  
He alone talks Russian.

One after another, his sentences hit like horseshoes; he  
Pounds them out. He always hits the nail, the balls.

After each death, he is like a Georgian tribesman,  
Putting a raspberry in his mouth.

(adaptation by Robert Lowell)<sup>141</sup>

Mandelstam depicts "The Kremlin's Mountaineer" as a man who derives and exercises power through his usurpation of language: "He alone talks Russian." The images of violence and oppression center around his tyrannical control of language; he is felt in every whispered half-conversation, his words are heavy "as ten-pounds weights." Language becomes a violent weapon which hits and pounds with physical cruelty, torturing, castrating--"He always hits the nail, the balls"--and reducing others to a subhuman gurgling of "touching and funny animal sounds." This concrete depiction of verbal violence, as George Steiner writes, "images and enacts a notion of language as being itself murderous."<sup>142</sup> Stalin's murderous language contains a political ideology: the ideology of absolute power which controls every half-conversation and indeed redefines language in its own terms. It is a power which parallels that of the Professor in *La Leçon* who both creates language and uses it to kill; it also parallels the philosophy of O'Brien in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*: "The object of power is

power," O'Brien tells Winston; "When finally you surrender to us it must be of your own free will. We do not destroy the heretic...we convert him, we capture his inner mind, we reshape him."<sup>143</sup> No doubt he is reshaped into a half-man who "makes touching and funny animal sounds."

All of the plays studied above, implicitly or explicitly view language domination as the extension of an ideology. The ideologies vary, but all are encapsuled and propagated through language, and all result in the dehumanization of their victims. It is interesting that the three authors discussed here--Ionesco, Pinter, and Havel--implicate in their plays the three major ideologies of the twentieth century: Fascism, Capitalism, and Marxism. The implications range from the blatant--the Professor's donning of a swastika-emblazoned armband and Hugo's mastery of dialectical rhetorics, to the subtle--Goldberg's mass of corporate jargon. In either case they form a backdrop and a context for the verbal violence.

The Professor's method of instruction is clearly in the totalitarian mode; he silences the Student's attempts to ask questions--"Taisez-vous. Restez assis, n'interrompez pas" (p. 92)--and forces on her a vocabulary, verbal and conceptual, which she has no option to challenge or debate. Threats of violence--"Silence! Ou je vous fracasse la crane!" (p. 101)--and their ultimate implementation through verbal rape and murder, complete the picture of a dictatorial will forced on its drained victims. The Professor's self-validating, hypnotic language closely approximates

Marcuse's description of "magic" authoritarian-ritual speech formulas. Marcuse claims, and the Professor proves, that such language is aimed at reducing its victims into unquestioning obedience and powerless subordination. As we noted above, Ionesco's injection of the Nazi armband at the end of *La Leçon*, while dramatically clumsy, underlines the affinity which the play demonstrates between coercive verbal practices and totalitarian regimes. The degeneration of the German language under Nazism--a degeneration from which German, according to Sternberger, has not yet fully recovered<sup>144</sup>--is only one example of the reciprocal influence of language on ideology and ideology on language.

Ionesco, who is an outspoken detractor of Brecht, Sartre, and other "committed" playwrights, and who in 1958 engaged in a public dispute with Kenneth Tynan and others over the role of literature (personal testimony versus social commitment),<sup>145</sup> is in fact an intensely "committed" writer. His commitment, however, is *against* the spreading of ideologies. Ionesco's basic fear of authoritarianism--personal and political--and of the doctrines and ideologies which foster it, underlies his attack on language.

If anything needs demystifying it is our ideologies, which offer ready-made solutions (which history quickly overtakes and refutes) and a language that congeals as soon as it is formulated. It is these ideologies which must be continually re-examined in the light of our anxieties and dreams, and their congealed language must be relentlessly split apart in order to find the living sap beneath.<sup>146</sup>

Hardened ideologies and the fossilized verbal mold which they take--being "nothing but clichés, empty formulas and slogans"<sup>147</sup>--impose themselves on



the individual and replace the contents of the subjective self. Ionesco calls man thus controlled by external verbal codes a *petit bourgeois*:<sup>148</sup> "a man of slogans, who no longer thinks for himself but repeats the truths that others have imposed upon him, ready-made and therefore lifeless. In short the *petit bourgeois* is a manipulated man."<sup>149</sup> He is manipulated into continuous conformity through an unfelt, mechanical language. It is this uncritical acceptance of a vocabulary, of a body of pre-determined concepts, which turns the "average" man into "a ubiquitous conformist."<sup>150</sup>

Havel's *The Memorandum*, while less overtly violent than *La Leçon*, has a similar thrust. Ideology is directly codified into the synthetic form and perverted meanings of *Ptydepe*. Rather than serving as a tool for communication, *Ptydepe* destroys the link between human intention and verbal formulation; meaning is subordinated to prescribed forms of expression, thus: language dictates thought.

Conceptual dictatorship is even more clearly demonstrated in *The Birthday Party* and *The Garden Party*. In these plays, as in *Kaspar* and *Jacques*, language imposes conformity to ideological norms. The means of imposition is through verbal indoctrination; the result is the conversion of the victim and his subsequent perpetuation of the imposed doctrine. Stanley and Hugo differ from each other in a number of important ways: Stanley has rejected conformity to mainstream norms and mores and is forced to return through verbal torture. He fights against his brutal re-integration but loses, to be reborn into the visual mold (clean-shaven,

well-dressed), and verbal stereotypes of his torturers. Hugo is a more opportunistic character; prompted by his parents' ambition, he chooses to "play up, play up, and play the game," as Goldberg would put it, unaware that the process of successful conformity will lead to his personal annihilation. Both emerge, at the end of the plays, laced into a straight-jacket of clichés and decked out in what one critic calls "the uniform of uniformity":<sup>151</sup> Stanley's well-tailored executive image, and Hugo's faceless cloak of party power.

Pinter and Havel create for their characters language-determined fates which are similar, although rooted in different ideologies. In Stanley's case the materialistic bias of a capital-oriented society becomes apparent in the list of promises which Goldberg and McCann make to him. Moreover, the promises have the ring of an advertisement campaign to intensify consumer desires. In Hugo's case the fossilized rhetorics of bureaucratic politics are contained in a "fetish-ridden" dialectic mold<sup>152</sup> which betrays its Marxist bias. In both cases, succumbing to the verbal structures of the ruling norm entails the characters' automatic incorporation into the political power-structures which this language embodies and serves. Stanley and Hugo are *absorbed* by the language and emerge as supporters and perpetuators of the dogma. This is made clear through Stanley's projected future: he will be rich and powerful, "you'll give orders...make decisions...be a magnate...a statesman...you'll own yachts..." (p. 84). Similarly, Hugo attains the heights of power through his verbal parrotry. For both, the possession of politically endorsed rhetoric is *identical* with

the possession of political power. Language has replaced individual consciousness and responsibility, realizing Orwell's warning that personal subjugation through prefabricated language "if not indispensable, is at any rate favorable to political conformity."<sup>153</sup>

In all of these plays language is imposed, from without, on a resistant but powerless character. This power-language--i.e. language with the power to torture, destroy, and convert--is represented through figures of authority and position: a Professor (*La Leçon*), parents (*Jacques*), officials of a powerful "organization" (*The Birthday Party*), leading bureaucrats (*The Garden Party* and *The Memorandum*). The catch and irony of this is that these figures derive their position and their authority from their *own* conformity to pre-existing verbal norms, and are thus rendered appropriate vessels through which language can subjugate the rebellious or the uninitiated. The abstract quality of this socially and politically imposed "normative" language is paradigmatically captured in *Kaspar*, in which language is embodied in the aural presence of Prompters, "Einsager," who through words alone, without the need for physical presence, coerce total conformity by forcing Kaspar into a mold of speech. Roland Barthes, in what Susan Sontag terms "that instantly notorious hyperbole",<sup>154</sup> indicts the power of language with the words "language--the performance of a language system...is quite simply fascist; for fascism does not prevent speech, it compels speech."<sup>155</sup> For Barthes, language is that object "in which power is inscribed, for all of human eternity." Citing Jakobson,

Barthes argues that "a speech-system is defined less by what it *permits* us to say than by what it *compels* us to say":

In French (I shall take obvious examples) I am obliged to posit myself first as subject before stating the action which will henceforth be no more than my attribute: what I do is merely the consequence and consecution of what I am. In the same way, I must always choose between masculine and feminine, for the neuter and the dual are forbidden me. Further, I must indicate my relation to the other person by resorting to either *tu* or *vous*; social or affective suspension is denied me. Thus, by its very structure my language implies an inevitable relation of alienation. To speak, and, with even greater reason, to utter a discourse is not, as it too often repeated, to communicate; it is to subjugate: the whole of language is a generalized *rection*.<sup>156</sup>

Barthes concludes that: "Once uttered, even in the subject's deepest privacy, speech enters the service of power."<sup>157</sup>

Whatever ideology it represents, the results of total conformity to an inherited or imposed language is always personal dehumanization. The French philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy, in agreement with Barthes, makes this point quite convincingly, and more overtly politically, in his book *Barbarism with a Human Face*.<sup>158</sup> The barbarism to which the title refers is political; its sources are both in the Left and in the Right; and its weapon is an absolutist ideology. "There is an obvious relationship between the forms of power and the shape of language, between the orders of a Prince and the images of a sentence" he writes, quoting Oswald Spengler.<sup>159</sup> "There is a linguistic capital subject to strict rules of conservation and transformation... (speech) is simply power, the very form of power,

entirely shaped by power even in its most modest rhetorical expression... To speak is inevitably to pronounce and articulate the law. There is no full speech which is not full of prohibition, no free discourse not stamped with the seal of tyranny... Grammar is a police force, syntax a court of law, writing a pair of handcuffs... to speak is to become, in every sense of the term, a *subject*."<sup>150</sup> Lévy develops this idea of language as power and control in connection with the totalitarian state:

What does a State do when it hatches the mad project to become identical with the society it administers? It imposes a language on it, its own language, its own discourse, claiming to have found it in society and simply to have transcribed it; for Stalinists this is known as "democratic centralism." What is to be understood by a total state and its negation of division and social polyphony? This must mean not the State but the total discourse, the one it offers about itself and indirectly about the society it denies--as in Carl Schmidt's homage to the inspired speech of Hitler the "ventriloquist." What is the politics of a Marxist state, how does it define the domain of the political, this State that claims to have broken with bourgeois models? It is a politics of the word, the incarnate and actualized word, reality becoming the word and the word becoming reality...ideology from that point on functions not only to obscure and travesty reality, but also to shape it, deform it, and establish it.<sup>151</sup>

It is this active function of language as a shaping, manipulative force, independent of individual human control and in constant conflict with man's will to individuality, which is heightened and exposed in these plays. Language is both abstracted--i.e. separated from the speaker; and made concrete--i.e. given a personality of its own. Ionesco, Pinter, and Havel all sound a warning in their plays: beware of your unthinking obedience to the inherited or imposed verbal, and thus behavioral, structures of society. The cliché--in the broadest sense of pre-fabricated

rhetorics, hackneyed jargon, unexamined slogans, ideological pass-words and the like--is not only a "dead" coin of speech, it is also a living and self-perpetuating threat. If the cliché destroys Jacques, Stanley, and Hugo--it also recreates them in its own image.

## IV

## LANGUAGE AS A PRISON: ON VERBAL DEBRIS AND DEPRIVATION

In Peter Handke's play *Die Unvernünftigen sterben aus* (1973), the loquacious tycoon Quitt--who throughout has been seeking words which would create him as an individual--accuses his servant/confidant Hans of making fun of his language:

Ich würde mich auch lieber mit Sprachlosigkeit ausdrücken wie die einfachen Leute in dem Theaterstück kürzlich, erinnerst du dich? Da hättest du wenigstens Mitleid mit mir. So leide ich daran, dass bei mir zum Leiden die Sprechlust gehört. Bei euch ist ja nur mitleidsfähig, wer von seinen Leiden nicht sprechen kann.<sup>1</sup>

With sarcasm Quitt explains that the characters of that play moved him, for despite their speechlessness, their poverty and seemingly dehumanized demeanor - they too seek contact:

Auch sie wollen Zärtlichkeit, ein Leben zu zweit undsoweiter-- sie können es nur nicht sagen, und deswegen vergewaltigen und ermorden sie einander...Das Kreatürliche zieht mich an, das Wehrlose, die Erniedrigten und Beleidigten.<sup>2</sup>

Handke's semi-mocking remarks are obviously directed against a fellow playwright who, like Handke, is obsessed with the relationship between speech and the unhuman, namely Franz Xaver Kroetz.<sup>2</sup> But unlike Quitt, Kroetz's socially depressed characters do not have the option of meaningful speech, it is this of which they are, most basically, deprived.

Language deprivation--stunted, inarticulate speech--has a deep relation to verbal, as well as physical, violence--as will be illustrated in over half a dozen sample plays which will serve as models. The victims of this language deprivation are members of an extreme lower class, or fringe social group. They are doubly disenfranchised: socially as well as verbally. They live, as Quitt accurately puts it, in "menechenunwürdigen Umständen"<sup>4</sup> both in terms of material want and cultural void. Three playwrights--the German Franz Xaver Kroetz, the English Edward Bond, and the American David Mamet--dramatically demonstrate this form of language-related aggression. Of the three the Bavarian Kroetz is of central interest. He alone has dedicated a whole group of plays--I will mention six--to the problem of restricted language and deminished lives. The Englishman Bond in his play *Saved* and the American playwright Mamet in his powerful *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry, Glenn Ross* deal with similar themes. All three demonstrate the inter-relationships between characters and their social milieu; between the milieu and the restricted language available; and between the language and the overt and covert violence which erupts with sudden and mindless brutality in their plays. All of the plays



are characterized by their realistic depiction of character and milieu, and by a language consisting largely of fragmented sentences, uncommunicative banalities and repetitive clichés. They are plays in which a very limited verbal world imprisons the characters, drastically stunts their relationships with the outer world and their inner selves, and leads to disproportionate aggression.

When two of Kroetz's plays were first produced in 1971 they created a minor scandal. Shouting crowds, throwing stinkbombs and rotten eggs, protested the showing of the two one-act plays *Heimarbeit* and *Hartnäckig* in which an attempted abortion, masturbation, and an infant murder were to be shown on stage. Marieluise Fleisser, who came out of retirement to attend the premier of her "favorite son"<sup>6</sup> later wrote that "Die kleinen Leute, die auf der Strasse protestierten, ahnten nicht, dass es hier um die Sache der kleinen Leute ging."<sup>6</sup> The scandal and outrage which accompanied Kroetz's introduction to the German audience recalls another opening of a similar play in London in 1965: Edward Bond's *Saved*. In this play an infant is brutally tortured and murdered on stage. At that time *Saved* was actually banned by the Lord Chamberlain from being shown on a public stage.<sup>7</sup> The similarities between these two authors go beyond their overt and shocking depiction of brutality on stage, and beyond the hostile receptions which both initially received. In both, socially and culturally deprived characters are shown as the debased and hopeless prisoners of a severely circumscribed language and the victims of their own violence.

## FRANZ XAVER KROETZ: The Stunted Heritage

Kroetz belongs to a group of young German and Austrian playwrights who in the mid-60's emerged with a drama which can be termed a "New Realism" or, as some critics prefer to view it, "das neue Volksstück". Writers like Martin Sperr, Rainer W. Fassbinder, Jochen Ziem, Harold Sommer, Peter Turrini--all of whom write about the socially underprivileged--demonstrate the helplessness and oppression of their characters through their verbal inarticulateness. Like Kroetz they employ "eine mehr oder weniger stark verkümmerte, unreflektierte, meist mundartlich gefärbte Sprache".<sup>10</sup> In this sense, Kroetz is representative of this group. In addition, these writers--especially Fassbinder, Sperr, and Ziem--share with Kroetz a debt to the "re-discovered" playwrights Ödön von Horváth (1901-38) and Marieluise Fleisser (1901-73). In the mid-60's Horváth and Fleisser, who had been virtually unread and certainly unproduced and unpublished since the early 1930's, were revived on the German stage. Horváth, a German-speaking Austro-Hungarian, and Fleisser, a Bavarian, both wrote in the 1920's and 30's in the dramatic genre termed "das Volksstück"; and both documented the corrupt, clichéd language of the *Kleinbürgertum*. It is in their use of language that they have been most influential and their influence on this group is freely admitted by the young writers. The new realists, like Horváth and Fleisser, write about the "common man"--usually of a lower-class milieu--and employ a vernacular rather than a literary style of speech. Kroetz, who has repeatedly declared his indebtedness to both

Horváth and Fleisser<sup>11</sup> goes further than his contemporaries in demonstrating and indicting a class-connected language which has become an alienating and distortive tool. Like Horváth, he views the "little" man as disinherited, fiercely restricted and unable to fashion his own fate. Like Fleisser, he gives his characters a language "die ihnen nichts nützt, weil sie nicht die ihre ist."<sup>12</sup>

Kroetz's plays fall roughly into two periods: the early plays (1968-1971), and those written after 1972, when Kroetz became an active member of the German Communist Party (DKP). The plays written after 1972 differ from the earlier work in a number of ways: the milieu shifts from the rural lower-class to an urban lower middle-class; the extremity of sudden brutality, which had originally brought him fame as well as notoriety, is reduced; and most importantly, his characters are given a greater verbal capacity.<sup>13</sup> These changes are conscious, ideological, and interesting in themselves; they are however less relevant for this study. I will therefore limit myself to Kroetz's early plays.

All of these plays deal with a marginal social group living outside of industrial German society and excluded from the main-stream economic prosperity. They are essentially "family" dramas and take place almost completely within the home or immediate environment of the characters. The plots of the dramas are also family oriented and the violence which occurs in them all arises from within the stifling family unit. Incapable of

coping with the problems which face them, their inarticulate animal-like reactions to distress are brutal replacements for verbal negotiation.

In Kroetz's first play *Wildwechsel*, (1968) the pregnant 13 year old Hanni refuses to give up her lover--or the coat which he gave her as a gift. The reaction of her father Erwin is revealing:

Erwin: Der Fetzn is von eim andern. Richtig. (er stockt und gibt ihr unvermittelt eine Ohrfeige). Die Red bleibt eim weg. (p. 31)<sup>14</sup>

The violence which replaces speech will finally lead to his being shot to death by his daughter and her boyfriend. In *Heimarbeit* (1969) Martha tries to abort her illegitimate child with a knitting needle--"Probieren geht über studeieren" (sc. 5)--thus deforming the infant. Her husband Willy will later drown the mutilated child in a tub, of which he says, "Ein Tod wie jeder andere" (sc. 19). In *Männersache* (1970) a woman shoots her dog on stage to please her jealous lover, but this doesn't satisfy him and their relationship ends in a duel with a rifle. In *Nichis Blut* (1970), a strange two character play consisting almost entirely of the painful attempt of a man and a woman to make some meaningful verbal contact, the one action of the play is the crude abortion of Marie's child by Karl, the father--"Probieren geht über studieren" (sc. 5)--and her resulting death. *Stallerhof* and its sequel *Geisterbahn* (1971) include scenes of rape, defecation, the poisoning of a dog, and finally an infanticide carried out by its mentally and verbally backwards 14 year old mother, on stage. In my analysis I will draw largely from these last three plays.

The claustrophobic nature of Kroetz's plays results from a number of devices: all of the plays focus on a few characters in short, close-up scenes; all of the characters speak the same language and are on the same level of verbal and existential consciousness; and there is almost no author intrusion. This last point is prominently felt in the plays, and is perhaps the major factor in their utter hopelessness, the sense of total, unretrieved imprisonment. By author intrusion I mean, e.g., the use of a character who in a sense speaks for the author, represents an alternative voice, an option; or, at the very least, a character whose level of consciousness is above that of the others. No such character exists in Kroetz's early plays. The author can also comment on his plays by slanting blame, passing judgement on his characters. This too is absent: all the characters are presented in an equal light, all are victims who exist on the stage without comment, without blame. The author can also intrude through stage direction or prefigurations (in language or actions) which prepare an audience for vital events. For example: in *Hedda Gabler* the numerous references to Hedda's gun and its symbolic significance had prefigured her suicide. Ibsen organized each element of his stage reality so that they reinforce and explain each other. Kroetz rarely does so. Violence and graphically distasteful scenes (defecating or masturbating on stage) all occur suddenly, without preparation or aftermath, with a stubborn refusal of comment. This refusal to comment often creates a feeling of lack of motives, of unexplained occurrence which adds to the hopelessness and the sense of outside determination. The audience, like the characters, is shut out from any privileged information. Each action, each

dialogue, is a closed unit, unwilled, unalterable; and this leads to the certainty of a closed future, a future which cannot conceivably be different than the present which we experience in the plays. In the absence of any free agent, any spokesman for a verbal or moral alternative within the world of the play, all escape routes are shut. The characters learn nothing during the play, they don't change (unless they die) and rarely develop as people. All this, as shall be shown, is most prominently contained and demonstrated through their language. The banality, the triviality of their language is totally transparent; it harbors no "unexpressed" depths. Unlike e.g. Chekhov's characters, whose banality masks profound longings and helps bridge over great personal unhappiness, with Kroetz the banal is all there is. That which Kroetz's figures cannot express is, tragically, that which they also cannot think. Their language is the contents of their consciousness, the limit of their potential. And as such it is painfully insufficient, incapable of intimacy, of understanding, of compassion. If there is any effort on the part of the characters it is to maintain the status quo of their own banality, a status quo continuously given in the normative clichés which contain and define their morality. For this reason, deviant occurrences--usually shown in the form of unexpected pregnancies--are so mindlessly fought against. "Wiederherstellung der Ordnung" is the title which Kroetz gives to scene 5 of *Nichis Blut* in which Karl tries to abort Marie's child. "Ordnung" is restored in *Heimarbeit* through the murder of the undesired infant. "Jetzt bin ich wieder da. Jetzt herrscht wieder Ordnung," Martha says in the last scene of that play. All is as usual, despite murder, abortion, rape.

Kroetz has claimed that the speech of his characters doesn't function properly, that the problems they have lie so far back and are so advanced that they can no longer express them in words.<sup>15</sup> He blames as the source of their inarticulateness the social structure which has made of his characters victims of "Enteignung von Sprache".<sup>16</sup> But the impression of a language expropriated, stolen by society, is, as we shall see, not available in the plays themselves. The social situation is given by the author without comment and accepted by the characters with hardly a thought. Poverty and social deprivation are the realities, but they are rarely the issue. Nevertheless, they do underlie all of Kroetz's plays, are implied by the settings and situations; the characters, events and language would be substanceless without the background reality of their social milieu. Kroetz doesn't analyze a social situation, nor does he condemn: he merely presents it in act and dialogue. As one critic put it: "Kroetz zwingt uns nicht, die Dumpfheit, mit der seine Figuren handeln, als systembedingt zu erkennen; er führt uns die Dumpfheit nur minutiös vor und macht uns bestenfalls betroffen."<sup>17</sup> Like the characters of Naturalist drama the fate of these characters is not within their control. But in Naturalist drama the characters go down struggling, aware of their fate. In Hauptmann's *Die Ratten*, e.g., Frau John can talk--authentically--about her tragic dilemma, she can reflect and make decisions--even if only to kill herself. The struggle may be of little avail but it is at least an option. In Kroetz's drama the circumstances are such that struggle is almost inconceivable, since to conceive--to think, to speak of thought--has become one of the fatalities of their circumstance. Kroetz has chosen to

demonstrate social depression through verbal deprivation. The choice of language as the essential factor of his plays functions to locate the problems *within* language, as an imprisonment greater than material poverty, more basic, less given to remedy. In addition, this language prison--with its deep implications of cultural and humanistic emptiness--is shown to be the reason for on-going oppression and for hopelessness. A detailed social reality is therefore not really lacking; it is rather subsumed and contained within the verbal debris which replaces the fullness of speech. Paradoxically, it is in their strangled language that the characters' situation becomes most explicit.

Kroetz's language manages to sound natural but is actually highly stylized. The plays are written in a German colored by the Bavarian diction, but by no means in dialect--compared e.g. to Harold Sommer's *A unhamlich schtorka obgong*, or Peter Turrini's *rozznjogd*.<sup>10</sup> The dialect form is mainly apparent in the structure of the sentences and in the use of typical Bavarian idioms. Kroetz is not interested in reproducing a local language or in creating authentic spontaneous speech. In fact, his dialogues studiously avoid those devices which would give the illusion of verbal spontaneity. Spontaneous speech is typified by false starts, hesitations, retractions, new beginnings, i.e.: the struggle to verbalize is part of the speech itself. Naturalist drama uses this device abundantly as e.g. in Hauptmann's *Biberpelz*:

Julius: Denn immer...immer zu...all...wat... (Act 1).



or in *Die Ratten*:

**Walburga:** ...Ich bin ja des Todes...ich bin ja des Todes  
erschrocken, Frau John! (Act 1).

It is common in dramas which attempt to realistically reproduce the speech of a given milieu. Kroetz's language lacks such false verbal planning completely.<sup>19</sup> His syntax is undifferentiated, the language is forshortened, emphatic, and extremely lean (Kroetz himself speaks of "der Kargheit der Sprache" in his Preface to *Wildwechsel*). He omits all hesitations, interjections, or spontaneous exclamations; characters don't interrupt each other, sentences don't overlap: all of those elements which transfer dialogue into lived and felt speech are missing. The reason is perhaps that unlike Naturalist language--which tends to *characterize* its speaker, to describe and situate him within his environment--Kroetz's characters are not differentiated through a verbal style. Style connotes individuality, the interplay of personality and emotionality within language. Kroetz's figures all seem to speak the same language, their inner life, their personal idiosyncracies, don't break through the verbal mold. Language is imposed upon them, not created out of them.

Certain characteristic linguistic elements recur in all of Kroetz's early plays. These elements define the speech of his characters, they also mark the limits of their verbal capacity. In analyzing these linguistic elements I hope to show the intimate connection between the characters' stringently limited verbal options and their inhumanity--their lack of

freedom, of compassion, of hope. I will apply the following analysis mainly to *Stallerhof* and its sequel *Geisterbahn*.

The language of these plays is composed almost entirely of pre-formed, standard and repetitive units of speech strung together. These units fall into three groups: 1. clichés and cliché-idioms; 2. proverbs and other quotations; and 3. semantic blanks. The cliché is the most extensively used form, it is the staple of communication among the characters, spiced and reinforced by proverbs and axiomatic wisdoms. The two main characteristics of the cliché are its total absence of originality and a sense of automatism, of unthinking, pre-conditioned response. Whole sections of dialogue often consist of such clichés which, however, as opposed to the clichés studied in the previous chapter, are neither absurd nor even comic:

Stallerin: ...Wie mans macht, is es falsch.  
Staller: Genau...  
Stallerin: Wer die Wahl hat, hat die Qual. (pause) Besser spät wie nie.  
Staller: Warum?  
Stallerin: Besser spät wie nie.  
Staller: Ja. Es is nie zu spät. (pause)  
Stallerin: Das is jetzt keine Zeit zum Kopfhängenlassen!  
(*Geisterbahn*, III, 4)

These typical German clichés--'Whatever you do is wrong', 'He who has to choose has the blues', 'Better late than never', 'It's never too late', 'This is no time to throw in the towel' (my free translations)--comprise the entire content of the above 'discussion'.

Quotations in Kroetz's dialogue are used in counterpoint to the clichés. The quote is an important element in the fabric of his characters' speech; it is almost a second language. Quotes are always in *Hochdeutsch*, a "foreign" language, one of authority and wisdom. To quote is to participate in this wisdom, to gain a momentary sense of borrowed power. Quotes are of two sorts: the quotation proper, i.e. quoting proverbs, biblical verse or a well-known aphorism; and quoting axiomatic wisdoms, "Volksweisheiten", which usually include the explanation "es heisst" or "man sagt".

Sepp: Kein Glück hab ich ebn ghabt im Lebn, das is es. Wenn  
einer kein Glück hat, kann er nix machn.

(pause)

Staller: Jeder is seines Glückes Schmied, heisst es.

Sepp: Net jeder.

(*Stallerhof*, I, 4)

Whenever profundity is attempted by Kroetz's characters we invariably find them quoting--as in the above example: 'Each man forges his own luck, it is said'. These two types of language--the cliché which the character treats as his own creation, and the quote which the character uses as a borrowed authority to support his own cliché--create the powerful impression of a "found" language, a language superimposed upon them, uncreated and unowned.

What is meant by "unowned" language? Let us set up for the moment an opposition: owned/unowned language. Owned language is language which is constantly being created out of a personality to fit a situation. It is language which both reflects and engenders thought; which draws on a public net of words and grammar and reshapes them in order to express a private

thought or intuition in words and grammar which can, in turn, be understood by at least a segment of the public world. "By the same act through which man spins language out of himself, he also spins himself into it..." wrote Wilhelm von Humboldt,<sup>20</sup> reflecting on the interrelations between public and private language. Each nation (according to Humboldt) is to an extent determined by its language, a language which is peculiar to it alone; yet the language is also a creation of that nation: they are interdependent and form an organic whole. "Owned" language partakes of the public word, but is recreated in the private personality. This is a symbiotic process which always contains the germ, the potential, for originality. Without this concept there could be no meaning to the word cliché--i.e. a word or phrase so overused as to become automatic, insincere, devoid of private recreation.

It is precisely this private recreation of which Kroetz's characters are most incapable, and since they don't own their language, they also reject responsibility for that which they say. "Redn wird man durfn"--No harm in talking--becomes a common defense for even the most indefensible utterances. In Act III, scene 1 of *Stallerhof*, e.g., Staller and his wife are on their way to church with their somewhat retarded 14 year old daughter Beppi, who is in her first months of pregnancy. Beppi had been raped by the farmer's workman Sepp, a man in his late fifties, and a love relationship had consequently developed between them, to the horror of Beppi's parents. Staller is worried that her pregnancy may already be visible and declares "Da darf auch nie was zum sehn sein". The following

"discussion" between the Staller and Stallerin is an attempt to find a solution to the crisis which Beppi's pregnancy has created.

Stallerin: Es wird gsagt, dass etwa Harrische den Tod net spürn wie mir.  
Staller: Freilich, eine Fliegn merkt auch nix.  
(pause)  
Stallerin: Fünftens du sollst nicht töten  
Staller: Sechstens, du sollst nicht Unkeuschheit treiben.  
(pause) Das mach ich mit meim Herrgott allein aus.  
(pause)  
Stallerin: Es wird gsagt, ein Kind lebt im Bauch von der Mutter noch stundlang weiter.  
Staller: Des net.  
(grosse pause)  
Stallerin: Das tät ich jedenfalls mein Leb'n lang nicht mehr vergessen. Das weiss ich.  
Staller: Wenn man sich nimmer zum Helf'n weiss, weils alles nix is, muss man ein Ausweg findn.  
Stallerin: Ja.  
(pause)  
Stallerin: Selig die im Geiste Armen, denn ihrer ist das Himmelreich.  
Staller: Das glaub ich net.  
Stallerin: Auf was man für Gedank'n kommt, net zum Auedenk'n.  
Staller: Man redt ja bloss.

The Staller and his wife, quoting biblical verse and the 10 commandments, discuss in disconnected sentences, between long pauses, the possibility of killing their own daughter as a way out of the shame which her pregnancy will bring them. "Es wird gsagt" the Stallerin twice says and repeats the most fantastic superstitions as though they were fact. The use of "es wird gsagt" frees the Stallerin to speak of her daughter's death and to even consider the fate of the unborn child--who, it is said, will live on for hours in the dead mother's womb. "Es wird gsagt" removes from her the responsibility for such thoughts: the quoted form gives them the air of objectivity. This is followed by quotations from the ten commandments.

Without explanation or preamble, the Stallerin quotes the fifth commandment--Thou shalt not kill--Staller counters with the sixth--Thou shalt not be unchaste. The two commandments cancel each other out; yet they do not develop into a discussion. The quote is not an introduction to discussion, it *is* the discussion. In them they express their contrasting moral views without ever owning their positions. When the Stallerin tries again by quoting from the Sermon on the Mount--Blessed are the weak in spirit--Staller rejects the authority of that sentiment outright. Commandment against commandment, sentence against sentence, each unit separated by pauses exists in isolation. The meaning of their remarks is not elaborated, the intension behind them is never made explicit: they never gather cumulative strength since sentences don't build on each other. Each unit stands on its own, depleted, inconclusive. When Stallerin finally protests against the thoughts they are having Staller counters: "Man redt ja bloss." This defense--we're only talking, no harm in talking--is a recurrent denial of any inherent power in words. To their minds words and actions are always two separate realms. "A Red hat er. Sonst nix" Stallerin accuses her husband (III, 3) when he asks her in surprise if she really intends to abort Beppi's child with the soap-water solution ("Laugn") she's preparing.

This scene between the farmer and his wife is central to the "mind" dimension of the play. It is the only scene in which problem-solving is attempted through supposedly rational verbal discussion. Yet the last line of that scene--"So sagt man ebn"--sums up the true nature of their

interchange. Staller, railing against his fate, calls Sepp, a man he's worked with, shared his food with, and spoken with on a more or less personal level (I, 3) an "altn Taugenichts". His wife, surprised at this unfitting epithet asks why a "Tunichtgut" to which he answers: "So sagt man ebn". It is important to note how public language, the clichés of some anonymous world, here come to characterize and replace both Sepp and Beppi. When the Stallerin speaks of the painless death of "Narrische" she borrows what which is "said" and replaces, unaware, the life of her own daughter. Staller does the same to Sepp. Axiomatic language and quotations, a borrowed code, thus give the characters the impression of having thought and discussed, while in fact brutally putting an end to any individual reflection. And not only do Kroetz's characters speak and think in clichés and borrowed idioms, they also feel in second-hand, pre-formed emotions. In Act III, scene 4 Staller and his wife are in bed talking, refusing to blame themselves for the tragedy which has occurred. After a pause Staller says:

Staller: Wenn man wenigstens noch ein Kind hätt, einen Bubn,  
das wär ein Lichtblick.  
Stallerin: Warum?  
Staller: Das is doch klar.

Why is it clear that a son, if only they had one, would be a ray of light in their lives now? The answer here too, we can assume, is "so sagt man ebn". This cliché sentiment, like the language used, is borrowed. The conventional wisdom, that which "is doch klar", both creates the emotional longing for a son as consolation, and justifies that desire. When Stallerin

attacks him for having that wish--he knows that she's been barren since Beppi's birth--Staller answers defensively, "Redn wird man durfn...".

The extent to which axiomatic speech comprises personal identity is pointedly demonstrated in *Geisterbahn*. This play begins after the birth of Georg, Beppi and Sepp's son. Beppi, who had been virtually dumb in *Stallerhof*, now speaks far more, especially to her child for fear that he will turn out to be like her. "Aber jetzt redt sie mehr, seit der Geburt. Das merkt man" says her father. "Weil der bub net red, red sie." (I, 2). Beppi's parents have decided to send Georg to a Home, in order to put an end to Sepp's visits to his son, a right which the law gives him, "Das is amtlich". When Beppi learns of this she forms her first true sentence, her first expression of will: "Wenn der Georg in das Heim muss, bringe ich mich um" (I, 6). She repeats this sentence to herself, privately rehearses it until it becomes her own, and with this threat finds the strength to leave home and go with the child to the city to live with Sepp. Act II scene 1 has Beppi proudly telling Sepp her sentence. They celebrate with a game of clichés which is in fact far more than a game:

**Beppi:** Wer wagt, gewinnt!...

**Sepp:** Des is ein Sprichwörtl sonst nix.

**Beppi:** Wer wagt, gewinnt!

**Sepp:** (lächelt) Jeder ist seines Glückes Schmied!

(Pause)

**Beppi:** Dem Tüchtigen gehört die Welt.

**Sepp:** Sterne reissts vom Himmel, das kleine Wort: ich will!

(Pause)

**Sepp:** Und?

**Beppi:** Wer wagt, gewinnt!

**Sepp:** Ham mir schon ghabt.

**Beppi:** Nachad?

**Sepp:** Selbst is der Mann!



Beppi: Genau.  
(Beide lächeln).

"Des is ein Sprichwörtl sonst nix" says Sepp to Beppi's victory cry "Wer wagt, gewinnt!". But here, like in Beppi's liberating sentence about suicide, the significance of the cliché, of the "borrowed" speech-coin, is for a moment turned around. With poignant irony these two outcasts find courage in those same cliché forms which have, all their lives, imprisoned them. For a moment, the cliché is lifted into a series of liberating mottoes, formulas for courage. But the contents of these aphorisms--which claim that through courage, will and selfhood, man can forge his own fate--is in pathetic contrast to the meek lack of power, will and consciousness, which characterize both Sepp and Beppi. Ironically, while Beppi seems to find momentary liberation from her fate by forming a sentence which is her "own", it is precisely the nature of this sentence, and of those used in their "game" of quotes, which undermines true self-expression and communication in Kroetz's plays. Beppi, with her newly acquired slogans, has only reached the abyssal level of the other characters.

Semantic blanks, the third type of speech which Kroetz's characters use, consist of certain words or phrases which recur incessantly in the dialogue as replacements for response, or as ways to stem discussion. The most common words are *genau*, *ebn*, and *warum*, all of which lose their lexical meanings.<sup>21</sup> When Staller confronts Sepp with the information that Beppi is pregnant and that this will cost Sepp ten years "und mich die Ehr", we get the following collection of non-sequiturs:

Staller: Magst ein Geheimnis hörn: schwanger is.  
 Sepp: Warum.  
 Staller: Ebn.  
 Sepp: Nix wahr is. Alles glogn.  
 Staller: Mir ham Beweise.  
 Sepp: Des geht net.  
 Staller: Genau.  
 Sepp: Nix is.  
 Staller: Bin Test wird da gmacht. Zehn Mark kost der.  
 Sepp: Warum?

(*Stallerhof*, II, 7)

The words are reduced to sounds, as though the emotionality of this subject can only evoke grunts. Sepp's "warum", "das geht net", "nix is", are used to fend off blows. Staller's "ebn", and "genau" are not, as they would imply, words of agreement, but emphatic gestures, exclamation points. *Ebn* and *genau* also function to neutralize contradictions, to stem the breakdown of communication which at all times threatens Kroetz's dialogue. At one point Beppi tries to hit her parents. Stallerin taunts her husband with his lack of reaction:

Stallerin: Hat er eine Angst vor seinem leiblichen Kind.  
 Staller: Warum?  
 Stallerin: Ebn.  
 (Pause).

(*Geisterbahn*, I, 7)

"Ebn" is not an answer to "warum", nor is "warum" a plausible response to the Stallerin's accusation that her husband fears his own child. "Warum" is not used to mean "wieso", i.e. why do you say that, or how do you mean. "Warum", as in Sepp's use of the word above, is a defensive act. "Ebn", which is normally a term of agreement, an affirmation, is then used by the Stallerin to contain the potential quarrel, to neutralize tension.

Another empty verbal form common in Kroetz's plays is the tautological sentence: "Wenns nix nutzt, dann nutzt es nix," (*Stallerhof*, III, 4); "Was is, is" (*Geisterbahn*, II, 2); "Besser is besser" (*Geisterbahn*, II, 11). These types of sentences carry a sense of finality, of fatality and resignation. They serve to justify things as they are. Like the cliché-idiom, tautological sentences are circular and function to close off venues for response.<sup>22</sup> "Ich geh weg von dir Willy, weil ich dich verlass," (*Heimarbeit*, 12). "Da kann man nix dafür, wenn man krank is, weils einem nicht gut geht" (*Geisterbahn*, II, 10).

Another device is found in the structure of the sentences themselves. Many sentences begin with the words *wo* or *weil*. This linguistic form serves a double function: it places the speech within the idiom of the Bavarian vernacular, giving a sense of authenticity; and it lends the dialogue a false impression of question-answer communication. These words are used idiosyncratically, without any real function as questions meant to elicit a response, or as answers.

Staller: Das kost dich zehn Jahr und mich die Ehr.  
Sepp: Aber net wegn der Absicht.  
Staller: Weil das etwas nutzt.  
(Lange Pause). (*Stallerhof*, II, 7).

