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THE DECLINE OF POLITICAL THEATRE IN 20TH CENTURY EUROPE:

SHAW, BRECHT, SARTRE, AND IONESCO COMPARED

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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Many political theorists, from Hannah Arendt and Theodor Adorno to Sheldon Wolin and Jurgen Habermas, have noted that the twentieth century was a time of an “eclipse of the public sphere” and a “sublimation of politics.” Partly due to the traumas of world war, totalitarianism, and genocide, and partly due to the absorptive capacities of instrumental reason and mass consumerism, mid-twentieth century Europe experienced an exhaustion of radical energy and a hollowing out of political discourse. This dissertation contributes to the narration of these developments by offering an account of the decline of political theater in twentieth century Europe. While since the ancient Greeks theater had been an important medium of political reflection and communication—and thus an important genre of political theorizing—by the middle of the 20th century theater became, especially in Western Europe and the United States, a medium of mass entertainment deprived of political aspiration and bite. This dissertation tells the story of this decline of political theater through profiles of four of the most important, brilliant, and influential playwrights of the century—George Bernard Shaw,

Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Eugene Ionesco. The first three playwrights sought to dramatize the challenges of their times in ways that could promote radical political change. Each, in his own way, failed in this effort. The fourth, Ionesco, also experienced the traumas of the century, but responded by developing a new, “absurdist” theater that was deeply anti-political. By profiling these important writers, and by linking them in a narrative of political theater’s decline in the 20th century, this dissertation has two primary goals: to contribute to the remembrance of a “world we have lost,” and through such remembrance to incite contemporary political theorists to revisit and rethink the political potential of the theater.

DEDICATION

For my biggest supporters:
Mom, Dad, Fiona, Drake, & Tony
Steve
Jeffrey
Lexie
(And for b.b.)

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Political Theatre as Political Theory

It should be readily apparent to anyone familiar with the organized sections of the American Political Science Association that art and culture have little place in the modern conception of politics and in the discipline devoted to its study. A quick glimpse through the program of any recent APSA annual convention reveals the pervasive preoccupation with governmental institutions and actors who seek to influence them, whether they be individuals, interest groups, or non-governmental organizations. The exceptions to this preoccupation – certain subsets of political theory focused on politics and literature, for example, and subsets of comparative politics that deal with political culture -- seem to prove the rule, as they are relatively undervalued and still pressured to conform to the methodological requirements of politics as a social science. Divisions that seek to expand the narrow working definition within which they operate, such as Politics and Literature and Film, often spend much of their energy providing justifications for their very existence as part of their constant quest for recognition and legitimacy.

What is most fascinating about this is that the delimitation of the study of politics to institutions and practices of government is a strikingly recent historical development limited to specific global geographic regions (i.e. the North and/or West). Yet, there seems to be little to no acknowledgement of this fact or the implications that arise from it in the consciousness of the men and women who spend their lives professionally analyzing “politics.” Hence, when I recently explained to a political theory colleague the nature of this project – an effort to revive interest in politics and theatre, centered on the discussion of four playwrights -- I was barraged with criticism regarding its irrelevance to the discipline of political science and told point blank that, while the project might shed

light on theatre or dramatic literature, it had nothing to do with theorizing about politics. At the time, I fell into the trap to which many political scientists concerned with art and culture, who are more comfortable thinking of themselves as mere students of politics, succumb: I attempted to justify myself. Upon reflection, however, I realized that the more appropriate thing to do would have been to ask this colleague a simple question: “Do you realize that, up until at most 75 years ago, it would have been inconceivable to question the fundamental linkages between art and politics?” Or, more pointedly, “Do you have any idea how presentist you sound?”

For millennia, the study of politics had been understood as inseparable from the study of social life as a whole. Art, religion, history, politics, morality – all of these things were understood as interconnected, as constituted by and constitutive of human interaction. To segregate the study of each from the others would have been inconceivable to the ancient Greeks, ancient Romans, medieval Christians, *philosophes* of the European enlightenment, Romantics, and the liberal and radical intellectuals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. An ecological conception of politics, which views politics as part of a dynamic whole that is best understood – and possibly, only understood – *as a whole*, is still dominant in many cultures to this day, and it lost its position of dominance in the West only when liberal capitalism became hegemonic in the 20th century. The flippant rejection of a project that combined the study of art with that of politics would likely not have been possible even 50 years ago, when the aesthetic dimensions of politics were clear even to those behavioralists who most sought to exorcize them from a proper “science” of politics. And yet today it is simply taken for

granted, even among most academic scholars, that politics is politics, and art is art, and the two domains share no obvious or essential connections.

This begs the question: How could this monumental shift in our conception of social life have occurred so quickly and, further, how could it have become so complete that we are no longer aware of alternative ways of understanding our discipline and our world? The mentality that governs the APSA is hardly limited to that organization: the division of labor that constitutes the modern academy is a reflection of a larger cultural bias that compartmentalizes knowledge and views holistic conceptions of reality as oversimplified and, ironically, reductionist.

The compartmentalization of reality into separate parts is historically tied to the rise of both liberal democracy and capitalism. For while the subject/object dichotomy has been a prominent part of Western culture since ancient Greece,¹ it was only with the rise of modern liberalism, and its codification in core documents of modern constitutionalism such as the Declaration of Independence and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen, that the separation of subject and object was legally and practically established. And it was only with the philosophical innovations of Immanuel Kant – who sought to protect the liberal pursuit of scientific knowledge and individual moral autonomy from intrusion by the church – that this separation was intellectually established. It is important to see how modern liberals, such as Kant, sought to promote an “art of separation” as part of their project of political emancipation.² It is equally important to note the abstract conception of politics that this entailed. Kant’s division of the realms of knowledge into distinct categories that could never – and should never – be

¹ See the discussion of Hegel on this topic in Shlomo Avineri, *Hegel’s Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge University Press, 1974).

² See Michael Walzer, “Liberalism and the Art of Separation,” *Political Theory* 12(4), pp. 315-30.

reunited created a “separate but equal” division between science (“theoretical” knowledge of objective reality), religion and ethics (“practical” knowledge of subjective freedom), and judgment (“aesthetic” knowledge of taste, beauty, and purely subjective experience). Whatever the complexities of Kant’s philosophical system, its effect was to help drive a wedge between the spheres of politics and culture, and to give pride of place to the privileged knowledge claims of science.³ A product of his time, Kant was unaware of the liberal ideological foundation of his philosophy and of the implications of taking his arguments to their logical conclusions.

Less than a century later, Marx unmasked the modern subject/object divide as a product of bourgeois ideology, which justified the exploitation of the proletariat in the private economic sphere while guaranteeing him equality in the public sphere of democratic government. Marx’s critiques -- made most powerfully in “On the Jewish Question”-- explained why the divisions between areas of social life existed: far from accidental, these divisions allowed certain groups economic and political power to the detriment of others. The more naturalized these divisions became, the easier it was for the bourgeoisie to reconstitute their power. As Marx made clear, the ironic result of universal political freedom has been the civic atomization and the economic and cultural enslavement of human beings at the hands of their political liberators, the bourgeoisie.

So while it is true that how an individual spends her time, to whom she speaks, where she works, and what she does are her own affairs, it is also true that, even if she wanted to make her private life take on public meaning, she has few means at her disposal to do so. Her privacy is protected, but her ability to participate in public life is

³ On Kant’s general contribution, see Ronald Beiner and William James Booth, eds. *Kant and Political Philosophy: the Contemporary Legacy* (Yale University Press, 1996).

limited by the unequal distribution of economic resources and effective power.

Inhabitants of liberal democracies cannot have it both ways: if their private lives are to be insulated from interference by the state, then the state must also be insulated from interference by private citizens. Marx makes just this point in “On the Jewish Question,” yet he limits his articulation of the implications of this claim to the area of religious identification.⁴ Religion becomes marginalized in any effective liberal democracy. But the same is true of culture. Both are accorded a kind of social “freedom.” But both are also deprived of any public significance.

Marx, modernity’s most penetrating critic of these divisions, was himself not immune from their power. And so if on the one hand he inaugurated a tradition of critical theory focused on the alienating consequences of capitalist rationality, on the other hand he also claimed to institute a more “scientific” socialism that spoke on behalf of a higher form of rationality. In this way Marx and Marxism are themselves partly culpable for the reductionist approach to art that we confront. At the same time, the tradition of critical theory has drawn upon the insights of Marx -- and also of Max Weber and of psychoanalysis -- to develop an increasingly sophisticated critique of the ways that modern bourgeois society reduces culture and evacuates meaning to the detriment of the autonomy that capitalism claims to advance.

The tradition of critical theory associated with the Frankfurt School is the seminal tradition that reflects on the relation between culture and domination in the modern

⁴ See Marx’s classic distinction between political emancipation and human emancipation in “On the Jewish Question,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, 2nd edition, David McLellan, ed. (Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 46-70. See also Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge University Press, 1970), and especially Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, 2nd Edition (Routledge, 2002).

world. Writers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodore Adorno, and Max Horkheimer were profoundly concerned with questions of culture and aesthetics, and with the loss of art's critical functions at the hands of what they called the culture industry. The culture industry thesis was first laid out by Adorno and Horkheimer in the final chapter of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: their central argument is that the capitalist mode of production, in a constant need to develop new markets, commodifies all cultural goods, transforming art into packageable, reproducible, transitory objects to be bought and sold.⁵

As Adorno expanded on this theme in a 1975 essay:

The cultural commodities of the industry are governed . . . by the principle of their realization as value, and not by their own specific content and harmonious formation. The entire practice of the culture industry transfers the profit motive naked onto cultural forms. . . . The autonomy of works of art, which of course rarely ever predominated in an entirely pure form, and was always permeated by a constellation of effects, is tendentially eliminated by the culture industry, with or without the conscious will of those in control.⁶

Culture is thus at the mercy of the market: it must be sellable to the lowest common denominator and/or to those with the most disposable income. Though certain niche markets will possibly always exist which value high art; and while the education system keeps around classic texts like Shakespeare's plays, the *Iliad*, and Hemingway's novels; capitalism has drained art and culture of its authenticity by co-opting its revolutionary potential and stripping it of its uniqueness.⁷

⁵ Theodore W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, John Cumming, trans. (Continuum, 2001).

⁶ Theodore W. Adorno and Anson G. Rabinbach, "Culture Industry Reconsidered," *New German Critique* 6 (Autumn 1975), p. 13.

⁷ As Adorno writes, "Culture, in the true sense, did not simply accommodate itself to human beings; but it always simultaneously raised a protest against the petrified relations under which they lived, thereby honoring them. Insofar as culture becomes wholly assimilated to and integrated in those petrified relations, human beings are once more debased. Cultural entities typical of the culture industry are no longer *also* commodities, they are commodities through and through." *Ibid.*

Though mass production of cultural texts has existed for centuries, the culture industry cannot really be said to exist until the 20th century. Only in the past 100 years has culture become a market unto itself in such a dramatic way; and the capitalist task of conquering culture is not yet complete. No doubt, the impact of capitalism on culture has contributed to the rejection of the study of culture by serious academics: the creation of cultural studies as an academic discipline in its own right is both a reflection of and a reaction to the rejection of contemporary culture as something tainted and unfit for serious scholarly research. Cultural studies is now itself a niche market, an embodiment of the argument that the culture industry controls the production and distribution of knowledge.⁸

But shouldn't academics know better? Even if understanding the political importance of culture is no longer an important, or even necessary, aspect of the lives of most people in society, is it not part of our job, as intellectuals, as scholars, to familiarize ourselves with our own cultural history and to reflect upon our place within it? If it is the case that even political scientists cannot understand a world in which political art exists – not as state-funded art, but as art that does political work – and in which culture is inherently public and political, then our discipline has become nothing more than a product of our age; we have lost our ability to engage in self-reflection and have damned our work as irrelevant outside of the confines of our narrowly-defined profession.

The academic profession of political science as it exists today is an industry like any other: everyone within it has a vested interest in perpetuating its existence and in attaining the highest status possible as an individual operating within it. Individual

⁸ For an interesting recent discussion, see Michael Bérubé, "What's The Matter with Cultural Studies? The Popular Discipline Has Lost its Bearings." *The Chronicle Review* (September 14, 2009).

academics, who are becoming increasingly proletarianized, succeed only by following the rules of the disciplinary game. The incentives to specialize in ever-more minute areas of research are great, and the reward for thinking in cross-disciplinary terms or extending the boundaries of what political science could be is minimal. Living “in the now” is just as important in academia as in any other industry or domain of society. Keeping up with trends, focusing on current events and institutions, and avoiding counterfactuals or research that focuses on possibilities – these are all strategies that increase one’s probability for success as a university-based scholar.⁹

While to a certain degree the pressures of the academic labor market determine which conceptions of politics are valued and which are not, we have the power to resist those pressures and to define the boundaries of our discipline. This is a classic collective action problem, worthy of more attention than can be paid here. At the very least, we as political scientists ought to be aware of the costs involved in the decisions we make about how we define our subject and be willing to accept them. As it stands, we appear oblivious to our own anachronistic conceptions of what politics is: looking at the political universe from a particular social-economic vantage point, we impose our reality on those in other times and places and fit their realities into our pre-conceived categories of thought and explanation. This stifles our imagination, prevents us from gaining a useful understanding of the societies we study, and reinforces our understanding of the world as

⁹ On the use of symbolic capital in the academy, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Homo Academicus* (Stanford University Press, 1990); on the corporatization of the contemporary academy, see Carey Nelson ed., *Will Teach for Food: Academic Labor in Crisis* (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), and “The Corporate University” in Carey Nelson and Stephen Watt, *Academic Key Words: A Devil’s Dictionary for Higher Education* (Routledge, 1999); on the hyper-professionalization of political science, see Gabriel Almond, *A Discipline Divided* (Sage, 1990), and Kristen Renwick Monroe, ed. *Perestroika! The Raucous Rebellion in Political Science* (Yale University Press, 2005).

the only one possible, so that when we think we are looking at the world, we are seeing only ourselves in the mirror we have created.

What I offer here is a case study of how four seminal playwrights – George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Eugene Ionesco -- each responded to the eclipse of political theatre and sought to sustain theatre as a domain of political culture in dark times. My point is not to offer an exhaustive account of political theatre in the 20th century, nor to offer a complete study of the works and lives of the four playwrights; instead, I offer a counter-narrative that helps us to see how we have arrived at this point of the eclipse of political culture, how strange our situation is, and how and why it has escaped our attention.

I have chosen to take theatre as my subject for two reasons. The first is that I consider the experience of theater, as a spectator and as a performer, to be a deeply compelling aesthetic experience. The second, more germane to this dissertation as a work of academic scholarship, is that I believe that theatre is inherently political. Like all art, theatre can serve as a window into the life-world of a specific time and place, providing a glimpse of a culture's value systems, underlying ideologies, and understandings of human nature and the human condition. Yet theatre differs from other art forms in that it is dialogic in structure – the very form of theatre requires interaction between and among human beings. Structurally dependent on human relationships, theatre takes as its subject the human condition, and the issues of judgment, affect, power, communication, and change that are intrinsic to humanity. It dramatizes the power of human misunderstandings and conflicts, the ridiculousness of pride and the absurdity of social conventions, and the ways in which unintended consequences can play havoc with human

plans, lives, and relationships. This is why Hannah Arendt maintained that “the theatre is the political art par excellence; only there is the political sphere transposed into art. By the same token, it is the only art whose sole subject is man in his relationship to others.”¹⁰

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest among academic political theorists in the writings of the ancient Greek dramatists and in the importance of theater to ancient Greek politics more generally.¹¹ My discussion takes its bearings from these insights into the political character of theater. But I depart from the *antiquarianism* that characterizes much of this literature in two ways. First, drawing on the insights of critical theory, I am interested in the ways in which the conditions of life in the 20th century increasingly marginalized political theater, making it difficult if not impossible for playwrights committed to a political understanding of their work to succeed in locating venues and audiences. And second, I am interested in the distinctive moral and political themes and challenges presented by the experiences of the 20th century, a century characterized by extraordinary violence and destructiveness, and by a deep disillusionment with Enlightenment ideals and indeed with a broader culture of humanism traceable to the ancient Greeks. Nihilism, world war, complicity in evil, and totalitarian dictatorship are ever-present themes of 20th century literature and political theory, and they are also animating themes of the playwrights I will discuss.¹² While it

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (University of Chicago Press, 1989), p. 188.

¹¹ See Peter Euben, ed., *Greek Tragedy and Political Theory* (University of California Press, 1987); Sara Monoson, *Plato's Democratic Entanglements: Athenian Politics and the Practice of Philosophy* (Princeton University Press, 2000); Arlene W. Saxonhouse, *Fear of Diversity: The Birth of Political Science in Ancient Greek Thought* (University of Chicago Press, 1992); and Peter J. Ahrens Dorf, *Greek Tragedy and Political Philosophy* (Cambridge University Press, 2009).

¹² On the distinctiveness of the twentieth century, see Terence Ball and Richard Bellamy, eds., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth Century Political Thought* (Cambridge University Press, 2000); Michael Walzer, *The Company of Critics* (Basic Books, 1988); Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion* (Yale University Press, 1992); and especially Stephen Eric Bronner, *Ideas in Action: Political Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (Rowman & Littlefield, 1999).

would be presumptuous of me to claim that the dramatization of these themes represents the most profound method of understanding them, I believe it would be equally presumptuous for political theorists to ignore the fact that some of the most profound and self-consciously political efforts to describe and understand these phenomena have been undertaken by dramatic artists/public intellectuals like those I profile.

Historically the political nature of the theatre has been not only recognized, but in various contexts celebrated, exploited, and/or utilized by state and non-state actors as a means of education, reflection, and critique. This makes it all the more astonishing that the particular challenges of political theatre in the 20th century receive so little attention from political scientists, including most political theorists. The consequence of this is simply to promote forgetfulness of an important aspect of recent intellectual history and cultural practice, and to treat as natural a situation in which theatre has become nothing but entertainment.

This is why I have chosen to discuss four of the most accomplished, most politically-minded playwrights of the 20th century. The first three – George Bernard Shaw, Bertolt Brecht, and Jean-Paul Sartre – were drawn to the theatre because of the possibilities it offered for political education, public engagement, and social change. Each believed in the potential political impact of his drama on the society in which he lived; and each was disappointed to discover that, in spite of his best efforts, his dramas made little more than a dent in the consciousness of his audience and the political and social structure in which he lived. These three playwrights represent the hard cases: if the most politically educated, motivated, talented, dedicated, and popular playwrights of the time could not maintain the political power of theatre in the 20th century, then it is hard to

see how anyone could. Their stories – their hopeful beginnings, moments of fame, and later, their gradual acceptance of their political impotence as playwrights – deserve to be told. And that which makes each case unique also deserves to be explored. For while Shaw pulled away from society after his heart was broken by the First World War, and Brecht made some strategic if questionable choices in a world of necessity, Sartre was able to persevere politically, though through different communicative forms. If the three playwrights shared a certain disillusionment, the forms this took were different in ways worth discussing.

The fourth playwright under discussion, Eugene Ionesco, is exemplary in a way quite different from the others: having experienced the same horrors of the 20th century, Ionesco's response was to use the theatre as a means of escape from political life and social life more generally. He is the proto-postmodern playwright – denying the connection between politics and theatre and adamantly opposed to their unification, Ionesco helped to turn theatre from a tool of civic education to a means of clever, self-absorbed, and often mindless entertainment.

Looking at the cases along a timeline reveals yet another point of interest: the trajectory of their experiences, when presented side by side, forms a larger narrative of the decline of political theatre as it took place within the grander context of the 20th century. The heart of this dissertation consists of profiles of Shaw, Brecht, Sartre, and Ionesco. I will analyze the way each writer in turn confronted, reflected upon, and responded to the crises of his times, and discuss the challenges that each faced in his efforts to use theatre as a political response to crisis. Each chapter will treat a playwright as an example or “type”—Shaw a bourgeois radical, for example, and Ionesco as an

absurdist—and will develop this theme by linking biographical and political narrative with the interpretation of key plays. These chapters are intended as both interpretations and as “morality tales” of the crisis of political theatre in the 20th century. In my concluding chapter I will offer some brief reflections on the enduring lessons that can be drawn from my four profiles, and from the narrative of theater’s public decline more generally. My basic point will be that over the course of the 20th century, European theatre gradually lost its distinctively political function. While totalitarianism actively silenced political dramatists through force and coercion, the capitalist culture industry coopted the political impact of political theatre, gradually marginalizing it by transforming it into one of many entertainment media. Under these conditions, even the most talented, politically motivated dramatists were denied the ability to substantially impact their political world.