Staller: Jetzt bin ich ganz munter.  
Stallerin: Dann schlaf, weils sonst überhaupt nimmer geht.  
Staller: Weil man sich net auskennt.  
(Pause) (*Geisterbahn*, I, 2).

Sepp: Das is bloss ein Schmarrn, aber es stimmt.  
Beppi: Wo ich es kann.  
(Pause).  
Beppi: ...Wo is der Hund?  
Sepp: Warum?

Bepi: Wo er gsagt hat, ein neuer Hund is da.  
(Pause) (Geisterbahn, II, 3).

These forms give the impression of conversational response while they actually, again, close off conversation. Note that each *wo* or *weil* sentence is followed by a pause. This is a clear indication of how they function to end conversation despite the impression that they give (at least to the characters themselves) of doing the opposite.

The recurrence of the above verbal forms and the extreme unoriginality of Kroetz's characters' language, suggests an inherently restricted language code. This term, Restricted Code, belongs to a socio-linguistic theory developed by Basil Bernstein<sup>23</sup> and which has gained wide--though controversial--acceptance.<sup>24</sup> Bernstein's theory of Elaborated and Restricted Codes is cogently relevant to Kroetz's use of language and the insight it offers into the relationship between language structures, social milieu, and the potential for communication.

Bernstein postulates two speech systems or linguistic codes which are generated by different social structures. These two codes condition the way a speaker conceptualizes and expresses himself. Speakers of an Elaborated Code select "from a wide range of syntactic alternatives"<sup>25</sup> and it is thus hard to predict which option they will choose. They expect their listeners to be different from themselves and are therefore oriented towards a verbal *elaboration* of meaning. Shared assumptions are not taken for granted: the speakers' intent is made verbally explicit. An Elaborated Code user comes

to regard language "as a set of theoretical possibilities available for the transmission of unique experience".<sup>26</sup> His concept of self will be verbally differentiated and will become the object of special perceptual activity.

Speakers of a Restricted Code, on the other hand, own a reduced range of syntactic alternatives. They presuppose shared assumptions between speaker and listener and tend *not* to elaborate intent verbally or to make it explicit. The code is based on, and reinforces, the form of the social relationship between the speakers. That relationship--parent/child, husband/wife, lovers--determines the form of speech. In addition, the range of the code is defined by that which speaker and listener have in common. Personal differences will not be emphasized and thus the code is not available "for the transmission of unique experience" and discussion is restricted and minimal. The form of social relation which generates an Elaborated Code is rooted in the expectation of psychological difference. In the case of a Restricted Code it is the status relationship between speakers which is dominant. Elaborated Codes are person oriented, Restricted Codes tend to be status oriented and the concept of self will tend to be refracted through the implications of the status arrangements.

These codes are learned, not inherent, and are entirely dependent on sociological constraints. "The general behavior elicited from speakers of these two codes is directed toward different dimensions of signifiacnce",<sup>27</sup> the one serves to emphasize individuality, uniqueness, conceptual abstraction; the other focuses on the social role and relation, depresses a

sense of self, is oriented towards concrete, descriptive, narrative statements. This second function is typical of Kroetz's language.

Bernstein concludes that these two codes tend to be connected with learning procedures within different social classes and are culturally induced. Middle-class children tend to possess both an Elaborated and a Restricted Code while children socialized within some sections of the working-class, and especially the lower working-class, tend to be limited to a Restricted Code.

A number of elements of this theory are clearly applicable to Kroetz's figures and their language. Bernstein shows the intimate connection between social milieu and the verbal options generated; and this theme of social deprivation as the source of lingual deprivation--and vice versa--is basic to Kroetz.<sup>20</sup> The fateful tie between social status and verbal ability, between social and verbal determination, is at the heart of Kroetz's plays: his figures are imprisoned and determined by their language in a way which cannot be differentiated from their socially determined existence. In Kroetz's plays the lingual reality both mirrors and perpetuates limited and restricted lives. The language of his characters is never explicit and always assumes common, mutual intent. The extensive use of cliché-idioms and axiomatic speech supports this: they are used as a verbal shorthand to reinforce a consensus of opinion which is *assumed* ("man sagt", "es heisst") but never explicitly stated or discussed. And their use, conversely, puts an end to any need for discussion, since the verbal formula proposed

replaces elaboration of meaning. The resultant language is highly unoriginal and makes original thought virtually impossible. This striking lack of originality belies Chomsky's contention that most utterances are unique and newly formed for each occasion (the Chomskian ideal of "free syntax"), and that the creativity of language is one of its most salient characteristics. Yet, Chomsky too admits that although the predisposition for language is "innate", it requires definite environmental conditions for the "maturation" of those innate structures.<sup>29</sup> This is Bernstein's point. He believes that one of the chief means by which the biological is transformed into the cultural is through language. Language lies "at the heart of the problem of how culture is transmitted".<sup>30</sup> Kroetz's plays all focus on the family and on the incapacity to transmit culture, values, or any of the basic humanizing qualities since the means of transmission--language--is a destroyed and destructive tool. The lack of sufficient language in these plays not only makes transmission impossible, more tragically, it defeats the possibility of ever acquiring any of those basic values.

Another of Bernstein's points which is particularly valid for Kroetz is the lack of selfhood which a Restricted Code seems to generate: the self is subordinated to a social role. This does much to explain the rigid formulas which pass as communication between child and parent, man and woman, employer and employee. As Sepp says of himself, "Bloss, wo ich immer der Schwächer gwesen bin...Da kann man sich net wehrn, wenn man der Schwächere is" (*Geistenbahn*, II, 1). Women particularly suffer:

Karl: Weinen, des kannst.  
Marie: Ich sag ja gar nix.  
Karl: Is auch besser, wennst still bist.  
Marie: Ich glaub dirs eh, du bist der Mann und ich die Frau.  
Karl: Genau. Wennst es nur einsiehst.  
(*Nichis Blut*, 4)

It is Karl who forces Marie to abort her child. It is Willy who leads Martha to try to abort hers (*Heimarbeit*). The best example is Beppi, verbally backward Beppi who is never consulted by her parents on any of the crucial decisions they make about her life. When told that her son would be put into a Home she threatens suicide, but this is ignored. Beppi then takes a stick of firewood and threatens to hit her parents. It is this act of self-assertion which draws a reaction--but not to her as an individual. Staller explains her aberration quite simply: "Das is, wells eine Mutter is. Das unterschätzt man" (*Geisterbahn*, I, 7). Her role as a mother is seen as the source of this action, it is not attributed to her as a person.

Clichés, quotations, and semantic blanks characterize the restricted speech of Kroetz's plays, but they only partially define the Kroetzian dialogue. For that dialogue is composed not only of speech but also of silences, of pauses which are an essential element and an inherent part of the language itself. Pauses are one of Kroetz's most basic stage techniques and of paramount importance for the reading and interpretation of his plays. Kroetz himself continuously stresses their importance. "Das ausgeprägteste Verhalten meiner Figuren liegt im Schweigen; denn ihre Sprache funktioniert nicht."<sup>21</sup> In the stage directions for *Stallerhof* Kroetz breaks down the various types of pauses (dash sign, pause within



dialogue, pause between sentences, long pause) into exact units of 5 to 30 seconds each, which he insists must be strictly adhered to if the play is to become "transparent and übersetzbar". In *Heimarbeit* he goes so far as to indicate the minimum time a scene should last on stage, often demanding three to four minutes of a scene of only twenty lines. The word "Pause" or "Lange Pause" occurs after every few lines. This is especially true of *Stallerhof* and *Geisterbahn* in which the most common conversational pattern is a unit of 3 to 8 lines ending with a pause. Often, especially if the subject under discussion is a serious one, pauses may follow every line or two. Kroetz's pauses are blank spaces, transitions from one fragment of speech to another, from one cliché to the next. Unlike e.g. Pinter's pauses, they are not uneasy or menacing, they do not contain and build tension--on the contrary: they are a safety valve, an escape route. Pinter's pauses are only seemingly empty, actually they are emotionally charged; within them meanings multiply, centers of power shift; they are a direct continuation of the dialogue. Kroetz's pauses are the opposite, they mark the end of a unit of tension, a sudden dissipation of whatever slight interaction the dialogue may have created.<sup>22</sup> Like timid boxers, Kroetz's characters say their few lines and then return to their corners. The subject may be continued in the next round, but no cumulative power is carried over from one unit to the next. This serves to increase the terrible isolation in which Kroetz's dialogue exists. Since each unit exists in isolation, continuity and consistency of opinion is neither expected nor found. Speech and thought are disjointed, almost arbitrary, and the lack of cumulative thought makes it impossible to reach rational

decisions. When discussions are attempted (as in the attempt to decide what to do about the pregnant Beppi, quoted above) they usually end in a stalemate, without a decision having been made. "Wenn man so drüber redt, kommt man immer tiefer hinein und will es gar net. Ganz durchnander kommt man" Staller admits in despair when he and his wife try to decide what to do about their grandson (*Geisterbahn*, I, 2). Talk only leads to confusion. The connection between decision-making and reflection is obvious. Decisions are the outcome of thought and for thought the capacity for logical and cumulative reflection is a necessary precondition. Kroetz's characters are fond of the expression "Jeder is seines Glückes Schmied" (*Stallerhof*, I, 4; *Geisterbahn*, II, 1 and 2), yet they are obviously not the forgers of their fates. As I will discuss below, it is indeed their extreme inability to create their own lives which characterizes them all. The "decisions" which they make are not the outcome of free will: they are mindless reactions. And the most common reaction to crisis--in which decisions become imperative--is a sudden and isolated act of violence. Lacking all recourse to verbal self-assertion violence erupts in its stead.

Kroetz's fragmented dialogue is paralleled by the sudden outbursts of violence; more precisely, it *underlies* the violence. The failure of speech shuts out all other options. Violence exists in isolation, as do the fragments of speech, and occurs without comment, unmediated, unreflected. Beppi suffocates her baby suddenly, and in silence. Willy's drowning of Martha's infant is done completely in pantomime. Kroetz masks his intentions until the end. In a long, silent scene Willy prepares the bath-

water, heats it and tests the temperature carefully. He then washes the baby with a sponge "gründlich und nicht ungeschickt. Dann ertränkt er das Baby im Bottich. Er lässt das Baby im Bottich liegen und trocknet sich die Hände am Handtuch am Ofen ab...Dann räumt er auf" (sc. 16). Willy kills the infant without any emotion. The murder gains in horror by his unfeeling comment, made later to Martha, "Ein Tod wie jeder andere" (sc. 19). Beppi's rape by Sepp is even more sudden and unexpected. Sepp has brought the retarded Beppi to a country fair and takes her for a ride on a ghost train. When they get off the train Beppi in fear silently fouls her pants and Sepp helps her to clean herself. Beppi never utters a word during the entire scene:

Sepp: Hast dich anmacht?--Angmacht, geh mit.--Hast eine Angst ghabt?

(Beppi ganz verwirt.)

Sepp: Oder der Likör. Komm, bringen mir in Ordnung... Hosenscheisser.--Lass mich. (Putzt sie ab). Zieh die Unterhosen aus, so kannst net weiter.

(Bepi tut es.)

Sepp: Putz dich ab damit.--Lass mich. (Er putzt sie ab, nimmt sein Taschentuch, putzt sie damit ab.) Geht schon wieder. Geh her.

(Nimmt sie, entjungfert sie.)

(Stallerhof, II, 1)

The switch from paternal care to brutal rape is sudden and presented without comment. Sepp takes Beppi like an animal, her silence and helplessness seem to elicit it. Later in *Geisterbahn*, when Sepp and Beppi are living together, Sepp says to her, "Die Beppi is wie ein Hund, der net redn kann" (II, 10). When language does precede violence, it is always in the form of a banal cliché. The abortions in both *Heimarbeit* and *Nichis*

*Blut* are preceded by the words "Probieren geht über studieren", and this same cliché is the comment which initiates the rifle duel at the end of *Männersache*.

Kroetz wrote that "Menschen, die gelernt haben zu reden, können sich verständigen, oder, was wichtiger ist, sie können sich wehren".<sup>23</sup> This thought on the connection between language and self-defence is appropriate for all the above mentioned acts of violence, but it is most ironically reflected in scene 5 of *Michis Blut*, titled, significantly, "Wiederherstellung der Ordnung". Marie lies with her legs spread, passively accepting the soap-water solution which Karl pours into her womb in order to abort the child who threatens their "orderly" life. While this horrifying procedure takes place--three times, since "Alle gutn dinge sind drei"--Marie, grunting but hopeful, expresses her faith in the superiority of man over beast--of which this act of abortion is supposedly an example:

Marie: Em. Das is der Unterschied, dass sich ein Viech ned wehrn kann, bald ihm was nicht passt.

Karl: Mir wehrn uns.

Marie: Genau.

The irony is wrenching. The speechless, like beasts, are in fact defenseless; and the equation of the two is itself a recurrent theme in Kroetz's early plays.

Animals, especially dogs, play an important role in these plays. In *Männersache*, Martha apparently has a relationship of sodomy with her German

Shepherd mongrel Rolfi. She finds comfort and companionship from her lonely and loveless life in the dumb submissiveness of a dog. Later, when a relationship develops between her and Otto, a vulgar and abusive man, it becomes clear that not only was Rolfi the better lover, but also a kinder, more compassionate friend.<sup>24</sup> In *Stallerhof*, Sepp's relationship with his dog is virtually paternal. He speaks to his dog in the same words that the Stallerin uses to speak with the infant Georg in *Geisterbahn*. The parallel is obvious and pointed:

**Sepp:** Jetzt tu halt essn. (Pause) Magst net? (Pause.) Was anders hab ich net...Wennst es net frisst, kriegts die Katz. Dann wirst schaun, wennst ein Hunger hast. Was man ihm hinstellt, tut ein braver Hund essn, oder weisst des net. (*Stallerhof*, I, 6)

**Stallerin:** ...Jetzt tun mir einmal essn.... Magst net? (Pause.) Was anderes ham mir net. (Pause.) Wenn er es net mag, kriegn es die Katzn. Dann wird er aber schaun, wenn er Hunger hat. Ein gutes Kind isst, was auf den Tisch kommt, oder weisst das net? (*Geisterbahn*, I, 3)

The dog is Sepp's only companion, and as with Martha his friendship is valued above that of men. Sepp's dog is eventually poisoned, apparently by Staller as revenge. The only time that Sepp shows any true emotion is when he packs to leave the Stallerhof, packing his dead dog into a suitcase, to take with him. Beppi begs Sepp to remain with her, but he can only cry for his dog. "Wo der Hund tot is, halt mich nix mehr" (II, 10). Dumb animal submissiveness, naturalness and companionship is contrasted with the brutality of humans who are equally dumb and submissive, but no longer natural.<sup>25</sup> The inability to communicate is not innocent, it is not natural to man, as it is to dogs. Beastiality becomes evident in the violence which

replaces language and in the lack of morality and a dimension of mind for which man, unlike dogs, must suffer.

The suffering of the verbally deprived is painfully apparent in *Nichis Blut*. This short one-act play places the theme of speechlessness overtly within the text; the inability to communicate is contrasted with the dire need to make human contact. This play differs from Kroetz's other early plays in a few important aspects. It contains a rawer, more vulgar language, full of obscenities and invective. In *Stallerhof* and *Geisterbahn* language determines the characters' lives through its restrictiveness, through the absence of verbal options. Quotes, clichés, and silences are the staples of a maimed and stricken speech. In *Nichis Blut* even these devices deteriorate and speech becomes verbal abuse, sad, depleted abuse, totally lacking in originality. When it was first printed, the play carried the subtitle "Ein Requiem auf Bayrisch".<sup>26</sup> The Bavarian dialect is here far heavier than in Kroetz's other plays, and as Kroetz wrote: "Für mich ist das Bayrische eine geschundene Sprache, eine Volkssprache, eine traurige Sprache."<sup>27</sup> The sadness of inhuman speech indeed permeates the play. *Nichis Blut* consists of 15 short scenes of almost pure dialogue, with very few actions. It contains only two characters, Marie and Karl, and takes place entirely within their one room. The central event is an unexpected pregnancy, a crude abortion, and the resultant painful death of Marie. So far the play is consistent with most of Kroetz's early plays, many of which contain short scenes, few characters in claustrophobic settings, and in which the theme of undesired pregnancy, abortion, and infant death or

murder recurs almost compulsively. Two unusual details are however immediately obvious: each of the 15 scenes is preceded by a title which often ironically comments on the following dialogue; and the play contains *no* stage directions or comments. No setting is given, no stage action is described and, most suprising, no pauses are indicated. Directions for actions--such as the abortion scene (5) which occurs graphically on stage--must be inferred from the dialogue itself. Silences too emerge only from what is said; Marie: "--Wegen was redstn nix mehr?" (5). Yet while Kroetz appears to have removed the last traces of any author intrusion, he introduces the device of scene titles which returns the author as commentator.<sup>30</sup> This device is more than a means of ironic comment: it is a reflection on the language of his characters. The titles have a literary ring; they pin-point in a few well chosen words the intent or action of the scene--and those words are drawn from a vocabulary to which his characters have no access: "Gedanken zur Liebe", "Pläneschneiden", "Abfindung und Bilanz", "Zukunft und Vernunft", "Wahrheitsfindung". The titles are conceptualizations; they are a concrete demonstration of a language unavailable to the characters, and whose lack is the source of their suffering.

In each dialogue the two characters seek ways to make contact. Marie still believes in speech and has the urgent need to say something which would break through the meanness of their communication and the misery of their lives. Karl has no faith in speech "Was eh kein gut tut mit uns" (15). Speech only leads to abuse and he seeks relief--and perhaps

communion--through silence. "Wissen müsst man halt, wie man dran is, dann tät man es schon ändern" Marie at one point says (2). But the words at their disposal and their inability to develop a dialogue beyond the stock phrases which invariably lead to aggression, makes such knowledge impossible.

The first scene already contains these themes. It is ironically entitled "Gespräch zu Tisch"--Table Conversations, with its connotation of cultured small-talk--and consists entirely of seemingly unmotivated invective:

Marie: Wenn mir nur ein Zimmer ham, gehet aufn Abort.  
Karl: Weils da kalt is.  
Marie: Aber alles kann man sich ned gfalln lassn.  
Karl: Genau.  
Marie: Weilst eine Sau bist.  
Karl: Das bist du, was bin denn ich?  
Marie: Harrisch bist.  
Karl: Das bist du, was bin denn ich?  
Marie: Geil bist, aber zambringen tust nix.  
Karl: Das bist du, was bin denn ich?--Das is mir auch wurscht.

The scene opens in mid-conversation. The ugly, childish taunting ("Das bist du, was bin denn ich?") is obviously a stock response to their endless fights and bickering of this sort. The recurrent theme of the play already appears within the worn banalities of their strife: Marie's need for speech, and Karl's desire for silence.

Marie: Wenn man ein braucht und er merkt es, dann weisse er es  
ned zum schätz'n.--Willst ein Friedn von meiner.  
Karl: Bine Ruh mag ich.  
Marie: Sagt eh niemand etwas.  
Karl: Mag nimmer.



Marie is trying to provoke Karl into admitting some affection for her, but each sentence draws only the expected belligerent response. When Marie starts to cry Karl accuses her of not understanding what he's saying, but this too is followed by an automatic aggressive cliché:

**Karl:** --Hör auf zum weinen, wennst nicht mitkommst, was man sagt.  
**Marie:** Ich versteh mir genug.  
**Karl:** Weilst blöd bist.  
**Marie:** Lieber blöd, wie eine Sau.  
**Karl:** Mögn tu ich ebn nimmer...  
Was redet dann und mischt dich ein?  
**Marie:** Hab auch ein Recht.  
**Karl:** Nix hast du.

Karl is weary of the inevitable aggression which speech evokes ("Mag nimmer"). He is drawn to an animal dumbness which is in any case inherent in their incapacity for meaningful speech. Marie's defensive "Sagt eh niemand etwas" and "Hab auch ein Recht" are typical and revealing: after two dozen lines of cruelties nothing has been said; but as a human being she senses that she has the right to be able to speak and create meaning.

**Marie:** Weil ich auch ein mensch bin.  
**Karl:** Weil das was is.

(13)

Scene 2, equally ironically titled "Gedanken zur Liebe", continues the mutual recriminations. Marie wants to know "wie man dran is" (Karl: "Schlecht"), whether there's any love left between them.

**Marie:** Wenn ich mich ned mit dir einlassen hätt!  
**Karl:** Was dann?  
**Marie:** Das sag ich nicht.  
**Karl:** Weil dir nix einfallt.

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Marie: Mir werd nix einfalln.  
Karl: Genau.--Lauter.  
Marie: Ich hätt viel zum Sagn. Da tätst aber schaun.

"Ich hätt viel zum Sagn." The staggering unoriginality and helplessness of her language is coupled with a desperate need to say something of meaning, to astound Karl, "Da tätst aber schaun". Although neither Marie nor Karl consciously discuss language, it recurs as a subject in almost every scene. And Karl's reaction is always to beg for silence:

Karl: Red nicht.  
Marie: Bin schon still. (2)  
  
Marie: Ich sag ja gar nix.  
Karl: Is auch besser, wennst still bist. (4)  
  
Karl: Redst.  
Marie: Ich sag eh nix. (12)

In scene 14, titled "Retungsversuche"--Attempts at Salvation-- a dying Marie tries to make sense of the death of her aborted child, to find some 'salvation' through an understanding of her fate. Typically, this is done by quoting a cliché notion of human suffering:

Marie: Eine jede Minutn verhungert ein Kind, heisst es.  
Karl: Willst was?  
Marie: Bestimmt nicht. Aber redn wird man noch dürfn.  
Karl: Red is Silber und Schweign is Gold, heisst es.  
Oder weisst das nicht?  
Marie: Das werd ich nicht wissen.  
Karl: Nachad is man still, oder vielleicht nicht.  
Marie: Bim Menschn wie ich, wo am Sterbn is, is leicht,  
das Redn verbietn.

These lines contain both of their positions, Marie's need for speech, Karl's for silence: and both are equally clichéic and uncomprehending. Karl has given up on seeking 'meaning'. For him, 'Silence is Golden'. Marie, realizing that she is "am Sterbn", seeks some final comfort in the knowledge of the universality of death: 'It is said that every minute a child dies of huunger.' This quoted bit of 'folk-wisdom' places her child's death, and her own, within a universal--if also a banal--context. It denies the responsibility of her own act, an act which led to these deaths, but over which she seems to have had as little control as over the anonymous deaths by hunger.

Richard Gilman wrote of this play:

...the painfulness of these exchanges rises both from their substance, naturally, but even more from their relation to the play's events or, more accurately, the expected significance of those events, their 'values'...The clichés, the repetitions of banalities, the bromides all testify to the stricken nature of their speech...the entire absence of originality, the queer and terrifying sense it gives of not having been created by them but of having instead passed through them, as it were. It is as though their language has been come upon, picked up, scavenged....<sup>39</sup>

The lack of originality is insidious; and its verbal manifestation covers a deeper lack of morality and compassion. Morality and compassion are closely related, and highly dependent on a capacity for authentic self-expression. Compassion for the suffering of others--a trait so lacking in Kroetz's characters--depends on the capacity to *imagine* anothers' pain. The last line of *Nichis Blut*, spoken by Karl after Marie has apparently died,

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Richard Gilman wrote of this play:

...the painfulness of these exchanges rises both from their substance, naturally, but even more from their relation to the play's events or, more accurately, the expected significance of those events, their 'values'...The clichés, the repetitions of banalities, the bromides all testify to the stricken nature of their speech...the entire absence of originality, the queer and terrifying sense it gives of not having been created by them but of having instead passed through them, as it were. It is as though their language has been come upon, picked up, scavenged....<sup>39</sup>

The lack of originality is insidious; and its verbal manifestation covers a deeper lack of morality and compassion. Morality and compassion are closely related, and highly dependent on a capacity for authentic self-expression. Compassion for the suffering of others--a trait so lacking in Kroetz's characters--depends on the capacity to *imagine* anothers' pain. The last line of *Nichis Blut*, spoken by Karl after Marie has apparently died,

is "...Hörst ned? Wer ned hörn will, muss fühl'n, verstehst?" The irony of this sentence applies to all of Kroetz's plays; for those who cannot listen and understand each other, can't in fact feel. Verbal and emotional imagination are inseparable. To say of the murder of an infant "Bin Tod wie jeder andere" requires a peculiar lack of imagination--and compassion. In this Kroetz's characters seem almost interchangeable. The same expressions recur in play after play, the same attitudes and mindless brutalities. In speech and action, in selfhood and relationships, they all seem disturbingly alike: isolated, uncomprehending, devoid of emotional imagination. All of the characters seem formed by the same mold--and indeed they are: by the mold of a language which not only usurps their individuality but becomes, finally, their fate. The language-structure which they possess, which forms their consciousness, is so dominant in its influence on their lives that it can be said to fulfill the function of fate: parallel e.g. to heredity in Naturalist drama.<sup>40</sup> In Ibsen's *Ghosts*, Oswald's hereditary syphilis is his fate. No willed action can circumvent this fact of a pre-determined imbecility and painful death. As Burger/von Matt suggest, the element of fate within a play can be understood as those factors which objectively limit the characters' freedom, and determine their options.<sup>41</sup> This is certainly true of language here. To say that Kroetz's characters are determined by their language is not to deny the impact of social oppression and poverty, but to claim that Kroetz has chosen to channel these factors into the resultant dominant reality of socio-linguistic determination. This is poignantly demonstrated by Sepp who, in *Geisterbahn*, tries to verbalize a vision which he vaguely has of

his son's future. His son will be different: he will be powerful, take initiative. As Sepp puts it: "Der Bub wird es ihnen zeigen was mir können! Der werd gar net fragn, ob er gfragt is, der wird es ihnen einfach sagn, ohne dass er aufgrufn is..." (II, 3). Sepp's vision is totally rooted in the son's verbal freedom, in his ability to "tell them" without being called upon, to exercise free verbal options, to control his fate. Ironically, Sepp's stilted, undeveloped sentence, demonstrates only too clearly the limited, hopeless language which the son will inevitably learn from his father--and which will determine *his* future, as it has Sepp's.

According to Kroetz, there is a direct relationship between "Sprachgewalt und Dumpfheit", a relationship which all of his plays demonstrate. "Es gibt eine Enteignung durch Vorenthaltung der Sprache. Das Proletariat in der Provinz kann sich nicht ausdrücken, kann sich nicht verständigen, kann sich nicht organisieren. Das ist sein *Schicksal*."<sup>42</sup> Their language is not only a reflection of poverty, it *is* their poverty--and a far more pessimistic poverty than mere material want. Language deprivation is the key reason for the utter hopelessness of Kroetz's plays. Change is inconceivable without consciousness, and there can be no consciousness without language: through which thought is not only expressed, but more importantly, formed. "Wennst redst bist ein anderer Mensch," Sepp promises Beppi (*Geisterbahn*, II, 3). But this hope, that through mastering language Beppi can change her fate, is no longer possible. There proves to be no way out of the inarticulateness which confines and brutalizes them all.

EDWARD BOND: Saved?

Verbal deprivation has also been dramatically explored outside of Germany. In England Arnold Wesker made language the theme of his play *Roots* (1959) which centers around the poor, uneducated Bryant family of rural Norfolk. *Roots* is more ideological than Kroetz's early plays (and actually has more in common with his later plays, e.g. *Das Nest*). It portrays a "re-education" process. Beatie Bryant returns for a visit to Norfolk from London, where she has become politicized through her relationship with a Socialist intellectual, Ronnie Kahn. She brings her new social and verbal consciousness home with her. Thus, unlike Kroetz, Wesker offers us a spokesman for a different verbal world.

**Beatie:** ...Do you know what language is?...It's bridges, so that you can get safely from one place to another. And the more bridges you know about the more places you can see...Use your bridges...It took thousands of years to build them, use them!  
(Act I)

Beatie tries to awaken her family to their own oppressed lives and debased language; and although she fails--"Whatever she will do they will continue to live as before"--the outcome of the play is not totally pessimistic. She herself does escape their fate, and by the end of the play is "articulate at last" (Act III). Wesker focuses on the equation between language and consciousness, language and power. Beatie Bryant is perhaps not unlike Shaw's Liza Doolittle who is also "recreated" through speech, a change which Shaw claims "is neither impossible nor uncommon".<sup>43</sup> Wesker too

believes in the capacity for change. He presents lack of articulateness as a deprivation, but not as hopeless. He is far more optimistic than is a fellow Englishman, Edward Bond, in his play *Saved*.

*Saved* presents a group of characters who are just as inarticulate as Kroetz's--but with a difference. Kroetz's language is sparse and lean, and intersected by long silences. It is an empty language, fragmented, weak, isolated; and the violence which reflects the speech is also sporadic and dumb. Bond's language in *Saved* is much more insistent and fluent. It is a mean-spirited speech, goading, full of taunts and curses, barbs and threats. The inarticulate barrage of language grates, as we shall see, not only on the audience--but on the characters, provoking them; and the violence of the play is a direct continuation and logical conclusion of verbal maliciousness. The cruelty of stunted speech is transformed into equally cruel action.

Bond's language is not stylized, in fact it is naturalistic to a fault.<sup>44</sup> His characters speak the dialect of South London, and the printed play contains 27 footnotes, translations from the dialect to standard English--not only for its American readers, but for the English as well.<sup>45</sup> The realism of his language sets up the socio-linguistic reality within which Bond's characters exist. It is a reality as limiting and stultifying as Kroetz's but with an added agility, the sly agility of an urban animal who needs to maneuver within the pressures of impoverished city life. The language reflects, as in Kroetz's plays, an inability for thought or



compassion. It is coarse and vulgar and strikes out in repetitive, almost automatic, attack. The characters in *Saved* are all of the lowest social class, products and progenitors of a socially induced violence. "I write about violence as naturally as Jane Austen wrote about manners. Violence shapes and obsesses our society...It would be immoral not to write about violence" claims Bond.<sup>46</sup> The language creates and reflects this violence-- but it also functions to maintain and perpetuate it.

*Saved* consists of 13 scenes. Its characters fall into two groups and display, correspondingly, two slightly different functions of language. The first group is the family members: Mary and Harry, two middle-aged working-class people who have not spoken a word to each other in over twenty years; Pam, their daughter, 23, vulgar; and Len, a young man she picks up and seduces in scene 1 and who consequently moves in as a paying tenant and becomes part of the family. The second group is a street gang of uneducated, manual laborers, bullies who always appear together. Their leader is Fred, with whom Pam is desperately in love, and who is also Len's "mate". The story takes place over a number of years, but the characters remain consistent in attitude and language, throughout. The first three scenes show the courtship of Pam and Len. Scene 4 shows the family together at home. Pam now has a baby, but it is not Len's; she has long since tired of him and has taken up with Fred who in turn, is sick of her. Pam and Len have a very bad relationship, she wants him to move out, but he tenaciously hangs on, hoping perhaps to regain her affection. The center of the play is scene 6 in which Pam, to spite Fred, abandons her child in the park and the

infant is tortured and stoned to death by the gang. For this Fred is arrested and sent to prison; Pam waits for him and continues to perseue him when he is released. The rest of the play shows the degenerating and increasingly brutal relationships within the family. The last scene, scene 13, is almost totally silent, as the family sits together in the living room while Len mends a chair. It is, in its silence, the most eloquent scene in the play.

*Saved* opened to a private audience at the Royal Court Theatre in London, in 1965, and immediately received mostly outraged reviews. Herbert Ketzmer of the (London) *Daily Express* wrote of the characters "who, almost without exception, are foul-mouthed, dirty-minded, illiterate and barely to be judged on any recognizable human level at all".<sup>47</sup> Irving Wardle of the *London Times* called "the writing itself...a systematic degradation of the human animal".<sup>48</sup> J.C. Trewin of *The Illustrated London News* had this to say:

It may not be the feeblest thing I have seen on any stage, but it is certainly the nastiest, and contains perhaps the most horrid scene in the contemporary theatre...The author's single asset, if this is the word, is an ear for the loose lingo of vicious teenagers and the semi-articulate banalities of their elders. He reproduces the dialogue faithfully...a recording of the slovenly, obscene horrors of everyday speech....<sup>49</sup>

Not all of the critics were detractors, favorable reviews were eventually also forthcoming<sup>50</sup> but these reviews pinpoint the elements of *Saved* which interest me: the inarticulate, banal and vicious language; and the extreme violence which not only accompanies the language, but is a direct outgrowth

and continuation of verbal violence. I will focus on two themes of the play: the infant murder of scene 6, which is also prefigured in a number of passages; and the relationship of cruel silence between Harry and Mary, and its reflection in the relationship of Pam and Len.

Speech in *Saved* is basically a form of attack. There are only a few rare moments in which it is used for something resembling communication; its general function is to repel intimacy and contact. There are two basic modes of speech: the "group-language" which is used by the gang; and the more personal form of dialogue which takes place between two speakers, usually within the family unit. Both of these modes of speech are highly aggressive and restricted, but the group language is an impersonal type of viciousness. It is a style of speech common to all the group members, and in a sense, serves as a bond between them.

Pete: 'Ow's it then?

Mike: Bugged up.

Colin: Like your arse.

Mike: Like your flippin' ear in a minute.

Pete: I--I!

Mike: Laugh. (sc. 6).<sup>51</sup>

Colin: 'Ere we are again.

Barry: Wipe yer boots.

Mike: On you!

Barry: Were we sittin'?

Mike: On yer 'ead!

Barry: On me arse!

Liz: Don't know 'ow 'e tells the difference. (sc. 10)

This peurile and flippant sort of aggression is automatic, expected, and unlocalized.

Inter-personal speech is somewhat more varied. At its most benign it is used to ward off contact. Scene 2, the only idyllic scene in the play, shows Len and Pam in a rowboat in the park--the same park in which the infant will later be killed. Len is trying to find out a little about Pam and her family. Len is the central character of the play and differs from the others in that he at least makes some attempts at intimacy. He asks questions--which are usually repelled--and even has hopes for the future. Bond wrote in the "Author's Note" to the play that Len "is naturally good, in spite of his upbringing and environment, and he remains good in spite of the pressures of the play...He lives with people at their worst and most hopeless...and does not turn away for them".<sup>52</sup> But Pam is incapable of opening up to Len's questions. When asked whether her mother likes Len, her response is typical:

Pam: Never arst.  
Len: Thought she might a said.  
Pam: Never listen.  
Len: O.

Later he asks about the silence between the parents:

Len: 'Ow'd it start?  
Pam: Never arst.  
Len: No one said?  
Pam: Never listen. It's their life.

Len's curiosity is aroused. How do they communicate? Do they write notes to each other?

Pam: No need.  
Len: They must.  
Pam: No.  
Len: Why?  
Pam: Nothin' t'say...Talk about something else.

Never asked, never listen, nothing to say. This characterizes the speech and the relationships between the family members. "No one listens," Pam will later cry in despair (sc. 11), and the connection between not listening and not responding--verbally and emotionally--becomes one of the themes of the play. This is demonstrated quite painfully in scene 4. By now Len has settled into the family almost like a son. This scene is the first time we see the whole family together and it sets the pattern of their inter-relationship throughout. Pam watches TV and puts on make-up. Mary sets the table for Len's dinner, Harry sits in silence. The conversation is all fragments of trivial bickering and circular, repetitive fighting. But it is lifted to something quite horrible by the fact that throughout, "without a break until the end of the scene", we hear the baby crying. Its cries get louder and more desperate, but nobody moves to help it.

(The baby screams with rage. After a while Mary lifts her head in the direction of the screams.)

**Mary:** Pam-laa! (Slight pause. Pam stands and puts her cosmetics in a little bag. She goes to the TV set. *She turns up the volume.* She goes back to the couch and sits).  
There's plenty of left-overs.

**Len:** Full up.

**Mary:** An' there's rhubarb and custard.

**Len:** O.

(Pause. The baby chokes)

**Pam:** Too lazy t' get up an' fetch it.

**Mary:** Don't start. Let's 'ave a bit a peace for one night.

**Pam:** 'Is last servant died a over-work.

**Len:** I ain' finished this, nosey...

**Mary:** (Watching TV) I ain' going' up for yer... (Pause, to Len.)  
Busy?

**Len:** Murder.

**Mary:** (Watching TV) Weather don't 'elp.

**Len:** (Still watching TV). Eh? (The baby whimpers pitifully.)

It's a fairly long scene and the only humane--though useless--comment about the suffering child is Len's hopeful "It'll cry itself t'sleep". The baby's cries are treated as noise to be drowned out by the noise of the TV set or the trivial chatter ("Weather don't 'elp") of the indifferent. The callous insensitivity to the need of the infant sets up the violence which will be directed against him in scene 6.

Scene 6 is complex and carefully structured. It contains two sections of personal talk and then the gang enters and works itself up, through casual verbal aggression, to the physical violence which finally ensues. This violence, in contrast to that in Kroetz's plays, does not "erupt". It is not sudden or unexpected. Violence emerges gradually, out of the web of verbal aggression which precedes it, accompanies it, and is indeed an integral part of it.

The obscene murder in Scene 6 is already foreshadowed by a section of dialogue in scene 3, which is the first time we meet the gang. Pete, Barry, Mike and Colin are all assembled in the park. Pete is dressed up for a funeral, the funeral of a boy "only ten or twelve" whom he has run over with his car:

Pete: ...'E come runnin' round be'ind the bus. Only a nipper.  
Like a flash I thought right, yer nasty bastard. Only ten  
or twelve. I jumps right down on me revver an' bang I got  
'im on me offside an' 'e shoots right out under this lorry  
comin' straight on.

Mike: Crunch.

Colin: Blood all over the shop.

Mike: The Fall a the Roman Empire...

Colin: What a giggle, though.

Mike: Accidents is legal.  
Colin: Can't touch yer...  
Pete: Rraammmmmmmmmmm!  
Colin: Bad for the body work...Ruined 'is paint work.

Barry, who is jealous of the attention Pete is getting, claims that he's "done blokes in" too. "More'n you 'ad 'ot dinners. In the jungle. Shootin' up the yeller-niggers. An' cut 'em up after with the ol' pig-sticker. Yeh." The repulsiveness of this dialogue is actually an extension of the obscenity which is their only mode of communication. But it warns us of violence to come; for people who can talk like this are apt to be no better than their speech. Another reference to a brutal child death precedes this in scene 2. Pam tells Len, in a few fragmented phrases and without any apparent emotion, that her parents had a son before she was born, during the war.

Len: Theirs?  
Pam: Yeh.  
Len: I ain' seen 'im.  
Pam: Dead.  
Len: O.  
Pam: A bomb in a park.  
Len: That what made 'em go funny?  
Pam: No. I come after.  
Len: What a life.

That's all we learn of him, "dead", and the most eloquent reaction of which Len is capable is the shabby fatuity, "What a life". Again the death was violent and took place in a park, and again it evokes, at best, indifference.

Scene 6 begins with Len and Fred fishing in the park. Len tries to talk about Pam who is suffering from Fred's neglect, but Fred repulses any personal discussion, "I come out for the fishin. I don't wanna 'ear all your ol' crap". Fred cuts Len off by turning the discussion to the bait which has wriggled off his hook. He then proceeds in graphic detail to teach Len how to hook a worm.

Fred: Right, yer take yer worm. Yer roll it in yer 'and t' knock it out. Thass first. Then yer break a bit off...Now yer thread yer 'ook through this bit. Ta. Yer thread yer other bit on the 'ook, but yer leave a fair bit 'angin' off like that, why, t'wriggle in the water...Main thing, keep it neat.

There are a few connotations to this "lesson". One is sexual, Fred is teaching Len his superior techniques. The other connotation of the indifferent torturing of a worm is of course to point us towards the torture of the child, which will follow. In the next section Pam enters the park pushing the baby carriage. She has come to beg Fred to spend the night with her "juss this last time". Their "discussion" is carried out in short fragmented sentences, in the pared-down line of five or six syllables which characterizes the blunt, tense rhythm of Bond's stifled speech.<sup>53</sup> The child is used by Pam as "bait" with which to capture Fred; she appeals to him as a father:

Pam: ...That kid ought a be in bed. Less take it 'ome, Fred.  
It's 'ad newmoanier once.

Fred: You take it 'ome...

Pam: Yer ain' seen it in a long time, 'ave yer? (she turns the pram around.) It's puttin' on weight...