George Bernard Shaw: The Last Great Bourgeois Playwright

Writing in England at the fin de siècle, George Bernard Shaw was one of the most prominent intellectual and cultural icons of his day. His work was an integration of scientific theory, political activism, metaphysics, and art; as such, it was presented through various media including newspaper editorials and reviews, public speeches, political pamphlets, plays, and lengthy essays explaining the meaning within his plays. Shaw held an ecological conception of the social world at a time when doing so was still socially acceptable. He was a well-rounded aristocratic intellectual living in a yet-to-be fully developed democracy, in which the aristocracy still had political power.¹³

¹³ On outlining the broad contours of Shaw’s life and work, I relied on the following biographies: Arthur Ganz, *George Bernard Shaw* (Grove Press, Inc., 1983); Ivor Brown, *Shaw in his Time* (Nelson, 1965); Eric Bentley, *Bernard Shaw: A Reconsideration* (New Directions Books, 1947); George Bernard Shaw, *Shaw: An Autobiography 1856-1898*, Stanley Weintraub, ed. (Weybright and Talley, 1969); George

Shaw continually sought his place in the public eye and, through his public persona of G.B.S., he took a public position on every issue he could, utilizing different media to share his views. He had grand debates through the press with other public intellectuals, and through his drama was able to transform his political and social commentary into art that was entertaining and educational, as well as thought provoking and sometimes scandalous, to the bourgeois public.¹⁴

Shaw was one of the last great playwrights of the old world – the world in which theatre was a public art form created for civic education, for the cultivation of insight, and for the motivation to political action. Already in his day, however, Shaw was an exception: the typical process of play production involved an actor-manager who contracted with the owner of a theater. Operating under the profit-motive, the owners demanded high prices for the use of their space, putting pressure on the actor-managers to produce plays that would appeal to the greatest number of audience members. The culture industry's foothold in the English theatre made production difficult for Shaw, whose plays were often too high-concept to appeal to the lowest-common denominator. What they wanted to see – formulaic comedies and melodramas – were often quite different from what he wanted to show them. Shaw's situation was made further complicated by the censorship powers of the English government, which banned one of his plays for several years due to its depiction of its subject matter. Caught between the censorship of his pseudo-monarchical government on the one hand and the purchasing power of his bourgeois audience on the other, Shaw had a difficult time succeeding in the

Bernard Shaw, *Shaw: An Autobiography 1898-1950*, Stanley Weintraub, ed. (Weybright and Talley, 1970).

¹⁴ On Shaw's public persona, see Ivor Brown, "Politics and Platforms" and "The Shavian State" in *Shaw in his Time*; Ronald Ford, ed., *The Letters of Bernard Shaw to the Times* (Irish Academic Press, 2007).

theatre. Indeed, it took him more than a decade to solidify his prominence as a playwright of the English stage¹⁵.

Though it took years and required the careful packaging of his ideas into the commercialized theatrical genres of his day, Shaw achieved his goal of becoming a renowned playwright. However, his heyday was short – the same year his most successful play, *Pygmalion*, premiered, World War I began, and Shaw's world was forever shattered. The moment he publicly questioned the motives and the strategy behind Britain's involvement in the war, Shaw became a pariah. The more he attempted to clarify his criticisms and his own motives – that he was speaking out because he was trying to prevent catastrophe; that he was not anti-war or even against this particular war; that he was merely stating facts and asking questions; that he ultimately would support the government's decisions – the worse the public's opinion of him grew.¹⁶

Shaw released no new plays during the war. Instead, he published two political pamphlets on the war which were poorly received, in spite of the fact that his cautions were more than reasonable and his concerns proved to be prophetic with time.

Heartbreak House, published and produced in 1919, was the last play he wrote that dealt realistically with the English social situation of the time. Afterwards, his plays retreated to other realms – historical, fictional, hypothetical – in which he explored the issues that mattered to him; no longer having to cater to the whims of the bourgeoisie, the established Shaw followed his own bliss, having realized that his political influence over

¹⁵ On the conventions of theatre in fin de siècle England, see Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth-Century Theater* (Princeton University Press, 1963); Leon Hugo, "Shaw and his Critics: *Fanny's First Play*" in *Bernard Shaw on Stage: Papers from the 1989 International Shaw Conference*, L.W. Conolly and Ellen Pearson, eds. (University of Guelph Press, 1991).

¹⁶ For Shaw's views on WWI, see Bernard Shaw, *What I Really Wrote about the War* (Constable and Co.Ltd., 1931). For Shaw's disillusionment, see Stanley Weintraub, *Journey to Heartbreak: The Crucible Years of Bernard Shaw, 1914-18* (Weybright and Talley, 1971).

the public had, at best, been destroyed by the war, and at worst, had never in fact existed.¹⁷

Shaw's case is of interest here because it contains portents of things to come. In miniature, Shaw's case is that of the playwright as he exists in 20th century capitalist democracy: expecting his work to matter – for it has always done so – the playwright in the 20th century is shocked to discover that his place in society is in fact limited to that of an entertainer. Though he sees his work as contributing to the public debate and intellectual life of his fellow citizens, he soon finds this is not the case; when the stakes are raised and he raises his voice to speak out, he is reprimanded for not keeping quiet. Stripped of his social position as educator and enricher of culture, and forced to exist in the private sphere, the 20th century bourgeois playwright, now politically irrelevant, retreats to his own imagination. By the end of the century, there are no longer any playwrights of Shaw's caliber who protest their position. It has become so naturalized that the idea of political theatre is inconceivable. The end result is a theatre that competes against other performance art media for a section of the entertainment market share. Political theatre has become redefined as theatre that deals with political themes. And plays such as Shaw's or Shakespeare's, Aeschylus' or Brecht's, are performed for their historical value as relics of another era.

Bertolt Brecht: The Theatre of Proletarian Revolution

Shaw was one of the most politically radical playwrights of the British bourgeoisie; yet with Bertolt Brecht, radical theatre took on a whole new edge. Brecht was a proletarian playwright who took on the workers' burdens as his own. For Brecht, as a Marxist, Shaw's socialism, while progressive, was also hopelessly inadequate.

¹⁷ On Shaw's later works see Weintraub, *Journey to Heartbreak*.

Indeed, when once asked what made him laugh the hardest in his life, he replied, “When I heard Shaw is a socialist.”¹⁸

The case of Bertolt Brecht in Germany is illustrative of the political impact that art, and theatre specifically, had in Germany during the first half of the 20th century. An autocratic state transitioning from feudalism to capitalism, Germany at the fin de siècle had yet to embrace the principles of liberal democracy that Britain had long prized. The militarist government that led the newly formed state into WWI allowed culture to exist, so long as it did not attempt to undermine the government’s authority. In the aftermath of the war, in the artificially imposed democratic Weimar world, Germany existed as a nation without a firm sense of grounding. Existing under the thumb of the victors, Germany was an economic wasteland with a state that had governmental power, but little authority; liberal democracy was alien to German culture and, structurally uncertain, the Weimar regime was dangerously prone to both internal and external threats to its existence.

In this context Bertolt Brecht rose to prominence as one of the most important playwrights in German history. In attitude and style, his work begins where Shaw’s left off: Shaw ended his career by exploring the English theatrical genre of the Extravaganza – the most experimental and least realistic of all the popular genres existing at the time. As he had become more jaded over time and less interested in the world as it was than as it could be, his works drifted further and further away from the bounds of realism. The 20th century had rejected him and his way of being; hence, he rejected it and chose instead to explore the potential hidden within the human condition.

¹⁸ This story is recounted in Nicholas Grene, “Bernard Shaw: Socialist and Playwright,” *The Crane Bag* 7(1), *Socialism and Culture* (1983), pp. 135-40.

Having experienced the war as a young man rather than as a mature adult, Bertolt Brecht was not as crushed by it as was Shaw. It was the formative experience of his youth – his starting point. Beginning his career in the war's aftermath, Brecht, like many of his contemporaries, found inspiration and solace in the artistic movement of the New Objectivity, which emerged from the harsh realities of the war.

Brecht's first play, *Baal*, was a rejection of the expressionist movement that had become passé as a result of the war. As a playwright, he took key aspects of the New Objectivity – critical distance from the subject matter, focus on material reality in all its ugliness, a focus on the everyday – and elevated them to the level of the political. Brecht used his Marxist philosophical background to create a new dramaturgy directed toward the proletariat. He used the theatre as a space for civic education and political organizing: through his *Lehrstücke* he unmasked the mechanisms of capitalism and taught his audience about both the present state of exploitation and alienation, and the potential future state of equality and humanism. Until he was forced to leave Germany in 1933, Brecht created political art in a public forum that was as large as the state was weak. Yet when the Nazis came to power, the public sphere was given a new type of education.¹⁹

Writing in exile, first in Scandinavia, then in the United States, Brecht did not have the same impact he had had in Germany. He continued to write, and his plays were produced – indeed, he wrote some of his most dramatically sophisticated work during his exile – yet his dream of helping to construct a workers' state was no longer a possibility. In the liberal democracies in which he spent his years, his plays belonged to the private

¹⁹ For the broad contours of Brecht's life and work, I have relied on the following: Ronald Gray, *Bertolt Brecht* (Grove Press, 1961); Peter Thompson and Glendyr Sacks, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge University Press, 1994); Hans Mayer, *Steppenwolf and Everyman*, Jack D. Zipes, trans. (Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1971).

sphere: they were merely social critiques, providing cultural enrichment. Brecht's failure in Los Angeles to break into the film industry speaks to the fact that having a political message and being obstinately opinionated about one's own work were not helpful traits in a society in which the culture industry determined all aspects of production and distribution. While in Germany he could get away with overseeing all aspects of his productions to ensure they aligned with his artistic vision, in the United States this was an unacceptable practice for, after providing the script, the playwright had no right to the means of his plays' productions.²⁰

Brecht dreamed for decades of being able to go home again. At his own theatre in East Berlin, protected from the culture industry by the authoritarian governments of East Germany and the Soviet Union, Brecht could once again operate in the public sphere. Of course, he operated with caution within the bounds of what the state would allow; still, he was home.

Brecht's case is informative because it demonstrates the potentialities and limitations of one of the most committed political dramatists of the 20th century. His *Lehrstücke*, written fairly early in his career, marked what he viewed as his greatest achievement. His forced emigration and his battle with Georg Lukács and the other ideologues of the socialist-realist variety made it impossible for Brecht to fulfill his vision of a theatre for the working class. In spite of his talent and his best efforts, he was not able to realize his life-long dream.

Jean-Paul Sartre: The Theatre of Situations

²⁰ On Brecht in exile, see James K. Lyon, *Bertolt Brecht in America* (Princeton University Press, 1980); Hannah Arendt, *Men in Dark Times* (Harcourt Brace and Company, 1995[1955]).

While Brecht was committed to the growth and development of theatre throughout his adult life, going so far as to create his own theory of drama on par with Stanislavski's,²¹ Sartre's experience with the theatre was quite brief. Drama for him was one medium of expression among many others. It helped him accomplish his political work only for a fleeting historical moment; understanding the nature of theatre had changed, after the war he abandoned the theatre for other, more fruitful modes of political communication.

The France of Sartre's youth at the fin de siècle was, like England, quite comfortably bourgeois. And though WWI decimated a generation of young men there as in Germany, the foundation of France's government was left intact; hence, until the Nazi occupation began in 1940, France was a relatively stable capitalist democracy. Theatre operated here much as it did in England: as entertainment for the bourgeoisie. The innovations in expressionism that occurred during the interwar era were certainly important, but did little political work. The French public was comfortable to live as much of their lives in private as possible; hence, the need for and usefulness of a politically-focused theatre was practically non-existent.

The German Occupation shook the French public to its very core. It forced the French citizenry to exist publicly – as all things private were now deemed public by the Nazis – and it forced them to face political life head on. The period of Occupation – from 1940 to 1944 – was an exceptional one for France. As the French way of life was threatened, a French public sphere emerged and operated, sometimes underground, as an essential part of the French war effort.

²¹ On Brecht's dramaturgy see Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (Verso, 2000).

It was in this context that Sartre began to write for the theatre. His first piece, *Bariona*, he wrote while in a POW camp in Trier. It was a play about Christmas, and was not overtly political in content. Yet his experience of the play's production, of the way it united his fellow soldiers in a common project, lifted their spirits, and commanded their complete engagement with one another led him to see the theatre as a medium for communicating his political and philosophical message to a larger public.²² His best and most famous plays – *The Flies*, *No Exit*, and *Dirty Hands* – were written during the war and were influential in much the ways he had hoped. As long as his public was politically engaged, it was willing to follow Sartre into his theatrical worlds and engage the questions and issues he put before it.²³

Yet this period of political engagement in France was short-lived. After the war, with political and economic stability restored, the people of France drifted back into their private worlds and the old liberal distinction between the state and civil society reemerged. By the 1950s Sartre realized that “the public” for which he had been writing his plays no longer existed; in 1959 he wrote his final play, abandoning the theatrical medium for other, more scholarly modes of communication. The post-war French theatre became, once again, entertainment for the bourgeois class, the political potential within in left to decay.²⁴

Sartre's case underlines the importance of having a politically engaged public for the existence and creation of traditional (i.e. politically informed and politically active) theatre. His experience also illustrates the process by which a viable public sphere can

²² Sartre's description of his experience with *Bariona* can be found in Jean-Paul Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, eds., Frank Jellinek, trans. (Pantheon Books, 1976).

²³ On Sartre's theatre more generally, see Mayer, *Steppenwolf and Everyman*; Dorothy McCall, *The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Columbia University Press, 1971).

²⁴ On Sartre's decision to stop writing plays, see Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p. 69.

come to exist in a capitalist democracy and, by the same token, the process by which that sphere can disintegrate. In other words, the existence of the theatre revival in France during WWII has grave implications not merely for the future of theatre, but for the future of any viable public sphere in a stable capitalist democracy. Political and economic stability – i.e. the complete separation of the state from civil society – signals a threat to public life, including public art, and especially, theatre as it was traditionally understood. Without threats, internal or external, to the existence of the state or to society, the citizenry feels no need to interact with one another in a political/public way. All necessary interactions occur in the private realm of civil society. There is no public sphere of which to speak.

Eugène Ionesco: The Eclipse of Political Theatre

Indeed, as the case of Eugène Ionesco demonstrates, after the restoration of bourgeois order, theatre lost its political function. Ionesco began writing plays in the early 1950s. Just as Sartre was coming to the realization that theatre could no longer accomplish any of his political or philosophical goals, Ionesco was writing plays that demonstrated exactly that. He wrote his first play, *The Bald Soprano*, as a joke – a parody of the lackluster bourgeois drama that was filling the theatres of France after the war. Yet his parody was received by drama critics as a bold statement on society, and he quickly rose to prominence as a playwright of the avant-garde.²⁵

Enjoying his success, Ionesco put effort into producing more plays of a similar nature; he took his work seriously, and produced a series of plays that were clever, thought-provoking, and often dark. None of them directly addressed political themes or

²⁵ See Rosette C. Lamont, *Ionesco's Imperatives: The Politics of Culture* (University of Michigan Press, 1993), chapter 3, "The Surrealist Prankster," pp. 37-64, especially p. 42.

engaged real political alternatives; and yet the “absurdism” of his plays seemed only to cement his reputation and his popularity.²⁶ One voice – that of theatre critic Kenneth Tynan – bemoaned the loss of the political in contemporary theatre, and the debate he had with Ionesco on the relationship between politics and theatre summed up the issue brilliantly. While Tynan defended his position that politics should have a place in theatre – at least in terms of content if not intention – Ionesco rejected any mention of politics as tainting art beyond repair.²⁷ In the long run, history favored Ionesco’s position, and the reasons for this are apparent. The separation between politics and art that triumphed in the theatre and in other art forms was a simple reflection of the divide that was perfected in the latter half-of the 20th century between the state and civil society.

The result for theatre was disastrous, and Ionesco’s career is a perfect illustration of the effects of his own position. As the public eventually tired of his absurdist comedy, Ionesco moved on to writing full-length plays that dealt increasingly with his own highly personal experience of existence. The content of his work became narrower and narrower until, at the end, his plays revolved entirely around specific aspects of his own life story. Meaningful and painful moments from his autobiography were staged over and over, seemingly in an attempt to exorcise his demons. In the hands of the anti-political Ionesco, theatre became solipsistic psychodrama.

Conclusion: The Inversion of the Public and the Private

The move away from political themes, teachings, and potentialities towards purely culinary entertainment signaled the eclipse of theatre as a political medium. Now,

²⁶ On Ionesco’s fame and celebrity, see Ronald Hayman, *Eugene Ionesco* (Ungar, 1976).

²⁷ Kenneth Tynan’s commentaries on Ionesco are contained in his anthology *Curtains* (Atheneum, 1961); for a superb discussion of the Tynan-Ionescu dust up, see Mayer’s “Ionesco and Ideologies” in *Steppenwolf and Everyman*.

in the age of television, movies, and the internet, theatres find it nearly impossible to compete for a share of the entertainment market. Very soon we may see theatre suffer a painful death, and disappear from society altogether.

The decline in the impact of the theatrical medium is merely an illustration of larger social processes at work in capitalist democracies. As the division between the state and civil society becomes increasingly absolute, so too does the division between politics and art. Without a public political function that demonstrates its worth, art exists at the whims of the capitalist market. This is a scary fact for all those dedicated to producing art aimed not at the lowest common-denominator of society but at anyone and anything higher. And without art that is shielded from the forces of the market, our society will increasingly suffer from cultural stupidity, from a lack of historical knowledge or appreciation, and from an even greater lack of appreciation for the value of human imagination and potentiality.

This leads me back to the question I posed at the beginning: how we as a society could be oblivious to the fact that the contemporary division between politics and culture is historically new and that it – and not the idea that the realms are united – needs to be explained. The short answer is that, in a society in which the divide is firmly in place and in a discipline which is very much the product of that society, it is difficult to see outside the categories that structure our thought. Immanent critique and reflexivity are not valued or even necessary activities for success in academia or in capitalist democratic society as it currently exists, and the slide towards cultural and historical ignorance is well underway. It should not be surprising then that from time to time we forget that we are operating within a specific ideological framework, for it has become so naturalized,

and we so out of practice at recognizing it, that we sometimes miss things right under our nose.

The chapters that follow are intended as a contribution to political theory broadly understood. My subjects, and indeed the topic of political theatre more generally, are not especially fashionable within contemporary political science. And even within the subfield of political theory itself there are those who question the relevance of this kind of inquiry to political science. Andrew Rehfeld's "Offensive Political Theory" gives voice to this new "realism" within the field. Originally presented at the Association for Political Theory, and recently published in *Perspectives on Politics*,²⁸ the essay insists that for work to "count" as "political theory" within political science, the work must be focused on manifestly political topics as they can be observed in the "objective" world, and offer carefully stated and falsifiable claims about these phenomena. According to Rehfeld, work that fails to meet these criteria -- and he is clear that there is much such work -- ought not to be considered authentic "political science," and it ought to be encouraged in other places -- in the humanities disciplines or in interdisciplinary centers. This is a highly constricted and constricting view of what counts as "political theory," and it serves to reproduce the alienation of politics and culture, which is very definitely political and indeed politically disempowering.

Rehfeld's argument epitomizes the bureaucratization of intellectual life in the contemporary academy, and the atrophy of critical public culture and critical intellectuals, bringing to mind Theodor Adorno's observation about the ways in which contemporary intellectuals become "servile" in the face of the culture industry. On Adorno's view, "Anxious to reconcile themselves with the phenomenon," such

²⁸ Andrew Rehfeld, "Offensive Political Theory." *Perspectives on Politics* 8(2), pp.465-486.

intellectuals simply take the existing compartmentalization of social life, and the academic division of labor that corresponds to it, for granted. The consequence is that art and culture are relegated to a “non-political” sphere and politics is equated with technique and power. This dissertation proceeds from a different view of politics and society and a different conception of the purpose of political theory. Bonnie Honig writes against the turn towards an uncritical “realism” in political theory, endorsing instead a practice of political theory that seeks to “historicize in order to animate the unthinkable, the unimaginable, the nearly forgotten, sometimes by recontextualising the past . . . and sometimes by defamiliarization.” Similar impulses animate the chapters that follow. Each offers a profile of an exemplary 20th century playwright who confronted the evils of his time and sought to create a kind of theatre that might both shed light on and reckon with these evils. There are overarching themes here regarding politics and theater in the twentieth century. At the same time, each chapter stands alone as a “counter-narrative” to the dominant narrative of contemporary political science, a narrative that takes for granted what must be understood and grieved—the decline of political theatre in contemporary politics.

This decline is something that warrants attention, and a sense of loss, and at least some effort to recuperate the ethical and political resources that political theatre at its best always promised. My dissertation is intended as but one contribution to this attentiveness. Given the diversity of my subjects and the complexity of their histories, it would be foolish to pretend that my “counter-narrative” is either exhaustive or final. Instead, I prefer to view these profiles, and the work as a whole, as a provocation, and as a preface to further inquiry and argument. In this respect my approach is similar to that

taken by Stephen Eric Bronner in his book *On Critical Theory and its Theorists*, and it would be hard to end this Introduction on a better note than Bronner's concluding comment about the tradition of the critical theorists of the 20th century:

Critical theory is not a system nor is it reducible to any fixed set of proscriptions. Every major figure in the tradition of critical theory, perhaps for this very reason, employed the essay as a stylistic vehicle. The essay, with its inherently unfinished quality, is the logical form for generating anti-systemic claims and fostering the exercise of reflexivity. A certain logic always tied together the essayistic efforts of critical theorists from the past and that is also the case here. The contributions of one thinker are treated in one way and those of another are dealt with differently. The point is not to offer a neutral set of judgments or assess the importance of each thinker within the tradition equally. Each chapter provides a new and distinct interpretation of its subject matter. But themes carry over and new ones emerge. There is an open quality to the work, a space for the subject to develop connections, which probably reflects the condition of philosophical inquiry in general and the state of critical theory in particular. Indeed, if the essay is consonant with the spirit of the critical enterprise, so is the hope that the whole will coalesce into more than the sum of its parts.²⁹

²⁹ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists*, 2nd Edition. (Routledge, 2002), p. 4.