Fred: Yeh, lovely. (He looks away.)



At the same time she promises that the child won't disturb them, "Won't wake up till t'morra": it's been drugged with asperins. When Fred finally rejects her she explodes, and as revenge leaves the park, leaving the child behind with him, "An' yer can take yer bloody bastard round yer tart's".

The gang enters the park in mid-conversation, taunting each other as usual. They see the carriage and direct their aggression towards it, but it is at first playful aggression; the type which characterizes their mutual relationships. It is important to note that their smirking, vulgar humor will take on its exact parallel in physical action:

Barry: ...'Oo's 'e look like? (They laugh.)  
Mike: Don't stick your ugly mug in its face!  
Pete: It'll crap itself t'death...  
Fred: You wake it up an' yer can put it t'sleep.  
(Colin and Pete laugh.)  
Barry: Put it t'sleep?  
Colin: 'E'll put it t'sleep for good.  
Pete: With a brick.

The threats are not seriously meant, but once they have been made they become possibilities; in fact the baby is eventually smeared in its own excrement and the "brick" becomes stones which do "put it t'sleep for good". The references to death and murder multiply, all still in a spirit of "play" but with a growing sense of real aggression. Barry, pushing the pram, sings the child a mock lullaby:

Barry: Rock a bye baby on a tree top,  
When the wind blows the cradle will rock,  
When the bough breaks the cradle will fall,  
And down will come baby and cradle and tree an'  
bash its little brains out an' dad'll scoop 'em

up and use 'em for bait.  
(They laugh.)  
Fred: Save money.

As one German critic put it, "Die Tat bereitet sich in makabren 'Scherzen' vor; wer so redet, handelt auch so..."<sup>54</sup> Again the child is equated with Fred's worms, a helpless victim of unthinking violence. The game gets more serious when the gang notices that the child is awake, quivering and shaking but unable to utter a sound. They pull its hair to draw a response.

Barry: It don't say nothin'.  
Colin: Little bleeder's 'alf dead a fright.  
Mike: Still awake.  
Pete: Ain't co-operatin'.

"Ain' co-operatin'": the drugged infant isn't responding as they expect, and its silence seems to enrage them. The violence grows as the gang members egg each other on with growing viciousness.

Pete: Give it a punch.  
Mike: Yeh less!  
Colin: There's no one about! (Pete punches it.) Ugh!  
Mind yer don't 'urt it.  
Mike: Yer can't.  
Barry: Not at that age.  
Mike: Course yer can't, no feelin's.  
Pete: Like animals.  
Mike: 'It it again.  
Colin: I can't see!  
Barry: 'Arder.  
Pete: Yeh.  
Barry: Like that! (He hits it.)  
Colin: An' that! (He also hits it.)  
Mike: What a giggle!  
Pete: Cloutin's good for 'em. I read it.

The chorus of sadistic urgings and justifications builds on itself. The child, unresponding, is compared with an animal without feelings--reminiscent of the Stallerin's remark in *Stallerhof* that "Narrische" don't feel pain at their death. Like her, Pete believes what is "said", common knowledge such as that "Cloutin's good for 'em. *I read it.*" And like Kroetz's characters, these brutal men can't begin to imagine the suffering of another. The child's silence is a provocation, a seeming invitation, not unlike the silence which seems to draw Sepp to rape Beppi. The inability to respond dehumanizes it. Martin Esslin wrote of this scene:

Bond has succeeded in making the inarticulate, in their very inability to express themselves, become transparent before our eyes... ..the baby does not respond to the first casual and quite well-meant attentions of the gang. Because it does not respond, they try to arouse it by other means, and that is how they gradually work up to greater and greater brutality, simply to make the mysteriously reactionless, drugged child show a sign of life. There could not be a more graphic illustration of the way in which lack of responsibility and lack of understanding, lack of intellectual and moral *intelligence*, lies at the root of the brutality of our age...The baby in the pram is neglected because his mother cannot picture him as a human being like herself; the boys of the gang kill him because having been made into an object without conscience they treat him like a mere object.<sup>55</sup>

The stoning of the child is a new phase. No longer "play" they are now deadly serious: they intend to kill it. The group taunts Fred--unparticipating until now--to throw the first stone. Note the clichés with which they goad each other on and justify their intentions:

Mike: (Quietly.) Reckon it's all right?

Colin: (Quietly.) No one around.

Pete: (Quietly.) They don't know it's us...

Barry: Might as well enjoy ourselves.

Pete: (Quietly.) Yer don't get a chance like this everyday.

The frenzy mounts; and the same vicious, low-minded chatter accompanies all of the acts of violence which will lead to the child's death. It is a chorus of brutality, feeding on its own maliciousness.

Aggression is easily sustained within the group in which personal identity merges into the larger social unit and, it would seem, the individual draws comfort from the expected style of vicious banter. No member of the group is ever affected emotionally by the insults or abuse which they hurl at each other, nor does any member feel responsibility for what is said or done: the gang by its very nature becomes a depersonalized unit, undifferentiated in language or action. It is ironically Fred who, in prison, says: "I don't know what'll 'appen. There's bloody gangs like that roamin' everywhere. The bloody police don't do their job" (sc. 7).

This easy aggression is not true of the family unit within which attacks are personal and emotionally straining. The family members suffer from their incapacity to communicate. Pam speaks of growing "ill" from all the fighting (sc. 4); "It's got a stop! It ain't worth it! Juss round an' round," she screams (sc. 8); "Yer can't call it livin" (sc. 11). Len is "sick a rows"; "I don't give a damn if they don't talk, but they don't even listen t'yer...No one tells yer anythin' really" (sc. 12). For the family, the pattern of verbal violence, which is the only verbal pattern they know, is an insidious breeder of lovelessness. To talk is to destroy, nothing else is possible, for nothing else is known. The only way out of the

aggression of speech is through silence, the alternative which Mary and Harry have chosen. "Don't speak to 'em at all" Harry advises Len, "It saves a lot a misunderstandin' (sc. 12).

As long as this silence is maintained, Mary and Harry live in cold peace. But when it is finally broken--following an incident between Mary and Len which has some sexual overtones--the couple fall right into the expected fierce verbal altercation.

**Mary:** Don't you dare talk to me!...  
Dirty filth! Worse! Ha!...Don't you dare talk to me!...  
Mind out of a drain...  
**Harry:** I don't want to listen.  
**Mary:** Filth...Don't talk t'me! You!...  
**Harry:** I 'ad enough a you in the past!...  
**Mary:** Yer jealous ol' swine!  
**Harry:** Of a bag like you? (sc. 11)

Mary hits Harry with her teapot, wounding him, and he stands there shocked and bleeding. "'Ope yer die...Use words t'me!" Mary says. "Whass 'e done?" Pam asks, horrified; "Swore at me!".

The brutal action results almost uncontrollably from the language. This same pattern of aggression is used repeatedly by Pam and Len, and Pam and Fred. In fact, most of the speech between two characters follows the same violent pattern. "I've heard it all before", Len says wearily of their fight (sc. 12). Mary hits Harry not merely because he swore at her, but because speech for these characters is a circular trap; it goes "round an' round" with no exit available except violence or silence. The circularity

and deficiency of the language becomes a cage, enclosing the characters within, and not even Len--who alone among them makes some attempt to break out of the verbal viciousness--escapes. No hope is extended for the future; as in Kroetz's plays a sense of fated entrapment prevails. There can be little doubt that Len and Pam will one day be like Mary and Harry; they too will either live together in cruel silence--which scene 13 seems to suggest--or do each other physical harm. "I won't turn out like that" Len had promised Pam in scene two, referring to her parents. But the fact that he is kinder and more honest than the others seems to make little difference; he is caught in the same trap and can't break through. "Yer don't wan'a go", Harry tells Len when he speaks of leaving, "no point...no different any other place" (sc. 12). Harry had once left and returned; he claims that Len too would have no other option. When Len speaks of escape the only thing that occurs to him is to emigrate. ("Yer're too young t'emigrate," Harry tells him, "do that when yer past fifty.") To emigrate is not necessarily to leave England, but to leave his world; and this, precisely, is shown as quite futile. That which ties the family members together is not love but hopelessness. They are not only trapped with each other but with their own limitations: each carries that world, limited and apparently inescapable, within him.

"*Saved* is almost irresponsibly optimistic," Bond writes; "The play ends in a silent social stalemate, but if the spectator thinks this is pessimistic that is because he has not learned to clutch at straws."<sup>86</sup> The final scene shows the family in their usual positions, Pam reading the

*Radio Times*, Mary clearing the table, Harry filling out a football coupon. The tableau is similar to the opening of scene 4, but in contrast, here barely a word is spoken. The only action is Len mending a chair. The interaction between Len and the chair, a long and varied series of physical positions, is the most intimate action of the play. It is tender and forceful, almost an act of love, sexual but without any aggression.<sup>57</sup> The silence between the family members is not a communicative silence; each character is isolated, none look at Len or at each other, and it is, no doubt, only a temporary silence.<sup>58</sup> But the play ends in that silence, and with Len embracing, slipping his arm around, resting his chest against--a chair. This pathetic communion is the "straw" of optimism which Bond offers us. It lies outside of speech, outside of the patterns of verbal maliciousness which have deformed them all. No more than a silent gesture, this final tableau suggests an incipient humaneness and possible hope extended.

#### DAVID MAMET: The Business of Communication

One further example of a playwright who imprisons his characters within crippling verbal debris is the American, David Mamet. In two obsessively, almost unbearably verbal plays, *American Buffalo* (1975), and *Glengarry, Glen Ross* (1983), Mamet studies the relationships between groups

of people who interact through a radically restricted, highly jargonized, and painfully "unowned" language. Like Kroetz and Bond, Mamet's surface realism, his reproduction of a seemingly ultra-naturalistic cast of lower-class speech, is implicitly critical of a society, a social ethos, and a political system which can produce such a debased, fringe existence. Also as with Kroetz and Bond, Mamet's characters are soldered into their language; the identity between persona and speech is gapless, i.e.: no self-critical distance exists, no alternate speech idiom or option offered. Mamet's landscape, like Bond's, is urban. It is, however, a landscape which is solely reflected through the language: unlike *Saved*, with its park and street scenes, *American Buffalo* and *Glengarry, Glen Ross* are both restricted to indoor locations: a junk-shop, a restaurant, a real-estate office. The city is reproduced through the manic rhythm, the crude brutality of the speech, and through the implicit equation of moral bankruptcy and verbal manipulation.

*American Buffalo* is a two-act play which takes place, fittingly, in a junk-shop: "Don's Resale Shop". The stage, cluttered with debris, decayed household objects as well as castoff cultural souvenirs from the "Century of Progress" exhibition of the 1933 Chicago World's Fair, visually reflects the broken, displaced speech which is the play's core. Walter Kerr, in his review of the Broadway production, complained that there is too much talk and not enough action in the play:

"...when words become an end in themselves, when they tend to constitute a playwright's entire stock in trade...then, I think, we've got trouble...it's surely a mistake to urge him to



make whole evenings out of logorrhea, out of the compulsive, circular, run-on and irrelevant flow of words that tend to spill from folk when they're otherwise impotent...they fatuously, foolishly, furiously speculate...decorating their outbursts liberally with obscenities...staking everything on the verbiage that is the only thing left to them or to us."<sup>59</sup>

The speakers of this "circular, run-on and irrelevant flow of words" are Don, a man in his forties, owner of the shop; Bob, his gopher, a young punk, ex-junkie; and Teach, a "friend and associate" of Don's. All three are petty hoodlums, and the central "action" of the play is the incoherent planning of a finally unaccomplished robbery. Almost nothing happens, the action is all within the language--a compulsively obscene, almost unintelligible junk-pile of sordid expletives, clichés, and verbal distortions. Clive Barnes called it "one of the foulest-mouthed plays ever staged, at a time when very few writers produce dialogue that actually smells of roses."<sup>60</sup> *American Buffalo* is a study of non-talking. The characters circle around the words like wary animals, sniffing out meanings which are never explicitly given. The inexplicitness of the language, its restricted, fragmented and elliptic quality, breed endless misunderstandings. Overburdened by incoherence, the language repeatedly breaks down into verbal--and eventually physical--assault.

The play's central image is the buffalo-head nickel for which it is named. This remnant from America's past (an ironic reminder of the mythic frontier, of open spaces and heroic challenges) is found by a customer who, much to Don's surprise, offers him a huge sum for it. The coin's value eludes Don, but its price--"Ninety dollars for a nickel...I bet it's worth

five times that" (p. 31)<sup>61</sup>--becomes the occasion for the planned robbery. That robbery is discussed as a business venture whose motive is rightful profit--as Teach puts it, America is *founded* on the Individual's right "to secure his honest chance to make a profit" by "Embark(ing) on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit" (p. 73). The terminology of classical liberalism employed in the service of burglary functions for the characters as a justification, but alerts us to a warped value system which is Mamet's main concern. Neither *American Buffalo* nor *Glengarry, Glen Ross* contain any female characters. In both, the "male" world of business manipulation intermingles with the values of male friendship; and in the distortion of both--business ethics and personal loyalty--Mamet offers a sharp criticism of the moral disintegration of a Capitalist society.

Like Bond's *Saved*, this is a play about violence; and like both Bond and Kroetz, Mamet writes about the impossibility of human contact or compassion, among the verbally and morally debased. The relationship between the older Don and young Bob is shown as part paternal, part perhaps homosexual. Bob is passive and speaks little. He is good-natured although slow-witted, rather like a child with good intentions, and like the children in Kroetz's and Bond's plays, he too will suffer the fate of the silent and weak. Don views himself as a man of experience, a businessman, and is given to sententious philosophizing spiced with street-wise proverbs like: "Action talks and bullshit walks" (p. 4). We know little about Walter Cole, called Teach, except that he is apparently a small-time crook,

paranoid, and given to violent fits of aggression. His first words on entering Don's shop are:

Teach: ...Fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie,  
fuckin' Ruthie, fuckin' Ruthie.

Don: What?

Teach: Fuckin' Ruthie...

Don: ...yeah? (p. 9)

Ruthie has, it seems, made a remark to Teach in a tone which he interprets as insulting. In an attempt at a "fair" assessment of the situation, Teach explains:

Teach: Only (and I tell you this, Don). Only, and I'm not, I don't think, casting anything on anyone: from the mouth of a Southern bulldyke asshole of a vicious nowhere cunt can this trash come... ..This hurts me, Don. This hurts me in a way I don't know what the fuck to do. (Pause)

Don: You're probably just upset.

Teach: You're fuckin' A I'm upset. I am very upset, Don. ...The only way to teach these people is to kill them. (pp. 10-11)

A few pages later Teach gets cornered into admitting that part of his anger stems from the fact that he lost a lot of money to Ruthie in cards the previous night. He back-tracks on his words, stumbles, and finally, in tangles, gives up on words completely:

Teach: And I like 'em too. (I know, I know.) I'm not averse to this. I'm not averse to sitting down. (I know we *will* sit down.) These things happen, I'm not saying that they don't...and yeah, yeah, yeah, I know I lost a bundle at the game and blah blah blah...

(Long pause.)

So what's new?

Don: Nothing.

Teach: Same old shit, huh? (p. 16)

In the absence of explicit verbal intent, the *sound* of the speech becomes very important since tone is the main indicator of meaning. Mamet indicates the tone of the speech by italicizing words to be emphasized--e.g. Don's recurrent "*Oh yeah*"--and by placing sections of dialogue in parentheses which, according to Mamet, "serve to mark a slight change of outlook on the part of the speaker--perhaps a momentary change to a more introspective regard."<sup>62</sup> This reliance on tone is noted by Bernstein in his description of Restricted Codes. Bernstein argues that an undeveloped code may be so redundant and predictable, that the speaker's intention can only be fathomed through "extra-verbal channels" of gesture or intonation. Furthermore, he claims, those who are limited to a Restricted Code often become very sensitive to such cues and highly dependent on them.<sup>63</sup> Mamet combines intonation with a strict rhythm which verges on stylization. Speech is orchestrated to reproduce the crude pace and violent energy of caged urban animals. Dialogue is elliptic in the extreme, expressing emotional nuance rather than logical connections, and interpretation depends on the characters' ability to 'read' extra-verbal cues--at which they usually fail. The result of this style is to create both tension and almost incomprehensible aggression. Mamet claims that "the language we use, its rhythm, actually determines the way we behave rather than the other way around."<sup>64</sup> Teach's manic speech pattern, his over-emphatic obscenities and sudden changes of tone are an early indication of the violence which he will later exercise: "The only way to teach these people is to kill them."

Don and Bob plan to rob the coin-buyer's apartment that night--"the robbery that symbolizes the corrupted, contemporary version of the American success myth" as one critic put it.<sup>65</sup> Bob claims to have "spotted" the man, found out where he lives and discovered that he's left his house for the week-end, thus clearing the coast. When Teach enters the shop he senses some "action" in the air and wants a part--only without Bob, "We both know we're talking about some job needs more than a kid's gonna skin-pop go in there with a *crowbar*..." (p. 34). Teach convinces Don to betray Bob, despite the friendship between them, and take him instead as a partner: "Loyalty...you know how I am on this. This is great. This is admirable...This is swell. It turns my heart the things that you do for the kid...All I mean, a guy can be too loyal, Don...What are we saying here? Business...don't confuse business with pleasure" (pp. 33-34). Don gets rid of Bob--with 25 dollars as compensation. Bigsby claims that Capitalism "offers a model and a vocabulary for human relations, substituting exchange value for personal relations."<sup>66</sup> Don is incapable of distinguishing between personal loyalty and business expediency since market values and jargon have infiltrated and eroded "the ethical basis for private and public action."<sup>67</sup> Don's betrayal of Bob is an extension of the focal opposition between "business" and "friendship" assumed by the characters. The "job" is "a *business proposition*", and, as both Don and Teach assure us, humane behavior depends on being able to keep the two concepts separate:

Don: 'Cause there's business and there's friendship  
Bobby...there are many things, and when you walk around you  
hear a lot of things, and what you got to do is keep clear  
who your friends are, and who treated you like what. Or

else the rest is garbage, Bob, because I want to tell you something.

**Bob:** Okay.

**Don:** Things are not always what they seem to be. (pp. 7-8)

**Teach:** We're talking about money for chrissake, huh? We're talking about cards. Friendship is friendship, and a wonderful thing...But let's just keep it separate huh, let's just keep the two apart, and maybe we can deal with each other like some human beings. (p. 15).

Mamet creates two types of language which correspond to this opposition of personal relations and business relations, and like the opposition itself, the two interpenetrate and undermine each other. The basic interpersonal mode of speech consists of petty attack and retreat, a profusion of words with little surface meaning which mainly serve to indicate a rising and subsiding aggression. Banal and inane chatter twists and turns around itself and, since speech is a web of subjective connotations, every remark is open to interpretation. Thus questions like "What the fuck does that mean?" and defenses like "I didn't mean anything" (p. 60) are common. No thought is ever fixed; the characters change their positions and attitudes from line to line. The language has no center and the result is inherent uncertainty and mutual wariness.

A second level of speech is that which the characters consider "objective", i.e. talk which has to do with business. Here they draw on cliché concepts and idioms and present them as truth and thus unassailable. The jumble of conceptual confusion is just as great as in the more personal level of speech but, as with Kroetz's use of quotation and proverbs, "business" clichés carry a certain authority. As Teach says, "I am a

businessman, I am here to do business, I am here to face facts" (p. 83), and "A fact stands by itself...we must face the facts and act on them" (p. 75). These self-confident platitudes are more than slightly ludicrous since the "facts" change at whim, and neither he nor Don are capable of the logical analysis and action which such a statement implies. "You have your job, I have my job, Don. I am not here to smother you in theory," Teach tells Don when asked how he plans to break into the house. From this a "professional" business discussion evolves:

Don: We can use somebody watch our rear.  
Teach: You keep your numbers down, you don't *have* a rear. You know what has rears? Armies.  
Don: I'm just saying, something goes *wrong*...  
Teach: Wrong, wrong, you make your own right and wrong. Hey Big fucking deal. The shot is yours, no one's disputing that. We're talking business, let's *talk* business: you think it's good business call Fletch in? To help us.  
Don: Yes.  
Teach: Well then okay....  
And you're probably right, we could use three of us of the job.  
Don: Yeah.  
Teach: Somebody watch for the *cops*...work out a *signal*...  
Don: Yeah.  
Teach: Safety in numbers.  
Don: Yeah.  
Teach: Three-men jobs.  
Don: Yeah.  
Teach: You, me, Fletcher.  
Don: Yeah.  
Teach: A division of labor. (Pause)  
(Security. Muscle. Intelligence.) Huh?  
Don: Yeah.  
Teach: This means, what, a traditional split. Am I right?...  
(pp. 52-3)

Teach "talks business" in flat clichés which sound (to him) professional and objective: "safety in numbers," "a division of labor," "a traditional

split". This business vocabulary justifies for him Don's apparent betrayal of faith in Teach's capacity to carry out the "shot" on his own. Mamet said in an interview that *American Buffalo* "is about the American ethic of business: about how we excuse all sorts of great and small betrayals and ethical compromises called business."<sup>69</sup> Unlike *Glengarry, Glen Ross*, in which the business ethic is clearly portrayed through characters who are salesmen, *American Buffalo* attacks the distorted morality of American Capitalism metaphorically: petty crooks using the vocabulary of free enterprise within a moral void. Words are no longer anchored in meaning. There is no conceptual structure, no value system which imbues words with connotations. Language does not reverberate: it merely proliferates. Robert Storey noted that:

The making of Mamet's America is founded upon a verbal busyness, glib, deft, quick; the parenthetical asides that lace his dialogue (destined, undoubtedly, to become as celebrated as Pinter's pauses) suggest minds that abhor verbal vacuums, that operate, at all levels, on the energy of language itself.<sup>69</sup>

Like the corpse in Ionesco's *Amédée*, language expands to fill any empty space. Mamet's characters seem almost incapable of *choosing* their words; words tumble out of them, barely digested, barely connected. The following dialogue is a pivotal example of the disruption between personal morality and public rhetorical pieties, or what Bigsby calls "an American past plundered for its rhetoric but denied as the source of values."<sup>70</sup>

Teach: You know what is free enterprise?  
Don: No. What?  
Teach: The freedom...  
Don: ...yeah?  
Teach: Of the *Individual*...



Don: ...yeah?  
Teach: To Embark on Any Fucking Course that he sees fit.  
Don: Uh-huh...  
Teach: In order to secure his honest chance to make a profit.  
Am I so out of line on this?  
Don: No.  
Teach: Does this make me a Commie?  
Don: No.  
Teach: The country's *founded* on this, Don. You know this...  
without this we're just savage shitheads in the  
wilderness.  
Don: Yeah.  
Teach: Sitting around some vicious campfire...And take those  
fuckers in the concentration camps. You think they went  
there by *choice*?  
Don: No.  
Teach: They were *dragged* in there, Don...  
Don: ...yeah.  
Teach: Kicking and screaming. (pp. 72-3)

The extreme alienation of these characters from their language, the disintegration of all moral coherence in the arguments they present, is alarming. Teach and Don are unaware of the vacuity of their communication. Worse, the ability to manipulate the shell of once-meaningful concepts gives them the impression of participating in, upholding even, the basic tenets of American liberalism. They cannot think beyond their fragmented speech-world; but through these dislocated fragments they repeatedly seek to give meaning to their personal and moral isolation. Speech is an activity which simulates contact--whether inter-personal or conceptual. Although almost every attempt at communication leads to confusion and aggression, Mamet's characters don't give up. They would like to believe, as Don puts it, that "we're human beings. We can *talk*, we can negotiate, we can *this...*". But with "*this*" their capacity to negotiate, and the extent of their humanity, is at an end.

The climax of the play occurs in the second act with the eruption of physical violence and the simultaneous disruption of realistic speech. Don and Teach are waiting for a third partner, Fletch, in order to "go in" and "take the shot". It is very late and he doesn't show up, "Cocksucker should be horsewhipped with a horsewhip" (p. 72). Instead Bob returns with the news that Fletch had been mugged and is in hospital. Don and Teach immediately read multiple meanings into this statement, betrayal, conspiracy, and attack Bob, blaming him. His only defense is the incessantly repeated words: "I came here". Don and Teach interrogate him, but his confusion and retractions multiply their suspicions. At a loss for words forceful enough to express his pent-up frustration, Teach suddenly grabs a nearby object and hits Bob viciously on the side of the head:

Teach: ...you shithead; you don't fuck with us, I'll kick your fucking head in. (I don't give a shit...) (Pause.)  
You twerp...  
(A pause near the end of which Bob starts whimpering)

Bob falls to the floor with blood running out of his ear. Finally, semi-conscious, he admits--"I eat shit"--that he lied about spotting the coin-collector that morning, only said it in order to please Don. With this admission Teach, and his language, go completely out of control. He starts wildly destroying the shop while shouting a list of disjointed mottoes--almost credcos--which is no longer naturalistic speech, but more like speech gone mad:

My Whole Cocksucking Life...  
The Whole Entire World.  
There Is No Law.

There Is No Right and Wrong.  
The World Is Lies.  
There Is No Friendship.  
Every Fucking Thing.  
(Pause.)  
Every God-forsaken Thing...  
We all live like the cavemen...  
(Pause.)  
I go out there. I'm out there every day.  
(Pause.)  
There is nothing out there.  
(Pause.)  
I fuck myself. (pp. 103-4)

Teach's verbal break-down, his frenzied and elliptic litany of deeply felt accusations, push the language beyond realism. Mamet's use of capitalization here alerts us to the fact that this is no longer conversational speech: Teach's language has entered the oracular mode. Pushed to the limit of his capacity to feel and to verbalize, Teach erupts in a row of fragmented and negative postulates which testify to his moral vacuity. The wild accusations are not directed against anyone in particular; they are almost metaphysical, decrying the grotesque and violent disparity between human needs--contact, communication, comprehension--and the moral and verbal poverty which prohibit their attainment.

The play ends with Don and Bob alone on a destroyed stage, softly muttering confused and pointless words of apology and forgiveness, drawn together in "a fragile bond of shared futility, human castoffs," broken, hopeless, "alongside the inanimate ones."<sup>71</sup>

*Glengarry, Glen Ross* is more sophisticated, and even more devastating, than *American Buffalo*. It won Mamet the 1984 Pulitzer Prize and established his reputation as a master of the slippery vernacular facade which both harbours and exposes American ethical vacuity. Like *American Buffalo* it is concerned with the infiltration of individual morality and inter-personal contact by the values and jargon of business. Also like *American Buffalo*, it is an oppressively verbal play in which deformity and violence are performed through a highly limited and opaque language.

We have, however, moved up a rung in the not-quite-social ladder of Mamet's dehumanized landscape. No longer a play about petty crooks incapable of carrying out an incoherent robbery, we now have experienced real-estate salesmen in their forties and fifties who *do* manage to "knock off" the office for which they work. As in *American Buffalo*, criminal action is conceived and discussed in the same commercial jargon through which both personal and business interaction is conducted. *American Buffalo's* obscenities are here supplemented by a dense technical jargon, almost a "code" of real-estate salesmanship which, Bigsby suggests, "creates a pressure that sustains audience interest"--in the desire to break the arcane code--"no less powerfully than does plot revelation."<sup>72</sup> The play opens with the following baffling references:

**Levene:** John...John...John. Okay. John. John. Look:...

All I'm saying, you look at the *board*, he's throwing...wait, wait, wait, he's throwing them *away*, he's throwing the leads away. All that I'm saying, that you're wasting leads...all I'm saying, put a *closer* on the job. There's more than one man for the....Put a..wait a second,

put a *proven man out*...and you watch, now wait a second--  
and you watch your *dollar volumes*...

Williamson: Shelly, you blew the last...

Levene: No. John. No. Let's wait...One kicked out, one I  
*closed*... (p. 3).<sup>73</sup>

Levene: ...look at the *sheets*...look at the *sheets*. Nineteen  
*eighty*, *eighty-one*...*eighty-two*...six months of *eighty-*  
*two*...who's there? Who's up there?...It's *me*. It isn't  
*fucking Moss*. Due respect, he's an *order taker*, John. He  
*talks*, he talks a good game, look at the *board*, and it's  
*me*, John, it's *me*... (p.4)

Levene: ...When was the last time he went out on a sit. Sales  
contest. It's *laughable*. It's cold out there now, John.  
It's tight. Money is *tight*....

Williamson: ...The hot leads are assigned according to the  
board. During the contest. *Period*. Anyone who beats fifty  
per...

Levene: That's *fucked*. That's *fucked*. You don't look at the  
*fucking percentage*. You look at the *gross*... (pp. 6-7)

This terminology is sustained throughout the play, it is repeated,  
"hammered and rehammered" as Marcuse put it<sup>74</sup>, until the audience is  
totally enmeshed within a windowless world of "leads", "sheets", "sits",  
"boards", "shots", "dollar volumes", and "closings"; a world which is  
totally self-contained, and at the same time transparently reflects the  
audiences' own. "Always be closing" is the motto with which Mamet prefaces  
his play. It is the "sales maxim" which pressures the characters' into a  
robbery to attain the "leads" (addresses of potential serious customers)  
through which they might sell ("close") a property and thus gain a higher  
position in the hierarchy ("board") of the company's competition. This  
competition tests the salesman's capacity to survive: the winner gets a  
Cadillac, the runner-up, a set of steak knives, the losers: will be fired.  
Mamet claims that criminality does not merely result from office  
competition, but is an inherent element of business as such. Drawing on his

own experience as a one-time real-estate agent, Mamet disingenuously explains that the potential customer is "called a *lead*--in the same way that a clue in a criminal case is called a *lead*--i.e. it may lead to the suspect, the suspect in this case being a *prospect*."<sup>75</sup> The image of the salesman as a detective hunting the "culprit" is developed in the play's dialogue as well as in its thematic moral inversions. Levene, an experienced and fierce salesman, talks of his job in terms we usually associate with policeman jargon:

Levene: You can't learn that in an office. ...You have to learn it on the streets. You can't *buy* that. You have to *live* it...Cause your partner *depends* on it...Your partner *depends* on you....You have to go *with* him and *for* him...or you're shit, you're *shit*, you can't exist alone...  
(pp. 57-8)

The prey being stalked out there "on the streets" is the potential buyer, and the salesman, the last of "a dying breed" of real *men*, as Roma (a totally ruthless man, therefore: first on the board) puts it, must catch his prey through talk alone.

The act of talking, which already in *American Buffalo* is ambiguously treated by the characters themselves, is here developed into a schizophrenic term: to 'talk' is to *act*, talk is power, *men* know how to 'talk'. When Williamson, the office manager, ruins an important sale for Roma by saying the wrong things, by not "talking the game", Roma attacks his masculinity:

Roma: You stupid fucking cunt. You, Williamson...I'm talking to  
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*you, shithead...You just cost me six thousand dallars.*  
(Pause) Six thousand dollars. And one Cadillac....Where did you learn your *trade*. You stupid fucking *cunt*. You *idiot*. Whoever told you you could work with *men*?...Anyone in this office lives on their *wits*...(....) What you're hired for is to *help* us...to help *men* who are going *out* there to try to earn a *living*. You *fairy*. You company man...You fucking *child*... (pp. 56-7)

Cunts, fairies, and children are incapable of 'talk' and have no place working with 'men'. In an earlier scene Levene too attacks Williamson's lack of male street experience and at the same time demonstrates the second meaning of 'talk':

**Williamson:** ...my job is to marshall those leads...

**Levene:** Marshall the leads...marshall the leads. What the fuck, what bus did *you* get off of, we're here to fucking *sell*. Fuck marshalling the leads. What the fuck talk is that? What the fuck talk is that? Where did you learn that? In school...? (Pause) That's 'talk', my friend, that's 'talk'. Our job is to *sell*. I'm the *man* to sell. I'm getting garbage. (p. 5)

Levene opposes action (i.e., talk which *sells*) with the other meaning of 'talk' developed in the play: talk as "the blah blah blah" (p. 13), talk divorced from action, talk as a denial of intent. He is offended by Williamson's phrase 'marshall the leads' because it is not an action term--and because Williamson is using this 'educated' phrase to hold Levene off. The opposition between 'talk' and talk is most clearly shown through a conversation between Moss and Aaronow, two failing salesmen no longer "on the board". Moss broaches the idea of breaking into the office and stealing the leads, which they will then sell to a competing Agency:

**Aaronow:** ...are you actually talking about this, or are we just...

**Moss:** No, we're just...  
**Aaronow:** We're just *'talking'* about it.  
**Moss:** We're just *speaking* about it. (Pause) As an *idea*.  
**Aaronow:** As an idea.  
**Moss:** Yes.  
**Aaronow:** We're not actually *talking* about it.  
**Moss:** No.  
**Aaronow:** Talking about it as a...  
**Moss:** *No*.  
**Aaronow:** As a *robbery*. ...  
**Moss:** ... I said *'Not actually'*. The fuck you care, George? We're just *talking*...  
**Aaronow:** We are?  
**Moss:** Yes. (Pause)  
**Aaronow:** Because, because, you know, it's a *crime*.  
**Moss:** That's right. It's a crime. It is a crime. It's also very safe.  
**Aaronow:** You're actually *talking* about this?  
**Moss:** That's right. (pp. 18-19)

Aaronow, a weak man, is willing to 'talk' about the robbery--"Redn wurd man durfn," as Kroetz's characters would put it--but not to actually *talk* about it. To "actually talk" is equivalent to acting. When Moss tells him that "to the law, you're an accessory. Before the fact" Aaronow answers: "...we eat down to eat *dinner*, and here I'm a *criminal*..." (p. 23). Talk is not innocent. For characters who use language as a way to attain something, who have no use for 'talk' which does not activate or manipulate, to participate in talk is to take a risk.

**Moss:** ... In or out. You tell me, you're out you take the consequences.  
**Aaronow:** I do.  
**Moss:** Yes. (Pause)  
**Aaronow:** And why is that?  
**Moss:** Because you listened. (p. 23)

Mamet's salesman "go *out* there to try to earn a *living*" through talk. To succeed is to succeed in selling, to (as Levene says) "generate the



dollar revenue sufficient to *buy*"...leads which, again, must be sold (p. 6). There is no goal beyond the selling, no need beyond success. Levene builds a mythology around his early success as a salesman. Much like Arthur Miller's Willy Loman, he recreates a past in which the Agency owners "*lived on the business I brought in*" (p. 7), in which "I bought him a trip to Bermuda once..." (p. 10). Towards the end of the play Levene seems to manage to close a deal and, euphoric at having broken a "losing streak", glorifies "*The old ways. The old ways...convert the motherfucker...sell him...sell him ...make him sign the check*" (pp. 41-2). He has "converted" "Harriett and blah blah Nyborg", selling them "something they don't even want" (p. 44). Levene repeats his spiel to Roma, tells how he overpowered them with his rhetorical force until finally "They signed, Ricky. It was great. It was fucking great. It was like they wilted all at once. No gesture...nothing. Like together. They, I swear to God, they both kind of *imperceptibly slumped*. And he reaches and takes the pen and signs..." (pp. 42-3). Levene's victory, retold in mock-heroic terms, is in the defeat of the suspect, i.e. the prospect. When Moss tells him "I don't want to hear your fucking war stories" (p. 38) the implication is clear: each sale is a battle and the victor's weapon--like that of Pinter's Goldberg and McCann--is his language.

Jargon, which in Pinter (with whom Mamet is often compared<sup>77</sup>) is a power tool for intimidation,<sup>78</sup> is in this play the sole substance of the language. No other idiom exists or can exist: business terminology has invaded and colonized the minds of these characters. Even intimacy is

expressed in business terms. When Roma tries to convince a client of his capacity to decide on a purchase alone, despite his wife's disapproval, he describes their marital ties as "a contract...You have certain things you do *jointly*, you have a *bond* there..." (p. 55). Despite an awareness of some vague unsatisfied need within them, Mamet's characters are incapable of real intimacy or emotion. "The problem is," Bigsby writes, "that they have so thoroughly plundered the language of private need and self-fulfilment and deployed it for the purpose of deceit and betrayal that they no longer have access to words that will articulate their feelings."<sup>79</sup> Language has only one function: to generate profit. Morality is a by-product of gain: to steal the company files is theft; to deceive a client, to sell useless land to weak victims--is simply good business.<sup>80</sup> In such a world the very act of speech is a betrayal. To talk is to become an accomplice; to listen is to be implicated ("Because you listened"). Words can only buy and sell, and they sell trust and friendship just as easily as land.

*Glengarry, Glen Ross* is a study of betrayal. Each dialogue charts a verbal manipulation; nothing can be believed, no fraternity exists--not even the supposed fraternity among thieves. When Moss tries to convince Aaronow to steal the files with him, he promises to split the profit "half and half". Later, caught in an inconsistency, he admits, "I lied...Alright? My end is *my business*" (p. 23). Roma, supposedly an admirer of Levene's, proposes that they go out on 'sits' together and "split everything right down the middle" (p. 63). He then tells Williamson, behind Levene's back:

"My stuff is mine, whatever he gets, I'm talking half (...) Do you understand? My stuff is mine, his stuff is ours" (p. 64).

Neither *American Buffalo* or *Glengarry, Glen Ross* has a central character or a 'hero'. They are group portraits of interdependent characters, all of whom are formed by a vague, unarticulated but clearly felt system. The group, as in Chekhov, is a social unit and the language, gestures, desires and values are *social* products, not expressions of individual will. Thus there is a feeling in *Glengarry, Glen Ross* that the very words available to the characters are pre-packaged, pre-determined, infected and contagious, spreading a perversity which is beyond the character's grasp or control. Their inarticulate obscenities, their limited vocabulary and repetitive jargon seem to *precede* them, to mold them. We meet six salesmen in *Glengarry, Glen Ross* and hear of half a dozen others who are certainly no different than they. The implication seems to go beyond the individual betrayal: Mamet draws a portrait of a culture in which exploitation and deception are the inevitable bedfellows of a concept of success which is wholly materialistic and geared toward individual gain or loss. It is hard to 'like' these characters. Bond, in *Saved*, gives us Len with whom we can identify, whom we can pity. Kroetz too has characters who move us, Beppi and Sepp are certainly figures we might care about. Mamet, however, is pitiless. Despite the obvious misery of his characters, they are so thoroughly infected, so basely motivated as to awaken more revulsion than pity. This is especially true of *Glengarry, Glen Ross* (Bob and Don do have moments of tenderness in *American Buffalo*) in which ethical

perversity and verbal maliciousness are totally interlocked. A confined and brutal language is shown as both the product and breeder of a bestiality which, Mamet seems to be saying, pervades a whole society.

### The Language Trap

Inarticulateness is not a new phenomenon in drama, but it has never in the past been used as the subject and entire substance of a play. Even Büchner's *Woyzeck*, the first and most famous of the modern inarticulates, is surrounded by characters who can control their language, and therefore also control him. And *Woyzeck* himself has spurts of an almost mystical lyricism which none of these characters is ever allowed. Another famous inarticulate is O'Neill's Yank, *The Hariy Ape*. He, like *Woyzeck*, represents the natural goodness of the oppressed, warped by a loquacious and uncaring world. Whatever Yank cannot say is made clear by the other characters; the burden of verbal expressiveness is not on him alone. Moreover, both *Woyzeck* and Yank transcend their verbal inadequacy through their heightened, and expressive, literary significance. The characters of *Kroetz*, *Bond*, and Mamet don't have this advantage. They in no way transcend their deficient verbal lives, for they are formed and shaped by that deficiency. The audience, like the characters, is shut into the impoverished and hermetically closed world of the inarticulate, and no hope

is extended. The dramatists center our attention on the diminished verbal world of the socially underprivileged or socially distorted, showing it as not merely the *result* but as the *source* of their stunted existence. Verbal poverty has severe consequences for, as these plays show, there is an intimate connection between the lack of free language options and the lack of personal morality.

Language, and its lack, constitute the mental and emotional potential of the individual. As Leibnitz suggested in 1697, language is not the *vehicle* of thought, but its *determining* medium. We feel and think as our particular language impels and allows us to do.<sup>e1</sup> Two modern American linguists, Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf, developed and tested this suggestion and arrived at the far-reaching conclusion that human beings are indeed prisoners of their language, "very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium for their society".<sup>e2</sup> Whorf's relativist thesis of segmented language-cultures and "thought-worlds"--while no longer quite in fashion and opposed by the Chomskian claim of a universal generative grammar--is suggestive in the context of these plays. The idea that the native language of an individual determines his perception of the world and his attitude towards it; that each person is unconsciously *controlled* by the intricate patterns of his specific language world; and that "people act about situations in ways which are like the ways they talk about them"<sup>e3</sup> implies a determinism to which all of these plays give dramatic expression.

In each of these plays a certain environment is reproduced and a cohesive, if usually fringe group, speaking an undifferentiated and highly restricted language, is portrayed. Within its given social context, each group seems to comprise a closed "thought-world" ruled by a limited and limiting language structure, almost a sub-culture within an (assumedly but unseen) broader verbal community. The aberrant, anti-social and often violent behavior of these characters is tied by the authors, as I have tried to demonstrate, to an absence of verbal options and thus thought options. Their desires and aspirations are stymied by their inability to think beyond the words at their disposal or, more important still, to free themselves from what Whorf calls the "patternment", the unconscious structures of their specific language and thought world. These patterns are pre-conscious and culturally determined: "...significant behavior is ruled by pattern from outside the focus of personal consciousness" Whorf claims. Whorf opposes "patternment" (structuring) to "lexation" (name-giving, word choice), arguing that the former "always overrides and controls" the latter. Thus, "the sway of pattern over reference" may even produce amusing results, as "when a pattern engenders meanings utterly extraneous to the original lexation reference."<sup>84</sup> It is perhaps to this rule of pattern over reference that Mamet refers when he claims that "the language we use, its rhythm, actually determines the way we behave rather than the other way around."<sup>85</sup> Mamet's emphasis on rhythm, on the aural patterning of speech which enables the characters' to ignore lexical contradictions, even nonsense, seems to intuitively translate Whorf's ideas into concrete prose. Kroetz shows a similar sensitivity to innate "patternment": the recurrent

'semantic blanks' in his dialogue, his use of long pauses and short, almost strangled dialogue fragments--are cardinal to the production of a sense of determinism in his plays. These devices abstract language from mere personal idiosyncrasy and embed it in a social milieu, a specific speech-world. They also point to the intimate connection between culturally imposed language potential and the capacity of the individual for thought and behavior. If Whorf is right and language "is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the *shaper* of ideas"<sup>65</sup> then characters shaped by a language which is either empty or vicious, devoid of originality and lacking in compassion, are probably condemned to be no better than their language.

## V

## PERSON TO PERSON: THE VERBAL BATTLEFIELD

The single contemporary play which the category of "verbal assault" most immediately brings to mind is Edward Albee's insistently vituperative *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* verbal vindictiveness is first and foremost of the surface, up-front affrontery sustained over three voluble Acts. Critics of the original 1962 Broadway production called it, among other things, a "sordid and cynical dip into depravity",<sup>1</sup> and a "vulgar mishmash" which "could be cut in half by the elimination of the 'goddam''s, 'Jesus Christ's' and other expressions...."<sup>2</sup> John Gassner and John Mason Brown nominated the play for the Pulitzer Prize, and when the advisory board rejected their recommendation for this "filthy play"<sup>3</sup> which one reviewer compared to a "sewer overflowing", both Gassner and Brown resigned their positions as members of the Pulitzer Jury.<sup>4</sup> Despite the outrage, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* received both the New York Drama Critics' and the Tony awards for the best play of the 1962-3 season, and was a popular success both on Broadway (running for 2 years) and in most European capitals.<sup>5</sup> The play has since acquired the status of a "masterpiece of the American



theatre" and has received massive critical attention and widely varied readings and interpretations.<sup>7</sup>

In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* verbal violence is starkly manifested in its most basic form: the form of interpersonal communication. Albee is less concerned with the abstract analysis of language as the determining factor of consciousness and behavior than is, e.g., Handke. His play lacks the allegorical immediacy and implicit political critique of language as a power-structure that we find in Ionesco's *La Leçon* or Havel's *The Garden Party*. Nor does *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* demonstrate the social deformations performed through language-poverty as do the previously discussed plays by Kroetz, Bond and Mamet.<sup>8</sup> Albee returns verbal assault to the realistic and seemingly well-made bourgeois living-room: where August Strindberg had first placed it in his play *The Father*.

George and Martha are descendents of Strindberg's warring couples as found in *The Father*, *The Creditors*, or in *The Dance of Death*. They continue Strindberg's "dialogues of cruelty"--in Ruby Cohn's coinage<sup>9</sup>--using a similar strategy of verbal thrust and parry, wounding through revelation and insinuation, teasing, taunting, and "hacking away at each other, all red in the face and winded"--as George puts it<sup>10</sup>--through words alone. Like the Captain and Laura of *The Father*, George and Martha carry their battle to dangerous extremes, "trickling poison (...)--like herbane" into each other's ears,<sup>11</sup> doing battle "to the death." But Albee's "dialogues of cruelty" display a manic excessiveness and verbal self-consciousness which,

as we shall see, transform Strindberg's psychological interest into a self-reflective portrait of the dangers of language itself. Language in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is not only the tool of aggression (as it is in Strindberg's plays), rather, it emerges as one of the play's thematic centers, redirecting our attention from the marital strife of the realistic level to the language and its wider implications.

Strindberg's "brain-battles" determine one of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*'s obsessions; but its flavor and modernity, its vitality and critical language-consciousness indicate another seminal influence: Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*. With Jarry, words become game-objects: self-reflective, inventive, joyously perverse, they both shocked the sensibility (at least, when originally staged)<sup>12</sup> and called attention to themselves as acts which can crack the shell of convention. Ubu, that literary spoof with his dirty-mouthed vitality and toilet-brush humor, whose appetite, ambitions and verbal obscenities were meant as attacks against both the conventionality of the theatre and the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality, underlies much of the savagery and excess of George and Martha. Like Ubu, their language is often explosive and exhilarating with vulgarity as a measure for inventiveness and imagination. George and Martha revel in their excesses; they continue beyond reason--indeed, beyond realism--in the throes of a murderous verbal orgy.

Albee harnesses the childlike and self-reflective destructiveness of Jarry's explosive language to the deadly intensity and realistic malignancy

of Strindberg's interpersonal power-struggles. In *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* "Merdre" no longer merely shocks, it shakes our faith in verbal communication. When Martha strikes out verbally the effect is deeply wounding, even repulsive, leaving "blood in (her) mouth" (p. 208). "Aimless...butchery" (p. 193) Nick calls it, aghast at the brutalities which exceed their ostensible cause and redirect our attention towards the language itself, a language which overflows and becomes a defining feature of the play.

The purpose of this chapter is to study the verbal aggression found in such abundance in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and a number of related plays. My point of view will not be to test a relationship which is conveyed through language (this is the more common critical strategy); rather, I will focus on an interrelational system which exists almost totally *within* language. George and Martha are unusually language-conscious--unusual for a realistic dramatic couple. They obsessively discuss the words they use, bicker over their verbal styles, win or lose at language-games as though these were concrete realities. Their communication system is to a great degree dependent on verbal imagination and a lust for verbal control. The "illusions" which most critics agree are at the heart of their unhappiness<sup>12</sup> are not merely expressed through language but are actually created by the language which they weave, and whose perverse violence rarely takes a physical turn. This verbal activity climaxes with the revelation that their son, the object of so much of their verbal

aggression, is himself only an invention who is given life, fleshed out and brought up, within language.

I will claim that Albee clearly stresses the unusual and almost total equation of language with the lies and illusions which are the substance of George and Martha's relationship. Their language is not only explosive and witty, it is also highly dangerous, even deadly, both to the recipients of the barbed speech and to the speaker himself. Ruby Cohn entitles her study of Albee's plays "The Verbal Murders of Edward Albee" and claims that "murderous dialogue leads obliquely to murder."<sup>14</sup> This becomes clear in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* especially through the play's ending, in which both illusion and verbal violence are simultaneously exorcised through the "murder" of the son, and are replaced by verbal simplicity, sincerity and authentic contact. The implications of this equation will be broadened by placing *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* within two seemingly contradictory dramatic traditions: the claustrophobic psychological realism of Strindberg's "soul-battles";<sup>15</sup> and the self-consciously stylized *jeu* of Jarry's verbally explosive Ubuisms.

EDWARD ALBEE: *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

The plot of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* unfolds along two parallel lines. On the surface, we have a conventional three-Act play set in the

naturalistic living room "of a house on the campus of a small New England college" (stage directions) named New Carthage. The action extends from 2 a.m. to dawn of a Sunday morning and includes four realistically described and well delineated characters. On this level we have the story of the unhappy marriage of a middle-aged couple, George and Martha. George is Associate Professor of History at New Carthage College, unambitious, contemplative, "hair going gray". Martha is the daughter of the college President and founder, frustrated and bitter she is "boisterous", vulgar and alcoholic. Over three Acts this sado-masochistic couple "exercise (...)...what is left of (their) wits"--as George puts it--and display the ugly disintegration of their marriage to a young, new faculty couple: Nick, a blond, attractive and cold-blooded biologist; and his simpy, "rather plain" wife, Honey.

Parallel to these naturalistic details we find a mythic landscape: New Carthage, with its overtones of an ancient city whose success had contained the seeds of its own destruction, a destruction so complete that it became a synonym for doom. Oswald Spengler, the 19th century historian so admired and quoted by George, drew a parallel between Carthage and modern America in his book *The Decline of the West*, emphasizing a shared sterility and implying a possibly shared fate. George sets New Carthage within the broader mythic context of "Illyria...Penguin Island...Gemorrah...you think you're going to be happy here in New Carthage, eh?" (p. 40).<sup>16</sup> Then there are the names 'George and Martha' which evoke the image of America's first White House couple and whose behavior shows the intellectual and moral

disintegration of the "American Dream" which Albee had already taken to task in his earlier play by that name.<sup>17</sup> In addition, the titles of the three Acts--"Fun and Games", "Walpurgisnacht" and "The Exorcism", prepare us for the ghosts and ghouls which metaphorically inhabit George and Martha and which are finally expelled. Albee had originally intended to name the entire play "The Exorcism"<sup>18</sup> thus emphasizing the underlying ritual action of the play which, as we shall see, undermines the surface realism both in action and language.

Realism and ritualism are tied together through the strategy of game-playing. George and Martha explicitly name four games which they play during those night hours: "Humiliate the Host", "Get the Guests", "Hump the Hostess", and "Bringing up Baby." The alliteration in these names is an early indication of the verbal wit which is a requirement of the game. Indeed, all of these games are played *within* language and the winner is the better (verbal) shot. "My God, what archery! First try, too" (p. 103) George gloats when he uncovers Nick's real reason for marrying the inane Honey. Martha, in a more visceral image, likens her mouth to a gun: "I'm a Gatling gun. Hahahahahahaha!" which shoots wounding words.

Game-playing is a highly theatrical device which constantly reminds the audience that the realistic living-room on stage is only an illusion within the theatre. "Although ostensibly a realistic drama", writes June Schlueter, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is supremely aware of itself as a play and manifests this awareness throughout.<sup>19</sup> Ruby Cohn counted over 30

uses of the word "game" in the play.<sup>20</sup> These are strange, cruel games which require little action, only an abundance of verbal energy. Even "Hump the Hostess", the only game with a physical correlative, consists mainly of verbal foreplay and, after the failed infidelity, a barrage of verbal backlash. Games and language are inseparable in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* After George has lost the first round of "Humiliate the Host", a game which possibly exposes his past as a patricide and matricide (truth or illusion?) and leads him to try to strangle Martha (stragulation as a way of trying to shut her up?) he says: "Well! That's one game. What shall we do now, hunh? (...) I mean, come on! We must know other games, college-type types like us...that can't be the...*limit of our vocabulary*, can it?" (pp. 138-9, emphasis mine). The identification of "vocabulary" with "games" is central to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, and both are essential to the reality of George and Martha.<sup>21</sup>

Although the play may appear to be a loose string of confrontation-games and verbal struggles, "a series of confessions, revelations, and interior journeys which recall the circuitous windings of O'Neill's late plays", as Robert Brustein puts it,<sup>22</sup> there is in fact a calculated *progression* and intensification at work. We can discern three stages in the relationships and verbal developments, which roughly correspond with the play's division into three Acts:

Act I introduces us to the characters and their verbal styles. The dialogue is witty, vulgar and realistic throughout and is self-consciously

reflected in George and Martha's *metacommunication*, i.e. their discussions about their communication itself. From the start George and Martha quarrel over verbal usages and show their language to be not merely an expressive medium but one object of their power struggle. Basic exposition is given though this too remains problematic since the past is as equivocal and unstable as the changing ways in which it is discussed. Revealing and concealing of the past will continue until almost the end of the play, and comprises one more of their "truth or illusion?" games.

Act II, fittingly titled "Walpurgisnacht", is packed with ugly games; there is an intensification of both action and language, and the metacommunication already present in Act I is sharpened. The heightened violence of Act II is mainly verbal but the vocabulary used to describe it: pointedly equates verbal and physical violence. George and Martha are presented as boxers or wrestlers who "hack away" at each other, flex, flagellate, slash, scar, whip and rip--all through language.

Act III presents the crux of the plot, the central "game" which George and Martha have been playing for over 20 years: their joint son-game. This game is played "to the death" and involves the verbal murder of their fictive son. The son-myth is elaborated, exposed and climactically destroyed, "exorcised", as the title of the Act promises. The language here takes on a ritualized rhythm; it is incantatory, interspersed with Latin phrases from the Mass for the Dead, and becomes more hallucinatory than real.



After the exorcism of the son, the play ends with a dialogue of simple and direct communication between George and Martha. Ghosts and ghouls, cruel wit and destructive illusions have been expelled along with the language which nourished them and gave them life.

In the detailed analysis of these problems I will proceed in the following manner:

1. I will begin with the play itself analyzing, Act by Act, its abundance of self-conscious and self-referential language in order to demonstrate the centrality of language critique to its thematic and dramatic concerns. I will claim that an interpretation of the play depends to a major degree on an understanding of its language which, far from being a mere "vulgar mishmash" or a "sewer overflowing", is the carrier of Albee's critique of modern intellectual existence. Man's *Versprachlichung*, as Peter Handke put it, his existence as a "language object" and his "resulting brutalization"<sup>23</sup> is given a nuanced reading in Albee's play. Language will be shown to be both a *sickness* which has invaded George and Martha, replacing authentic contact; and a form of *rebellion* against the deadening banality of verbal and social conformity as represented by Nick and Honey.
2. This analysis will then be expanded by placing *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* within the context of Strindbergian plays of marital cruelty (especially *The Father* and *The Dance of Death*) in order to show the *difference* between the Strindbergian model--which is basically psychological and realistic--and Albee's abstraction of

Strindberg's theme through language. I will also claim that the energy of Albee's play, its wit and self-consciousness, show parallels to Jarry's creation, *Ubu*.

3. Finally I will briefly compare *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with other contemporary plays in which verbal excess and cruelty displace authentic communication. In this comparison I will concentrate on John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, and emphasize the limitations, in terms of language critique, of plays caught within the realistic Strindbergian model.

#### ACT I: The Possession of the Word

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* opens in *medias res* of a verbal altercation; the opening lines plunge us immediately into the vituperation for which the play is famous.

Martha: Jesus...  
George: ...Shhhhhhh....  
Martha: ...H. Christ...  
George: For God's sake, Martha, it's two o'clock in the....  
Martha: Oh, George!  
George: Well, I'm sorry, but....  
Martha: What a cluck! What a cluck you are.  
George: It's late, you know? Late.  
Martha: (Looks about the room. Imitates Bette Davis) What a dump. Hey, what's that from? "What a dump!"  
George: How would I know what....  
Martha: Aw, come on! What's it from? *You* know....  
George: ...Martha....  
Martha: WHAT'S IT FROM, FOR CHRIST'S SAKE?  
(...)

**Martha:** Dumbbell! It's from some goddamn Bette Davis picture...some goddamn Warner Brothers epic....  
**George:** I can't remember all the pictures that....  
**Martha:** Nobody's asking you to remember every single goddamn Warner Brothers epic...just one! One single little epic!  
(pp. 3-4)

From the start, Albee characterizes George and Martha, around whom the entire play revolves, through their differing verbal styles. Martha appears initially as crass, vulgar and domineering, while George seems more passive and restrained. Within the first few pages of the play she imitates a Bette Davis line, taken from some "goddamn Warner Brothers epic", patronizes George with the sing-song nursely rhyme "Poor Georgie-Porgie, put-upon pie" (p. 12) and repeats, with relish, her version of the Disney song "Who's afraid of the big bad wolf," which she'd performed earlier that evening at the faculty party. George and Martha's discussion of that performance is an early example of Martha's coarse and adolescent vocabulary and George's use of restraint and irony.

**Martha:** AWWWWWWWWW! (No reaction) Hey! (No reaction) HEY!  
(George looks at her, put-upon) Hey. (She sings)  
Who's afraid of Virginia Woolf,  
Virginia Woolf,  
Virginia Woolf....  
Ha, ha, ha, HA! (No reaction) What's the matter...didn't you think that was funny? Hunh? (Defiantly) I thought it was a scream...a real scream. You didn't like it, hunh?  
**George:** It was all right, Martha....  
**Martha:** You laughed your head off when you heard it at the party.  
**George:** I smiled. I didn't laugh my head off...I smiled, you know?...it was all right.  
**Martha:** (Gazing into her drink) You laughed your goddamn head off.  
**George:** It was all right...  
**Martha:** (Ugly) It was a scream!  
**George:** (Patiently) It was very funny; yes.  
**Martha:** (After a moment's consideration) You make me puke!

George: What?  
Martha: Uh...you make me puke!  
George: (Thinks about it...then...) That wasn't a very nice  
thing to say, Martha.  
Martha: That wasn't what?  
George:...a very nice thing to say.

(pp. 12-13)

We note that what for Martha "was a scream!", was for George "very funny." Indeed, not only the reader, but George and Martha themselves have noted their stylistic differences and later, in front of Nick and Honey, they will (again in their own styles) discuss the implications of this disparity:

Martha: I thought I'd bust a gut; I really did....I really  
thought I'd bust a gut laughing. George didn't like  
it....George didn't think it was funny at all.  
George: Lord, Martha, do we have to go through this again?  
Martha: I'm trying to shame you into a sense of humor, angel,  
that's all.  
George: (Over-patiently, to Honey and Nick) Martha didn't think  
I laughed loud enough. Martha thinks that unless...as she  
demurely puts it...that unless you "bust a gut" you aren't  
amused. You know?

(p. 25)

George pointedly equates Martha's coarse vocabulary with her vulgar mode of experience.

From the outset a pattern of aggression is established which will recur throughout the play. The unusual hallmark of this pattern is its focus--as indicated by George and Martha themselves--on the very words which they use. Language seems to be less of a communicative tool for relaying information than a relational gauge through which the definition

of their reality is constantly--and violently--being negotiated. To control that definition, to determine whether a song was "a scream" or "very funny", whether to "bust a gut" is a sign of vitality or vulgarity, is to control their reality.

The equation of verbal-control with reality-control occurs within a number of syntactic models. As we shall see, numerous instances of struggles over the fitting style of a phrase, the correct usage of a word, exist in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Disagreements over definitions and grammatical structures always become occasions for brawling. In each case we are struck by the characters' great sensitivity to language, their constant awareness of its nuances, and the importance they place on being able to control it.

This "language awareness", of which I will speak, is mainly demonstrated through George and Martha's metacommunication--this will emerge even more clearly in the analysis of Act II in which the very rules of their communication-games are negotiated. But already here, at the start of the play, dialogue is constantly being interrupted by the speakers in order to struggle over a word or a usage. For example, in the following passage which occurs just before Nick and Honey arrive, George warns Martha not to "start on the bit":

**Martha:** The bit? The bit? What kind of language is that? What are you talking about?

**George:** The bit. Just don't start in on the bit.

**Martha:** You imitating one of your students, for God's sake? What are you trying to do? WHAT BIT?

George: Just don't start in on the bit about the kid, that's all.

Martha: What do you take me for?

George: Much too much.

(p. 18)

A "bit" is theatrical parlance for a short scene either rehearsed or improvised on some known subject. Albee's use of "bit" here--the first mention of the son in the play--alerts us to the son's fictive nature, to his status as illusion. Martha, however, reacts not to the subject (the son) but to George's style, his use of adolescent slang--her province--and draws his attention to the "kind of language" he is using.<sup>24</sup>

In both of the above examples the subjects ostensibly under discussion--George's sense of humor and Martha's lack of discretion--are actually viewed through the style of their presentation. The way the subject is discussed replaces the subject itself and becomes the source of dispute. The difficulty which Nick and Honey--and indeed the reader too--have in validating George and Martha's reality results from this endless displacement of facts or information by the way in which it is presented. "Truth or illusion?", the question which George and Martha pose after their intimate revelations, becomes increasingly hard to determine. Did George really kill his father and mother? Is his novel autobiographical or fictive? Is George really the only man Martha has ever loved? "True or false? Hunh?" (p. 141). George and Martha are aware that the nature of reality is determined by the manner of its presentation, and it is around this question that most of their struggles revolve.

The centrality of this logocentricity can be demonstrated through a few further examples within which choice of words, grammatical usage and language structure become subjects of dispute.

When, early on, Martha attacks George's passivity, the following dialogue ensues:

**George:** What do you want me to do? Do you want me to act like you? Do you want me to go around all night *braying* at everybody, the way you do?  
**Martha:** (Braying) I DON'T BRAY!  
**George:** (Softly) All right...you don't bray.  
**Martha:** (Hurt) I do not *bray*.  
**George:** All right. I said you didn't bray.

(p. 7)

The same pattern repeats a few moments later when Martha tells George that they're expecting late-night guests:

**George:** I wish you'd *tell* me about something sometime...I wish you'd stop *springing* things on me all the time.  
**Martha:** I don't *spring* things on you all the time.  
**George:** Yes, you do...you really do...you're always *springing* things on me.  
**Martha:** (Friendly-patronizing) Oh, Goerge!  
**George:** Always.

(pp. 11-12)

The words "bray" and "spring" are emphasized and draw attention to *themselves*, almost losing their lexical meaning through overuse. Martha's reaction in both cases is to George's choice of words and to his insistence on the precision of his choices.

Or when Martha describes Bette Davis as being married in the movie "to Joseph Cotton or something...", George corrects her:

**George:** ...Some *body*...

**Martha:** ...Some *body*...

(pp. 4-5)

Later, Martha corrects George's English usage:

**George:** (Very cheerful) Well now, let me see. I've got the ice....

**Martha:** ...gotten....

**George:** *Got*, Martha. *Got* is perfectly correct...it's just a little...archaic, like you.

(p. 166)

These language corrections extend even to Nick and Honey, once they become integrated and involved with the older couple. Nick corrects George's mispronunciation of the word 'chromosomes' "with a small smile" (p. 37) which implies a small victory; and Honey tries to correct Martha's grammar:

**Martha:** You rose to the occasion...good. Real good.

**Honey:** Well...real well (...)

**George:** Martha knows...she knows better.

**Martha:** I know better. I been to college like everybody else.

(pp. 72-3)

Later, during an especially fierce brawl in which George accuses Martha of having moved "bag and baggage into your own fantasy world", of "playing variations on your own distortions"; Martha interrupts George's analysis of her mental state with these linguistic remarks:

**Martha:** Have you ever listened to your *sentences*, George? Have



you ever listened to the way you talk? You're so frigging...convoluted...that's what you are...  
(pp. 155-6, my emphasis)

The power involved in language control is even more explicit where the definition of words is at stake. On discussing Nick's profession, Martha mistakes him for a mathematician and is corrected by George:

**Martha:** ...So? He's a biologist. Good for him. Biology's even better. It's less...abstruse.

**George:** Abstract.

**Martha:** ABSTRUSE! In the sense of recondite. (Sticks her tongue out at George) Don't you tell me words....

(p. 63)

To know "words" is a mark of both competence and control. To misuse language is, in this play, a sign of weakness and carries an immediate loss of power. This is brilliantly shown in Act II in which George and Nick vie for position and superiority through a verbal game of "confessions" which includes the following section:

**George:** ...You know what they do in South America...in Rio? The puntas? Do you know? They hiss...like geese....They stand around in the street and they hiss at you...like a bunch of geese.

**Nick:** Gangle.

**George:** Hm?

**Nick:** Gangle...gangle of geese...not bunch...gangle.

**George:** Well, if you're going to get all cute about it, all ornithological, it's gaggle...not gangle, gaggle.

**Nick:** Gaggle? Not gangle?

**George:** Yes, gaggle.

**Nick:** (Crestfallen) Oh.

(p. 113)

Nick's attempt to "tell" George words is a way of attaining position, in which he fails. The knowledge, and thus the power, remains with George. Also, the oft repeated sound: gangle/gaggle, causes the word to almost lose its meaning through overuse, as with the examples of "bray" and "spring" discussed above. Lexical definition gives way to the definition of relational power.

George and Martha's use of language has received an unusual reading by the Sociologists Paul Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin and D.D. Jackson in their book *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes*. The authors devote an entire chapter of their theoretical study to an analysis of the verbal moves in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*,<sup>26</sup> choosing to view the relationship between George and Martha as a model of a derailed communication system. Intriguingly, they study the play as an example of an interactional system which, despite its being a product of Albee's imagination, is considered "possibly even more real than reality."<sup>26</sup> Watzlawick *et al* chose *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a model through which to illustrate interactional and interrelational communication because of its manageable size, independent data (i.e. not influenced by the researchers) and public accessibility--qualities hard to come by in a real life test situation.<sup>27</sup> Their choice acknowledges Albee's verbal realism and his focus on language in an interpersonal context. It should be remembered, however, that the authors treat *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as a "test-case" through which to study the pathology of communication, and not as a literary construct. As

literature, George and Martha's entrapment within mutually binding verbal violence has no (necessary) antecedent in outside reality. Eccentric concentration on the verbal interaction between George and Martha is a literary device freely chosen by Albee and aimed at a *thematic* concern--not at pathological description. Thus I will eventually ask *why* Albee focuses so obsessively on shared verbal cruelty, and what meaning can be ascribed to its final banishment--which occurs simultaneously with the ritualized exorcism of the son-myth. Watzlawick *et al*, on the other hand, are more interested in describing the *how?* of George and Martha's relationship, on abstracting structures which can then be generalized (for their purposes) than in seeking literary insight.

An interactional system is defined by the authors as "two or more communicants in the process of, or at the level of, defining the nature of their relationship."<sup>28</sup> Interrelational communication emphasizes the response which a communication incites and the respective counter-response. This process is akin to Eric Berne's "transactional analysis"<sup>29</sup> and both endeavor to define all communication as depending on the interaction *between* speakers, rather than on the intension or verbal style of any single communicant.

The authors demonstrate the double aspect of every communicative activity. On the one hand: the informational aspect relays semantic information; on the other hand: the relational aspect defines the interpersonal relationship between the speakers. The interplay between

information (semantic) and how it is understood (relational) creates a continual tension within the dialogue of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* which is sometimes neutralized through wit, and at other times through brawling. When, e.g., Martha compliments George's original toast ("for the mind's blind eye, the heart's ease, and the liver's craw") by saying: "You have a poetic nature George....A Dylan Thomas-y quality that gets me right where I live." George turns the semantic meaning against her with the words "Vulgar girl! With guests here!" (p. 24) and thus reopens their relationship conflict. At another point, Martha accuses George of causing Honey to throw-up:

George: I did not make her throw up.  
Martha: You most certainly did!  
George: I did not! (...)  
Martha: (To George) Well, who do you think did...Sexy over there? You think he made his *own* little wife sick?  
George: (Helpfully) Well, you make *me* sick.  
Martha: THAT'S DIFFERENT!

(p. 118)

The same interplay of semantic and relational aspects is apparent here.

Watzlawick *et al* claim that George and Martha's relationship is "a system of mutual provocation that neither party can stop."<sup>30</sup> It proceeds through "symmetrical escalation",<sup>31</sup> the constant need to compete and out-do each other, and forms a circular "game without end" from which neither can escape.<sup>32</sup> There are two areas in which the game-rules are of particular interest: first, regarding their shared secret son-game, to which I'll return later; second, regarding their metacommunication. This

metacommunication "proves to be subject to the same rule of symmetry" that regulates their other communication.<sup>33</sup> It is this point which determines the seamless circularity of their discourse since any attempt to negotiate the root of their conflict--language control--is subject to the same "symmetrical escalation" and thus becomes one more area of contention.

This sociological analysis does much to explain the formal mechanism of the aggression between George and Martha; but it leaves two important questions unanswered: Why is so much of the "symmetrical escalation" centered around language? And why, as Watzlawick *et al* themselves point out, is "the constraint on their symmetry (...) that they must be not only effective but witty and daring",<sup>34</sup> i.e. the requirement of imagination? A closer look at the second question may also help to answer the first.

As I previously suggested, language aggression moves in two directions in this play. On the one hand language is treated as a power tool, to be controlled and possessed. Within language George and Martha develop and fight their relationship struggle, within language their self-enclosed reality is defined and given substance. In this sense, "reality" is always at a *remove* from the words which give it a shifting form, and the balance of power between George and Martha is tipped in favor of the one who at any given moment maintains verbal control.

But there is another sense in which George and Martha wield language *together* against the numbing platitudes of the outside world--as

represented by Nick and Honey. In this sense verbal power is not given through linguistic control or by "knowing words"--but through wit and creativity. "Martha's a devil with language, she really is" (pp. 20-21) George warns his newly-arrived visitors. As we shall see, George and Martha's "devilish" verbal ingenuity express certain shared values which go beyond Watzlawick et al's analysis and which clearly distinguish the elder couple from their verbally banal and conventional guests.

These values are already hinted at very early in the play, surprisingly, in a passage of vitriolic brawling:

**Martha:** (After a moment's consideration) You make me puke!  
**George:** What?  
**Martha:** Uh...you make me puke!  
**George:** (Thinks about it...then...) That wasn't a very nice thing  
to say, Martha.  
**Martha:** That wasn't *what*?  
**George:** ...a very nice thing to say.  
**Martha:** I like your anger. I think that's what I like about you most...your anger. You're such a...such a simp! You don't even have the...the what?....  
**George:** ...guts?....  
**Martha:** PHRASEMAKER! (Pause...then they both laugh)...  
(pp. 13-14)

Why this moment of communion here? Besides enjoying their successful teamwork in creating the cliché, George and Martha recognize in each other a shared attitude towards that cliché. Their joint creation and repudiation of the phrase "You don't even have the...guts..." tells us what value they place on language; for George and Martha recognize the difference between the clichéic and the creative, the imitative and the imaginative. And

unlike any of the other characters we have studied, they are on the side of the creative use of language.

George and Martha constantly comment on their own and on Nick and Honey's language. They rarely let a platitude slip by unremarked and are quick to jeer at any "phrasemaker." This is especially obvious in their contempt for the simpy Honey who giggles and whines and is totally devoid of self-irony. Honey's speech is a mixture of inane maxims--"Never mix - never worry" (p. 23); and vacuous hyperbole--"...it was a *wonderful* party (...) And your father! Oh! He is so marvelous! (...) He's a wonderful man" (pp. 25-6). When at one point Honey coyly expresses the need to "put some powder on my nose", George's reaction is clear and expressive: he pointedly asks Martha to "show her where we keep the...euphemism" (p. 29).

Indeed, Honey almost seems to have slipped into *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* straight out of an earlier--and for this analysis thematically pertinent--Albee play: his one-act absurdist comedy *The American Dream* (1960). That farce about Middle America is almost entirely composed of platitudes and clichés. The "story" is curiously similar to that of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, although in a completely different idiom. We have a domineering Mommy and a weak Daddy, an unbelievable son whose existence and death are no more than literal realizations of speech clichés, and two outsiders: the conventional Mrs. Barker and the tough Grandma, the most interesting character in the play.

These one-dimensional characters are non-realistic and, aside from Grandma, have no self-awareness. Their relationships are the manifestations of clichés and their dialogue, reminiscent in many ways of Ionesco's *La Cantatrice chauve*, is a collection of inanities, euphemisms, and speech coins. They go to the "johnny" to do their "johnny-do's"; they "feel misgivings, (...) definite qualms, (...) right around where the stitches were"; they "move around a lot, from one apartment to another, up and down the social ladder like mice, if you like similies"--which Mrs. Barker claims she doesn't, "particularly"<sup>35</sup>. Except in the case of the straight-talking Grandma, who comes from "Pioneer stock" and whose death, suggests Ruby Cohn, is the result of the "clichés of middle-class America",<sup>36</sup> the dialogue does not emanate from within the characters. They are but mouth-pieces for Albee whose presence and pointing finger is apparent throughout. Albee manipulates his characters through every verbal trick, all the while winking at his audience and inviting them to recognize themselves, their language, their attitudes. "We live in the age of deformity" Grandma says, and while the other characters may not grasp her wit or the tediousness of their own fatuous babble, the audience, presumably, always does.

This constant authorial presence is exactly the opposite of, e.g., Kroetz's use of cliché in his ultra-realistic plays.<sup>37</sup> In those plays (e.g. *Stallerhof* and *Geisterbahn*) cliché relationships and language emanate solely from within the characters' limited consciousness, and no authorial comment is available. Cliché-ridden speech is not ridiculed, it is simply given. No other speech form is offered and the author is nowhere to be



found. *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* stands somewhere between these two styles. The characters of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* are realistic, much as in Kroetz's plays, and their language emanates from their personalities, not from the author's. But unlike Kroetz's limited characters--indeed, unlike the stick-figures of *The American Dream*--George and Martha are *conscious* of the language they use. In a sense, the authorial consciousness which is so sorely missing in Kroetz and is so overly present in *The American Dream*, has in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* been *internalized* within the characters of George and Martha who seem to be both the *dramatis personae* and the directors of their play.<sup>32</sup>

George and Martha possess an advantage denied not only to Mommy, Daddy and Mrs. Barker, but to all of the characters studied in the preceding chapters, namely: verbal options. In contrast to the characters of, e.g., Kroetz, Bond and Mamet--characters who belong to the lowest social and cultural strata and who are all but verbally incapacitated--George and Martha, Nick and Honey represent the cultural "elite", University professors and their spouses, educated, sophisticated and psychologically complex characters. As George ironically puts it: "I am a Doctor. A.B....M.A....PH.D....ABMAPHID! Abmaphid has been variously described as a wasting disease of the frontal lobes, and as a wonder drug. It is actually both" (p. 37). George is cynically aware of his intellectual advantage. He is equally aware that education can also be a danger, a "wasting disease", when it culminates in mere titles--A.B., M.A., Ph.D.--when it leads to mere verbal profusion which distances truth and authenticity. George and Martha

play with language and within language. They move easily from academic glosses--like George's elaboration on the Spenglerian thesis of the fall of the West (p. 117)--to teeny-bopper slang; from the vulgar to the poetic; all the while exhibiting their verbal dexterity, "exercising (...) what's left of our wits", as George puts it.

Paradoxically, wit and imagination, which seem to be used almost as a rebellion against the banal, have also displaced and replaced the authentic. George and Martha "know" words, but they do not know--or at least won't acknowledge--reality. Existence is constantly verbalized, *versprachlicht*, restructured in a phrase. Even the central event of George and Martha's lives--their joint son--is no more than a verbal elaboration, a fiction akin to Mommy's "bumble of joy" in *The American Dream*. George at one point sums up his life and existential situation with a surprising grammatical innovation: "Dashed hopes, and good intentions. Good, better, best, bested. How do you like that for a declension (...)?" (p. 32). Indeed, it is fitting that a declension should be used to define an existence which, for all its originality and self-consciousness, is trapped within the verbal matrix.

## ACT II: "Hacking Away at Each Other"

Act II contains most of the more painful scenes of the play, the uglier confessions and humiliations. George, who in Act I had already suffered humiliation through Martha's description of his failed career, is here further exposed as Martha betrays his secret first novel and implies that its subject --a boy who accidentally killed both his mother and his father--is autobiographical. Humiliate the Host, Get the Guests, and Hump the Hostess are all played out at an excellerating pace in Act II.

What will interest us, however, is not the contents of these perverse confessions and betrayals, but the metacommunication--the ways in which George, Martha and Nick discuss their verbal interactions. There are 4 such discussions in Act II and in the first half of Act III, and in each we find different partners: George and Nick, then George and Martha, then Martha and Nick, and finally, as an introduction to the climactic game of Bringing Up Baby, again George and Martha. In each of these discussions a number of elements recur: the verbal communication in question is described in metaphors of brute physical violence; the communicants re-enact that brutal verbal style as their metacommunication itself escalates into aggression; and this aggression sets off another round of verbal violence. It is a cyclical communication pattern which Watzlawick describes well as a "game without end" since even the attempts to discuss--and thus perhaps neutralize--their brutality, becomes one more arena for aggression.

The numerous equations of verbal and physical violence are more than merely metaphorical, for the results of verbal violence is demonstrated as being no less painful or dangerous than the physical brutality in terms of which it is described. Through these recurrent discussions of language in terms of physical harm, Albee emphasizes his argument that language is a real action within which violence is not merely expressed but actually created.

Act II begins with a short discussion between George and Nick on the interaction witnessed in Act I. George admits that his and Martha's behavior had been "disgusting" and angers Nick by implying that he is not a worthy audience for their fights. "Do you think I like having...whatever-it-is... ridiculing me, tearing me down, in front of (waves his hand in a gesture of contemptuous dismissal) YOU?" (p. 91). Nick counters by saying that if George and Martha "...want to go at each other, like a couple of...(.)...animals" they needn't subject other people to the spectacle (pp. 91-2).<sup>39</sup>

**George:** (Considers it) (...)Well, you're quite right, of course. It isn't the prettiest spectacle...seeing a couple of middle-age types hacking away at each other, all red in the face and winded, missing half the time.

**Nick:** Oh, you two don't miss...you two are pretty good. Impressive. (...) ...sometimes I can admire things that I don't admire. Now, flagellation isn't my idea of good times, but....

**George:** ...but you can admire a good flagellator...a real pro. (pp. 92-3)

This initial description of George and Martha's language-violence sets up the metaphors which will recur repeatedly, developed and strengthened, over the next two acts. George's "hacking" metaphor evokes the image of a ring-fight, boxers or wrestlers "all red in the face and winded" footing for position, striking out relentlessly, "hacking away" in physical frenzy. Nick counters with his "flagellation" metaphor, connecting it with "good times" and thus evoking the sado-masochistic context of George and Martha's behavior. Both of these metaphors are drawn from the field of physical violence--not verbal or psychological aggression, which they in fact represent. It is the physical correlative which is of importance here, for while George and Martha's battles are almost totally devoid of action, their word-battles function as real acts. This is attested to by Nick. After George reveals to Honey that Nick had betrayed the secret of her hysterical pregnancy, Nick threatens George:

**Nick:** (To George, as he moves toward the hall) You're going to regret this.

**George:** Probably. I regret everything.

**Nick:** I mean, I'm going to make you regret this.

**George:** (Softly) No doubt. Acute embarrassment, eh?

**Nick:** I'll play the charades like you've got 'em set up....I'll play in your language....

(pp. 149-50)

The strongest threat that Nick can conjure up is to "play in (George's) language" thus stressing the reality of the violence imbued in language aggression and its real capacity to wound and punish.

The second discussion about language in Act II is between George and Martha, and follows George's successful game of Get the Guests. It centers both on the efficacy of language-violence and on the rules of their communication-games within which this violence takes place. Martha attacks George for "pigmy hunting" (p. 151), implying that Nick and Honey are not worthy opponents for his practiced archery. Indeed, when George guesses Nick's secret reason for marrying Honey--that she is wealthy--he exclaims joyously: "You mean I was right? I hit it? (...) My God, what archery! First try, too" (p. 102-3). Thus "to get" someone verbally is equated with hunting and shooting metaphors. George, who expected Martha to celebrate his victory, is upset by her derision and exposes her style of mutilation:

George: It's perfectly all right for you....I mean, you can make your own rules...you can go around like a hopped-up Arab, slashing away at everything in sight, scarring up half the world if you want to. But somebody else try it...no sir! (...) Why baby, I did it all for you. I thought you'd like it, sweetheart...it's sort of to your taste...blood, carnage and all.