Bernard Shaw: The Last Great Bourgeois Playwright

Born in 1856, George Bernard Shaw grew up in the cultural heart of 19th century Europe, Victorian England. English industry was at that time the most advanced in Europe; the government's censorship laws were the most liberal of their kind; and the overtaking of the aristocracy by the bourgeoisie was well underway. In this politically liberal and intellectually rich milieu, Shaw created a life for himself based on his strongest assets: his quick wit, his keen insight into both cultural and political affairs, and his ability to express himself in both written and spoken form. Born into an aristocratic family on the verge of poverty, Shaw became quickly aware of the importance of social class and its related hazards: though his parents could have made money by turning to speculation or trade, they refused to do so on the grounds that such activities were below their dignity as members of the aristocracy. The decision to value social status over material stability – and the fact that these were two separate features of modern society -- always struck Shaw as bizarre and contributed to his appreciation of the power of social norms to constrain common sense. Unlike his parents, Shaw saw through the veneer of aristocratic superiority and embraced the modernizing world even as he criticized it.³⁰

From aristocratic beginnings to a life of intellectual labor; from critic to creator; from a man of the 19th century to a man of the 20th century, Shaw self-consciously developed himself as a man in touch with the times in which he lived. For 94 years, Shaw engaged in diagnosis and treatment of the social and political ills that plagued both England and Europe. He demonstrated insight into matters others could not penetrate; he

³⁰ On Shaw's biography, I draw here primarily on Arthur Ganz, *George Bernard Shaw* (Grove Press, 1983); and Michael Holyrod, *Bernard Shaw: Volume 1, The Search for Love* (Random House, 1988).

understood the implications of the Great War before the war had begun; and he was painfully aware of the possibilities that lay ahead in the later part of the 20th century.

As a bourgeois playwright, he focused his attentions on critiquing and deconstructing the values, norms, and social structures of the aristocracy through realistic portraits that both drew on and subverted traditional aristocratic theatrical tropes. The outbreak of WWI turned his once powerful social critiques into outdated, superfluous jibes at a class that had, throughout Europe, been surpassed. The years after WWI required a new kind of theatre that dealt with the new subject matter of the times – war, nationalism, exploitation, existential uncertainty, and subjective experience. Shaw continued to develop his social critiques of the aristocracy through 1919. And while the Great War caused him to see the limits of his earlier critiques, he remained wedded to key tenets of bourgeois thinking—the faith in science, a belief in progress, and a deep suspicion of mass politics. Shaw can thus be considered the last great bourgeois playwright.

An examination of his key plays reveals a trajectory beginning with political engagement and leading towards political disillusionment. In what follows I lay out the basic historical context in which Shaw wrote. I then trace his increasing political disillusionment through three important plays, each of which I treat as exemplifying a moment in his evolution as a political dramatist. *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, written in 1894, is an example of Shaw's social critique at its best: taking the gender and sexual norms of Victorian England as his target, he compellingly defends the practice of prostitution on rational – perhaps even moral -- grounds. In the process, he exposes the hypocrisy of late Victorian aristocratic norms even as he shines a light on the way that

bourgeois society reduces everything to market relations. *Heartbreak House*, written in the midst of WWI, but not published or performed until 1919, is a searing portrayal of the decay of the cultured aristocracy and their failure to prevent their own demise. It encapsulates Shaw's anger towards the segment of the ruling class who should have defended intellectual freedom during the war and who should have taken action to prevent England's role in the war and yet utterly failed to exercise any such responsibility. Fully disillusioned by politics, Shaw retreated into his own Lamarckian world, which centered on the metaphysical concept of the Life Force, and of the perfection of man through evolution. *Back to Methuselah*, written in 1921, is a mystical, mythical journey into the future – and away from the political and social realities of contemporary life. It represents Shaw's retreat away from politics, into his own subjective experience and fantasy. The shift in Shaw's dramatic perspective exemplified by these three plays is paradigmatic of the broader crisis of political theatre that is the topic of this dissertation, and that I will discuss below in connection with Shaw's successors: Bertolt Brecht, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Eugene Ionesco.

Europe at the Fin de Siècle

The abrupt upheaval in European culture and politics brought about by World War I cannot be understood without an appreciation of the character and contradictions of European society in the 19th century. In considering this period, I draw upon Eric Hobsbawm's notion of a "long 19th century," extending from 1789 to 1914.³¹ This period had a unique set of social norms and ideologies common throughout Western Europe.

³¹See Eric Hobsbawm's three volume history of the 19th century: *The Age of Revolution: Europe, 1789-1848* (Vintage Books, 1962); *The Age of Capital, 1848-1875* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1975); *The Age of Empire, 1875-1914* (Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1987). See also Modris Eksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Houghton Mifflin, 1989).

Economically, the feudal aristocracy was in great decline as the capitalist mode of production gained supremacy; the rate at which this economic shift took place varied from nation to nation, with England and France at the forefront, and Prussia, Italy and Spain lagging far behind.³² Liberal political views emerged with this change in economic control. The French Revolutionary cry for liberty, equality, and fraternity was echoed throughout Western Europe; those countries in which the bourgeoisie was strongest were those in which liberal politics carried the most weight. In England and France, as in the United States of America, intellectuals and bourgeois politicians aspired to realize the ideals of the French revolutionaries: they sought the guarantee of political freedom and equality for all citizens through voting rights, the support of free trade, and through limiting the powers of government censorship of the press and the arts. Again, though the level of progress of liberal policies varied greatly across the nations of Europe – with Prussian militaristic authoritarianism contrasting sharply with British liberalism – liberal ideas, at least, were gaining ground throughout the continent.³³

The 19th century is often referred to as a century of peace, especially when considered relative to the 18th and 20th centuries. Few wars between the nations of Europe were fought during this period, a fact that both emerged from and contributed to a widespread belief in humankind's ability to transcend the barbarism of war. Faith in pacifism was common especially among intellectuals, and many believed that war was obsolete. The idea that the human species could reject war was part and parcel of a wider

³² Alexander Gerschenkron, *Economic Backwardness in Historical Perspective: A Book of Essays* (Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1962). See also, Charles Tilly, *Coercion, Capital, and European States: AD 990-1992* (Blackwell, 1990); Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Cornell University Press, 1983); Charles Tilly, *European Revolutions: 1492-1992* (Blackwell, 1993); and Roderick Phillips, *Society, State, and Nation in Twentieth-Century Europe* (Prentice Hall, 1996).

³³ Barrington Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World* (Beacon Press, 1993 [1966]). See also Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge University Press, 1979).

belief in the limitless progress of humankind in all realms of life. Darwin's notion of physical evolution, Marx's vision of an immanent communist utopia, and the positivistic theories of Herbert Spencer and August Comte all both reflected and contributed to a growing faith that man was master of his own destiny. Evidence of social progress could be found everywhere one looked: technology was constantly evolving; the peace was holding through a complex balance of power; intellectualism was flourishing; and the French Revolutionary ideals of *liberté, égalité, and fraternité* were increasingly being realized throughout Europe.³⁴ Thus J.B. Bury observed in his 1920 *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry Into its Origin and Growth*, that "We now take it so much for granted, we are so conscious of constantly progressing in knowledge, arts, organising capacity, utilities of all sorts, that it is easy to look upon Progress as an aim, like liberty or a world-federation, which it only depends on our own efforts and good-will to achieve."³⁵

Of course there was another side to the 19th century that becomes clear especially in retrospect. The precarious balance of powers established at the Conference of Vienna in 1815, though long lasting, was inherently problematic and unstable.³⁶ The rise of the bourgeoisie to power brought with it the expansion of the proletariat, a class whose existence centered on exploitation and domination, and yet at the same time a class that from its beginnings stirred with revolt. Victorian morality sublimated creativity, sexuality and individuality to a harsh work ethic and strict social codes. Furthermore, the

³⁴ See J.B. Bury, *The Idea of Progress: An Inquiry into its Origin and Growth* (Macmillan, 1920). See also Maurice Mandelbaum, *History, Man and Reason: A Study in Nineteenth Century Thought* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1971); Robert Nisbet, *History of the Idea of Progress, 2nd Edition* (Transaction Publishers, 1994); George G. Iggers, "The Idea of Progress: A Critical Assessment," *The American Historical Review* 71(1), (October 1965), pp. 1-17; and Morris Ginsberg, *The Idea of Progress: A Revaluation* (Greenwood Press, 1972).

³⁵ See Bury, "Introduction," *The Idea of Progress*.

³⁶ The classic account of the European balance of power remains Hans Morgenthau's *Politics Among Nations*, originally published in 1948 (McGraw Hill, Sixth edition, 1985).

nationalism that spread throughout Europe since the French Revolution was superimposed on an already existing political model of imperialism and Empire – a political cocktail that would prove to be Europe’s undoing, for nationalist ideology provided a ready made army of men willing to die for their country out of pure sentiment. Indeed, the dark shadow of the late 19th century spread far and wide.³⁷

Enter George Bernard Shaw, an outspoken intellectual who, even in the moment, was able to appreciate and articulate both the light and the dark aspects of English society at the fin de siècle. Shaw was a complex figure. In many ways he held an almost naive belief in the power of progress to ensure social and political change. Yet at the same time, his ability to unmask the power relations at root in social relationships and to attack instances of inequality that others took for granted was quite scandalous. Like everyone else, Shaw was forever changed by the Great War. Unlike most, however, he both anticipated its occurrence and understood its implications for the progress so many believed would emerge. The plays he wrote after the Great War are brilliant, both as illustrations of the way political thought changed during that time and as works of art that communicate metaphysical hope in the midst of political desperation.

George Bernard Shaw lived in and for the public sphere. Whether the mode of communication was artistic critique, political pamphlet, stage play, or oration, Shaw always had something to say. He was continually engaged in public conversation on social and political issues, and he never shied away from a debate or controversy.