(pp. 151-2)

Martha as a "hopped-up Arab" whose taste runs to "blood, carnage and all" is said to slash and scar, drawing blood, creating carnage: again, all through language. Brutality is part of their game, one of its rules ("Why baby, I did it all for you") and this again evokes the sado-masochistic context. This is made pointedly clear when George mockingly claims that he thought that his game of Get the Guests would sexually stimulate her. "Why, I thought you'd get all excited...sort of heave and pant and come running to me, your melons bobbling."

Martha immediately reverses George's metaphor and turns it against him. Her objection to George's game is that playing against an outside opponent is not in their rules. She extends his sado-masochistic context by claiming that Nick can't take such "tearing apart" while George can--"YOU CAN STAND IT!! YOU MARRIED ME FOR IT!!"

George: (Quietly) That is a desperately sick lie.  
Martha: DON'T YOU KNOW IT, EVEN YET?  
George: (Shaking his head) Oh...Martha.  
Martha: My arm has gotten tired whipping you.  
(p. 153)

Thus Martha makes explicit claim to satisfying George's needs by "whipping" him. Only, those needs are not physical, the pain she inflicts is through words alone.

The discussion of the rules and reasons for their games escalates into a full-fledged battle in which each threatens to finish the other off, culminating in a mutual pact of "total war".

Martha: ...I'm going to make the damned biggest explosion you ever heard.  
George: (Very pointedly) You try it and I'll beat you at your own game.  
Martha: Is that a threat, George? Hunh?  
George: That's a threat, Martha.  
Martha: (Fake-spits at him) You're going to get it, baby.  
George: Be careful, Martha...I'll rip you to pieces.  
Martha: You aren't man enough...you haven't got the guts.  
George: Total war?  
Martha: Total. (Silence. They both seem relieved...elated).  
(pp. 158-9)

"Total war" implies that the limits which had till now regulated their game-moves are now no longer valid. It is an invitation to renewed imaginative daring in strategy and tactics which leaves both George and Martha "elated" by the challenge.<sup>40</sup> They will "explode" and rip each other to pieces, they will stretch their verbal violence to new heights--until it finally almost destroys them both.

The results of this challenge is Martha's game of Hump the Hostess and George's feigned indifference, which provokes Martha into really seducing Nick. That seduction, however, proves unsatisfactory as Nick, saturated with alcohol, turns out to be one more "flop". The ensuent discussion of Nick's failure to "perform" leads to some of the strongest equations of words and mutilation.

**Martha:** Ohhhh! The stallion's mad, hunh. The gelding's all upset. Ha, ha, ha, HA!  
**Nick:** (Softly; wounded) You...you swing wild, don't you.  
**Martha:** (Triumphant) HAH!  
**Nick:** Just...anywhere.  
**Martha:** HAH! I'm a Gatling gun. Hahahahahahahahaha!  
**Nick:** (In wonder) Aimless...butchery. Pointless.  
**Martha:** AW! You poor little bastard.  
**Nick:** Hit out at everything.

(pp. 192-3)

Martha compares her mouth to a gun, a murderous weapon which Nick says creates "butchery". Nick twice repeats the words "aimless" and "pointless" in connection with Martha's verbal butchery. The second time, he adds the description 'wanton': "Aimless...wanton...pointless." These words, together with "you swing wild", and "hit out at everything" imply that, for Nick,



Martha's verbal savagery exceeds its ostensible cause to such an extent that it itself becomes an object of wonder. The degree of her excess is incomprehensible to pragmatic, unimaginative Nick and he finally says, in awe, and fittingly using a cliché, "There's no limit to you, is there?" (p. 194).

In the fourth discussion, this time again between George and Martha, the word "language" is never mentioned. The subject is one final game which George insists on playing despite Martha's plea that they've had enough. Martha senses the dangerous seriousness of George's intended game and tries to beg out of it. George reacts angrily:

George: (Grabbing her hair, pulling her head back) Now, you listen to me, Martha; you have had quite an evening...quite a night for yourself, and you can't just cut it off whenever you've got enough blood in your mouth. We are going on, and I'm going to have at you, and it's going to make your performance tonight look like an Easter pageant. Now I want you to get yourself a little alert. (Slaps her lightly with his free hand) I want a little life in you, baby. (Again)

(p. 208)

The "blood in your mouth" to which George refers, recalls the "blood, carnage and all" which he had previously described as being to Martha's taste. It also ties in with the "Gatling Gun" image with which Martha had described herself. It is with her mouth--her words--that Martha draws blood and creates "butchery." Now George promises "to have at" her and wants her alert, wants a worthy opponent. He spurs her on like a coach before a

major-league match, goading her into anger, preparing her for one final round to be played "to the death":

**George:** (Again) Pull yourself together! (Again) I want you on your feet and slugging, sweetheart, because I'm going to knock you around, and I want you up for it. (Again; he pulls away, releases her; she rises)

**Martha:** All right, George. What do you want, George?

**George:** An equal battle, baby; that's all.

**Martha:** You'll get it!

**George:** I want you mad.

**Martha:** I'M MAD!!

**George:** Get madder!

**Martha:** DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT!

**George:** Good for you, girl; now, we're going to play this one to the death.

**Martha:** (She paces, actually looks a bit like a fighter) I'm ready for you.

(pp. 208-9)

"On your feet and slugging" is of course a boxing cliché, as is "knock you around." Albee notes in his stage directions that Martha "paces, actually looks like a fighter." Previously, after playing Humiliate the Host and George's attempt to strangle Martha, Albee similarly commented that "They all move around a little, self-consciously, like wrestlers flexing after a fall" (p. 138). Thus our fighters are again ready to enter the verbal ring.<sup>41</sup>

In 1968, Friedrich Dürrenmatt, the Swiss playwright, wrote and staged an adaptation of August Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* which he called *Play Strindberg*. Using much of Strindberg's original dialogue, though pared down and deflated, Dürrenmatt rearranged Strindberg's two Acts into twelve short "rounds". Each round opens with one of the three characters

announcing the number of the round and its title, then a gong is heard and the scene begins. This literal presentation of marital strife as a 12-round boxing match makes the implicit apparent. Dürrenmatt translates a literary battle "to the death" into a transparent and highly theatrical metaphor. In a Note forwarding his play, Dürrenmatt wrote:

From Strindberg I took the story and the dramatic idea. By eliminating the literary side of Strindberg, his dramatic vision becomes more sharply focused and more modern, (...) Strindberg's dialogue was used as the starting-point of an anti-Strindberg dialogue--out of an actors' play I made a play for acting. The actor no longer needs to present studies of demonic obsessions, but has to make possible on the stage a text which has been depoeiticized and deflated in the extreme.<sup>42</sup>

Dürrenmatt's concept is not foreign to Strindberg's play, as we will later see. There too episodes of game-playing--card games, dancing, piano playing, games of infidelity--alternate with verbal skirmishes, confessions, threats, and brawling. The essence of both plays is warfare, only "while Strindberg explores the motivation of the battles, Dürrenmatt studies only the battle tactics themselves."<sup>43</sup>

What interests me at this point, however, is not the relationship between *Play Strindberg* and *The Dance of Death*, but rather that between *Play Strindberg* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Dürrenmatt has bared the bones of Strindberg's play in order to both expose its essence and to comment on that essence. His play is, we might say, a *metacommunication* on *The Dance of Death*. Dürrenmatt's main critical strategy is structural. The division into 12 rounds does more than to literally represent marriage as a

boxing match, it also focuses attention on the mechanism of obsession, analyzes each dramatic confrontation, isolates and studies each small climax. In *The Dance of Death* games and playing are loosely laced into the hallucinatory dialogue. The "game" has no separate reality, it is not discussed by the characters as representative of their lives. Indeed, Strindberg allows for little open metacommunication: the characters don't step out of their roles even though the roles themselves are inherently fluid and unstable. Alice and Edgar are trapped within the failed game of marriage whose rules need not be elaborated in the play, since they pre-exist in society.

Dürrenmatt takes the opposite extreme by separating the game from its enactment. Audience and characters are explicitly shown the rules, boundaries and score of the cruel game which they are either watching or participating in. The use of a boxing-ring also tells us that the game being played is a spectator sport, in need of an audience. Kurt, like Nick and Honey, plays that audience while also modifying the game itself through his presence. All of this is explicit in Dürrenmatt's version of Strindberg's play: in *The Dance of Death* it is only implicit.

The results of Dürrenmatt's reshaping of *The Dance of Death* is to emphasize the mechanism, the rules of the "collaborative conflict"--to use Watzlawick et al's term--rather than its psychological motivation. *Play Strindberg* is an analytic play. The characters are at a remove from their roles in the Brechtian tradition: they play at being Alice, Edgar or Kurt

to the sound of the game's gong. At the end of each round they revert to being actors or to being characters aware of the game they sometimes play. This of course inhibits emotional identification in actor and audience, and keeps the metaphoric game structure at the forefront of our attention.

Albee certainly does not go as far as Dürrenmatt. Although he too divides his play into a number of explicit games, the rules are not quite so mechanical, nor the structure so rigid.

George and Martha differ from Strindberg's Alice and Edgar in that they are aware of their games, are capable of discussing, even naming them, and move consciously from one round to the next. They also differ from Dürrenmatt's Alice and Edgar in that they have *internalized* the game-structure within their dramatic reality and do not need an outside, (author) imposed mechanical structure which would remove the game from their control. George and Martha stand somewhere between Strindberg and Dürrenmatt: maintaining Strindberg's realism and intensity, but commenting on their games and turning them into theatrical events. George and Martha know and can discuss the game-rules (as we see in the metacommunication), they however also *live* those games, live the game of marriage and illusion—as do Strindberg's characters. Analytic distance and psychological realism co-exist, the game and its enactment are held in a "delicate balance", a painful, perverse balance which George decides to destroy through the expulsion of illusion, the destruction of the son-game, and the banishment of the language which nourished them.

### ACT III: Verbal Murder and Restoration

Most critics agree that the theme of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* centers on Truth and Illusion, truth being rather scarce until illusion, in the form of the fictive son, is expelled from their lives.<sup>44</sup> "When George murders their fictive son," writes June Schlueter, "he just as certainly murders the fictive portion of his and Martha's identities" and thereby demonstrates "the relationship between reality and illusion."<sup>45</sup> Lawrence Kingsley claims that "Albee introduces illusion only to reassess it, to show how his characters must rid themselves of falsehood and return to the world in which they must live."<sup>46</sup> Albee's characters perform "upon the shifting sands of truth" writes Robert Brustein,<sup>47</sup> and "his real enemy" according to Bigsby, "is illusion."<sup>48</sup>

Although there is general agreement on the centrality of the son-myth to the play's theme (along with disagreement as to its success as a central metaphor<sup>49</sup>) few critics draw the connection between the theme of Illusion, its manifestation in the son-myth, and their joint dependence and rootedness in the play's language.<sup>50</sup> It will be my contention that the plausibility of the son-myth, the efficacy of the fiction's expulsion, and the resultant reformed reality are all directly dependent on--and all take place within--the language of the play.

In Act III verbal realism begins to disintegrate as the focus shifts from communication *through* language to the recreation of reality *by* language. It is interesting to note that Watzlawick *et al*, who do devote a section to the analysis of the son-myth as a homeostatic mechanism which functions as a stable symmetrical coalition between George and Martha,<sup>51</sup> choose to ignore the *means* through which the son-myth is destroyed: namely, the incantatory recitation of the Mass for the Dead. This ritualized language and its anti-realistic usage, lays outside of their realistic communicational concern.

Watzlawick *et al* do however point out the important distinction between the "son" and the "son-game" or "son-myth", a distinction of which both George and Martha are aware. The first time the subject is mentioned at all George refers to "the bit (...) the bit about the kid" (p. 18) thus clearly meaning their improvised game. George and Martha know that the son is not a biological reality, and yet, as Watzlawick *et al* put it, "While the son is imaginary, their interaction about him is not, and the nature of this interaction, then, becomes the fruitful question."<sup>52</sup> It is only when the *son* is being discussed that the interaction grows serious, even desperate. As long as the *game* is in question a mocking self-irony characterizes their tone. The terms in which the son-myth is then portrayed are familiar--at least to whoever has read Albee's *The American Dream*. In Act I Martha's indiscreet slip about the existence of a son leads to the following double-edged dialogue in which son and son-game are simultaneously discussed:

George: (Too formal) Martha? When is our son coming home?

Martha: Never mind.

George: No, no..I want to know...you brought it out into the open. When is he coming home, Martha?

Martha: I said never mind. I'm sorry I brought it up.

George: Him up...not it. You brought *him* up. Well, more or less. When's the little bugger going to appear, hunh? I mean isn't tomorrow meant to be his birthday, or something?

Martha: I don't want to talk about it!

George: (Falsely innocent) But Martha....

Martha: I DON'T WANT TO TALK ABOUT IT!

George: I'll bet you don't. (To Honey and Nick) Martha does not want to talk about it...him. Martha is sorry she brought it up...him.

(pp. 69-70)

The "little bugger" phrase--repeatedly used--is only one of a row of parodic terms through which George, and Albee, mock the platitudes of parenthood (platitudes which emerge in an emotional cascade during the exorcism scene), and draw attention to the son's fictive status. George also calls his creation a "blond-eyed, blue-haired" boy (p. 72), "the apple of our eye...the sprout" (p. 83), a "comfort, a bean bag" (p. 98), a "bouncy boy" (p. 214), and a "baby-poo" (p. 216). These obviously mocking terms undercut Nick and Honey's--and the audiences--expectations of parental rhetoric and evoke, quite clearly, Mommy and Daddy's "bumble of joy" in Albee's *The American Dream*. Mommy and Daddy, like George and Martha, "couldn't have a bumble" of their own, and so they bought one which gave "no satisfaction."<sup>22</sup> Grandma's retelling of the bumble's demise is a pointed parody of the verbal clichés and emotional sterility which characterize Mommy and Daddy and, to a less absurd extent, George and Martha:

Grandma: (...) One night, it cried its heart out, if you can



imagine such a thing.  
**Mrs. Barker:** Cried its heart out! Well!  
**Grandma:** But that was only the beginning. Then it turned out it  
 only had eyes for its Daddy.  
**Mrs. Barker:** For its Daddy! Why, any self-respecting woman  
 would have gouged those eyes right out of its head.  
**Grandma:** Well, she did. That's exactly what she did. But then,  
 it kept its nose up in the air.  
**Mrs. Barker:** Ufgh! How disgusting!  
**Grandma:** That's what they thought. But *then*, it began to  
 develop an interest in its you-know-what.  
**Mrs. Barker:** In its you-know what! Well! I hope they cut its  
 hands off at the wrists! (...)  
**Grandma:** Of course. And then, as it got bigger, they found out  
 all sorts of terrible things about it, like: it didn't  
 have a head on its shoulders, it had no guts, it was  
 spineless, its feet were made of clay...just dreadful  
 things.<sup>54</sup>

The echoes of *The American Dream* are an early indication that reality is  
 being confounded through language. George and Martha's son, that perfect  
 product of a parent's imagination--"so beautiful, so wise", as Martha puts  
 it (p. 222)--has much in common with the "American Dream" character who  
 replaces Mommy and Daddy's unsatisfactory first child. "Well, I'm a type"  
 the beautiful young man admits, and describes his clichéic looks as "clean-  
 cut, midwest farm boy type, almost insultingly good-looking in a typically  
 American way. Good profile, straight nose, honest eyes, wonderful  
 smile...". But he knows that he is only an appearance with no inherent  
 reality: "(...) I let people love me...I accept the syntax around me, for  
 while I know I cannot relate...I know I must be related to."<sup>55</sup> This absurd  
 manifestation of platitudinal desires and emotional sterility is most  
 obviously evoked by George shortly before the exorcism when, carrying  
 "flores para los muertos" he pretends to mistake the good-looking Nick for

his and Martha's son. "Sonny! You've come home for your birthday!" (p. 195). Martha corrects this mock-error:

**Martha:** Ha, ha, ha, HA! That's the houseboy, for God's sake.  
**George:** Really? That's not our own little sonny-Jim? Our own little *all-American something-or-other?*<sup>256</sup>  
(p. 196, my emphasis)

That absent son, like the 'American Dream', exists only insofar as he is related to. Both are propositions, syntactical constructs, elaborated platitudes. The difference is that of idiom: while the 'American Dream' figure exists physically, the absurdity of the context renders him a mere metaphor. George and Martha's son, however, is evoked within a realistic context, thus the climactic revelation that he is a mere fiction, a verbal illusion, must be prepared in order for the son to attain symbolic meaning.

Bringing Up Baby, or the "exorcism", is thus preceded by a series of dialogues which overtly focus in on the central theme of the play--Truth and Illusion--and seek the link between them and the language which construct them. George and Martha's revelations in the first two Acts were questionable and ambivalent; neither Nick nor the audience knew how much to believe, where fiction ends and fact begins. But here, right before the climactic expulsion of illusion, the question of veracity and verification is urgently and repeatedly posed by George and Martha themselves.

Five dialogues center on this issue. The first concerns Martha's surprising revelation to Nick, at the opening of Act III, that the only man who has ever made her happy is her husband George. Nick refuses to believe her, to which she asks: "You always deal in appearances?" (p. 190). A bit later George and Martha argue about whether there's a moon out and George tells of an experience he had once, when sailing past Majorca: "the moon went down, thought about it for a little...considered it, you know what I mean?...and then, POP, came up again. Just like that."

**Martha:** That is not true! That is such a lie!

**George:** You must not call everything a lie, Martha. (To Nick)  
Must she?

**Nick:** Hell, I don't know when you people are lying, or what.

**Martha:** You're damned right!

**George:** You're not supposed to.

(pp. 199-200)

As the argument continues Martha questions whether George had in fact ever sailed past Majorca at all:

**George:** I certainly was! My Mommy and Daddy took me there as a college graduation present.

**Martha:** Nuts.

**Nick:** Was this after you killed them?

(George and Martha swing around and look at him; there is a brief, ugly pause)

**George:** (Defiantly) Maybe.

**Martha:** Yeah; maybe not, too.

**Nick:** Jesus! (...)

**George:** HAH!

**Nick:** Damn you.

**George:** (To Nick) Truth and illusion. Who knows the difference, eh, toots? Eh?

(pp. 200-201)

The discussion now switches to whether or not Nick is a "houseboy":

**George:** Look! I know the game! You don't make it in the sack, you're a houseboy.  
**Nick:** I AM NOT A HOUSEBOY!  
**George:** No? Well then, you must have made it in the sack. Yes?  
(...)  
**Nick:** (After a pause; to Martha, quietly with intense pleading) Tell him I'm not a houseboy.  
**Martha:** (After a pause, quietly) No; you're not a houseboy.  
**George:** (With great, sad relief) So be it.  
**Martha:** (Pleading) Truth and illusion, George; you don't know the difference.  
**George:** No; but we must carry on as though we did.  
**Martha:** Amen. (...)  
**Nick:** (To Martha) Do you want me to...do something to him?  
**Martha:** You leave him alone!  
**George:** If you're a houseboy, baby, you can pick up after me; if you're a stud, you can go protect your plow. Either way. Either way....Everything.  
**Nick:** Oh for God's....  
**Martha:** (A little afraid) Truth or illusion, George. Doesn't it matter to you...at all?

(pp. 202-204)

The subject culminates in a layered and evocative image which locates illusion within the language which propogates it; an image which prepares us for the "operation"--verbally performed--which will finally cut illusion out at its heart:

**George:** (...)I think we've been having a...a real good evening...all things considered....We've sat around, and got to know each other, and had fun and games...curl-up-on-the-floor, for example....  
**Honey:** ...the tiles....  
**George:** ...the tiles....Snap the Dragon.  
**Honey:** ...peel the label....  
**George:** ...peel the...what?  
**Martha:** Label. Peel the label.  
**Honey:** (Apologetically, holding up her brandy bottle) I peel labels.

(p. 212)

George responds by extending Honey's meaning of the word "label" to cover all the false tags we put on things, the names which conceal, the words which distort, the "appearances" which hide truth. Like Honey, he too will peel the lable--of his paternity, to expose the fiction hidden under the tag:

**George:** We all peel labels, sweetie; and when you get through the skin, all three layers, through the muscle, slosh aside the organs (An aside to Nick) them which is still sloshable-- (Back to Honey) and get down to bone...you know what you do then?

**Honey:** (Terribly interested) No!

**George:** When you get down to bone, you haven't got all the way, yet. There's something inside the bone...the marrow...and that's what you gotta get at. (A strange smile at Martha)

**Honey:** Oh! I see.

**George:** The marrow. But bones are pretty resilient, especially in the young. Now, take our son.... (pp. 212-3)

And with this the final game of Bringing Up Baby begins.

Bringing Up Baby differs from all of the previous games. It consists of two parallel verbal activities, recitations of pre-existing litanies, and is played exclusively between George and Martha. Nick and Honey are reduced to passive spectators whose shocked reaction to the game reflects the audience but does not modify the game itself. Moreover, unlike the previous games, Bringing Up Baby is not spontaneous; it has the rehearsed air of a ritual repetition and the interlocking of the two litanies is clearly planned and directed. In her study of *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama*, a book mainly occupied with drama which is *about* drama itself, June Schlueter suggests that Albee uses George as an alterego and

allows him to be both a "character" and the "playwright-director."<sup>57</sup> Act III, the Exorcism, is George's Act. He is its author and orchestrator and through it he accomplishes the one crucial action of the play: the expulsion of a fictive reality, and also ties the plot device--the imaginary son--with the thematic equation of language and illusion.

Once George has forced Martha to "play", Albee tells us in a stage direction that Martha speaks "By rote; a kind of almost-tearful recitation" (p. 216). George literally "prompts" Martha and encourages her:

George: (...)All right, Martha; your recitation, please.

Martha: (From far away) What, George?

George: (Prompting) "Our son...."

Martha: All right. Our son. Our son was born in a September night, a night not unlike tonight, though tomorrow, and twenty... one...years ago.

George: (Beginning of quiet asides) You see? I told you.

Martha: I was an easy birth....

George: Oh, Martha; no. You labored...how you labored.

Martha: It was an easy birth...once it had been...accepted, relaxed into.

George: Ah...yes. Better.

(p. 217)

Martha's "recitation" recreates the life-history of an almost mythic son. The terms in which she portrays him differ strongly from the gutsy and vulgar vocabulary we've come to associate with her. This son is described in terms of heroic perfection, a "sun" child--"Beautiful; wise; perfect" (p. 222). Martha's language draws strongly on the language of parental platitudes but here they are neither absurd, nor even ironic, but do have the rather familiar ring of trite sentimentality. "(...) He was a healthy child, a red, brawling child, with slippery firm limbs... (...) and a full

head of black, fine, fine hair which, oh, later, later, became blond as the sun, our son. (...) And we raised him... (...) ...with teddy bears and transparent floating goldfish..." (p. 218). As George will later say: "There's a real mother talking." (p. 222).

**Martha:** (...) And his eyes were green...green with...if you peered so deep into them...so deep...bronze...bronze parantheses around the irises...such green eyes!  
**George:** ...blue, green, brown....  
**Martha:** ...and he loved the sun!...He was tan before and after everyone...and in the sun his hair...became...fleece.  
**George:** (Echoing her) ...fleece....  
**Martha:** ...beautiful, beautiful boy.

(p. 220)

At this point, with the mythic fleece, the bronze and the sun all evoked, George begins his parallel litany:

**Martha:** ...beautiful, beautiful boy.  
**George:** Absolve, Domine, animas omnium fidelium defunctorum ab omni vinculo delictorum.  
**Martha:** ...and school...and summer camp...and sledding...and swimming....  
**George:** Et gratia tua illis succurrente, mereantur evadere iudicium ultionis. (...)  
**Martha:** And as he grew...and as he grew...oh! so wise!...he walked evenly between us... (She spreads her hands) ...a hand out to each of us for what we could offer by way of support, affection, teaching, even love...and these hands, still, to hold us off a bit, for mutual protection, to protect us all from George's...weakness...and my...necessary greater strength...to protect himself...and us.  
**George:** In memoria aeterna erit justus: ab auditione mala non timebit.  
**Martha:** So wise; so wise.  
**Nick:** (To George) What is this? What are you doing?  
**George:** Shhhhh.  
**Honey:** Shhhhh.  
**Nick:** (Shrugging) O.K.  
**Martha:** So beautiful; so wise.  
**George:** (Laughs quietly) All truth being relative.

Martha: It was true! Beautiful; wise; perfect.  
George: There's a real mother talking.

(pp. 220-22)

The Catholic Mass for the dead is an ironic counterpoint to the son's life-history. As Martha recreates her son in the only form in which he's ever lived--in language--George, using the same means, performs his death. Normally, the Mass follows a death. Its purpose is to give meaning and symbolic finality to physical demise. Here the Mass, through its potency as verbal reality, accomplishes the death. An alternate verbal reality, fraught with symbolic and traditional values, is chosen by George as the weapon through which to combat and destroy the "life" to which he and Martha had given verbal birth. It strikes the "marrow" of their perverted relationship, exposes and excises that "something inside the bone" which, as George had previously said, is the true meaning of "peeling labels." Like Priest and Confessor, George and Martha continue their separate, opposed litanies and end with overlapping recitations: George intoning with terrible finality the *Dies Irae*, Martha completing the "life-story" of "OUR SON" (p. 227).

The following section is a demotic restatement of that which had just been ritually enacted. George proclaims the simple fact of the son's "death": "Martha... (long pause)...our son is...dead." Martha's reaction is to step out of the game and object to George's right to play that extreme move.



**Martha:** (Quivering with rage and loss) NO! NO! YOU CANNOT DO THAT! YOU CAN'T DECIDE THAT FOR YOURSELF! I WILL NOT LET YOU DO THAT!

**George:** We'll have to leave around noon, I suppose....

**Martha:** I WILL NOT LET YOU DECIDE THESE THINGS! (...)

**George:** He is dead. Kyrie, eleison. Christe, eleison. Kyrie, eleison.

**Martha:** You cannot. You may not decide these things.

**Nick:** (Leaning over her; tenderly) He hasn't decided anything, lady. It's not his doing. He doesn't have the power....

**George:** That's right, Martha; I'm not a God. I don't have the power over life and death, do I?

**Martha:** YOU CAN'T KILL HIM! YOU CAN'T HAVE HIM DIE!

(pp. 232-233)

George's "decision" to "have him die" and his ironic remark that he is "not a God. I don't have the power over life and death, do I?", again emphasizes his role as surrogate author, as Albee's alterego. George's one decisive act within the play concerns the very premises of their "play". Just as Albee has created a violent and cruel play out of words, so George will expel violence and cruelty with words. At the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* the verbal construct--the play--and the invented reality--the Illusion--coincide. Both are "redeemed", both are simplified. The fiction is "pushed over the edge," as Martha puts it, and killed, together with the fictive part of George and Martha.

**Martha:** (...) Did you...did you...have to?

**George:** (Pause) Yes.

**Martha:** It was...? You had to?

**George:** (Pause) Yes.

**Martha:** I don't know.

**George:** It was...time.

**Martha:** Was it?

**George:** Yes.

(p. 239-240)

"It was...time". The ending of the fiction in their lives and the ending of the fiction on the stage--the play--are simultaneous. Albee has reaffirmed the importance of reality-acceptance through his invented plot; but, inversely, he has also shown that the illusions created in art can be "a form of illusion which ultimately leads towards truth."<sup>58</sup>

Whatever our feelings be as to the effectiveness or dramatic honesty of Albee's plot at this point,<sup>59</sup> it seems clear to me that within the world of the play, the death-through-pronouncement must be accepted as a *real* and effective act. It changes the characters' behaviour and their view of themselves. Martha, for all her rage, finally accepts both the death of the son and of the son-game--and redefines the relationship between them. George's murder-through-pronouncement does not contain the fantastic elements of, e.g., the Professor's murder of his student through the ritual repetition of the word "couteau" in Ionesco's *La Leçon*,<sup>60</sup> but George's verbal act is just as irreversible and accomplishes a psychic transformation which results in a changed, reformed interpersonal relationship.

The last section of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, in which George and Martha are alone, without guests, without illusions, consists entirely of one-line dialogue usually no more than two words long. Albee's stage directions read: "This whole last section very softly, very slowly", a rhythm sharply contrasting to what preceded.

Martha: (Pause) I'm cold.  
George: It's late.  
Martha: Yes.  
George: (Long silence) It will be better.  
Martha: (Long silence) I don't...know.  
George: It will be...maybe.  
Martha: I'm...not...sure.  
George: No.  
Martha: Just...us?  
George: Yes.  
Martha: I don't suppose, maybe, we could....  
George: No, Martha.  
Martha: Yes. No.  
George: Are you all right?  
Martha: Yes. No. (pp. 240-1)

Albee's intention in this final dialogue is surely to present "authentic" speech, cleansed of games of invective, of desperate wit. The language of illusion, the frenetic battles, the "blood and carnage", have been "exorcised" along with the fictive son. The son who was "born" and "raised" in verbal cruelty, can only "die" when the language which created and defined him, also dies. George's Mass for the Dead induces a double death: it kills the illusion along with the instrument of illusion--violent language.<sup>61</sup>

#### Expanding the Context: STRINDBERG AND JARRY

Ruby Cohn, in her study of verbal cruelty, claims that "Strindberg was the first dramatist to base whole plays upon dialogues of cruelty, and several contemporary playwrights have learned verbal sadism from that master."<sup>62</sup> Among those contemporary playwrights she, inevitably, places

Albee and his play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Citing Strindberg's influence on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is in fact a critical commonplace: few critics can disregard the obvious surface parallels between Albee's unhappy couple and Strindberg's mutual mutilators in *The Father*, *The Creditors*, *The Bond* or *The Dance of Death*. Thus Strindberg has come to define the "cultural tradition" for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, as has Ionesco for *The American Dream*, or Genet for *The Zoo Story*.<sup>63</sup> Indeed, in characterization, plot action, as well as in certain thematics, George and Martha can easily be seen as modern relatives of Strindberg's couples. Like Alice and The Captain (*The Dance of Death*) they enact the game/reality of failed marriage and mutual recrimination; like Laura and Adolf (*The Father*) they plot and fence for power over each other and over their child; like the Baron and Baroness (*The Bond*) they lie, contrive and torture each other; like Tekla, Gustav and Adolph (*The Creditors*) shifting coalitions are manipulated to extract the greatest amount of pain and humiliation. Martha seems deceptively like Strindberg's emasculating harridans, especially Laura and Alice, while George shares a certain weakness with Strindberg's males, e.g. Adolf and Edgar. All of the couples are locked in a struggle in which, as Adolf says, "one of us must go under" (*The Father*, p. 41). The similarities go beyond the "warring couple" idiom: thematically, sado-eroticism, spiritual cannibalism, cultural/biological antagonism and the "will to power" are common to both authors. Children are always pawns, absent objects fought over by possessive parents and often leading to the play's climax. Death or psychic annihilation occur again and again.

Although the parallels are clear, and those relevant to this study will be gone into in detail below, the Strindbergian model is only externally relevant to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. I quite agree with Bigsby who, in his introduction to a collection of essays on Albee, warns: "It is surely (...) a mistake to regard *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as simply a modern version of Strindberg's *The Dance of Death*. (...) The influence is there; the voice is Albee's."<sup>64</sup> This remark is perhaps directed at critics like Marion A. Taylor who, in an article published in 1965, all but accuses Albee of plagiarism.<sup>65</sup> Taylor's study is instructive: for while her detailed comparison points up much similarity of detail and incident, the tone and thematic thrust--the "voice", as Bigsby has it--even in her examples, are markedly different. Taylor ignores these areas; it is striking that in her summary of the similarities between the two plays, all reference to language, verbal power, or wit are lacking.<sup>66</sup>

*The Dance of Death* (part I), written in 1901, is structurally similar to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. The play consists of a series of games, arguments, power maneuvers and shifting alliances between Alice and Edgar, miserably married for 25 years, and Kurt, a spectator and participant in one night of their marital struggle. Like George and Martha, Alice and Edgar expose and disgrace each other, using their spectator/guest as a backboard against which to bounce off mutual acrimony, past failures, vile accusations. As in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* it is difficult to know who is lying and when, and as in Albee's play, *The Dance of Death* ends with a tentative reconciliation between the couple after their guest has left.

The intensity of the interpersonal combat, its compressed and unrelieved bile, its eerie malignancy, have made *The Dance of Death* something of a prototype for plays of "spoken cruelty." M. Morgan claims that "*The Dance of Death* has been one of Strindberg's most influential plays, a model for Sartre's *Huis Clos*, for O'Neill's *Long Days Journey into Night* and for Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*"--all highly verbal and cruel plays. Ruby Cohn writes more specifically of "dialogues of cruelty", of "verbal sadism" as the distinctive and influential aspect of Strindberg's dramaturgy.<sup>69</sup> Allowing for the obvious and abundant similarities mentioned above, I would like to focus, firstly, on a comparison of the use of language in *The Dance of Death* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in order to test whether Strindberg's "verbal sadism" is in fact a model for Albee.

A comparison of a few superficially similar passages may help to gage the differences in their style and language.

- (1) Alice: (...) the last time I waltzed wasn't yesterday.  
The Captain: Could you do it still?  
Alice: Still?  
The Captain: Ye-es. You're a bit past dancing, same as I am.  
Alice: I'm ten years younger than you.  
The Captain: Then we're the same age--for the lady always has to be ten years younger.  
Alice: How dare you! You're an old man, and I'm in my prime.  
(*The Dance of Death*, p. 132)<sup>69</sup>

George: (...) It's that habit you have...chewing your ice cubes...like a cocker spaniel. You'll crack your big teeth.

Martha: THEY'RE MY BIG TEETH!

George: Some of them...some of them.

Martha: I've got more teeth than you've got.

George: Two more.

Martha: Well, two more's a lot more.

George: I suppose it is. I suppose it's pretty remarkable...considering how old you are.

Martha: YOU CUT THAT OUT! (Pause) You're not so young yourself.

George: (With boyish pleasure...a chant) I'm six years younger than you are...I always have been and I always will be.

Martha: (Glumly) Well...you're going bald.

George: So are you. (Pause...they both laugh)

(*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, pp. 14-15)

(2) Kurt: Another thing--forgive my asking. Where are the children?  
(...)

Alice: In the town. They couldn't stay at home. He set them against me....

Kurt: And you against him.

Alice: Yes, naturally. Then it came to taking sides, canvassing, bribery...So, in order not to destroy the children, we parted from them. What should have been a bond drove us apart; the blessing of a home became its curse....

(*The Dance of Death*, p. 147)

George: (...)She has a son who fought her every inch of the way, who didn't want to be turned into a weapon against his father, who didn't want to be used as a goddamn club whenever Martha didn't get things like she wanted them!

Martha: (Rising to it) Lies! Lies!

George: Lies? All right. A son who would *not* disown his father, who came to him for advice, for information, for love that wasn't mixed with sickness--and you know what I mean, Martha!--who could not tolerate the slashing, braying residue that called itself his MOTHER. MOTHER? HAH!!

Martha: (Cold) All right, you. A son who was so ashamed of his father he asked me once if it--possibly--wasn't true, as he had heard, from some cruel boys, maybe, that he was not our child; who could not tolerate the shabby failure his father had become....

George: Lies!

(*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, p. 225)<sup>70</sup>

(3) Alice: Yes, go! You always do go; you always turn your back when the battle gets too hot for you and leave your wife to cover up your retreat. Boozer, boaster, liar! Curses on you!

Kurt: This is a bottomless pit.

(*The Dance of Death*, p. 164)

George: Monstre!  
Martha: Cochon!  
George: Bête!  
Martha: Canaille!  
George: Putain!

(*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, p. 101)

Each of the above three passages show how two different plays deal with identical subjects: age difference; using children as weapons; cursing. Strindberg presents these subjects in a straightforward style. His language translates information or emotion; it is concise, precise, and rather explicit. Strindberg tends to allow his characters to express their psychological states through rational and analytic language. Elsewhere, e.g., Alice explains that "we really are the most unhappy people in the world" (p. 146), or Edgar rationalizes that "people were so vindictive that I became vindictive too..." (p. 181). There is nothing extraordinary in their mode of expression; indeed, the "nightmarish atmosphere" which some critics note in *The Dance of Death*<sup>71</sup> is a cumulative feeling which emerges from the constant shifts and intensification of mood and declaration by the characters. It is the things *said* which are horrifying--not the way they are said. "Strindberg is pre-eminently the dramatist of a dynamic psychology," writes Raymond Williams; "He is extraordinarily creative (...) in the capacity to find new and dynamic forms through which psychological process can be enacted."<sup>72</sup> That which Cohn calls "dialogues of cruelty" are dialogues which *translate* cruel thoughts and emotions--sustained cruelty, certainly, but not "verbal sadism" in the sense that the language itself is wounding.



Albee is obviously different. Each of the above passages from his play shows cutting wit, hyperbole, a capacity to wound through the turn of phrase--the way his characters speak is wounding, not only what they say. When George describes Martha as "the slashing, braying residue that called itself MOTHER" he is doing more than accusing her (as Alice does Edgar) of "set(ting) them (the children) against me." His lines cannot be reduced to their factual content without losing the very marrow of which George and Martha's relationship consists. George and Martha play roles similar to those of Alice and Edgar, but the shifting chain of incidents (albeit, mainly spoken incidents) which are the heart of Strindberg's drama are transformed in Albee into verbal moves. Language serves different purposes in the two plays. Strindberg's language reveals; Albees' demonstrates, enacts. Like in Sartre's *Huis Clos* Strindberg's "hell" is concrete and realistic:

**The Captain:** You're not so childish as to believe in hell, are you?

**Kurt:** Don't you believe in it--you who are right in it?

**The Captain:** Only metaphorically.

**Kurt:** You've described your hell so realistically that metaphors, however poetic, are out of the picture.

(*The Dance of Death*, p. 157)

It is a hell which, like Sartre's, is psychological and lodged in the relationship between the participants. The presence of "l'autre" is the source of torture--their words, the quality of their language is of no importance.<sup>73</sup> This is best shown in Dürrenmatt's adaptation of Strindberg's *The Dance of Death*. In his opening Note to *Play Strindberg* Dürrenmatt speaks of his "depoeticized and deflated" text. "By eliminating the

literary side of Strindberg, his dramatic vision becomes more sharply focused" Dürrenmatt claims.<sup>74</sup> That is, Strindberg's couple does not need *language* to practice their mutual tortures. Dürrenmatt's play is quite different from Strindberg's, but it loses in neither intensity nor demonic strength through the expulsion of much of Strindberg's dialogue, and was, in fact, a highly popular and successful play.<sup>75</sup> If the same exercise were attempted on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* not only the flavor and wit of the play would suffer, its very substance would be lost. George and Martha struggle *within* language, not merely through it. They are incapable of straight vituperation like "Boozer, boaster, liar! Curses on you!" since the way they speak is more important to them than what they say. Style for George and Martha is of the essence: their list of French curse words--to which I'll return below when discussing Jarry--is more than mere name-calling. It does not simply express antipathy--as does "Boozer, boaster, liar!"--it creates the realm within which their relationship exists, the realm of original and provocative words. Dürrenmatt could strip Strindberg of verbiage and still retain the basic movement of his obsessive play. The only way *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* could be stripped down and still retain its essence is if it were stripped of action and turned into a radio play.

Although *The Dance of Death* is close to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* structurally, *The Father* is closer in theme and spirit. *The Father* was written in 1887 as a naturalistic play, influenced by the theories of Emile Zola.<sup>76</sup> Like *The Dance of Death* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*

it takes place in a bourgeois living-room and traces the animosity between a long-married, unhappy couple. Unlike *The Dance of Death*, *The Father* contains a clear and dramatic plot: the struggle of Captain Adolf and his wife Laura over control of their only daughter Bertha. This struggle is usually described as a "conflict of wills" or, in Strindberg's term, a "brain-battle" which results in a *Själamod*--a soul-murder, or psychic-murder.<sup>77</sup> In 1887 Strindberg defined psychic-murder as "another side of insanity"; it is the soul's "struggle for power" and involves spiritual cannibalism, the "devouring" of another's soul.<sup>78</sup> Indeed, despite Strindberg's naturalistic intension, *The Father* is an obsessive, nightmarish play almost abstract in its characterization.<sup>79</sup> Although realistic in detail, its compressed form and thematic mono-mania work against realism. As in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, the struggle between the Captain and Laura is one "of life and death", and to the death (*The Father*, p. 37). Robert Brustein goes so far as to suggest that *The Father* is set "less in a bourgeois household than an African jungle, where two wild animals, eyeing each other's jugular, mercilessly claw at each other until one of them falls."<sup>80</sup>

Like *The Dance of Death*, *The Father* is largely lacking in humor or wit; the enmity is deadly serious and unrelieved. The language however, is less straightforward and expository than in *The Dance of Death*. Strindberg relies heavily on innuendo, allusions, on whispered insinuations, on the nuance of words which, as the Captain says, "trickl(e) poisonous doubts--like herbane--in my ear" (p. 36). The Captain's apoplectic insanity and

death--his soul-murder--results directly from Laura's insinuations as to his paternity. This biological problem, the impossibility (in 1887) of scientifically establishing a father's paternity and the power which this gives women over their husbands and children, is the center of the play's plot. The obsessive need to possess the child, and the murder of the parent through "loss" of the child (verbally pronounced) are the themes which link *The Father* to *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*.

*The Father* opens with The Captain questioning Nöjd, a soldier, as to whether he is responsible for Emma's pregnancy. His answer sets the theme:

The Captain: Give me a straight answer now: are you the child's father, or are not *not*?

Nöjd: How am I to know?

The Captain: What's that you say? Don't you know?

Nöjd: Why, no sir--a fellow can't really be sure.

The Captain: Were there others?

Nöjd: Not *that* time--but just the same--how can I be sure I was the only one. (p. 8)

The Captain later tells Laura of this conversation and she uses that "scientific" information, the Captains "teachings", as she calls it, in order to instill a similar doubt in him.

Laura: Because a mother is closer to her child--more so since it has been discovered that no one can be absolutely certain who is the father of a child.

The Captain: What bearing has that on this case?

Laura: You don't know whether you are Bertha's father!

The Captain: Don't I?

Laura: How can you know what no one else knows?

The Captain: Are you joking?

Laura: No--I am simply employing your teachings. Besides, how do you know that I have not been unfaithful to you?

(p. 25)

The Captain's reaction to this is a feverish obsession which eats into his reason and rationality and finally leads him to beg for the word which would release him. "I plead with you, as a wounded man pleads for his final death blow, *to tell me everything*. Can't you see that I am helpless--helpless as a child--can't you hear I am whimpering as to a mother--won't you try to forget that I am a man, that I am a soldier who *by a mere word* can tame both men and beasts? All I ask of you is that you show compassion, as to one who is sick. I lay down all authority and I ask for mercy--ask that you let me live! (*The Father*, p. 39, my emphasis).

This same subject occurs in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in parodic form. Martha, like Laura, questions George's paternity; but George overcomes her insinuation *not* through an appeal to rationality or science, these he admits are doubtful, but through superior rhetorics. He "rises to the occasion" and triumphs over Martha through verbal imagination.

**Martha:** George's biggest problem about the little...ha, ha, ha, HA!...about our son, about our great big son, is that deep down in the private-most pit of his gut, he's not completely sure it's his own kid.

**George:** (Deeply serious) My God, you're a wicked woman.

**Martha:** And I've told you a million times, baby...I wouldn't conceive with anyone but you...you know that, baby.

**George:** A deeply wicked person.

**Honey:** (Deep in drunken grief) My, my, my, my. Oh, my.

**Nick:** I'm not sure that this is a subject for....

**George:** Martha's lying. I want you to know that, right now.

Martha's lying. (Martha laughs) There are very few things in this world that I *am* sure of...national boundaries, the level of the ocean, political allegiances, practical morality...none of these would I stake my stick on any more...but the one thing in this whole sinking world that I am sure of is my partnership, my chromosomological partnership in the...creation of our...blond-eyed, blue-haired...son.

Honey: Oh, I'm so glad!  
Martha: That was a very pretty speech, George.  
George: Thank you, Martha.  
Martha: You rose to the occasion...good. Real good.  
(pp. 71-2)

Martha admits defeat when she praises George's "pretty speech." After all, the question of George's paternity is a literary one--since his son has no biological reality. George need not grapple with scientific doubts, with chromosomes, as must The Captain; Martha's insinuation has no objective correlative. Still, George's "deeply serious" reaction to her accusation is sincere: since their shared fiction is their reality. The son they have been weaving for 21 years is their mutual, albeit literary, creation. Thus George's absurdly phrased "chromosomological partnership", and his striking description of their son as "blond-eyed, blue-haired", his credo of skepticism in all which is seemingly objective and his unshakeable faith in this unreal "partnership", affirm George's paternity in the idiom most fitting his creation: verbal mastery.

Another theme common to both *The Father* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is a "murder-through-pronouncement"--although again, one is realistic and psychologically motivated, while the other is a rhetorical ploy which banishes a verbal fiction. Laura's trickling of doubt, her whisper-campaign against the Captain, leads to his death. Her brother, the Pastor, leaves us no doubt as to Laura's guilt: "Let me look at your hand! Not a sign of blood to betray you--not a trace of insidious poison! An innocent murder that cannot be reached by the law..." (p. 45). *The Father* ends in the triumph of evil. Laura has brought insanity and death to the

Captain by killing the father in him, by proclaiming his paternity as doubtful.

*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* inverts this ending. It ends in the triumph of truth and the return of sanity. George has saved Martha and himself by killing the parent within them, achieved by proclaiming the death of their son. Hope is suggested at the end of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*--"It will be better (...) maybe"--because of the expulsion of the fictive bond which, to quote the Captain, "bound us together. But the bond became a chain" (*The Father*, p. 37).

Strindberg's relevance to Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is obvious and important; but it does not go beyond the realistic level of situation, incident, and a certain thematic cast. Strindberg supplies an inspirational frame for Albee's play; but that which is of specific interest in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* breaks out of the psychological Strindbergian model, travesties his seriousness, and suggests an opposed and very different source.

Alfred Jarry's name is not usually invoked in connection with Albee. Albee does not, to my knowledge, mention him as an inspiration, nor am I suggesting that *Ubu Roi* had any direct influence on *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Rather I would like to use Jarry's play as an alternate--or complimentary--model to Strindberg: the model for an anti-realistic farce of marital brawling, full of exhilarating obscenities and infantile

vulgarity. *Ubu Roi*, as opposed to, e.g., *The Dance of Death*, is a play which does not take its own themes seriously, which is more interested in the forms of imagination than in the suffering of the soul. It is a play which, finally, forces a re-evaluation of the norms and conventions of the theatre and of the bourgeois morality which underlies it. George and Martha have little in common with Mère and Père Ubu, at least on the level of plot or characterization; but I will try to suggest that the explosiveness of Albee's language, its self-reflective and perverse aspects, like Jarry's, suggest a critique of the conventional and banal, and an implicit challenge to the realistic model so often associated with Strindberg. *Ubu Roi* is no more an "explanation" for *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* than is *The Dance of Death*; indeed the differences between the two are far greater than the similarities. But I think that in a few respects Albee shares the perversity of Jarry's spirit and his sensitivity to the value of imagination and shock tactics. A comparison between the two may enrich our reading of Albee's play, and highlight some of his implicit critique.

Ubu is a grotesque parody of an heroic king whose essence is his excess. A degenerated and infantile Macbeth figure of gross appetite and no dignity, he murders and curses his way to power. Ubu is a mixture of offensiveness and vitality: while his cowardice and vulgarity repel us, his energy and inventiveness act as attractive and joyous foils. As with George and Martha, the audience is caught between revulsion for the unaesthetic excesses, and admiration for the unconventional brilliance. These contradictory impulses are also felt in Ubu's language, which became both



scandal and legend through its vulgarity and its playful ingenuity. Like its main character, *Ubu Roi's* language is convention-breaking, embarrassing, and titillating. The famous opening "Merdre!", exclaimed to the flourish of a toilet-brush,<sup>e1</sup> is only the first of a list of suggestive and original oaths and expletives: *cornegidouille, cornephynance, bougre de merdre, vrout, de par ma chandelle verte, bouffresque, salopin, bourrique*, etc., etc., are repeated at every turn.<sup>e2</sup>

This language, more than any other aspect of the play which Jarry himself directed in 1896, turned the opening performance into a tumultuous riot. Only two performances were held. The play which made Jarry and the Théâtre de l'Oeuvre famous was then removed from the stage to be revived only 12 years later, and a year after Jarry's death, by its leading actor Gémier.<sup>e3</sup> The language was an open affront to its audience; it was meant to shock, outrage, and provoke the spectators by challenging the morality they purport to uphold.<sup>e4</sup>

Similarly, the shocked reactions to Albee's "filthy play" stem from the wit and abusiveness of his dialogue, the savagery and excess which became the play's most characteristic feature. Like Jarry, Albee's language is *subversive*: it subverts the generic expectations of living-room realism and of psychological analysis. Albee sets up a conventional situation: unhappy married couple; places it in a conventional location: middle-class living room; and then bombards the audience with "filth", like a "sewer overflowing."<sup>e5</sup> So finely crafted as to almost make of the language

artifice, Albee's dialogue, like Jarry's, is all on the surface. Passages are more quoteable than revealing, and often seem to evolve out of a need for verbal inventiveness rather than for psychological verisimilitude. It is on this level of shock tactics and verbal explosiveness that I think that Jarry's up-start play may be looked at along-side Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. Both invest unusual energy in being offensive, and in both, the offensiveness goes beyond the needs of plot and becomes an end in itself.

Aside from the scatological quality of Père Ubu's language, we should note its gratuitousness: the use of expletives and verbal inventions for their own sake. Note, e.g., the dinner menu which Mère Ubu prepares for Ubu and his henchmen:

Mère Ubu: Soupe polonaise, côtes de rastron, veau, poulet, pâté de chien, croupions de dinde, charlotte russe...

Père Ubu: Eh! en violà assez, je suppose. Y en a-t-il encore?

Mère Ubu: (continuant) Bombe, salade, fruits, dessert, bouilli, topinambours, choux-fleurs à la merdre.

(p. 39)<sup>ee</sup>

When Ubu later asks Capitaine Bordure how he enjoyed his dinner, Bordure answers: "fort bien, monsieur, sauf la merdre", to which Ubu replies, "Eh! la merdre n'était pas mauvaise" (p. 43). This irrelevant vulgarity is also apparent in the relationship between Mère and Père Ubu. Père Ubu is always threatening to beat her up, as befits his brutish character; this however does not deter Mère Ubu, the more clever of the two, from publically reviling him.

**Capitaine Bordure:** Eh! vous empestez, Père Ubu. Vous ne vous lavez donc jamais?  
**Père Ubu:** Rarement.  
**Mère Ubu:** Jamais!  
**Père Ubu:** Je vais te marcher sur les pieds.  
**Mère Ubu:** Grosse merdre!

(p. 44)

In one of the funniest scenes of the play, Mère Ubu stumbles upon her cowardly husband sleeping in a cave and she pretends to be a supernatural apparition, the archangel Gabriel. The conversation between them is a collection of obscene and infantile abuse which has little to do with the plot of that scene, and everything to do with the gratuitous and joyous invention of vulgar wit.

**Mère Ubu:** Nous disions, monsieur Ubu, que vous étiez un gros bonhomme!  
**Père Ubu:** Très gros, en effet, ceci est juste.  
**Mère Ubu:** Taisez-vous, de par Dieu!  
**Père Ubu:** Oh! les anges ne jurent pas!  
**Mère Ubu:** Merdre! (*Continuant*) Vous êtes marié, Monsieur Ubu?  
**Père Ubu:** Parfaitement, à la dernière des chipies!  
**Mère Ubu:** Vous voulez dire que c'est une femme charmante.  
**Père Ubu:** Une horreur. Elle a des griffes partout, on ne sait par où la prendre.  
**Mère Ubu:** Il faut la prendre par la douceur, sire Ubu, et si vous la prenez ainsi vous verrez qu'elle est au moins l'égale de la Vénus de Capoue.  
**Père Ubu:** Qui dites-vous qui a des poux?  
**Mère Ubu:** Vous n'écoutez pas, monsieur Ubu; prêtez-nous une oreille plus attentive. (*A part*) Mais hâtons-nous, le jour va se lever. Monsieur Ubu, votre femme est adorable et délicieuse, elle n'a pas un seul défaut.  
**Père Ubu:** Vous vous trompez, il n'y a pas un défaut qu'elle ne possède.  
**Mère Ubu:** Silence donc! Votre femme ne vous fait pas d'infidélités!  
**Père Ubu:** Je voudrais bien voir qui pourrait être amoureux d'elle. C'est une harpie!  
**Mère Ubu:** Elle ne boit pas!  
**Père Ubu:** Depuis que j'ai pris la clef de la cave. Avant, à sept heures du matin elle était ronde et elle se parfumait à l'eau-de-vie. Maintenant qu'elle se parfume à

l'héliotrope elle ne sent pas plus mauvais. Ça m'est égal.  
 Mais maintenant il n'y a plus que moi à être rond! (...)  
**Mère Ubu:** Tout ceci sont des mensonges, votre femme est un  
 modèle et vous quel monstre vous faites!  
**Père Ubu:** Tout ceci sont des vérités. Ma femme est une coquine  
 et vous quelle andouille vous faites!

(pp. 116-8)

The subjects discussed--the wife's appearance, her faithfulness, her drinking and virtues--are all familiar from Strindberg; but here the point of the accusations is the crude wit which they allow, not as character revelation. Compare Ubu's description of his wife's drinking with this conversation between George and Martha:

**George:** (...)back when I was courting Martha, she'd order the damndest things! You wouldn't believe it! We'd go into a bar...you know, a bar...a whiskey, beer, and bourbon bar...and what she'd do would be, she'd screw up her face, think real hard, and come up with...brandy Alexanders, crème de cacao frappés, gimlets, flaming punch bowls...seven-layer liqueur things. (...)

**Martha:** Hey, where's my rubbing alcohol?

**George:** (Returning to the portable bar) But the years have brought to Martha a sense of essentials...the knowledge that cream is for coffee, lime juice for pies...and alcohol (Brings Martha her drink) pure and simple...here you are, angle...for the pure and simple.

(*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, p. 24)

Here too the turn of phrase, the imaginative evocation is far more important than the character exposition offered.

Ubu is more buffoon than man, oafish and thick-skulled he gives very little appearance of having any self-awareness, any critical faculty. When Ubu's speech does take a poetic or ironic turn it is not, like George's, a sign of self-conscious verbal manipulation. When, e.g., Ubu admonishes a

guard with the flighty words: "Garçon de ma merdre, (...) il y a sur tes épaules plus de plumes que de cervelle et tu as rêvé des sottises" (*Ubu Roi*, p. 94), this language does not reflect any quality of mind. Unlike George and Martha, the Ubu's have no "mind", no psychology. They are the incarnation of oafish vulgarity (Père Ubu) and crafty greed (Mère Ubu), unnuanced, unaware. Their language is not a conscious form of protest, a determined slap at conventionality; like Mommy and Daddy of Albee's *The American Dream*, the Ubu's are flat vehicles who speak for their author and in his distinctive voice.<sup>27</sup> The target of this language is not in the world of the play, but in the world of the audience. Verbal offensiveness and playful subversion are directed against the hypocritical conventions of stage and society, conventions through which, Jarry seems to imply, the stupid and greedy "Ubu's" of this world cover up their base desires and motives.

George and Martha are, of course, far more complex characters with a distinct psychology and abundant self-awareness. Yet a similar subversive verbal excess--albeit more sophisticated and polished--is part of their characterization. Their barbed wit, however, is usually played off against the over-conventional and clichéic Nick and Honey, who rarely react or seem to grasp the humor. Indeed, their deadpan silence when confronted with George's irrelevant verbal exercises or Martha's puns, is one sign that these excesses are outside the bounds of the play's normal "communication." It is also a sign that "normal" communication--if Nick and Honey can be taken to represent some norm<sup>ee</sup>--is being critiqued and challenged: verbal

imagination set alongside verbal conventionality. In the first conversation between George and Nick, e.g., George renders Nick speechless when he confronts him, for no reason, with his declension "Good, better, best, bested" (p. 32). Later, during a discussion of the dangers of biology, George suddenly and inexplicably expounds on his degrees and invents a new word: "A.B....M.A....Ph.D...ABMAPHID!...." (p. 37). Again Nick does not react. Throughout this section George seems to be carrying on two conversations: one, a conventional, if aggressive, chit-chat with Nick; the other a mad-cap, bitter, and verbally brilliant monologue with himself.

Another example of seemingly gratuitous and offensive excess occurs in George's second attack on the dangers of biology:

**George:** (...)I am unalterably opposed to it. I will not give up Berlin! (...)

**Honey:** I don't see what Berlin has to *do* with anything.

**George:** There is a saloon in West Berlin where the barstools are five feet high. And the earth...the floor...is so...far...below you. I will not give up things like that. No...I won't. I will fight you, young man...one hand on my scrotum, to be sure...but with my free hand I will battle you to the death.

**Martha:** (Mocking, laughing) Bravo! (...)

**Nick:** (Angry) Oh for God's sake!

**Honey:** (Shocked) OH!

**George:** The most profound indication of a social malignancy...no sense of humor. None of the monoliths could take a joke. Read history. (pp. 67-8)

Nick and Honey cannot relate to these outbursts of seemingly irrelevant imagination, just as they do not react when George tells Martha to show Honey where they keep the "...euphemism" (p. 29), or when Martha accepts George's gift of flowers with the words: "Pansies! Rosemary! Violence! My

wedding bouquet!" (p. 196). The conventional context, in each of these examples, is purposely strained. The most outrageous example of a realistic frame being threatened from within occurs when George tells Martha of their son's death. Martha, shattered, weeping, demands to see the fateful telegram, to which George replies: "I ate it." Both Nick and Honey react with horror to George's seeming callousness. They see only the conventional, realistic context and expect the usual rhetoric of grief. The tension between apparent realism and a parallel travesty of realistic expectations is lost on them--as it is, apparently, on Robert Brustein. Brustein's oft-quoted critique of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* pivots on a refusal to see in the play much besides failed realism. The passage dealing with the above quotes bears repeating:

Albee's theatrical inventiveness rests mainly on incongruous juxtapositions: when George aims a shotgun at his braying wife, for example, it shoots not bullets but a Japanese parasol. These shock tactics are a sure-fire comic technique, but they have the effect of alienating the spectator from the action the very moment he begins to accept it. Thus, when George launches a blistering attack on the evils of modern science, Albee undercuts it with a ludicrous non sequitur: "I will not give up Berlin." And when Martha speaks of her need to escape reality, he has her do so in a broad Irish brogue. George responds to Martha's infidelity by nonchalantly offering her flowers; he tells a harrowing story of matricide and patricide which is proved, first, to be autobiographical, and second, to be false; and when asked about the telegram announcing his son's death, he claims to have eaten it. Truth and illusion may be confused, as one character tells us, but after three and a half hours of prestidigitation, we become reluctant to accept one of these magical tricks as the real thing. In short, Albee is a highly accomplished stage magician, but he fails to convince us there is nothing up his sleeve. His thematic content is incompatible with his theatrical content--hi-jinks and high seriousness fail to fuse.<sup>29</sup>

Brustein sees in these "shock tactics" mere "comic technique" and sleight of hand. He disapproves of their effect, which is to "alienate (...) the spectator from the action the very moment he begins to accept it." For Brustein, Albee in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is mimicking his "models" Strindberg and O'Neill,<sup>90</sup> and such antics, non sequitur's, theatrical hi-jinks, are incompatible with the "high seriousness" such mimicry demands. However, if Albee *means* to alienate and annoy his audience, as did Jarry, if his "shock tactics" are not a question of comic technique but of subversion used to crack the Strindbergian frame, to direct our attention at a parallel *critique* of the assumptions, norms and language of the realistic frame: then perhaps Albee's "thematic content" and "theatrical content" do become compatible. The numerous examples of verbal imagination which undercut the "over-conventional" expectations of Nick and Honey<sup>91</sup>--and of the audience--suggest such a reading.

Other examples may be noted. Martha's speech is more direct and coarse than George's, as is her personality. Yet she too shows unconventional wit, usually in the form of puns created out of common idioms. Words become game objects, they are played with and, implicitly, used to critique the idioms they travesty:<sup>92</sup>

"Well, I can't be expected to remember everything. I meet 15 new teachers and their goddamn wives...*present company outlawed*, of course..." (p. 63)

"George? Don't worry about him. Besides, who could object to a friendly little kiss? *It's all in the faculty.*" (p. 163)



"Daddy, Daddy? Martha is abandon-ed. *Left to her own vices*  
at...something o'clock in the old A.M." (p. 185)

(my emphasis)

Another example of shared verbal eccentricity occurs in the play's only section of straight name-calling. In Act II George and Martha exchange seemingly conventional abuse: except that the words are in French; "Monstre!/Cochon!/ Bête!/Canaille!/Putain!". It should be noted that this exchange erupts with total suddenness, and ends just as unexpectedly. The use of French is unmotivated and unexplained, the vituperation is not expanded beyond this stylized, rather elegant explosion and, although Nick witnesses this dialogue, he is not shown to have any reaction. It is as though this section, as well as some of the other examples given, occur outside of the realistic framework of the play, or on a parallel level. The French curses might have been taken straight from Jarry--at least in spirit--or, more probably, from Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Didi and Gogo, like George and Martha, pass their time by playing a series of aggressive and sad games. At one point they get the idea of abusing each other:

Vladimir: Moron!  
Estragon: That's the idea, let's abuse each other. (...)  
Vladimir: Moron!  
Estragon: Vermin!  
Vladimir: Abortion!  
Estragon: Morpion!  
Vladimir: Sewer-rat!  
Estragon: Curate!  
Vladimir: Cretin!  
Estragon: (with finality) Crritic!  
Vladimir: Oh!<sup>93</sup>

Like Albee, and Jarry, Beckett assumes the audience within his dialogue ("Crritic!") and uses vituperation in a non-realistic and self-reflective manner. The words point to themselves. The French curses are a challenge to the play's realistic frame, not a part of the realistic plot. While George and Martha's aggression is real, the form it takes is often not. Their wit and inventiveness, their sudden switches of tone and idiom seem to purposely draw our attention to the language. Their language does not merely express psychological states, rather it itself becomes an object of wonder, or interest, or offense. This intruding wit threatens to crack the realistic frame of the Strindbergian sex-rivalry, and within this crack we perceive a critique of the conventional, the placid, and the audience's expectations.

Ernest Lehman's screen adaptation of Albee's play (1966; director: Mike Nichols), while largely loyal to the original, is clearly geared towards a psychological, realistic rendering of this unhappy marriage (aided by a naturalistic set and Method acting); one which does not strain genre-expectations. Lehman adds very little to Albee's text, but he does cut: and the sections he chooses to delete are most instructive. Almost none of the sections quoted above--the "rubbing alcohol", "Abmaphid", "I won't give up Berlin", Martha's puns, the French abuse--occur in the film. Moreover, most of the direct discussions of language (analyzed above in my discussion of the play), the "hacking" and "flagellating" images, Martha's use of "abstruse" and her admonition "Don't you tell me words", the gangle/gaggle section, Nick's threat to George that "I'll play in your

language," and others: have all been removed from the screenplay. This does not impair the story--in fact it probably strengthens it. Everything extraneous to the psychological interest, everything which cannot be realistically motivated, is removed: and what remains is a model Strindbergian marital-battle.<sup>24</sup> Albee's "voice" has been modulated, and the spirit of Jarry, which touches Albee's play, found to be "incompatible" with a purely realistic reading.

I will conclude this comparison by discussing a non-verbal image, in fact one of the few real "actions" of the play which, I think, most sharply catches the coexistence of psychological realism and subversive shock tactics, of malicious cruelty and genre-straining imagination. This image manifests both Strindbergian intensity and Jarry's *jeu*.

In Act I Martha tells the embarrassing and silly story of how she accidentally knocked George out in a mock boxing match. While Martha is explaining that "it was an *accident*...a real goddamn accident" George silently takes a short-barreled shotgun from behind his back "and calmly aims it at the back of Martha's head. Honey screams...rises. Nick rises, and simultaneously Martha turns her head to face George. George pulls the trigger" (p. 57). This highly dramatic and violent moment, which promises to confirm the sadistic, realistic genre of the play, is then exploded and turned into farcical comedy as George shouts POW!!! and "a large red and yellow Chinese parasol" blossoms forth from the barrel of the gun. The juxtaposition of cruelty and farce, of aggression set off by imagination,

is meant to startle and perhaps alienate. It precisely catches the two opposing contexts which inform *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, which supply it with tension and critical self-awareness, which question the conventional and force a constant reevaluation of expectations, and which, I believe, is most pointedly and abundantly found in the language of that play.

#### Some Relatives

Other contemporary plays have centered around overly loquacious, often compulsive talkers who "slash (...) away at everything in sight, scarring up half the world" (*Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, p. 152). One example is Martin Walser's marital 'comedy', *Die Zimmerschlacht* (1967),<sup>95</sup> which presents one night of "fun and games" with Felix and Trudy, and unveils the vacuity of their conventional, "typical German bourgeois marriage".<sup>96</sup> Obviously modelled on both Albee and Strindberg,<sup>97</sup> Walser's play functions through abundant, if rather declaratory dialogue<sup>98</sup> whose smooth surface exposes, as one critic put it, "jene bürgerlich-kapitalistische Ideologie...die die Ehepartner verinnerlicht haben."<sup>99</sup> The evening's battles--already indicated by the play's title which literally translates as "room-battle" (the English translation is entitled *Home Front*<sup>100</sup>)--are almost all verbally executed: but the language reflects little beyond a

middle-class mentality. Lacking both in brilliance and in self-reflective subversiveness, the play ultimately remains a limited, if entertaining study of the cruelty of personal alienation. Another example is Simon Gray's witty study of dissolution, *Butley* (1971).<sup>101</sup> Ben Butley's verbally manic and failed relationships with both sexes is given in brilliant, sardonic dialogue which, however, never exceeds its realistic, psychological function. Like *Die Zimmerschlacht*, *Butley* is a localized portrait of interpersonal brutality carried out entirely through language, but reflecting little about the language itself. The best known and most interesting study of verbal compulsiveness pre-dates *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and creates a character whose "axe-swinging" loquaciousness marked a turning-point in contemporary English drama: Jimmy Porter who in 1956 became the prototype for the Angry, and Prolix, Young Man in John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*.<sup>102</sup> All three of these plays are realistic in idiom and logocentric in focus. All three contain elements of the Strindbergian relationship-battle. I will concentrate on *Look Back in Anger*, the most acclaimed and interesting of these plays, in order to show the limitations of plays which function *through* language violence, but which are trapped within their naturalistic finality and thus fail to fashion a critique of the language which they study.

*Look Back in Anger* contains even less dramatic action than *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. It is a highly verbal play featuring an intensely verbose character who, in a sense like George and Martha, uses language subversively and aggressively, and through it combats,

excessively, the complacency and conformism of the characters who surround him. The reviews of *Look Back in Anger's* opening performance on May 8, 1956--an event whose disruptive and energizing effect is sometimes compared with the opening night of Jarry's *Ubu Roi*<sup>103</sup>--all stress the "violent writing," "savage talk," "foul invective," and "verbal fury" which characterize Osborne's play.<sup>104</sup>

Like *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*--or *The Dance of Death* with which Osborne's play is frequently compared<sup>105</sup>--*Look Back in Anger* is a living-room drama whose plot centers on an unhappy marriage. That marriage, described by Cliff--Jimmy and Alison's friend and flatmate--as "a very narrow strip of plain hell",<sup>106</sup> differs, however, from the hell of George and Martha, or Edgar and Alice. Alison's basic passivity and refusal to participate in Jimmy's form of aggression makes this a very one-sided battle. Unlike George and Martha, verbal perversity is not a bond between them, but rather a neurosis which Jimmy exercises and Alison, long-suffering, stoically bears. Both Jimmy and Alison are characterized by their language, indeed, it is Alison's passivity against which much of Jimmy's verbal fury is directed. "I rage and shout my head off," he at one point says, "But that girl there can twist your arm off with her silence" (p. 59).

Verbal aggression is the main action in *Look Back in Anger*. It takes the form of brawling--which Jimmy admits "is the only thing left I'm any good at" (p. 53)--of ugly puns and word games, insult, invective, and

endless run-on monologues. Jimmy emerges as an impotent and neurotic character whose high ideals and diffuse spiritual suffering can only find release through language, which he manipulates with manic energy. Osborne comments on this verbal action, and stresses its centrality, through his stage directions. He writes of Jimmy's "axe-swinging bravado" (p. 58), of his self-conscious "rhetoric...He's been cheated out of his response, but he's got to draw blood somehow" (p. 21), tells us that "He is talking for the sake of it, only half-listening to what he is saying" (p. 36). These images may recall Albee's "blood, carnage and all" or Nick's words to Martha "...you swing wild (...) Aimless...butchery. Pointless.", but there's a difference. Jimmy is characterized from the outset as "a disconcerting mixture of sincerity and cheerful malice (...) Blistering honesty, or apparent honesty, like his, makes few friends. To many he may seem sensitive to the point of vulgarity. To others, he is simply a loudmouth. To be as vehement as he is is to be almost non-committal" (stage directions, pp. 9-10). Jimmy's often "pointless" abuse is clearly motivated by his complex and confused character: it is the consistent expression of a personality which has often been described as that of a "rebel without a cause."

Jimmy's rebellion is against the insincere, the unfeeling, the listless and platitudinal world which critics have since identified as the malaise of a disappointed post-war generation.<sup>107</sup> He attacks the "posh" newspapers which he alone reads; the book-reviews which every week "seem to be the same as last week's. Different books--same reviews" (p. 10); the

radio, the government--all of those institutions which, like Alison, "spring into (their) well known lethargy, and say nothing!" (p. 53). Incapable of outside action, he subverts the complacency of his household--represented by Alison, Cliff, and later the middle-class Helena--through a wild rhetorical excess spiced by wit and cutting imagination. He identifies totally with his rhetoric and defines the objects of his aggression through the authority of the word. Here, for example, is one of his run-on attacks on Alison and her brother Nigel:

**Jimmy:** (...) As for Nigel and Alison (...) Nigel and Alison.

They're what they sound like: sycophantic, phlegmatic and pusillanimous. (...) I looked up that word the other day. It's one of those words I've never been quite sure of, but always thought I knew. (...) --pusillanimous. Do you know what it means? (Cliff shakes his head.) Neither did I really. All this time, I have been married to this woman, this monument to non-attachment, and suddenly I discover that there is actually a word that sums her up. Not just an adjective in the English language to describe her with--it's her name! Pusillanimous! It sounds like some fleshy Roman matron, doesn't it? The Lady Pusillanimous seen here with her husband Sextus, on their way to the Games. (Cliff looks troubled, and glances uneasily at Alison.) (...) The Lady Pusillanimous has been promised a brighter easier world than old Sextus can ever offer her. Hi, Pusey! What say we get the hell down to the Arena, and maybe feed ourselves to a couple of lions, huh?

**Alison:** God help me, if he doesn't stop, I'll go out of my mind in a minute.

**Jimmy:** Why don't you? That would be something, anyway.

(Crosses to chest of drawers R.) But I haven't told you what it means yet, have I? (Picks up dictionary.) I don't have to tell her--she knows. In fact, if my pronunciation is at fault, she'll probably wait for a suitably public moment to correct it. Here it is. I quote: Pusillanimous. Adjective. Wanting of firmness of mind, of small courage, having a little mind, mean spirited, cowardly, timid of mind. From the Latin pusillus, very little, and animus, the mind. (Slams the book shut.) That's my wife! That's her isn't it? Behold the Lady Pusillanimous. (Shouting hoarsely.) Hi, Pusey! When's your next picture?



(Jimmy watches her, waiting for her to break. For no more than a flash, Alison's face seems to contort, and it looks as though she might throw her head back, and scream. But it passes in a moment. She is used to these carefully rehearsed attacks.)

(pp. 21-2)

This verbose abusive monologue (this section is preceded by another page and half of the same speech) is typical of the play's form of verbal action. Alison's silence and "non-attachment" egg him on. He "sums her up" through a word which comes to define her as well as the sense of life against which his explosive rage is directed: the "mean spirited, cowardly, timid of mind", the complascent and phlegmatic, those who are at ease in their world. Mary McCarthy places Jimmy's protest in a broader context, showing his rebellion to extend to the entire milieu by which he feels stifled and against which he reacts with a defensive verbosity.

For Jimmy Porter...there is a principle involved. He is determined to stay alive, which means that he must struggle against the soporific substitutes for real life that make up the Sunday programme: the steady soft thud of the iron and the regular rustle of newsprint. His friend, Cliff, keeps telling him to shut up; his badgered wife, Alison, only wants peace, a little peace, but this is what Jimmy, or a part of Jimmy, his needling, cruel voice, has decided that she shall not have. He is fighting to keep her awake, to keep himself and his friend awake, as though all three were in the grip of a deathly coma or narcosis that had been spread over all of England by the gases emanating from the press, the clergy, the political parties, the B.B.C. Jimmy Porter's gibes are a therapeutic method designed to keep a few people alive, whether they like it or not, and patterned on the violent procedures used with patients who have taken an overdose of drugs and whose muttered plea, like Alison's, is always to be left alone. (...) there is only the deadly static provided by the Sunday weeklies, the Bishop of Bromley blessing the hydrogen bomb, and the church bells ringing outside.<sup>108</sup>

His is a voice raised in hopeless rebellion against the "deadly static", the drugging discourse of the media, the church, the unthinking conventionality of a world without ideals. McCarthy's examples all indict institutions which draw their power from the Word. They emit deadly verbal "gasses" which induce a mindless consensus and passivity; thus Jimmy's battle is really against the prevailing rhetoric. That rhetoric is best summed up in his bitter attack on brother Nigel--"The Platitude from Outer Space"--who represents, for Jimmy, all that is wrong with England:

**Jimmy:** Well, you've never heard so many well-bred commonplaces come from beneath the same bowler hat. The Platitude from Outer Space--that's brother Nigel. He'll end up in the Cabinet one day, make no mistake. (...) His knowledge of life and ordinary human beings is so hazy, he really deserves some sort of decoration for it--a medal inscribed "For Vaguerly in the Field". But it wouldn't do for him to be troubled by any stabs of conscience, however vague. (Moving down again.) Besides, he's a patriot and an Englishman, and he doesn't like the idea that he may have been selling out his countryman all these years, so what does he do? The only thing he can do--seek sanctuary in his own stupidity. The only way to keep things as much like they always have been as possible, is to make any alternative too much for your poor, tiny brain to grasp.

(p. 20)

Incapable of action, but too intelligent to simply accept things as they are, Jimmy has fashioned a brutal and compulsive verbal alternative to the lives of the Nick's and Honey's who populate his world. He shares with George and Martha an aggressive and imaginative language which is both a protest against the platitudinal, and a shield against his own personal fears and insufficiencies. But unlike Albee, Osborne uses verbal excess as a form of activism, a call for energy and imagination rooted in the word but directed against a wider social indifference and conformity. Jimmy

Porter's subversive use of language is not--as George and Martha's often *is*--directed against language itself, against the calcification of the word into the banal and the untrue. His protest has a clearer socio-political target, a more local message which is firmly anchored in a specific period.

Despite certain similarities, the language of *Look Back in Anger*, like that of *Die Zimmerschlacht* and *Butley*, and unlike that of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, remains enclosed within its naturalistic, psychological finality. There is no ritual element to the play, no theatrical self-consciousness. There is no dramatic metaphor (like the fictive son) to lift the play out of its limited realism and to give the central use of language-violence a dramatic correlative. Its language, while of central importance, is never in excess of the exigency of plot or characterization; moreover, it lacks the perversity and self-reflectiveness which make of language not only a tool *for* critique, but the object *of* that critique.

## VI

## CONCLUSION

The title of Handke's second full-length play, *Der Ritt über den Bodensee*, refers to a 19th century ballad by the poet Gustav Schwab, *Der Reiter und der Bodensee*. The ballad tells of a horseman who rode across the seemingly frozen Lake Constance only to learn, on reaching the other side, that the ice he had taken for solid was less than an inch thick. He thereupon drops dead from fright. This image of the 'thin ice' of rationality, of the abyss which, without our knowing it, lurks beneath the sign systems we take to be solid and real, underlies most of the plays studied in this dissertation. Both Strauss interprets the analogy quite bluntly:

The ride parallels the functioning of our grammar, of our system of co-ordinating perception and meaning, and of our linguistic and sentient powers of reason; it is only a provisional, permeable order, which, particularly when, as in Handke's play, *it becomes conscious of its own existence*, is threatened by...schizophrenia and madness.'

It is the unconscious nature of our assumptions about language which is here the important point; and the attempt to make the hidden dangers explicit, to *expose* the 'thin ice', is one of the common denominators of

all the plays I have discussed. Whatever their particular focus, the playwrights I study seek to translate an intuition about the true nature of language, and its concrete effect, into dramatic terms; and hope through this "aufmerksam machen,"<sup>2</sup> to make us aware and thus prod us to question that which we take for granted: our means of speech.

In this dissertation I have suggested that an awareness of language as an aggressor, as a force which both embodies and engenders violence, molding reality in its own image, violating man's autonomy and individuality -- has been given powerful and wide-ranging form in a portion of postwar drama. Further, I have suggested that the manner in which language is portrayed, its dramatic embodiment on the stage, is both new and uniquely contemporary. Shakespeare, for example, was already fully aware of the power which language wields and demonstrated this dramatically in a number of his plays. When, to take an obvious example, Marc Anthony incites a bewildered Roman crowd to mutiny, he does so solely through the force of rhetoric (Brutus had a moment earlier placated that same crowd through the same means, though less brilliantly applied). Rhetorics, the art of persuasion through language, is at least as old as the Greek Sophists. Euripedes employed it no less convincingly than Shakespeare, and in each, the speakers' designs and desires are molded into verbal structures which have the power to move and influence others.

Rhetoric is a tool; its persuasiveness depends on the speakers' skill and intention, thus the emphasis remains on the character. The post-World

War II plays which I cite, however, are essentially different: in them, the potency of language is no longer shown to be rooted in a character, for quite simply, *there are no persuaders*. The force of the word is not lodged in a speaker's intention, but in the language itself, grown anonymous and autonomous.

This shift in perspective betrays an implicit anxiety concerning modern man's capacity to fashion his own fate in the face of his pervasive exposure to, and manipulation by, language. Verbal proliferation, and thus devaluation, has been much discussed, and the terms themselves verge on the platitudinous.<sup>3</sup> Still, the accelerating propagation of speech-coins and slogans -- of verbal constructions "which impose upon the recipient the slanted and abridged meaning, the blocked development of content," to quote Marcuse<sup>4</sup> -- by the electronic media, advanced technology, and the press; the ease with which propaganda, commercial and political, invades every home; and the growing bureaucratization of society, in East and West, producing endless compartmentalization and specialized jargon, must be noted. The hallmarks of this phenomenon, speed and mechanical agglomeration, are most sharply caught by Ionesco's manic word-torrents in *La Cantatrice chauve* and *La Leçon*, and by Havel's mechanical repetitions of official jargon, as though a jammed machine were set into 'replay', in *The Garden Party*. The results of this verbal outpouring is what Elisabeth Meier terms "*Sprachmaterialgebirge*", language-mountains. Discussing the difference between ödön von Horváth's *Bildungsjargon*, which forged the

consciousness of his characters in the 1930's, and its contemporary counterpart, Meier notes the following:

Der heutige Bildungsjargon und die mit ihm vermittelten Vorstellungsschablonen sind ganz anderer Art. Und bei der Schnellebigkeit unserer Gegenwart *drohen sie als manipulierende Schemata noch weniger bewußt zu werden*, als dies um 1930 der Fall war, als man Goethe- und Schiller-Zitate, Bibelsprüche und vaterländische Parolen noch genau als angelerntes Bildungsgut bestimmen konnte...wir leiden weniger unter tradierten Vorstellungen...als daß wir ständig durch Massenmedien und offizielle Instanzen mit unüberschaubaren, sich widersprechenden Bildungs- und anderen Parolen überflutet werden, die wir uns unablässig einverleiben. Ja, von jeder dieser Aufklärungs- und Bildungswellen lagert sich in der allgemeinen Sprache und also auch im Denken eine neue Schicht ab; das in kurzer Zeit auf diese Weise entstandene Sprachmaterialgebirge steht...in seiner inhumanen Tendenz, der Zerstörung des Individuums, der Verhinderung freier vorurteilsloser sozialer Begegnung, vor allem aber in der Verschleierung der persönlichen Verantwortung...<sup>5</sup>

It is the speed with which new jargon and cliché is produced, and the opaque, the anonymous, traditionless nature of this verbal flood, of these "unüberschaubaren, sich widersprechenden...Parolen," which is perhaps responsible for the 'nausea' which many of the dramatists I discuss experienced when faced with the need to mold public speech into private expression. Perhaps they too found, as Meier warns, that we are all "in anerzogenen, angelernten Sprach- und Denkschablonen befangen" -- prisoners of the speech and thought clichés we've been taught and that, worse yet, "selbst der, dem diese Befangenheit bewußt wird, wird sich immer nur mit Mühe und teilweise von ihr befreien können."<sup>6</sup> T.S. Eliot, in a rather different context, expresses a similar despair of ever really being able to control language, to "get the better of words":

So here I am...  
Trying to learn to use words, and every attempt  
Is a wholly new start, and a different kind of failure

Because one has only learnt to get the better of words  
For the thing one no longer has to say, or the way in which  
One is no longer disposed to say it...