According to Dan Laurence and James Rambeau, “Of the manifold occupations in which Bernard Shaw was involved during his ninety-four years of life none was more felicitous

³⁷ See Eric Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge University Press, 1992). On the “dark side” of nineteenth century “progress,” see also Hannah Arendt, “Imperialism” in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1973 [1951]).

than that of professional debater. Swiftly mastering the dialectics of debate. . . Shaw metamorphosed into one of the most brilliant rhetoricians and spellbinding orators of his generation.” Indeed, even before the 20th century began, at the age of 44, he claimed with pride to have “addressed more than a thousand audiences, besting his challengers and harassers on practically every occasion.”³⁸

The stage was one of his preferred public spaces, and he used it to instigate his audience to join him in exercising their rights and duties as citizens. Through his plays he urged them to take politics seriously, to reflect on their own beliefs, to entertain new conceptions of morality and judgment, and to look more carefully at the society that they took for granted

Bourgeois Realism and the Critique of Aristocratic Values

Shaw began writing plays in the late 1880s, while he was working as music critic for *The Star*.³⁹ Disgusted with the romanticism that dominated contemporary theatre, Shaw sought to portray life as it really was. In spite of the acceptance of a materialist outlook on issues of economics and evolution (and thus religion), late Victorian society maintained a moral sensibility based in idealizations of social roles and relationships. The superstructure of aristocratic life remained even while its economic base fell to pieces. In the late 19th century, it seemed that the more economic ground the aristocracy lost to the bourgeoisie, the more adamant they became that their moral and social codes remain.⁴⁰ This incongruence between economic base and ideological superstructure

³⁸ Bernard Shaw, *Agitations: Letters to the Press, 1875-1950*, Dan H. Laurence and James Rambeau, eds. (Frederick Ungar Publishing Co., 1985), p. xi. See also Vanessa L. Ryan, ““Considering the Alternatives. . .”: Shaw and the Death of the Intellectual,” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* vol. 27 (2007), pp. 175-189.

³⁹ Arthur Ganz, *George Bernard Shaw* (Grove Press, 1983), p. 18.

⁴⁰ See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (Columbia University Press, 1983)

created a strange and, depending on one's perception, absurd situation. Shaw experienced this himself as a child in an impoverished aristocratic family whose parents refused to go into business out of pride in their social status.

The aristocracy's attempt to suppress bourgeois morals was hardly conducive to progress as many bourgeois radicals and socialists understood it. For these intellectuals and activists it was time for feudal era virtues, like the feudal mode of production, to take their place in the dustbin of history. Though he did not articulate his reasons for disdaining idealistic fancy along the lines outlined here, Shaw was clear that a key condition for progress was facing the truth. The romanticization of the brave soldier, the virtuous maiden, and the Christian martyr – each of these would have to be discredited as the myths they really were. The hypocrisy of the ruling classes would have to be exposed and an alternate conception of the good would have to be suggested. This was Shaw's project. According to Charles Grimes,

Shaw presents his political theater as a dramatic encounter in which he as the author is an accusing, external force attacking that part of our psyches that may (albeit dimly) doubt that our society is justly organized or beneficent to its members. The indictment of society includes how society oppresses others and how it restricts one from living fully. Shaw's works expose these social problems and the shock of this, the moral intervention a play can enact, alters our minds in the direction of social change.⁴¹

Or, as Shaw put this in his own words: "I write plays with the deliberate object of converting the nation to my opinion."⁴²

Shaw sought above all to pierce social illusion and hypocrisy and compel his readers and audiences to face the truth of a society in the midst of transition and to look

⁴¹ Charles Grimes, "Bernard Shaw's Theory of Political Theater: Difficulties from the Vantages of Postmodern and Modern Types of the Self." *SHAW The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, vol. 22 (2001), p.118.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.120.

forward. Much of Shaw's philosophy of progress can be traced to his political involvement as a founding member of the Fabian Society. The Fabians were an elite and self-consciously *elitist* group of British intellectuals who supported the radical social, economic and political reform of English society. As socialists they criticized the inefficiencies and injustices of capitalism, and advocated a range of social democratic reforms, including progressive tax reform, a minimum wage, universal health care, and a national system of public education. They also supported political reforms designed to break the power of the landed aristocracy, including the abolition of hereditary peerage and the strengthening of rational public administration through civil service reform. While social and political radicals, the Fabians were also harsh critics of populist discourse and of revolutionary politics.⁴³ They sought gradual reform through the progress of reason and the empowerment of the "rational." In this sense, they were deeply anti-democratic. Shaw was surely among the most influential -- celebrated and reviled -- of the Fabians, and his skepticism towards democracy was notorious, and perhaps best summed up in his aphorism, in *Maxims of a Revolutionist*, that "Democracy substitutes election by the incompetent many for appointment by the corrupt few."⁴⁴

Shaw's view of progress was summed up in his concept of the Life Force: the force in nature that pushes all life forward through physical and intellectual evolution. Though impressed by Darwin's theory of evolution, Shaw found more inspiration in the evolutionary theories of Lamarck, which attracted the attention of many of his Fabian

⁴³ In his Preface to *The Apple Cart*, Shaw writes: "I once saw a real popular movement in London. People were running excitedly through the streets. Everyone who saw them doing it immediately joined in the rush. . . . It was most impressive to see thousands of people sweeping along at full speed like that. There can be no doubt that it was literally a popular movement. I ascertained afterwards that it was started by a runaway cow. That cow had an important share in my education as a political philosopher," in Bernard Shaw, *Plays Political* (Penguin, 1986), p. 23.

⁴⁴ On Fabianism, and especially Shaw's, see Gareth Griffith, *On Socialism and Superior Brains: The Political Thought of George Bernard Shaw* (Routledge, 1995).

contemporaries. Both thinkers considered change to be an inherent feature of the universe, and regarded evolution as a natural process. Yet they disagreed fundamentally on the source and meaning of evolution. For Darwin, evolution is a process beyond the subject's control, occurring by accidental, random mutation. Changes in a species occur only when a subset develops a particular characteristic without which it would die: those born without it die off, leaving the more evolved as the only breeders. Thus, evolution occurs only inter-generationally, through a process of "natural selection." In contrast Lamarck -- at least as interpreted by many of Shaw's contemporaries -- believed that evolution could occur within one generation through a subconscious will toward self-improvement. Evolution was thus potentially under the subject's control and could occur at any time. Shaw preferred such a theory of "Creative Evolution" to what he considered the "fatalism" of Darwin's view. In Lamarck's theory Shaw found scientific support for the notion that there is a Life Force driving society forward.⁴⁵

Shaw found economic support for his theory of progress in the economic writings of Marx. Though he became a strong critic of a "fatalism" in Marx akin to that which he saw in Darwinism, Shaw continued to be inspired by Marx's critique of ideology and his belief in the transitory nature of injustice and the existence of historical forces propelling social and economic advancement of the human species.⁴⁶ As he wrote in *The Intelligent Woman's Guide to Socialism and Capitalism*: "NOTHING STAYS PUT. . . Human society is like a glacier: it looks like an immovable and eternal field of ice; but it is really flowing like a river; and. . . its unceasing movement splits it up into crevasses that make

⁴⁵ See A. M. Gibbs, "G.B.S. and 'The Law of Change.'" *SHAW The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, vol. 27 (2007), pp. 28-41. See also the discussion in Eric Bentley's *Bernard Shaw* (Robert Hale Ltd, 1950), pp. 67-114.

⁴⁶ Shaw once wrote, "I was a coward until Marx made a Communist of me and gave me a faith: Marx made a man of me." Quoted in Ganz, p. 16.

it frightfully dangerous to walk on, all the more as they are beautifully concealed by the natural whitewash in the shape of snow.”⁴⁷

Of course Shaw could not exist without his public. And the reactions to his work – from the critics, the government, and the public at large – speak volumes about the social world of 19th century Britain. The fact that Shaw spent so much time critiquing the moral codes of his society speaks to the fact that these codes were deeply entrenched. Late Victorian and Edwardian notions of propriety, virtue, and respect were stringently enforced with harsh consequences for those who would dare act against them. And so, when George Bernard Shaw presented an unapologetic prostitute named Mrs. Warren, the government banned his play from production. When in *Arms and the Man*, he ridiculed the romanticized version of war and countenanced the cowardice of soldiers, the critics pounced and the public was scandalized. Shaw’s plays unmasked aristocratic morals as hypocrisies and mocked those who would take them seriously. And the exaggerated reaction that they elicited demonstrated the cogency of his critique, for they proved that “respectable society” was more interested in maintaining appearances than in seriously debating political issues of public interest. The controversies surrounding Shaw’s theatre revolved around issues that would later seem so petty as to be laughable. Only in the late-Victorian 19th century could such public scandals arise around the lack of remorse of fictional characters who remain proud of their “sin.”

Shaw hated such hypocrisy and small-mindedness, and set out to undermine it. What he says about Ibsen in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* could also be read as a statement of his own dramatic intention: “When he [the playwright] can stab people to the heart by shewing [sic] them the meanness or cruelty of something they did yesterday

⁴⁷ Quoted in Gibbs, p. 30.

and intend to do tomorrow, all the old tricks to catch and hold their attention become the silliest of superfluities. . . . Ibsen substituted a terrible art of sharpshooting at the audience, trapping them, fencing with them, aiming always at the sorest spot in their consciences.” As Martin Weisel suggests in “Shaw and Revolution: The Politics of the Plays,” Shaw’s plays “are designed to culminate in a state of feeling, often including uneasiness and unresolved stress, that will effect a permanent change in consciousness bearing on social change.”⁴⁸

To accomplish this task, Shaw co-opted the standard genres and tropes of the popular theatre – chiefly melodrama, romance, and extravaganza – which he regarded as both superficial and absurdly formulaic. As Lisa A. Wilde writes in “Shaw’s Epic Theater,”

Shaw decried nineteenth century practices of both melodrama and the well-made plays. . . [and] . . . their trivial machinations. . . . His works are not particularly radical in terms of structure; instead, they subvert familiar contemporary forms—melodrama, the drama of adultery, romantic drama—even in some cases taking plots directly from the popular plays of Boucicault and Byron in order to lure the audiences into the theater.

Lulling his audience into a state of contentment with familiar themes and structures, Shaw then disrupted their expectations, causing great shock. Bertolt Brecht later commented approvingly of Shaw’s “delight in dislocating our stock association.”⁴⁹ Each of Shaw’s early plays deals with a specific issue of social importance through which Shaw subverts social custom and expresses his Fabian-inspired political viewpoint.

For example, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession* takes the familiar courtesan play and

⁴⁸ Both quotes are cited in Grimes, pp. 119-20.