"East Coker," section V (from "Four Quartets")

It is interesting, and probably more than coincidental, that all of the major authors studied here wrote their language-oriented plays early in their careers. Most of them later develop in other directions, some totally abandoning a language-oriented dramaturgy, others metamorphosing these concerns into broader social critiques. It seems likely that one reason for this has to do with a young playwright's early confrontation with the medium of his craft, language, and finding the words so tainted by the ubiquitous slogans and platitudes of commercial and political propaganda, so apt to form automatic verbal chains tacked together "like the sections of a prefabricated hen-house,"<sup>7</sup> that the resistance of language to personal meaning became painfully apparent. This is attested to by, e.g., Ionesco's language-inflicted vertigo and nausea, his awareness that words "had gone mad" and were out of control<sup>8</sup> which led to the writing of his first plays. Pinter experienced, and describes, a similar language-nausea:

Such a weight of words confronts us day in, day out, words spoken in contexts such as this, words written by me and by others, the bulk of it stale and dead terminology; ideas endlessly repeated and permuted, become platitudinous, trite, meaningless. Given this nausea, it's very easy to be overcome by it and step back into paralysis. I imagine most writers know something of this paralysis. But if it is possible to confront this nausea, to follow it to its hilt, then it is possible to say something has occurred, that something has been achieved.<sup>9</sup>



What Pinter achieves by "confronting" his nausea is an indictment of its source, and an exposure of the real menace which unconscious adherence to pre-formed and unexamined language poses. Handke goes so far as to *recommend* nausea as an appropriate response to language manipulation: "One should learn to be nauseated by language, as the hero of Sartre's *Nausea* is by things. At least that would be a beginning of consciousness."<sup>10</sup> This nausea is, of course, not exclusively contemporary. As I quoted in my Introduction, Hofmannsthal, as early as 1902 described this same word-sickness and paralysis in his Lord Chandos Letter. The phenomenon is not new, but its wide-spread translation into dramatic terms, and the concrete demonstration of *how* "Instead of men using language to think, we have language thinking for men,"<sup>11</sup> is.

The 'dramatic terms' which translate these intuitions about language are broad enough to allow for a wide range of styles, and varied enough not to become, themselves, instant clichés. Underlying them all is a sense of urgent warning, of clear indictment. As I have shown, there are a number of recurrent devices or dramatic techniques through which the playwrights encode and concretize their critique. To recapitulate:

-- The 'tyrannical' nature of language, its leveling tendencies and pull towards the normative and conformist are often dramatized through the use of characters who embody the language and values of the ruling norm and who act as 'controlling' agents, stemming non-conformity through a brutal wielding of language. These characters force their will on others,

manipulate and terrorize through the word alone and are shown to be embodiments of its nature. Good examples of this are the Prompters in *Kaspar*, those cold, formal voices, unnuanced, impersonal, who create Kaspar in their well-formed and conformist image merely by teaching him to speak; or Goldberg and McCann in *The Birthday Party*, gangsters who carry no weapon other than the clichés and jargon of a ruling middle class and who, through this, destroy the nonconformist Stanley. Pludek, in Havel's *The Garden Party* belongs to the same category although he differs in that his conversion is self-inflicted. Like Kaspar and Stanley he begins the play as an outsider and ends in total conformity through the parrotry of a ruling jargon, though unlike them, he is his own teacher. Another example is Ionesco's Professor who enacts the tyrannical nature of fascism through his mode of speech and his linguistic theories which prove unaccountably potent and lead to the Student's death. In all of these cases language is concretized in a character, an 'agent' whose characterization parallels that of the language he wields.

-- Another dramatic technique which exposes the nature of language involves an inverse procedure. We are presented with a group of realistically drawn and uncensored characters who, without authorial comment or intrusion, reveal their fatal inarticulateness by speaking. Two traits characterize their language: it is 'unowned', i.e. uncreated by the characters, 'found', automatic, insincere, and thus not morally binding; and contains a high degree of quotes or axiomatic wisdom. The extensive use of quotes -- biblical, commercial, or ideological -- shows the alienation

of the characters from their language and their dependence on a borrowed code. The playwrights -- Kroetz, Bond, and Mamet in the examples I gave -- equate verbal restrictedness with personal immorality and allow the audience to experience the results of language deprivation through claustrophobic, close-up scenes in which the only reality is the fragmented, stuttered banalities and empty expletives of the characters.

-- Other recurrent devices are the extended and self-reflecting use of cliché and jargon; the ritualization of language and its reduction into self-validating stock formulas; and verbal mechanization in which preformed verbalizations replace original thought and preclude the development, differentiation or contradiction of meaning. Taken together these devices expose the danger which language poses to conceptual and critical thought.

-- Obscenity is often employed as a shock tactic which alerts us to the language both in its degenerate forms (as in Mamet's *American Buffalo*) and in its potential for creativity (as in Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*).

It's true that the attempt to write *about* language *through* language can lead to a certain abstraction, and courts the danger of circularity. Using language to critique language -- as Wittgenstein was well aware, and herein lies one of his main criticisms of Mauthner<sup>12</sup> -- can be self-defeating. The inevitable regression which results from such a procedure is, however, to an extent minimized by the authors' adoption of dramatic

devices through which language is objectified. Handke's bodyless Prompters, who represent social norms and speech-dictates (*Kaspar*); Pinter's "organization men" who are a medium for socially endorsed values and idioms (*The Birthday Party*); Havel's de-humanized dogma-machine, Pludek, who finally becomes *identical* with the jargon he spouts (*The Garden Party*); Kroetz's or Bond's uncommented, realistic replay of a speech-world wrought merely from platitudes and quotes -- act as dramatic objects through which the action of language is both tested and exemplified.

Moreover, these 'objectified' representatives of language help to locate the sources of language perversion within a broader social context, and point to the inevitable link between language and values, between speech-options and morality. The Prompters, Ionesco's Professor, Goldberg and McCann, Pludek, all speak for, and in the voice of, a ruling social or political group. On the other hand, the characters of Kroetz, Bond, and to an extent Mamet, all personify the moral and physical debasement of the disenfranchised, those denied, or in any case lacking, 'owned' language or speech-options.

As I said in the Introduction, the plays discussed here differ from those Absurdist plays of the 40's and 50's in which communication is shown to be doomed *a priori*, either because of man's inherent separation from meaning (e.g. *Endgame*), or because of his personal, and thus social, isolation and absurdity (e.g. *La Cantatrice chauve*). The plays I discuss, on the contrary, are *warnings*, attempts to render concrete and conscious

our unthinking complicity in, and dangerous parrotry of -- like so many "goats and monkeys"<sup>13</sup> -- pre-formed, pre-digested, and thus prescriptive, language. The alternative to verbal manipulation implied in most of these plays: is first of all achieving *awareness* of its existence, of the insidious forms which it takes, and of our own role in its perpetuation. As Handke put it:

If the theatre makes us aware that there are functions of man's power over man that we ...accept by force of habit; if these functions suddenly strike us as man-made, as not at all nature-given; and if through theatre, through revelation in language, we are suddenly shown, by grammatical derivations, that the functions of mastery are neither God-given nor given by the state, then the theatre can be a moral institution.<sup>14</sup>

## NOTES: CHAPTER ONE

1. J.S. Doubrovsky, "Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity," *Yale French Studies*, 23 (1959), p. 8.
2. Jean Vannier, "Langages de L'Avant-Garde," *Théâtre Populaire*, 18 (May 1956), pp. 30-39; "A Theatre of Language," trans. Leonard C. Pronko, *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1963), pp. 180-186. The following quotations are taken from the English translation, pp. 181-2.
3. Vannier's pioneering analysis of this new function of language is implicit in Martin Esslin's study, especially in terms of self-reflecting language which is a critique of language itself.
4. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, revised ed. (Penguin Books, 1968), pp. 389-400.
5. Eugène Ionesco as quoted by Richard Schechner in "The Inner and the Outer Reality," *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 7, No. 3 (Spring 1963), p. 92.
6. Erich Heller, *The Ironic German: A Study of Thomas Mann* (London, 1958), p. 22.
7. W.B. Yeats, *Explorations* (London: Macmillan, 1962), p. 167.
8. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Ein Brief," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Prosa II (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1951), p. 9.
9. *Ibid.*, pp. 12 and 14.
10. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, *Der Schwierige*, in *Gesammelte Werke*, Band IV (Berlin: 1924), Act II, scene 14.
11. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. and ed. G.E.M. Ascombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 47e.
12. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, bi-lingual edition, trans. not given (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922; rpt. 1947), §4.002.
13. Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 3rd ed., 3 vols. (Leipzig: 1923; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967).

14. See: Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), p. 112.
15. Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 28.
16. Andrew K. Kennedy, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 1; Kennedy's emphasis.
17. Ibid.
18. Kennedy subsequently wrote a second book on dramatic language called *Dramatic Dialogue: The Duologue of Personal Encounter* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1983), in which he expands his study of dialogue, roaming freely, and interestingly, from the ancient Greeks up to Sam Shepard.
19. Kennedy, *Six Dramatists*, p. 237, note 11.
20. John Russell Brown, *Theatre Language* (London: Allen Lane, 1972); Ruby Cohn, *Dialogue in American Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), quote taken from p. 5; Gareth Lloyd Evans, *The Language of Modern Drama* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977); Pierre Larthomas, *Le Langage dramatique* (Paris: Colin, 1972); Keir Elam, *The Semiotics of Theatre and Drama* (London: Methuen, 1980), quote taken from p. 135.
21. E.g.: Jean Chothia, *Forging a Language: A Study in the Plays of Eugene O'Neill* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979); James Eliopoulos, *The Language of Samuel Beckett's Plays* (The Hague: 1975); Austin Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), this book, which concentrates on the verbal interactions in Pinter's plays, will be discussed in Chapter III, section 2.
22. Linda M. Hill, *Language as Aggression* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag, 1976).
23. Ibid., pp. 12-3.
24. The plays which Hill studies are: Ionesco, *Jacques, ou la soumission*; Albee, *The American Dream*; Hildesheimer, *Spiele in denen es dunkel wird*; Walser, *Eiche und Angora*; Ziem, *Nachrichten aus der Provinz*; and Handke, *Kaspar*. Although we both analyze *Kaspar* our readings are quite divergent and directed at different goals.
25. Martin Esslin, "Violence in Modern Drama," in *Reflections* (New York: Doubleday, 1969; Anchor ed. 1971), p. 159. This stimulating article discusses the various types of violence in modern drama. Verbal violence is only considered in terms of vituperation, and thus receives insufficient treatment.

26. Francis Fergusson, *The Idea of a Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1949; rpt. 1968), p. 8.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 9, my emphasis.
28. Sophocles, *King Oedipus*, trans. E.F. Watling in *The Theban Plays* (Penguin Books, 1947, rpt. 1971), p. 35.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 36.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 40.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 44.
33. William Shakespeare, *Coriolanus*, Act III, sc. 1, line 87.
34. *Ibid.*, Act I, sc. 1, lines 174-183.
35. *Ibid.*, Act III, sc. 1, line 408.
36. William Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act II, scene ii, lines 11-25.
37. I quote from the modern French translation of Rabelais' *Gargantua*, in *Oeuvres Complètes*, notated and trans., along with the original French version, by Geneviève Demerson, et al, (Paris: éditions du Seuil, 1973).
38. Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, in *Tout Ubu* (Paris: Livre de Poche, 1962).
39. Peter Handke, *Publikumsbeschimpfung* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1966; rpt. 1970), p. 46.
40. Ruby Cohn, *Currents in Contemporary Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1969), chapter on "Dialogue of Cruelty", pp. 54-84; this quote from p. 54.
41. *Ibid.*
42. *Ibid.*, p. 56.
43. Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber & Faber, 1958, rpt. 1973), p. 14. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
44. Cohn, *Currents*, p. 74.
45. J.D. O'Hara, "Introduction," to *20th Century Interpretations of Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable*, ed. J.D. O'Hara (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1970), p. 24.



46. J.-P. Sartre, *Huis Clos*, in *Théâtre I*, (Paris: éditions Gallimard, 1947), p. 182.
47. Cohn, *Currents*, p. 60.
48. Sartre, p. 147.

NOTES: CHAPTER TWO

1. Martin Heidegger, *Der Satz vom Grund* (Pfullingen: 1957), p. 161. Quoted by Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 29. Culler translates this quote (same page) as: "Language speaks. Man speaks only in so far as he artfully 'complies with' language."
2. Peter Handke, *Kaspar* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 7.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.8.
6. Peter Handke, "Horváth und Brecht," in *Ich bin ein Bewohner des Elfenbeinturms* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972), p. 63ff. In this article Handke accuses Brecht of being a "Trivial-autor" whose thought models are "allzu vereinfacht und widerspruchslos".
7. Peter Handke, as quoted by Artur Joseph in: "Nauseated by Language: from an Interview with Peter Handke," trans. E.B. Ashton, *The Drama Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Fall 1970), p. 58. This interview originally appeared in Artur Joseph, *Theater, unter vier Augen: Gespräche mit Prominente* (Cologne: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1969), pp. 27-39.
8. Ibid., p. 61.
9. For a biographical sketch on Handke see: Nicholas Hern, *Peter Handke: Theatre and Anti-Theatre* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1971) pp. 16-20; also, Rainer Nägele and Renate Voris, *Peter Handke* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1978), pp. 24-32, for more detailed biographical background material.

Nägele and Voris's study contains a good, although very selective bibliography on Handke up to 1977. A select bibliography was also compiled by Harald Müller, "Auswahlbibliographie zu Peter Handke", in *TEXT + KRITIK*, Vol. 24 (October 1969), pp. 66-76. A second *TEXT + KRITIK* issue on Handke, Vol. 24a, appeared in 1971. Michael Scharang's book: *über Peter Handke*, ed. Michael Scharang, (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972), contains an expanded bibliography, 28 pages long, which covers critical reaction to Handke up to 1972. Another useful bibliography can be found in Manfred Mixner's *Peter Handke* (Kronberg: Athenäum Verlag, 1977), pp. 237ff.

10. Critical praise of Handke has been generous. Bonnie Marranca wrote in "The Sprechstücke: Peter Handke's Universe of Words," *Performing Arts Journal*, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Fall 1976), p. 61, that "Handke's rigorous intellect is among the best we have in contemporary theatre, his plays among the most important in post-Beckettian drama." Michael Patterson, in *German Theatre Today* (London: Pitman Publishing, 1976), p. 29, calls Handke "the most original mind for decades." Max Frisch called *Kaspar* "the play of the decade," quoted in "Man, the plaything of language," (no author given) in the *Times Literary Supplement*, 7 Aug. 1970. Peter Horn, in "Vergewaltigung durch die Sprache: Peter Handke's *Kaspar*," *Literatur und Kritik*, 51 (February 1971), p. 39, claims that *Kaspar* is "eines der ganz wenigen wesentlichen Stücke seit 1945." Richard Gilman, in his acclaimed study: *The Making of Modern Drama* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1974), devotes a chapter to Handke, following uncontroversial chapters on Büchner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Pirandello, Brecht, and Beckett. In his "Foreword" to the book Gilman writes:

My principle of selection has simply been this: these are the playwrights of the past century or so I most love or admire, these are the plays of theirs I find most significant, either in themselves or in regard to the author's development. There are no eccentric choices here, nor are there any unknown masterpieces brought to light, although a word might be said about Peter Handke, a writer just out of his thirties, uncanonized as yet, the way the other seven, intelligently or not, have been. I include Handke because he seems to me to have written the most interesting plays since Beckett and, more than that, because he is carrying on more resolutely than anyone I know of that effort to renew drama, to combat its tendency to inertia and self-repetition, which is one of my book's implicit subjects. (pp. x-xi)

11. This is again like Brecht who, in his "Kleines Organon für das Theater" (first published 1949), insists that the actor not become the character, but maintain a critical distance.
12. Gilman, p. 270-1.
13. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 61.
14. Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 179.
15. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 59.
16. Peter Handke, "Bemerkung zu meinen Sprechstücken," in *Publikumsbeschimpfung und andere Sprechstücke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 100.
17. Handke, *Elfenbeinturms*, p. 20.

18. Fritz Mauthner, *Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 3rd ed. (Leipzig: 1923; rpt. Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1967), Vol. 1. For a critical discussion of Mauthner's 'Language Philosophy' see: Gershon Weiler, "On Fritz Mauthner's Critique of Language," *Mind*, Vol. 67 (1958), pp. 80-87; and his *Mauthner's Critique of Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970).
19. Hugo von Hofmannsthal, "Ein Brief," in *Gesammelte Werke*, Prosa II (Frankfurt a.M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1951), p. 14.
20. Karl Kraus, *Beim Wort genommen* (Munich: Kösel Verlag, 1955); quoted by Marianne Kesting, "The Social World as Platitude," trans. George Schulz-Behrend, *Dimension*, Vol. 2 (1969), p. 177.
21. Günther Rühle in his article "Der Jasager und die Einsager," calls Kaspar "Der deutlichste Kommentar zu Kraus' *Letzten Tagen der Menschheit*," an answer to a world "in der man spricht, ohne zu denkehn." In: Scharang, p. 135.
22. Gilman, p. 288.
23. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. and ed. G.E.M. Ascombe (New York: Macmillan, 1953), p. 47e.
24. Cf., William Barrett, *The Illusion of Technique* (New York: Doubleday, 1978), especially Part I, on Wittgenstein.
25. Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, bi-lingual edition, trans. not given (London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co., 1922, reprint 1947), section 5.6, p. 149.
26. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 57.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 59.
28. This is how Kaspar Hauser's sentence is transcribed by A. Ritter von Feuerbach, *Kaspar Hauser, Beispiel eines Verbrechens am Seelenleben des Menschen* (Ansbach: J.M. Dollfuss, 1832). For another historical study of Kaspar Hauser see F. Merckenschlager and K. Saller, *Kaspar Hauser, ein zeitloses Problem* (Nuremberg: 1966).
29. See: R.D. Theisz, "Kaspar Hauser im zwanzigsten Jahrhundert. Der Aussenseiter und die Gesellschaft," *German Quarterly*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (March 1976). Theisz studies the Kaspar Hauser motif in 20th century literature, especially Jakob Wassermann's novel *Kaspar Hauser oder die Trägheit des Herzens* (1908); Georg Trakl's poem "Kaspar Hauser Lied" (1913); Hans Arp's poem "Kaspar ist tot" (1920); and Handke's play *Kaspar*. Handke himself prefaces his play with Ernst Jandl's "concrete" poem "16 Jahr" which apparently refers to the lisping, astounded Kaspar Hauser when he first appears in society at the age of 16.

30. *Kaspar*, p. 7.
31. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 60.
32. Ibid.
33. Marianne Kesting writes that *Kaspar* deals with "the social adjustment of an unadjusted individual." *Kaspar*, "who enters the world of the stage as an adult and there learns to walk and talk, learns at the same time to adjust to a pre-formed environment that robs him of his individuality." p. 179.
34. Subsequent quotations from *Kaspar* will be followed parenthetically by the number of the section to which they refer, except for the opening remarks and stage directions, which are not numbered within the text. For those, notes will be used.
35. The description of *Kaspar* is similar to that of Didi and Gogo in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*. Clown elements in both plays are indicated through certain pieces of dress and mannerisms of mechanical movement. *Kaspar* is thwarted by objects, as are Didi and Gogo, and as in *Godot*, *Kaspar* has elements of slap-stick humour and music-hall routines which include his hat falling, tripping, and the like. Other comparisons between *Kaspar* and Beckett's plays can be made. In Beckett's silent *Act Without Words I*, for example, the single character is harassed and tortured by cruel, arbitrary, unseen forces, not unlike the Prompters in *Kaspar*. In Beckett's *Play*, spot-lights incite the speech of the three buried characters, just as in *Kaspar* spot-lights, in addition to the Prompters' words, direct *Kaspar*'s arrangement of the stage (25) and other learnt habits of order. Of course the difference between the two authors is no less significant: Beckett's forces and spot-lights are metaphysical; Handke's are social and sociolinguistic. Beckett is more pessimistic than Handke since Handke implies that with awareness can come change, whereas for Beckett the cruel and arbitrary forces are an unchangeable part of the human condition.
36. In this sense *Kaspar* can be considered a *Lehrstück*, i.e., *Kaspar* is educated, brought from innocence to experience as are the heroes of the *Bildungsroman*. G. Rühle calls *Kaspar* "Ein Lehrstück über die anonyme Macht der Sprache," p. 134. Gunther Sergooris, in *Peter Handke und die Sprache* (Bonn: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1979), p. 110, writes: "In *Kaspar* handelt es sich deutlich um ein Bildungs- oder Erziehungsmodell...".
37. Michael Roloff, in his translation of *Kaspar* in: *Kaspar and Other Plays* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1969), translates "Einsager" as "Prompters". "Einsager" is a made-up word which Nicholas Hern translates as meaning more literally "in-sayers" or "persuaders"; p. 63, Hern. I agree with Hern that these words better capture the function of the "Einsager", but Prompters is a more neutral

translation and also conveys theatrical and didactic connotations. For the sake of clarity and consistency I will adopt Roloff's translation throughout.

38. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 60.
39. The text they speak is often really not theirs, not merely in the general sense of the common platitude which belongs to "everyone". The text contains many direct, although unattributed, quotes from a large variety of sources. Mechthild Blanke in "Zu Handkes *Kaspar*," in: Scharang, p. 275-6, gives the sources of some of these quotes, also to be found in *Der Spiegel*, 21 (1968), p. 139. For example: sentences are lifted from the writings of Lenin, Mao, and a DDR pamphlet. These sentences are quoted in section 25, and are thus parodied. Other direct sources are ödön von Horváth, Hans Imhoff, Shakespeare, and Wittgenstein.
40. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 60.
41. See: Wolfram Buddecke and Jörg Hienger, "Jemand lernt sprechen; Sprachkritik bei Peter Handke," *Neue Sammlung*, Vol. 11, No. 6 (1971), pp. 556-8.
42. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 61.
43. Roland Barthes, *The Pleasure of the Text*, trans. Richard Miller (New York: Hill and Wang, 1975), p. 50. Originally published as *Le Plaisir du texte* (Paris: éditions du Seuil, 1973).
44. Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought, and Reality* (Massachusetts: MIT, 1956), p. 258.
45. *Ibid.*, p. 156, my emphasis.
46. "zum Sprechen gebracht werden", from the opening directions of *Kaspar*, p. 7.
47. Peter Handke, *Hörspiel*, No. 1, in *Wind und Meer, Vier Hörspiele* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1970), pp. 93-4.
48. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, section 4.01, p. 63.
49. *Ibid.*, section 2.131 and 2.16, pp. 39 and 40.
50. *Ibid.*, section 4.116, pp. 77 and 79.
51. Aside from the use of Wittgenstein's technical vocabulary--"Bild", "Tatsache", "Modell", "Gegenstand", "Satz"--the Prompters also quote, with slight variation, a sentence from Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, section 68, p. 33, which reads, "Es gibt keine Grenzen, aber man kann welche ziehen." Prompters: "Auch wenn es keine

Grenzen gibt: du kannst welche ziehen." (29). Handke intends this sentence, in the mouths of the manipulative Prompters, to work ironically. He wrote in *Elfenbeinturms*, p. 82, "Wittgenstein sagte: 'Es gibt keine Grenzen aber man kann welche ziehen'. Die meisten Leute scheinen damit beschäftigt zu sein ihre einmal (*gar nicht von sich selber*) gezogenen Grenzen immer wieder nachzuziehen." (my emphasis). Here again Handke is pointing out man's unthinking submissiveness to outside determinants. The limits, borders, are imposed from *without*, and the illusion of free action and free expression (an illusion which Whorf blames on the "completely autocratic" obligatory rules of language, (Whorf, p. 221)), is actually only the redrawing of pre-given limits--like Kaspar's repetition and imitation of the Prompters.

52. See Barrett, pp. 34-36 on "picture theory" and "mirroring". An excellent and original reading of the implications and sources of Wittgenstein's "Bild" theory and his critique of language is offered by Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin in *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), see especially pp. 182-190. A clear and concise study of the *Tractatus* can be found in A.J. Ayer, *Ludwig Wittgenstein* (Penguin Books, 1985), Chapter 2.
53. Whorf, p. 148.
54. *Ibid.*, pp. 213-4, Whorf's emphasis.
55. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
56. Roland Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France," trans. Richard Howard, appears in Susan Sontag, *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), pp. 457-478, this quote is on pp. 460-61. This is the text of Barthes' lecture upon being elected to the Collège de France as the Chair of Literary Semiology, delivered on 7 Jan. 1977. It was originally published as *Leçon* (Paris: éditions du Seuil, 1978).
57. Whorf, p. 212.
58. In: *Die Innenwelt der Aussenwelt der Innenwelt* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969), pp. 96-7.
59. Uwe Schultz, "Zwischen Virtuosität und Vakuum," *TEXT + KRITIK*, Vol. 24 (1969), p. 26.
60. As Sergio writes, p. 118: Kaspar is destroyed through "das Aufzwingen von vorgefertigten Formeln und Sätzen, die jede direkte Begegnung mit Mensch und Welt im Wege stehen."
61. These are the last words of Elisabeth in Ödön von Horváth's *Glaube Liebe Hoffnung* (1936), with a slight variation: she says "Da fliegen lauter so schwarze Würmer herum."
62. "Man, the plaything of language".

63. Hern, p. 67.
64. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 61.
65. Suhrkamp first published *Kaspar* in 1967 with this last sentence in the text. Subsequent printings appear without that ending.
66. Whorf, p. 154.
67. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 57.
68. Culler, p. 29.
69. Ibid., my emphasis.
70. Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée sauvage* (Paris: Plon, 1962), p. 326; quoted and translated by Jonathan Culler, p. 28.
71. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 61.
72. Cf., Michel Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Pantheon, 1965) for an expansion of this idea.
73. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, revised ed. (Penguin Books, 1968), p. 140.
74. Cf., Hern, p. 54.
75. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 61.
76. Rainer Nägele, "Peter Handke: The Staging of Language," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 23, No. 4 (Jan. 1981), p. 331.
77. Barthes, "Inaugural Lecture", English trans., p. 461.
78. In Joseph interview, English trans., p. 58, Handke says: "If the theatre makes us aware that there are functions of man's power over man that we didn't know about, functions that we accept by force of habit; if these functions suddenly strike us as man-made, as not at all nature-given...then the theatre can be a moral institution...."
79. Whorf, p. 156, my emphasis.
80. Handke, *Elfenbeinturms*, p. 30.
81. Mauthner, p. 39ff.
82. For a penetrating discussion of Mauthner's language philosophy in a dramatic context see: Linda Ben-Zvi, "Samuel Beckett, Fritz Mauthner, and the Limits of Language," *PMLA*, 95 (Mar. 1980), pp. 183-200.



83. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eight-Four* (New York: Signet Classic, 1949), p. 46.
84. *Kaspar*, p. 8.
85. Wittgenstein, *Tractatus*, section 6.54, p. 189.
86. Handke's suggestions for this text (section 59) are very precise, although he writes that "Der Text ist vielleicht folgender."
87. S.I. Hayakawa, *Language in Thought and Action* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, 1939), pp. 18ff. Hayakawa's study of "the relationship between language, thought, and behavior" (p. 22), is rooted in an awareness similar to that of Handke: the awareness that language has a direct control over our lives. Hayakawa is optimistic in his belief that in recognizing the "daily verbal Niagara as a possible source of trouble" (p. 19), and learning to use words with conscious precision, we can largely remedy our social ills. Handke shares Hayakawa's concerns but not his confident optimism.
88. Gilman, pp. 270-1.
89. Herbert Gamper, "Peter Handkes *Kaspar*," *Züricher Woche*, 17 May 1968. Reprinted in *Spectaculum*, XII (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1969), p. 304.
90. Peter Hamm, "Der neueste Fall von deutscher Innerlichkeit: Peter Handke," in: Scharang, pp. 304-313, is the strongest example of this accusation. See also, Martin Walsler, "Über die neueste Stimmung im Westen," *Kursbuch*, Vol. 20 (1970).
91. Joseph interview, English trans., p. 58.
92. *Ibid.*
93. Nägele, pp. 328-9.
94. Peter Handke, "Beschreibungsimpotenz, zur Tagung der Gruppe '47 in USA," first published in *konkret* (June 1966). Also appears in *Elfenbeinturms*, p. 34.
95. *Ibid.*
96. Buddecke and Hienger, p. 560.
97. *Ibid.*

98. On the connection between the rhythmic repetitiveness of the Prompters' sentences and the methods of advertisement, which use similar devices, Sergio, p. 110, writes: "Nicht sosehr der semantische Inhalt der Sätze, welche von den Einsagern ausgesprochen werden, bestimmen ihre Aufdringlichkeit, sondern der Rhythmus, die Wiederholungen und die akustische Aneinanderreihung. Es sind Elemente, die das Nervensystem betreffen und nicht rational-kritische Erwägungen. Ähnliche Techniken werden in der Werbung benutzt, wo der eigentliche "Inhalt" der Worte stark reduziert wird, aber die rhythmischen Qualitäten der Sprache hervorgehoben werden...".
99. Ernst Wendt, "Handke 1966-71, ein Schriftsteller, die Zeit und die Sprache," in Scharang, p. 341.

NOTES: CHAPTER THREE

1. Esslin's original edition (1961) did not include Havel, since Havel only wrote his first play in 1963.
2. Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, revised and enlarged ed. (Penguin Books, 1968), p. 396.
3. Ibid., see chapter 7: "The Significance of the Absurd," for further details.
4. Ibid., see chapter 6: "The Tradition of the Absurd," for further details.
5. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in his: *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), pp. 162-76.
6. Herbert Marcuse, "The Closing of the Universe of Discourse," in his: *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 84-120.
7. Orwell, p. 170.
8. Marcuse, pp. 86-7.
9. Ibid., p. 88.
10. J. S. Doubrovsky, "Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity," *Yale French Studies*, 23 (1959), p. 8.
11. Eugène Ionesco, *La Leçon*, in *Théâtre*, I, Collection "Locus Solus" (Paris: Arcanes, 1953), p. 73. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
12. Claude Bonnefoy, *Conversations with Eugène Ionesco*, trans. Jan Dawson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970). Discussing a production of *La Leçon* which he saw in Lausanne, Ionesco remarks that he was struck by the stage image of a vampire and his victim, an association which had not occurred to him when writing the play. "...you saw this sturdy girl being finally sucked dry by the spider of a teacher. It wasn't just rape, it was vampirism...he was devouring the girl, drinking her blood. And as he became stronger, her life was being sapped away, until in the end she was nothing but a limp rag," p. 103.
13. Orwell, p. 165.
14. Ibid., p. 172.

15. Henri Bergson, "Laughter," trans. not given, in *Comedy*, with an introduction and appendix by Wylie Sypher (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1956), p. 79.
16. Bonnefoy, p. 51.
17. Richard N. Coe, *Eugène Ionesco* (New York: Grove Press, 1961; revised ed. 1968; Evergreen Black Cat Ed. 1970), p. 37. My emphasis.
18. Ibid.
19. Bonnefoy, p. 110.
20. Ibid., p. 107.
21. Ronald Hayman, *Eugène Ionesco* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1976), p. 32.
22. Esslin, p. 145, sees in the student-teacher relationship a demonstration of the sexual/sadistic nature of all authority. He cites P.A. Touchard, "La Loi du théâtre," *Cahiers des Saisons*, No. 15, who claims that *La Leçon* "expresses in caricatured form the spirit of domination always present in teacher-pupil relationships" and which is, in turn, "a symbol for all forms of dictatorship," (Esslin, p. 144). This reading reflects my own view of the broader connotations which inform the Professor's despotism.  
  
Maurice Valency, in *The End of the World* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1980), takes the student-teacher parable to be, in part, an attack on the education system and its possible consequences. "The intimation is...that what happens to children in the name of education is a shameful violation of mind and body; indeed, that Nazism was a consequence of normal pedagogical practices..." p. 353. Moreover, *La Leçon* "serves, in a way, to make one aware of what is monstrous in a cultural system that insists on forcefully transmitting from one generation to the other the accumulated stupidities of the race," p. 354. These implications may be present in the Professor's destruction of the Student's vitality but they point, beyond themselves, to the broader danger of domination through language. Certainly the education system is not Ionesco's main target; and I reject outright Valency's contention that Ionesco may be implying that Nazism somehow emerged from "normal pedagogical practices."
23. Esslin, p. 143.
24. See: Linda Ben-Zvi, *The Devaluation of Language in Avant-Garde Drama*, Diss., Univ. Microfilms Int. (1972), p. 47.
25. Cornelia Berning, *Vom "Abstammungsnachweis" zum "Zuchtwart": Vokabular des Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter & Co., 1964).

26. Ibid., p. 7.
27. Ibid., p. 33.
28. Bonnefoy, p. 113.
29. Dolf Sternberger, Gerhard Storz, and Wilhelm E. Süskind, *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen* (Hamburg: Claassen Verlag, 1968), 3rd ed. This book, which collects the expressions and verbal distortions peculiar to Nazism, and which reflect and forged its ideology, was first published in 1957. This third expanded edition underlines Sternberger's contention that the verbal distortions of Nazism have clung to the German language despite the passage of time; it is still relevant. Of special interest is Sternberger's article "Maßstäbe der Sprachkritik," pp. 269-288.

Victor Klemperer, *Die unbewältigte Sprache*, 3rd ed. (Darmstadt: Joseph Melzer Verlag, n.d.). This book was originally published in 1946 in East Berlin under the title *Aus dem Notizbuch eines Philologen*. Klemperer was a professional linguist persecuted by the Nazis; he kept a diary tracing the collapse of the German language into Nazi jargon and the influence of the jargon on the affiliations of the German people.

30. Sternberger, "Vorbemerkung 1967", in *Aus dem Wörterbuch des Unmenschen*, p. 12.
31. Eugène Ionesco, *Le Roi se meurt*, in *Théâtre IV* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), p. 43.
32. Bonnefoy, p. 111.
33. Eugène Ionesco, *Jacques, ou la soumission*, in *Théâtre*, collection "Locus Solus" (Paris: Arcanes, 1953), p. 121. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
34. Bonnefoy, p. 136.
35. Ibid., p. 135.
36. Ibid., p. 136.
37. See: James T. Boulton, "Harold Pinter: *The Caretaker* and Other Plays," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (Sept. 1963), p. 133; also, Martin Esslin, *The Peopled Wound: The Plays of Harold Pinter* (London: Methuen & Co., 1970), p. 83.

38. See: John Russell Taylor, *Anger and After*, revised ed. (Penguin, 1963), p. 290; Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, p. 83; and Ruby Cohn, "The World of Harold Pinter," *Tulane Drama Review* Vol.6, No. 3 (March 1962), p. 64.
39. See: Bamber Gascoigne, *Twentieth Century Drama* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1962), p. 206; Jacqueline Hofer, "Pinter and Whiting: Two Attitudes Towards the Alienated Artist," *Modern Drama*, 4 (Feb. 1962), pp. 402-8; Bernard Dukore, "The Theatre of Harold Pinter," *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 6, No. 3 (March 1962), p. 51; Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, p. 82.
40. See: Raymond Williams, *Drama from Ibsen to Brecht* (Penguin, 1968), p. 373; Cohn, p. 63; Michael W. Kaufman, "Actions that a Man Might Play: Pinter's *The Birthday Party*," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Sept. 1973), p. 168ff.; Gregorz Sinko, "Stara i Moda Anglia," *Dialog*, Vol. 60, No. 4 (April 1961), pp. 97-99; cited in translation by Arnold P. Hinchliffe, *Harold Pinter* (New York: Twayne, 1967), p. 55.
41. Harold Pinter, *The Birthday Party*, in *The Birthday Party and The Room* (New York: Grove Press, 1968), revised ed., p. 23. Three versions of this play appeared: 1959, 1960, 1965. I use the 1965 text throughout. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
42. Richard Schechner, "Puzzling Pinter," *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Winter 1966), pp. 177-78.
43. Williams, p. 372.
44. John Russell Brown, *Theatre Language* (London: Allen Lane, the Penguin Press, 1972), p. 39.
45. Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, p. 78.
46. Austin E. Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975), p. 64.
47. G.L. Evans, *The Language of Modern Drama* (New Jersey: Dent et al, 1977), p. 171.
48. Peter Handke, *Kaspar* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 37, section 25.
49. J.B. Priestley, *Johnson Over Jordan* (London: William Heinemann, 1939), pp. 25-8. The comparison between Priestley and Pinter was suggested by Ronald Hayman in *Harold Pinter* (New York: Frederick Ungar, 1973), p. 37.
50. Dukore, p. 52.

51. Cf. John Pesta, "Pinter's Usurpers," *Drama Survey*, 7 (Spring 1967), pp. 57 & 63.
52. George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, paperback ed. Signet Classic (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jonavich, 1949), p. 220.
53. *Ibid.*, p. 211.
54. Harold Pinter, *The Dwarfs*, in *Three Plays* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961). Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
55. Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, p. 117; and Taylor, *Anger and After*, p. 307.
56. Austin E. Quigley, "The Dwarfs: A Study in Linguistic Dwarfism," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 17, No. 4 (Dec. 1974), p. 414.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 417.
58. *Ibid.*
59. Quigley, *The Pinter Problem*, p. 52.
60. *Ibid.*, p. 67.
61. Peter Handke, *Kaspar*, English trans. by Michael Roloff (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, trans. 1969), p. 97.
62. *Ibid.*, pp. 100-1.
63. See Quigley's article "The Dwarfs: A Study in Linguistic Dwarfism," for further information on interpersonal verbal control.
64. Hofer, p. 402.
65. B.F. Dukore, *Where Laughter Stops: Pinter's Tragicomedy* (Columbia: Univ. of Missouri Press, 1976), p. 12, fn. 9.
66. This incident has been variously interpreted as Oedipal fixation, Mother-revenge, adulthood initiation; I have not found this reading for that scene.
67. Esslin, *The Peopled Wound*, pp. 83-4; Cohn, p. 64; Schechner, p. 177.
68. Schechner, p. 177.
69. Sinko, quoted in Hinchliffe, p. 55.