⁴⁹ Lisa Wilde, “Shaw’s Epic Theater,” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* vol. 26 (2006), p. 136. For a full discussion of the theatrical tropes of the time, see also, Martin Meisel, *Shaw and the Nineteenth Century Theater* (Princeton University Press, 1963).

turns it on its head.⁵⁰ At the time such plays reinforced the conventional morality concerning prostitution by forcing a moral ending onto the main character – though she may be beautiful and contrite, in the end the courtesan gets what she deserves. Shaw describes the theatrical convention surrounding the courtesan play as follows:

members of Mrs. Warren's profession shall be tolerated on the stage only when they are beautiful, exquisitely dressed, and sumptuously lodged and fed; also, that they shall, at the end of the play, die of consumption to the sympathetic tears of the whole audience, or step into the next room to commit suicide, or at least be turned out by their protectors, and passed on to be 'redeemed' by old and faithful lovers who have adored them in spite of all their levities.⁵¹

In Shaw's version, however, the prostitute, Mrs. Warren, never apologizes for her vocation. In fact, she openly argues that her choice of profession is indicative not only of a high intellect, but of courage and self-respect. When her daughter, Vivie, accuses her of debasing herself, Mrs. Warren responds: "Do you think we [she and her sister] were such fools as to let other people trade in our good looks by employing us as shopgirls, or barmaids, or waitresses, when we could trade in them ourselves and get all the profits instead of starvation wages? Not likely."⁵² When Vivie retorts by asking, "Are you really and truly not one wee bit doubtful – or – or – ashamed?" Mrs. Warren replies sarcastically, "Well, of course, dearie, it's only good manners to be ashamed of it: it's expected from a woman." Later in the same conversation, however, she speaks to the question of shame quite seriously: "No: I was never a bit ashamed really. I consider I had a right to be proud of how we managed everything so respectably, and never had a word

⁵⁰ For a discussion of the Courtesan play, see Maurice Valency, *The Cart and the Trumpet: The Plays of George Bernard Shaw* (Oxford University Press, 1973) pp. 93-95.

⁵¹ Shaw, "Preface to Mrs. Warren's Profession" in *Plays Unpleasant: Widowers' Houses, The Philanderer, Mrs. Warren's Profession* (Penguin Books, 1946 [1930]) p. 186.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 249.

against us, and how the girls were so well taken care of.”⁵³ Indeed, Mrs. Warren defends herself with rational and practical arguments, and is devoid of emotionality and contrition. And at the end of the play, no terrible fate befalls her.

Her daughter, scandalized by the impropriety of her mother’s actions, rejects both her mother’s money and her company. Though heartbroken, Mrs. Warren does not beg for forgiveness as the convention dictates, but accepts her daughter’s wishes and continues on her own path. The effect produced by this ending is magnified by the fact that Vivie refuses the proposal of the handsome aristocrat, Frank. She does so, not in order to marry or woo someone else, but simply because “I don’t want a mother; and I don’t want a husband.”⁵⁴ Vivie breaks from her family to pursue her own life as a career woman. There is no happy ending to be had here, at least in the traditional sense. The sobering ending leaves each character to his or her own sorrows, though it can be said that it also leaves them as autonomous, self-aware individuals who govern their own lives. However philosophically interesting that perspective may be, theatrically the lack of kisses and tears was most unsettling to a 19th century audience. Shaw had left them awe-struck. Indeed, it was due to the unsettling portrayal of the life of the prostitute – and her pride, no doubt – that the English censors banned production of the play for 31 years. Though written in 1894 and produced privately in 1902, it was not given a full production in England until 1925.⁵⁵

It was not merely to agitate his audience and the royal censors that Shaw wrote works such as *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*. He had a political axe to grind, and he found that, though he could have a conversation with the intelligentsia in print, he could reach

⁵³ *Ibid*, p. 251.

⁵⁴ *Ibid*, p. 284.

⁵⁵ According to Valency, the 1902 production was “thoroughly denounced in the press,” p. 102.

the general public more effectively through his plays. Though filled with humor and wit, each of Shaw's plays contained a very serious comment on the social and political issues of the day. In explaining why he termed *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Widowers' Houses*, and *The Philanderer* as "Plays Unpleasant," Shaw wrote, "The reason is pretty obvious: their dramatic power is used to force the spectator to face unpleasant facts." He explained further:

here we are confronted. . . with those social horrors which arise from the fact that the average homebred Englishman, however honorable and goodnatured he may be in his private capacity, is, as a citizen, a wretched creature who, whilst clamouring for a gratuitous millennium, will shut his eyes to the most villainous abuses if the remedy threatens to add another penny in the pound to the rates and taxes which he has to be half cheated, half coerced into paying.⁵⁶

Indeed, the early Shavian mission had two interconnected elements: the elucidation of the material causes of the social issue at hand and the critique of the antiquated moral codes that hinder effective measures to be taken to solve the problem. In his courtesan play, for example, Shaw allows Mrs. Warren to explain the economic logic behind her choice of profession so reasonably that it is difficult not to accept the logic of her choice. At the same time, Vivie's devastation at her mother's revelation and her subsequent refusal to have any more to do with her is supported by the moral codes of the day. We feel sympathy for both women, even while we acknowledge that they cannot be reunited given the current reality. Shaw's unstated position here, as elsewhere, is that the entire fiasco could be avoided if society were open to change. Reason and logic and a moral code that supports such reason are what are required for social progress. Mrs. Warren and her daughter are victims of a society stuck in aristocratic

⁵⁶ Shaw, "Preface to *Plays Unpleasant*," pp. 25-26.

antiquity, but they need not be. It is high time that moral standards catch up with material reality.

Other plays that are part of the early Shavian mission of social progress are *Widowers' Houses*, which deals with the issue of slum-landlordism; *Major Barbara*, which comments on the foolishness of private charity; and *The Philanderer*, which presents marriage as obsolete. In each case Shaw demonstrated that the social ills of contemporary society were due, not to individual vice, but to structural problems in the social order – problems that could be fixed only once they were properly diagnosed.

While often the piece would give equal weight to a social problem and the aristocratic moral rules that perpetuated it, sometimes Shaw would focus his attention on the aristocratic sensibility more generally. In these plays Shaw would utilize the already existing theatrical genres and character types in order to twist them to meet his needs. The result was the production of plays that were less formulaic and more distinct. Since the focus was primarily on ideology and less on a specific issue, Shaw was able to imbue these plays with more of his own personal beliefs and his distinct vision of progress. *Man and Superman*, completed in 1902, is perhaps the best example of a play that embodies Shaw's early philosophy of progress. But each of the *Plays Unpleasant* deals with these themes as well.

Shaw released what would become his most popular play, *Pygmalion*, to the English public on April 11, 1914. It had already been produced in Germany with much success. The play was a skillful combination of Shaw's edgy humor with his philosophy of progress. Eliza Doolittle, a "gutter-snipe" with horrific speech patterns and cockney accent, is transformed by Henry Higgins, an expert on phonetics, into a well-spoken,

well-mannered beauty who is at one point mistaken for a princess. Beneath the surface comedy lies Shaw's description of the Life Force in action: class is demonstrated to be, not a natural separation, but an alterable convention that we as a society are better off without. Once the gutter-snipes of the world are elevated to a level of social equality with high society, the Life Force will take its course, and those with superior genes will find each other, as Eliza finds her future husband, Freddy. What can emerge – and will emerge, for progress is unstoppable – is a society in which the best men and women will create a better generation of Supermen.

Part of the brilliance of *Pygmalion* is that, unlike *Man and Superman*, Shaw's philosophy is not explicitly voiced by anyone in the play: it is the backbone of the play that the audience need not notice in order to benefit from, and as such, it does not take away from the dramatic value of the piece. Upon opening on April 11, the play was showered with public and critical esteem. Shaw had finally created the perfect fusion of dramatic form with political content. *Pygmalion* permanently elevated him to the status of great English playwright.⁵⁷

As with his other plays, there was of course controversy. In a scene in which the not yet polished Eliza visits Higgins' mother and her high society guests, she accidentally reverts to her old ways by saying "not bloody likely" in a pristine English accent. The use of the profane term "bloody" in the play created a major scandal. As Stanley Weintraub recounts, some members of the audience laughed uproariously while others booed during the curtain call. The critics were similarly torn: in a discussion of the issue, many could not bring themselves to put the profanity in print and instead used asterisks and allusions to communicate the word. Angry letters to the editor over the word were

⁵⁷ See Valency, pp. 312-313; Weintraub, *Journey to Heartbreak*.

printed for weeks, and the actor-manager of the production was asked by the Secretary of the Theatrical Managers' Association to remove the word from the script for the remainder of the run.⁵⁸ It is striking that in April of 1914 – only a few months before the “shot heard around the world” -- such public energy could be focused on the use of a widely used but “impolite” six-letter word in a play.

The Great War – Progress Tested

Late-Victorian English society was highly moralizing and left little room for privacy. Everything was open for public critique, judgment, and debate – not only one's public actions, but one's private behaviors, emotions, and thoughts. Victorian rules of social conduct were so stringent and so tightly enforced that they were impossible to ignore, especially for modernist intellectuals who believed in social progress. The public sphere was all encompassing, and the fear of judgment was ever-present.⁵⁹ It was in this public world that Shaw rose to prominence – through his attacks on the social system and the obtrusive and penetrating gaze of the judgmental eye of the other. His antics were tolerated, though often censored, by a complacent government and a society unthreatened by his mockery. When England's involvement in the war became imminent, however, the stakes changed. As Christa Zorn writes, “. . . the democratic function of the critical intellectual was challenged in World War I when fear and uncertainty suppressed divergent opinions and governments demanded conformity. The critical public voices. . . found themselves temporarily marginalized when they expressed their opposition from

⁵⁸ See Weintraub.

⁵⁹ See Michael S. Foldy, *The Trials of Oscar Wilde: Deviance, Morality, and Late Victorian Society* (Yale University Press, 1997); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (Vintage Books, 1996).

detached viewpoints beyond national identity.”⁶⁰ England, the most liberal society in Europe, thus promptly villainized its most insightful critic.

Though Shaw offered criticism of the English government’s handling of foreign policy in the months leading up to its declaration of war on Germany, he never argued against English involvement in the war. His style, both in the articles he wrote before August 4 and in his political pamphlet *Common Sense About the War*, was to point out the similarities that existed between the German militarists and Junkers and the English militarists and aristocrats. He insisted that “the Junker is by no means peculiar to Prussia,”⁶¹ and that the war is not about nationalism or heroism, but about conflicting material interests that exist between two countries with similar socio-economic structures. In a passage that almost anticipates Orwell, Shaw wrote: “Let us have no more nonsense about the Prussian Wolf and the British Lamb, the Prussian Machiavelli and the English Evangelist. We cannot shout for years that we are boys of the bulldog breed, and then suddenly pose as gazelles.”⁶² Shaw’s pre-war solution to the impending failure of inter-national relations was to establish a three-country compact between England, Germany, and France, such that England would side with the victim in any aggression between Germany and France.⁶³ It was a strategy clearly within the military paradigm of the day: to prevent an imbalance of power between nations, set up a series of unsavory consequences that encourage all parties to maintain the current equilibrium.⁶⁴

⁶⁰ Christa Zorn, “Cosmopolitan Shaw and the Transformation of the Public Sphere.” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies* vol. 28 (2008), p. 189.