70. Milan Kundera has been living in Paris since the early 70's. He is best known for his novels, though he has also written plays, most notably *Jacques and His Master* (first version, 1971). Pavel Kohout, whose play *Poor Murderer* was staged in New York in 1981, lives in Vienna. Other less known Czech playwrights still living in Czechoslovakia, and who share Havel's fate of official "invisibility" in their own country, are Ivan Klíma and Milan Uhde. See: Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, "Introduction" to *Drama Contemporary: Czechoslovakia* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1985), pp. 13-16. Goetz-Stankiewicz emphasizes Havel's special popularity in the West (p. 13).
71. See: Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, "Ethics at the Crossroads: The Czech 'Dissident Writer' as Dramatic Character," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (March 1984), pp. 112-123, for a discussion of how these two careers have merged in his trilogy: *Audience* (1975), *Vernissage* (1975), and *Protest* (1978).
72. Martin Esslin, *Reflections: Essays on Modern Theatre* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1961; Anchor Books ed., 1971), p. 138.
73. See: J.M. Burian, "Post-War Drama in Czechoslovakia," *Educational Theatre Journal*, 25 (Oct. 1973), p. 309; and Marketa Goetz-Stankiewicz, "The Theatre of the Absurd in Czechoslovakia," *Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 1-2 (Winter-Spring 1975), p. 85.
74. I will concentrate on Havel's early plays. For a discussion of his post-prison plays and his change of style, see: M.C. Bradbrook, "Václav Havel's Second Wind," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 27, No. 1 (March 1984), pp. 124-132.
75. Jan Grossman, "A Preface to Havel," trans. not given, *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 11, No. 3 (Spring 1967), p. 118.
76. *Ibid.*, p. 119.
77. Doubrovsky, p. 8.
78. Grossman, p. 119.
79. Vera Blackwell, "The New Czech Drama," *The Listener*, 5 Jan. 1967, p. 10.
80. Esslin, *Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 316.
81. Quoted in Burian, p. 311.



82. I. e., the first play he wrote on his own; he collaborated on two plays prior to *The Garden Party: The Hitchhiker* (1961) by Vyskocil and Havel; and *The Best 'Rock' of Mrs. Hermanová* (1962) by Havel and Macourek. See: Paul I. Trensky, *Czech Drama Since World War II* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1978), Columbia Slavic Studies series, p. 105.
83. Václav Havel, *The Garden Party*, trans. and adapted by Vera Blackwell (London: Jonathan Cape, 1969; the Czech original appeared in 1964), p. 14. This is the only translation of the play available. It does not always read very well; Blackwell seems to prefer literal to literary translation. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
84. *La Cantatrice chauve* was first produced in Prague in 1965, however it and other Ionesco plays had been widely read in literary circles before then. See: Goetz-Stankiewicz, "The Theatre of the Absurd in Czechoslovakia," for a review of the reception and practice of Absurdist drama in Czechoslovakia. Also, for Czech Absurdist theatre and the influence of the Western Absurdist tradition see: Paul I. Trensky, "Václav Havel and the Language of the Absurd," *Slavic and East European Journal*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (1969); Trensky, *Czech Drama*, Chapter V: "The Drama of the Absurd"; Petr Den, "Notes on Czechoslovakia's Young Theater of the Absurd," *Books Abroad*, 41 (1967), pp. 157-63; Martin Esslin, "Politisches Theater--Absurd," *Theater Heute* (Jan. 1966), pp. 8-11.
85. Compare Falk's inanities with these bits of wisdom from Ionesco's *Maid to Marry*, in *The Killer and Other Plays*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1969), pp. 154-5;
- Gentleman: (...) we can't deny progress, when we see it  
progressing every day (...) ...in technology, applied  
science, mechanics, literature and art (...) mankind's  
future's in the future. It's just the opposite for animals  
and plants...
86. Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," p. 165.
87. Karl Popper, *Unended Quest* (La Salle, Illinois: Open Court Pub. Co., 1974), p. 42.
88. Ibid.
89. Cf. Trensky, *Czech Drama*, p. 108.
90. Ibid., p. 113.
91. Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971; First Princeton Paperback Ed., 1974), p. 53.
92. Ibid.

93. See: Trensky, *Czech Drama*, p. 113.
94. Václav Havel, "On Dialectical Metaphysics," trans. Michal Schonberg, *Modern Drama*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 1980), p. 7.
95. *Ibid.*, p. 8.
96. Václav Havel, *The Memorandum*, trans. and adapted by Vera Blackwell (see my comment in note 83; the same applies here) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1967; the Czech edition appeared in 1966). Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
97. See: Ved Mehta, *Fly and the Fly-Bottle* (Penguin, 1962; published in Pelican Books, 1965), p. 30; and John Passmore, *A Hundred Years of Philosophy* (Penguin-Pelican, 1966), pp. 234-5
98. Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1970), p. 38.
99. *Ibid.*, pp. 38-9.
100. See: Trensky, *Czech Drama*, p. 118.
101. See: Trensky, "Václav Havel," p. 57.
102. Orwell, *Nineteen Eight-Four*, p. 46.
103. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-7.
104. *Ibid.*, p. 246.
105. Esslin, *Reflections*, p. 138.
106. See Michal Schonberg, "A Biographical Note on Václav Havel," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (March 1980), pp. 1-5. Also, see Bradbrook, pp. 124-8.
107. The letter is reprinted in *Survey*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (Summer 1975), pp. 168-90, trans. not given, under the title: "Document: Czechoslovakia: Letter to Dr. Gustav Husak, General Secretary of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, by Václav Havel."
108. See Schonberg, p. 4, and Goetz-Stankiewicz, "Ethics at the Crossroads," pp. 112-114.
109. Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," pp. 162-76.
110. Marcuse, pp. 84-120.
111. Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," p. 174.

112. Ibid., p. 172.
113. Ibid., p. 170.
114. Ibid., p. 165.
115. Ibid., p. 172.
116. Ibid.
117. Marcuse, p. 93.
118. Ibid., pp. 86-7.
119. Ibid., pp. 90-91.
120. Ibid., p. 88.
121. Ibid., p. 84.
122. Ibid., p. 88.
123. Samuel Beckett, *All That Fall* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 35.
124. Harold Pinter, *The Caretaker* (London: Methuen & Co., 1960), pp. 35-6.
125. Ibid., p. 60.
126. Ibid., p. 72.
127. Harold Pinter, *The Homecoming* (New York: Grove Press, 1966), p. 51.
128. F.J. Bernhard, "Beyond Realism: The Plays of Harold Pinter," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Sept. 1965), p. 188.
129. John Lahr, *Up Against the Fourth Wall* (New York: Grove Press, 1970), p. 196.
130. Marcuse, p. 90.
131. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 29.
132. Ibid.
133. Marcuse, p. 88.
134. Grossman, p. 119.
135. Marcuse, p. 88.

136. Ibid., pp. 90-91.
137. Handke, *Kaspar*, p. 80, section 62.
138. Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," p. 172.
139. Marcuse, p. 91.
140. Ibid., p. 93.
141. Mandelstam's poem, in Robert Lowell's adaptation, is printed in George Steiner's book *Extraterritorial* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), pp. 151-2.
142. Ibid., p. 152.
143. Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, p. 210.
144. Sternberger, pp. 11-21.
145. See: Eugène Ionesco, *Notes & Counter Notes*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), pp. 87-109.
146. Ibid., p. 92.
147. Ibid.
148. Susan Sontag, in her perceptive article "Ionesco," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966; Laurel ed. 1969), is critical of Ionesco's theoretical writings and especially his use of political vocabulary. "It is fitting that a playwright whose best works apotheosize the platitude has compiled a book on the theater crammed with platitudes (i.e. *Notes*)." (p. 121) See especially pp. 128-9.
149. Ionesco, *Notes*, p. 66.
150. Ibid., p. 180.
151. Kaufman, p. 175.
152. Havel, "On Dialectical Metaphysics," p. 8.
153. Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," p. 172.
154. Susan Sontag, in her "Introduction" to *A Barthes Reader* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982), p. xxxi, of which she is also the editor.
155. Roland Barthes "Inaugural Lecture, Collège de France," trans. Richard Howard, in Sontag, *A Barthes Reader*, p. 461. This lecture was originally delivered upon Barthes' inauguration as a member of the Collège de France, as Chair of Literary Semiology, 7 Jan. 1977. It was first published as *Leçon* (Paris: éditions du Seuil, 1978).

156. Ibid., p. 460, my emphasis.
157. Ibid., p. 461.
158. Bernard-Henri Lévi, *Barbarism with a Human Face*, trans. George Holoch (New York: Harper Colophon, 1979; the original French ed. appeared in 1977).
159. Ibid., p. 32. Lévi quotes from Oswald Spengler's *The Decline of the West* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), vol. II, p. 184.
160. Lévi, no longer quoting Spengler, pp. 32 & 34; Lévi's emphasis.
161. Ibid., pp. 146-7.

NOTES: CHAPTER FOUR

1. Peter Handke, *Die Unvernünftigen sterben aus* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 61.
2. Ibid., pp. 61-2.
3. I agree with Michael Töteberg, "Der Kleinbürger auf der Bühne," *Akzente*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (1976), p. 165, that this passage refers to Kroetz. Quitt's remark that the little people in the play rape and murder each other because they can't express their desires, makes this reference reasonably clear.
4. Handke, p. 61.
5. Marieluise Fleißer, "Alle meine Söhne. Über Martin Sperr, Rainer Werner Fassbinder und Franz Xaver Kroetz," in *Materialien zum Leben und Schreiben der Marieluise Fleißer*, ed. Günther Rühle (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1973), p. 410; Fleißer writes of Kroetz: "Es gibt liebste Söhne. Er hat mich am tiefsten gegraben...Er hat das Eigentliche 'erkannt'."
6. Ibid., p. 409.
7. For a discussion of this see Richard Scharine, *The Plays of Edward Bond* (London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1976), pp. 50-52.
8. Kroetz himself refers to this "group" as "Dieser neue Realismus" in an interview with Hannes Macher, "Was alles zur Gewalt führt," *Die Zeit*, 27 June 1972, p. 11. Richard Gilman in his "Introduction" to a selection of translations of Kroetz's plays, *Farmyard and Four Plays* (New York: Urizen Books, 1976), p. 19, suggests "the collective name of 'new realists'" for this group.
9. Cf. Helmut Motekat, *Das zeitgenössische deutsche Drama* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1977), pp. 106-128: "Das 'Neue Volksstück'". Also F.N. Mennemeier, *Modernes Deutsches Drama*, Vol. 2 (Munich: Wilhelm Fink, 1975), pp. 291-306: "Volkstheater gegen den Strich".
10. Motekat, p. 125.
11. Kroetz, "Horváth von heute für heute," first published in *Theater heute*, Dec. 1971; and "Liegt die Dummheit auf der Hand? Pioniere in Ingolstadt--überlegungen zu einem Stück von Marieluise Fleißer," first published in *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, (Munich), 20-21 Nov. 1971. Both can be found in the collection of plays, articles, and interviews by

Kroetz: *Weitere Aussichten...* (Köln: Kieperheuer & Witsch, 1976), pp. 519-522, and 523-527 respectively. Both of these articles are appreciations, analyses, and a payment of debt to the two writers whom he considers as the major influence on his early plays.

12. Kroetz, "Liegt die Dummheit auf der Hand?," in *Weitere Aussichten...*, p. 525.
13. In "Ich säße lieber in Bonn im Bundestag," an interview in *Theater heute*, Feb. 1973, Kroetz said: "Seit etwa 1971 stört mich das Extreme an meinen Stücken...so habe ich also begonnen, um der größeren Verständlichkeit willen, mich mit dem Durchschnitt zu befassen und ihn zu beschreiben." In "Die Lust am Lebendigen," a discussion with the editors of *kürbiskern*, No. 2 (1975), Kroetz explained: "In einem Dutzend Stücke habe ich die Ränder der Gesellschaft der Bundesrepublik ganz klar porträtiert. Das reicht mir. Ich bin bei der DKP. Ich bin politisch tätig; deshalb reizt es mich auch, jetzt Modelle zu liefern, Wege zu zeigen, die weiterführen. Es müssen positive Gestalten auftreten, und die müssen reden können. Wenn sie nicht reden können, ist es schwer, andere zu verlocken, daß sie ihnen folgen." These passages mark the change in approach and technique from his early to his later plays. The passages can be found in *Weitere Aussichten...* pp. 586-7, and 601, respectively.
14. F.X. Kroetz, *Gesammelte Stücke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972), this is the edition which will be used for all of Kroetz's plays quoted in this chapter. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
15. These remarks were originally printed in the "Vorbemerkung" to *Heimarbeit* when first published in *Drei Stücke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 6. In the *Gesammelte Stücke* this preface has been removed. For more information see Rolf-Peter Carl, *Franz Xaver Kroetz, Autorenbücher 10* (Munich: C.H. Beck, 1978). This book is an excellent introduction to the life and work of Kroetz and it contains a full bibliography up to 1978.
16. *Weitere Aussichten...*, p. 605.
17. Töteberg, p. 169.
18. Local dialect is still important to Kroetz, especially in performances. Kroetz prefaces *Wildwechsel* e.g. with the remark that the dialect should come across stronger on the stage "je nach Aufführungsort" than in the printed text. *Gesammelte Stücke*, p. 8.
19. Cf. Harald Burger and Peter von Matt, "Dramatischer Dialog und restringiertes Sprechen. F.X. Kroetz in linguistischer und literaturwissenschaftlicher Sicht," *Zeitschrift für Germanistische Linguistik*, Vol. 2, No. 3 (1974). This excellent and detailed article provides a careful socio-linguistic analysis of Kroetz, applied mainly to his

play *Oberösterreich* (1972), but is equally useful for Kroetz's earlier work. For "false verbal planning" see pp. 274-5.

20. Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Linguistic Variability and Intellectual Development*, trans. G.C. Buck and F.A. Raven (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1971), p. 39.
21. Cf. Burger/von Matt, pp. 272-4.
22. Ibid., p. 281.
23. The following is drawn from Basil Bernstein, "Elaborated and Restricted Codes: their Social Origins and Some Consequences," in *The Ethnography of Communication*, eds. J.J. Gumperz and Dell Hymes; a Monograph Issue of the series: *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 66, No. 6, part 2 (March 1964).
24. Malcolm Coulthard, "A Discussion of Restricted and Elaborated Codes," *Educational Review* (London), Vol. 22 (1969), writes: "The excitement and discussion aroused [by this theory] has been intense but of late the theory appears to have won complete acceptance." p. 38.
25. Bernstein, p. 57.
26. Ibid., p. 64.
27. Ibid., pp. 57-8.
28. Burger/von Matt title their article on Kroetz "Dramatischer Dialog und Restingiertes Sprechen" with Bernstein's theory in mind. They write of the connection between Kroetz's language and the Restricted Code theory, that his dialogues are "fast lehrhafte illustration einer klaren soziolinguistischen konzeption...wie ein soziolinguist es sich nicht exemplarischer und signifikanter wünschen könnte. Code-merkmale...bilden das strukturelle gerüst des sprechens in Kroetzschen dialogen." p. 270. As we will see, this also applies, although in varying ways, to Bond's and Mamet's plays.
29. Noam Chomsky, *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1965), pp. 33-4.
30. Bernstein in conversation with David Edge, "The Role of Language," *The Listener* (London), 7 April 1966, p. 503.
31. Preface to *Heimarbeit*, see note 15, above.
32. See: Ernst Wendt, "Bürgerseelen und Randexistenzen," in: *Moderne Dramaturgie* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1974), for a comparative study of Pinter and Kroetz. Also Moray McGowan, "Sprache, Gewalt und Gesellschaft. Franz Xaver Kroetz und die sozial-realistischen



- Dramatiker des englischen Theaters," in *TEXT + KRITIK*, Vol. 57 (Jan. 1978), pp. 37-48. Also useful for Wesker and Bond.
33. Kroetz, "Horváth von heute für heute", p. 520.
  34. Cf. Mennemeier, p. 296.
  35. Curt Hohoff, "An der Sprachlosigkeit entlang," *Merkur*, Vol. 2, No. 30 (1976), pp. 189-93.
  36. *Theater heute*, 12 (1971), p. 30.
  37. Quoted by Töteberg, p. 167.
  38. Scene titles or headings are often associated with Brecht, who used them both in his written works and his staged productions, as a means of audience alienation. It is however unclear whether Kroetz's use of scene titles here was influenced by Brecht, as he claims to have been only fleetingly acquainted with Brecht's work at this time, and in any case rejected Brecht as illusionistic and outdated. Kroetz takes up Brecht as a model only in 1973. See *Weitere Aussichten...* pp. 525 and 570.
  39. Gilman, "Introduction," p. 14.
  40. Cf. Burger/von Matt, p. 291.
  41. Ibid.
  42. Quoted by Töteberg, p. 166, italics mine.
  43. Bernard Shaw, "Preface" to *Pygmalion* (Penguin, rpt. 1963), p. 9.
  44. See Gareth Lloyd Evans, *The Language of Modern Drama* (New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1977), pp. 216-221, for a discussion of extreme use of the vernacular and loss of poetic effect. Also, see Richard Scharine, pp. 59-62, on Bond's extreme naturalistic speech.
  45. This is also true of Kroetz's *Nichis Blut* whose printed version appears with 14 footnotes, translations from the Bavarian--which is heavier in this play than in his others--to standard German.
  46. Edward Bond, "Author's Preface" to *Lear* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1972), p. v.
  47. Herbert Kretzmer, "Saved," in *Contemporary Theatre*, ed. Geoffrey Morgan (London: Magazine Editions, 1968), p. 45; cited by Scharine, p. 48.
  48. Irving Wardle, "A Question of Motives and Purposes," *London Times*, 4 November 1965, p. 17; cited by Scharine, p. 48.

49. J.C. Trewin, "Saved," *The Illustrated London News*, 249 (13 November 1965), p. 32; cited by Scharine pp. 48 and 59.
50. See Scharine, p. 49.
51. Edward Bond, *Saved*, in: *The New Theatre of Europe 4*, ed. Martin Esslin (New York: Delta, 1970), pp. 47-146. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
52. "Author's Note" to *Saved*, p. 49.
53. Cf. Scharine, p. 60.
54. Ernst Wendt, "Warten auf waswofür," *Theater heute*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (1967), p. 8.
55. Martin Esslin, "Edward Bond's Three Plays," in *Brief Chronicles* (London: Temple Smith, 1970), p. 175.
56. "Author's Note" to *Saved*, p. 49.
57. See William Babula, "Scene Thirteen of Bond's *Saved*," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (September 1972), pp. 147-9, for a discussion of this scene and its sexual overtones.
58. Andrew Kennedy, *Six Dramatists in Search of a Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1975), p. 13, suggests that "Physical scenes" in a large number of modern plays "are synchronized with the failure of words." Scene 13 of *Saved* is a good example of this.
59. Walter Kerr, "Language Alone Isn't Drama," *The New York Times*, Sunday, 6 March 1977, section D, p. 3.
60. Clive Barnes, "Skilled American Buffalo," *The New York Times*, 17 Feb. 1977, p. 50.
61. David Mamet, *American Buffalo* (New York: Grove Press, 1976). Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
62. *Ibid.*, a footnote on p. 5.
63. Bernstein, p. 59.
64. Quoted by C.W.E. Bigsby, in his monograph of *David Mamet* (London: Methuen, 1985), p. 19.
65. June Schlueter and Elizabeth Forsyth, "America as Junkshop: The Business Ethic in David Mamet's *American Buffalo*," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 26, No. 4, p. 492.

66. Bigsby, p. 67.
67. Ibid., p. 72.
68. Mamet, in an interview with Richard Gottlieb, in *The New York Times*, 15 January 1978, section D, p. 4.
69. Robert Storey, "The Making of David Mamet," *The Hollins Critic*, 16 (Oct. 1979), p. 2.
70. Bigsby, p. 17.
71. Christopher Portenfield, "David Mamet's Bond of Futility," *Time*, 28 Feb. 1977, p. 55.
72. Bigsby, p. 115.
73. David Mamet, *Glengarry, Glen Ross* (London: Methuen, 1984). Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
74. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 88. The full quote concerning concepts which are reduced to dogma and have become single-faceted and automatic, reads: "Hammered and re-hammered into the recipient's mind, they produce the effect of enclosing it within the circle of the conditions prescribed by the formula." See my discussion of this in Chapter III, especially section 4.
75. "Author's Note" to *Glengarry, Glen Ross*, p. 1.
76. Kroetz, *Stallerhof*, e.g. p. 156. See my discussion of Kroetz in section 1 of this Chapter, for a detailed analysis of Kroetz's uses of "Redn wird man dürfen," "Man redt ja bloss," "So sagt man ebn," etc.
77. Cf. Steven H. Gale, "David Mamet: The Plays, 1972-1980," in: *Essays on Contemporary American Drama*, eds. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Munich: Max Heuber Verlag, 1981), p. 207. Gale also refers the reader to T.E. Kallem, "Pinter Patter," *Time*, 12 July 1976, p. 68. Also, see Bigsby, p. 115 and passim. Mamet dedicated *Glengarry, Glen Ross* to Harold Pinter.
78. See my discussion of jargon as intimidation in Pinter's plays, in Chapter III, section 2.
79. Bigsby, p. 123.
80. Ibid.

81. See: George Steiner, "Whorf, Chomsky and the Student of Literature," *New Literary History*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Aug. 1972), p. 16. Steiner develops this point in the body of his article.
82. Edward Sapir, "The Status of Linguistics as a Science," *Language*, Vol. 5 (1929), p. 209.
83. Benjamin Lee Whorf, *Language, Thought and Reality* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1956), p. 148.
84. *Ibid.*, pp. 256-8.
85. See note 64.
86. Whorf, my italics.

NOTES: CHAPTER FIVE

1. *New York Mirror*, review (no name given), 15 Oct. 1962.
2. John McCarten, "Long Night's Journey into Daze," *The New Yorker*, 20 Oct. 1962; p. 85.
3. This remark by a member of the Pulitzer Prize full committee is quoted in Wendell V. Harris, "Morality, Absurdity, and Albee," *Southwest Review* (Summer, 1964), p. 249.
4. *Catholic Transcript*, 1 Jan. 1963.
5. See: Michael E. Rutenberg, *Edward Albee: Playwright in Protest* (New York: Avon Books, 1969), p. 93.
6. See: C.W.E. Bigsby, *Albee* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1969), p. 36.
7. June Schlueter, in *Metafictional Characters in Modern Drama* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1979), p. 80, affirms *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*'s status as a "masterpiece of the American theater" and writes:

Out of the proliferation of critical attention have come interpretations of the play as an allegory of the American dream, an example of the cosmic yearning of the female principle of creation for the civilizing influence of the masculine, a dramatization of a couple's coming of age, a depiction of a homosexual liaison, a parody of the Mass of Requiem, and an examination into the horrors of a science-dominated world.

Schlueter rejects these readings as offering any general interpretation of the play, as do I. See p. 127, note number 6 for her bibliographical references.

8. All of the playwrights and plays mentioned are discussed in detail in my previous chapters.
9. Ruby Cohn, *Currents in Contemporary Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1969), Chapter 2: "Dialogue of Cruelty." Cohn applies this category to a group of plays which, she claims, are influenced by Strindberg's use of verbal cruelty. See my Introduction, above, for a critique of her analysis.

10. Edward Albee, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* (New York: Pocket Books, Cardinal Edition, 1962), p. 92. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
11. August Strindberg, *The Father*, trans. Arvid Paulson in *Seven Plays by August Strindberg* (New York: Bantam Books, 1960), p. 36. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
12. See: Roger Shattuck, *The Banquet Years* (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1955; revised ed., 1968), pp. 206-11 for a description of reactions to *Ubu Roi's* first performance. I return to this event in a later section.
13. See notes no. 44-47, below.
14. See: Ruby Cohn, *Dialogue in American Drama* (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1971), p. 140.
15. See: Maurice Valency, *The Flower and the Castle* (New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1963), pp. 262-4.
16. See Bigsby, pp. 47-5, for an expanded treatment of New Carthage, Spengler, and St. Augustine.
17. See Rutenberg, p. 93. In an interview Rutenberg asked Albee whether he had Nikita Krushchev in mind when he named the blond biologist Nick. Rutenberg claims that Albee said he had. See pp. 95-6.
18. Bigsby, p. 38.
19. Schlueter, p. 83.
20. Cohn, *Dialogue*, p. 141.
21. Cf. Ruth Meyer, "Language: Truth and Illusion in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (1968), p. 62.
22. Robert Brustein, "Albee and the Medusa Head," in: *Seasons of Discontent* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1959), p. 146.
23. Peter Handke, "Nauseated by Language: from an interview with Artur Joseph," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Fall 1970), p. 58. See Chapter II, above, for an expanded discussion, and note no. 8 there.
24. Meyer, p. 62.

25. P. Watzlawick, J.H. Beavin, D.D. Jackson, *Pragmatics of Human Communication: A Study of Interactional Patterns, Pathologies, and Paradoxes* (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1967), Chapter 5, entitled: "A Communicational Approach to the play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*."
26. *Ibid.*, p. 150.
27. *Ibid.*
28. *Ibid.*, p. 153. Cf. Austin E. Quigley, *The Pinter Problem* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton Univ. Press, 1975). Quigley claims that language in Pinter's plays has an "interrelational function." See Chapter III, above, section on Pinter, for a discussion of Quigley.
29. Eric Berne, see: e.g., *Games People Play* (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1964), which is the popular account of his analysis of the psychology of human relations. This was first presented in his *Transactional Analysis in Psychotherapy* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1961), and comprises a "game" theory of social interaction. Joy Flash, in: "Games People Play in *Who's Afriad of Virginia Woolf?*," *Modern Drama*, Vol. 10, No. 3 (Dec. 1967), applies Berne's transactional principles to Albee's play; an article of limited interest.
30. Watzlawick *et al*, p. 157.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 160.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 182.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 158.
34. *Ibid.*, pp. 168-9.
35. Edward Albee, *The American Dream*, in: *Two Plays by Edward Albee* (New York: Signet Book, 1959), pp. 62, 82, and 95 respectively.
36. Cohn, *Dialogue*, p. 137.
37. See Chapter III, section 1, above.
38. Cf. Schlueter, pp. 86-7; and Meyer, p. 65.
39. See: Katharine Worth, "Edward Albee: Playwright of Evolution," in: *Essays on Contemporary American Drama*, ed. Hedwig Bock and Albert Wertheim (Munich: Max Hueber Verlag, 1981), in which she discusses animal images and evolution in Albee's plays.
40. Cf. Watzlawick *et al*, p. 182.

41. We might recall Martha's first story, in Act I, of how she accidentally knocked George out in a mock boxing-match. "I think it's colored our whole life" she adds (p. 57). I discuss this incident in a different context later.
42. Friedrich Dürrenmatt, *Play Strindberg*, trans. James Kirkup (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1973), p. 7.
43. Sister Corona Sharp, "Dürrenmatt's *Play Strindberg*," *Modern Drama* (December 1970), p. 279.
44. The major exponent of a variation of this view is Daniel Macdonald who in "Truth and Illusion in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," *Renascence*, 17 (1964), pp. 63-9, claims the "necessity of illusion" for life, a view upheld by certain psychological studies (see Watzlawick et al, pp. 172-4), but contested by Bigsby, pp. 37-8, and most other critics.
45. Schlueter, pp. 82 and 80.
46. Lawrence Kingsley, "Reality and Illusion: Continuity of a Theme in Albee," *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25 No. 1 (March 1973), p. 72.
47. Brustein, p. 146.
48. Bigsby, p. 47.
49. Brustein is vehement in his opposition to the child-metaphor, claiming its truthfulness to be doubtful after an evening of "stage illusions." "...after three and a half hours of prestidigitation, we become reluctant to accept one of these magical tricks as the real thing" p. 147. Malcolm Muggeridge and Howard Taubman reject the plausibility of the child-illusion out of hand (see Watzlawick et al, p. 172). Most critics, however, accept the son-metaphor and agree with Rutenberg who writes that "the child represents the illusions we create to make life bearable" and that we are better off without them. Rutenberg, p. 106.
50. The one notable exception is Ruth Meyer's article which well establishes the role of language in revealing and concealing truth. Her discussion of the son's exorcism, however, focuses on its motivation as an act of revenge or compassion; and she does not question the son's role and meaning as a verbal construct.
51. Watzlawick et al, p. 174.
52. Ibid.
53. Albee, *The American Dream*, p. 98.
54. Ibid., pp. 99-101.



55. Ibid., pp. 113, 107, and 115 respectively; my emphasis.
56. This "error" also underlines the obvious similarities between the young 'American Dream' character and the athletic, "baby-face" Nick. Both are ambitious, both will do "almost anything for money" (*The American Dream*, p. 109), both are emotionally "incomplete" and are willing to play both son and lover for the two mommy figures. Both represent degenerated ideals, the physical wrappings of a dream devoid of moral substance.
57. Schlueter, p. 85.
58. Ibid., p. 87. My analysis here of stage and plot fiction is an expansion of an idea suggested in Schlueter's book.
59. See note no. 49, above.
60. See Chapter III, section 1, above, for an analysis of that murder-through-pronouncement in Ionesco.
61. Bigsby claims that the simplified dialogue at the play's end signals a more meaningful contact between George and Martha and "mirrors the uncomplicated state to which their relationship has returned" (p. 50). This is perhaps over-optimistic.
62. Cohn, *Currents*, p. 54.
63. Brustein, in three separate articles on Albee in his *Seasons of Discontent*, notes these various "traditions", and goes so far as to write:

Lacking a developed style or a compelling subject, (Albee) elected to model himself on the more spectacular modern dramatists--and his impressions of Genet (*The Zoo Story*), Williams (*Bessie Smith*), and Ionesco (*The American Dream*) were, for the most part, very expert. By the time of *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*, Albee's gifts for mimicry were so advanced, and his models (Strindberg and O'Neill) so elevated, that he produced an ersatz masterpiece--masterly in its execution, ersatz at its core. (pp. 155-6. See also pp. 28-9, and 46-8).

Strindberg's name is coupled with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* in almost every serious critical evaluation of the play, though usually not in such a derogatory manner. See note 64, below.

64. C.W.E. Bigsby, "Introduction" to *Edward Albee: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. C.W.E. Bigsby (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1975), p. 9. Bigsby also answers Brustein's charge of "impressions" and "mimicry" with the words: "The gulf between eclecticism and impersonation is the gulf between honesty and fraud, a receptive

imagination and an impoverished sensibility." Albee has "a stunning integrity" (p. 9).

65. Marion A. Taylor, "Edward Albee and August Strindberg: Some Parallels between *The Dance of Death* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," in: *Papers on English Language and Literature*, Vol. I, No. 1 (1965). Among other things, Taylor writes that "Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* (...) has a story and characters so closely parallel to those of Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* as to seem more than coincidence" (p. 60); and "Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* deals with a love-hatred plot and characters so similar to Strindberg's *The Dance of Death* that the borrowing seems far from accidental" (p. 70).
66. Ibid., see pp. 70-71.
67. Margery Morgan, *August Strindberg* (New York: MacMillan, 1985), p. 111.
68. Cohn, *Currents*, p. 64.
69. August Strindberg, *The Dance of Death*, trans. Elizabeth Sprigge, in: *Five Plays of Strindberg* (New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday & Co., Inc., 1960). Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
70. Taylor quotes these two passages from each play to show their similarity. She notes the role inversion in Albee's play, but does not remark on their divergent styles or language.
71. E.g., Birgitta Steene, *The Greatest Fire: A Study of August Strindberg* (Southern Illinois Univ. Press, 1973), p. 41, writes: "...realistic details are compressed to form a grotesque and nightmarish atmosphere that anticipates certain plays within the absurdist theatre." See also Morgan, p. 68, and Valency, pp. 315-16.
72. Raymond Williams, "Private Tragedy: Strindberg," in: *Strindberg; A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. O. Reinert (New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1971), p. 53.
73. See my Introduction, above, for a discussion of *Huis Clos* and of the difference between language which acts as violence and language which merely translates enmity.
74. Dürrenmatt, p. 7.
75. Michael Patterson, in: *German Theatre Today* (London: Pitman Publishing, 1976), p. 28, writes that *Play Strindberg* "enjoyed colossal success (...) the most frequently staged contemporary play of the last decade" (i.e. from 1965-75).
76. See Valency, pp. 264-5.

77. Ibid., p. 264.
78. August Strindberg, "Psychic Murder (Apropos 'Rosmersholm')," first published in *Tryckt Och Otryckt*, III (1891) as "Själamodäre." Republished in *Tulane Drama Review*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (Winter 1968), pp. 113-118, trans. Walter Johnson.
79. See Steene; p. 48.
80. Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd., 1962), p. 106.
81. For a discussion of the "Merdre" see, e.g., Maurice Marc LaBelle, *Alfred Jarry: Nihilism and the Theatre of the Absurd* (New York: New York Univ. Press, 1980), pp. 89-91.
82. For a detailed analysis of verbal inventions, usages, and connotations see Michel Arrivé's semiotic study: *Les Langages de Jarry* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), especially pp. 165-319.
83. The history of this famous event is well known and beautifully retold by Shattuck, especially on pp. 203-210. See also LaBelle, pp. 88-91, and Claude Schumacher, *Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire* (London: MacMillan Publishers, Ltd., 1984), Chapter 4.
84. Cf. Christopher Innes, *Holy Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), pp. 21-2. After describing the audiences reaction to the first "Merdre," Innes writes: "...a figure symbolising all that bourgeois morality condemns is claimed to be representative of the real basis of bourgeois society, which then stands condemned by its own principles."
85. See notes 1-4, above.
86. Alfred Jarry, *Ubu Roi*, in: *Tout Ubu* (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1962), p. 39. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
87. See Shattuck on Gémier's actual use of Jarry's eccentric style of speech for his interpretation of Père Ubu, p. 207.
88. Watzlawick et al claim that "Nick and Honey maintain, to each other, an extremely overconventional style of communication" (p. 151), and are contrasted with George and Martha's unconventional style.
89. Brustein, *Seasons*, p. 147.
90. Brustein, see note no. 63, above.
91. See note no. 88, above.

92. Meyer calls these verbal usages "slanted clichés" and claims that Albee reveals "a special meaning" through them. She does not see them as critical of the original cliché itself.
93. Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove Press, 1954), p. 48b.
94. Not only the verbal dimension is simplified in the film: much of the political references and the history/biology antagonism has been deleted. On the whole the film was highly successful. It received three Academy Awards, and six further Academy Award Nominations.
95. Martin Walser, *Die Zimmerschlacht* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967). *Die Zimmerschlacht* is not really a comedy, anymore than *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* is; but the effect of its dialogue, as in Albee's play, is often comic. Michael Roloff, in his "Introduction" to *The Contemporary German Theater* (New York: Avon Books, 1972), an anthology of plays which he also edits, and containing the English translation of *Die Zimmerschlacht*, claims that the play has a "highly comic effect on stage," deriving from the extreme amount of "ghastliness, pettiness, silliness, pretense, and sentimentality...the sum of whose qualities perhaps exceed what is possible in real life." p. 15.
96. Roloff, *Contemporary German Theater*, p. 15.
97. Cf. Christopher D. Innes, *Modern German Drama: A Study in Form* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1979), p. 3; Michael Patterson, *German Theatre Today* (London: Pitman Publishing, 1976), p. 89; Dany Bentz, who devotes an entire article to a comparison between Albee and Walser, "Die Zimmerschlacht et *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*," *Études Littéraires*, 18 (1985), pp. 97-104; Henning Rischbieter, "Nachwort" in: *Deutsches Theater der Gegenwart I*, ed. Karlheinz Braun (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 644. This anthology of contemporary German drama was published the same year that Walser's *Die Zimmerschlacht* was presented on stage (a TV script version had been aired in 1963) and attests to the play's popularity.
98. See: Marcel Reich-Ranicki, "War es ein Mord?," in *über Martin Walser*, ed. Thomas Beckermann (Frankfurt a.M.: 1970), p. 145. Reich-Ranicki claims that Walser's play progresses through "Mitteilung statt Handlung, Deklaration statt Aktion." He is quoted by Rainer Taëni, "Modelle einer entfremdeten Gesellschaft?," in: *TEXT + KRITIK*, Vol. 41-2 (Jan. 1974), which is dedicated to articles on Martin Walser. Taëni adds that Walser's use of "Mitteilung und Deklaration" functions to expose the bourgeois rhetoric which his characters have internalized, p. 66.
99. Taëni, p. 66.

100. Martin Walser, *Home Front*, trans. Carole Burden and Christopher Holme, in Roloff, *Contemporary German Theater*, pp.101-161.
101. Simon Gray, *Butley* (London: Methuen & Co., 1971.).
102. See: John Russell Taylor *Anger and After* (Penguin Books, 1962), especially pp. 11-13, and 29-43, for an analysis of the play and its place in the inception of the "new" British drama.
103. Cf. Simon Trussler, *The Plays of John Osborne* (London: Panther Books, 1969), p. 36.
104. The reviews are conveniently collected in the *Casebook Series* study of *Look Back in Anger*, ed. by John Russell Taylor (London: Aurora Publishers Inc., 1970), pp. 35, 36, 40 and 42 respectively.
105. See: e.g.: Katharine J. Worth, "The Angry Young Man," (1963), printed in Taylor, *Casebook*, pp. 101-116, see especially pp. 103 and 105; also George E. Wellwarth, "John Osborne: 'Angry Young Man'?" (1969) in Taylor, *Casebook*, pp. 117-128, in which he writes: "Osborne has created an excellent, minutely accurate dissection of a perverse marriage in the style of Strindberg. *Look Back in Anger* irresistibly recalls the Swedish author's *The Dance of Death*." p. 120.
106. John Osborne, *Look Back in Anger* (London: Faber and Faber, 1957), p. 60. Subsequent references will appear parenthetically within the text and will refer to this edition.
107. Taylor, in *Anger*, pp. 38-9, writes: "Jimmy was taken to be speaking for a whole generation (...) essentially the post-war generation" which "gradually became disillusioned when a brave new world failed to materialize."
108. Mary McCarthy, "A New Word" (1959), in Taylor, *Casebook*, pp. 150-160, quote from p. 152. The title of her article is a pun on, and a deflation of, the idea of A New World. Jimmy's world is reduced to words.

NOTES: CHAPTER SIX

1. Botho Strauss, "Versuch, ästhetische und politische Ereignisse zusammenzudenken--neues Theater 1967-70," *Theater heute*, Vol. 11, No. 10 (Oct. 1970), pp. 61-68; quoted in translation by Nicholar Hern, *Peter Handke: Theatre and Anti-Theatre* (London: Oswald Wolff, 1971), p. 93. Emphasis mine.
2. Peter Handke has stated that this is the goal of his writing, to change people through awareness; See: "Bemerkung zu meinen Sprechstücken," in *Publikumsbeschimpfung und andere Sprechstücke* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1966), p. 100.
3. See, e.g., George Steiner, *Extraterritorial: Papers on Literature and the Language Revolution* (New York: Atheneum, 1976), especially the essays: "Extraterritorial," "The Language Animal," and "Linguistics and Poetics."
4. Herbert Marcuse, "The Closing of the Universe of Discourse," in *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. 90-91.
5. Elisabeth Meier, "'Abgründe dort sehen zu lehren, wo Gemeinplätze sind': Zur Sprachkritik von Ödön von Horváth und Peter Handke," in *Sprachnot und Wirklichkeitszerfall*, ed. Elisabeth Meier (Düsseldorf: Patmos-Verlag, 1972), pp. 39-40.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 39.
7. George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in his *A Collection of Essays* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1954), p. 165.
8. Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, trans. Donald Watson (New York: Grove Press, 1964), p. 179.
9. Harold Pinter, "Writing for the Theatre," *Evergreen Review*, No. 33 (Aug.-Sept. 1964), p. 81. This is a revised version of Pinter's speech at the Seventh National Students' Drama Festival, Bristol, first published in *The Sunday Times*, 4 March 1962, with the title "Between the Lines."
10. Peter Handke as quoted by Artur Joseph in, "Nauseated by Language: from an Interview with Peter Handke," *The Drama Review*, Vol. 15, No. 1 (Fall 1970), p. 61.
11. J. S. Doubrovsky, "Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity," *Yale French Studies*, 23 (1959), p. 8.

12. See: Allan Janik and Stephen Toulmin, *Wittgenstein's Vienna* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1973), pp. 180-183. On p. 182 Janik and Toulmin write that: "Mauthner's arguments, being basically nominalistic, had attempted to demonstrate the limits of language by means of a theory *about* language; they thus contained an element of circularity...With a propositional calculus at his disposal, Wittgenstein could eliminate the corresponding circularity, which--as Mauthner had admitted--characterized the earlier critique. In this way, one could expound the nature and limits of language in terms of its structure; the limits of language could be made evident and did not have to be stated explicitly. These are precisely the merits Wittgenstein claims on behalf of his co-called 'picture theory of language.'"
13. A quote from Handke's *Kaspar* via Shakespeare's *Othello*. See Chapter II for a discussion of this.
14. Handke, "Nauseated by Language," p. 58.

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