⁶¹ Shaw, *What I Really Wrote About the War*, p. 26.

⁶² *Ibid* p.30.

⁶³ *Ibid* p.11.

⁶⁴ See Daniel O’Leary, “Censored and Embedded Shaw: Print Culture and Shavian Analysis of Wartime Media,” *SHAW: The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, vol. 28 (2008), pp.181-185.

After the war began, Shaw attempted to explain to the public what the war was really about and why romantic sentiment and national propaganda were dangerous to England.

Though commonsensical to Shaw, his words not only infuriated the public and threatened the government, but they scandalized his intellectual friends as well. Passages such as, “No doubt the heroic remedy for this tragic misunderstanding [the war] is that both armies should shoot their officers and go home to gather in their harvests in the villages and make a revolution in the towns,”⁶⁵ caused his closest Fabian friends, Beatrice and Sidney Webb, to estrange themselves from him. The publication of his writings on the war were leading to negative publicity for their newspaper, the *New Statesman*, and though they wished to be supportive, they did not share his views about the war or his passion on the subject.⁶⁶ All potential English intellectual opposition to the war had been co-opted by the government, which set up a war propaganda coalition and garnered the support of the most famous intellectuals in the country to write in favor of the war. Completely isolated, Shaw continued to publish his views, and was ridiculed and misquoted by the press both in England and in the United States. Shaw experienced both public defamation and a huge wave of unpopularity. Many of his plays were boycotted, and many of his associates were imprisoned under The Defense of the Realm Act.⁶⁷ As one commentator writes,

The London papers attacked Shaw for having his spiritual home in Germany and, subsequently, warned the audience not to see a play by the author of *Common Sense*. In 1915 he was expelled from the Dramatists’ Club. By 1916, he was in a precarious situation; no theater company in England would include his plays.

⁶⁵ Shaw, *What I Really Wrote About the War*, p. 24.

⁶⁶ See Weintraub, pp. 29-33.

⁶⁷ Zorn, p.193.

She goes on, “As the war dragged on and the government tightened its clamp on dissidence, Shaw was publicly castigated, most famously by H.G. Wells, to the point that he became persona non grata, which seriously impaired his literary career.”⁶⁸ As Tracy Davis puts it, in *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre*, “By arguing that the welfare of the world was more important than that of a particular nation. . . . he went from being a literary superstar to reviled traitor overnight.”⁶⁹ The public sphere that Shaw had helped to strengthen throughout his life suddenly began to shrink in size: only voices that shouted for English victory in the field were acknowledged as legitimate. All dissenters were villainized as traitorous or insane.⁷⁰

The First World War was patriotism’s debut as a national weapon in an international crisis. Throughout Europe, states and ruling classes were rallying their publics to join the fight against the enemies of their nation. Pacifists and socialists were given the choice to fight for their communities or be condemned as traitors. The faith that the Second International put in the conviction of the proletariat and the certainty of an international general strike was revealed as naïve. The German Democratic Socialist Party failed to live up to its promise to protest the war; afterwards, one by one the socialist groups in other countries capitulated to the demands of their governments and their publics.⁷¹

England was no exception to the list of nations caught up in nationalist patriotic fervor. Because he spoke against the nationalist agenda, Shaw’s position shifted abruptly from that of esteemed intellectual to social pariah. As he fell from grace, his belief in the

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 194, 197.

⁶⁹ Tracy Davis, *George Bernard Shaw and the Socialist Theatre* (Praeger, 1994) p. 104.

⁷⁰ See Ryan.

⁷¹ Stephen Eric Bronner, *Socialism Unbound, 2nd Edition* (Westview Press, 2001) p. 108.

progress of the human species fell with him. The amazing technologies of the 19th century were put to use to kill a million men in a single battle. The economic laws of progress laid out by Marx were no match for the imperialist cravings of national leaders bent on destruction. And the pull of the Life Force towards a more advanced species was being overpowered by a nihilistic impulse that no one seemed able to control. The most advanced minds in the most advanced country in Europe were outsmarted by the human drive to belong to something bigger than oneself.

Shaw's despair was immensely personal. Yet it was not his alone. The Great War shattered the hopes of an entire continent: in the first weeks, when it was a common belief on both sides that the war would be over by Christmas, only an elite few foresaw the annihilation to come. But once Christmas 1914 came and went, followed by another, and another, and the bloodshed continued, European society came to realize the war's long-term implications. By 1918 Europe lay in ruins, the course of its future altered forever.⁷² Bernard Shaw, heartbroken, returned to the theatre.⁷³

An Uncertain Future – Life after the Great War

Shaw produced no new plays during the war. He spent his time and his energy writing political pamphlets and giving speeches. Yet he did begin a play during this time, though it was not finished or published until 1919. *Heartbreak House: A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes* was to become one of Shaw's most renowned plays. Inspired by Anton Chekov's unapologetic condemnation of the landed classes in Russia, Shaw painted a portrait of "cultured, leisured Europe before the war."⁷⁴ Through his

⁷² See Modris Ecksteins, *Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age* (Mariner Books, 2000).

⁷³ See Weintraub.

⁷⁴ Shaw, "Preface to *Heartbreak House*," p. 614, in *Selected Plays* (Dodd, Mead and Company, 1981).

depiction of the personal follies of an aristocratic family at their countryside estate, Shaw provided his most critical commentary on the ignorance, irresponsibility, and uselessness of the obsolete social class that would soon be maimed – but not crushed – by the war.

Centered on the romantic plight of Ellie Dunn, visitor to the Hushabye House, Shaw's play is set up like a familiar tale of courtship and proposals, full of melodrama and romance. But the premise is merely a façade for the audience and for Ellie, who comes to the Hushabye home to gain the advice of her friend Hesione as to whether she should choose to marry for love or money. Her two suitors then arrive at the house, setting up the main action of the play. Were this play written before the war, the situation would have lent itself to both comedy and melodrama, or, for Shaw, comedy and social commentary – with Ellie eventually having to choose between her loves or opt to remain single, as other Shavian heroines have done. Indeed, this kind of action is what Ellie expects to happen. But *Heartbreak House* is no ordinary play, and as Ellie discovers, the Hushabye home – which she later renames “Heartbreak House” -- is no ordinary estate. As Ellie's reality slowly breaks down, she – and the audience with her -- comes to see that nothing she has thought or believed about life has ever been true.

The man she loves is in fact Mr. Hector Hushabye, her friend's husband, who lied about his identity and exaggerated his noble attributes and civic courage in order to gain her attention. Boss Mangan, the capitalist who seeks to marry her, is in fact broke – he is beholden to investors, and has no assets of his own – and, beyond that, he is also an inept coward when it comes to managing his staff and his own investments. Further, while she thought Mangan to be her father's benefactor, in fact, as she is shocked to learn, Mangan bankrupted him. Lady Utterword, though a seemingly ideal specimen of grace and

beauty, is false in every way: even her beautiful hair, which Ellie greatly admires, is “too pretty to be real.”⁷⁵ Shattered by these revelations, Ellie decides at the end of the play to marry Captain Shotover, the elderly patriarch of Heartbreak House, for he is genuine, even if effectively impotent.

In the closing scene, bombs can be heard going off in the distance, arousing excitement and enthusiasm from the group. Mr. Hushabye, one of the many emasculated male figures of Heartbreak house, turns on all the lights and opens all the drapes in the house in an attempt to help the Germans hone in on the target. Hesione remarks to Ellie: “Did you hear the explosions? And the sound in the sky: it’s splendid: it’s like an orchestra: it’s like Beethoven”.⁷⁶ As the group sits outside enthusiastically awaiting their destruction, one bomb drops, missing the house but hitting the bunker, where only the capitalist and a house burglar – “the two practical men of business”⁷⁷ – were seeking shelter. Greatly disappointed, the group comforts each other with the hope that the bombers will return tomorrow: in the play’s last moment, Mrs. Hushabye turns to Ellie and says, “what a glorious experience! I hope they’ll come again tomorrow night.” Ellie, described in the stage directions as “radiant at the prospect” replies, “Oh, I hope so.”⁷⁸

Never before had Shaw shown the full extent of his resentment towards the aristocracy. In his commentary on the play, “Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall,” Shaw makes clear that there are two types of aristocratic irresponsibility. The first belongs to those who, like the inhabitants of Heartbreak House, were steeped in culture and art, and clung to romantic ideals of beauty and freedom. These elites, however, were

⁷⁵ Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, in *Selected Plays*, p.724.

⁷⁶ *Ibid*, p. 733.

⁷⁷ *Ibid*, p. 735.

⁷⁸ *Ibid*, p.735.

in all practical matters oblivious: “They hated politics. They did not wish to realize Utopia for the common people: they wished to realize their favourite fictions and poems in their own lives; and, when they could, they lived without scruple on incomes which they did nothing to earn.”⁷⁹ The other breed of aristocrats, those who resided in what Shaw referred to as “Horseback Hall,” had no interest in art or culture, and lived only for politics, consumption, and hunting. These were the men responsible for the failures of diplomacy that led to WWI; these were the men with “breeding” who should have done all they could to preserve the peace, but who valued their own political careers over the greater good. “In short, power and culture were in separate compartments. The barbarians were not only literally in the saddle but on the front bench in the House of Commons, with nobody to correct their incredible ignorance of modern thought and political science but upstarts from the counting-house, who had spent their lives furnishing their pockets instead of their minds.”⁸⁰

Shaw’s anger over the reclusiveness of the Heartbreak House inhabitants is revealed throughout the play. The scenes in which the family members reveal their awareness that Europe is headed for military catastrophe and in the same breath divert the conversation away from politics, choosing instead to quote Shelley, to discuss Shakespeare, or to talk of love, are especially telling. The character of Ellie, herself a young artist, exemplifies the obtuseness of the group. She declares at one point that, “There seems nothing real in the world except my father and Shakespeare,”⁸¹ yet it becomes crystal clear that she both misunderstands her father’s intentions and misinterprets Shakespeare’s texts. Shakespeare has a prominent place in *Heartbreak*

⁷⁹ *Ibid*, p.615.

⁸⁰ *Ibid*, p.616.

⁸¹ *Ibid*, p.724.

House, which is by no means accidental. Shaw once described Shakespeare's characters as "beings in the air, without public responsibilities of any kind. All Shakespeare's characters are so: that is why they seem natural to our middle classes, who are comfortable and irresponsible at other people's expense, and are neither ashamed of that condition nor even conscious of it."⁸² Shaw's characters in *Heartbreak House* are quite Shakespearean in this sense: they spend their time floating through the play, producing no action beyond their fruitless flirtations, abstract discussions of art, and their unconscious choice to acquiesce to the coming apocalypse.

Perhaps the play's most Shakespearean character is Captain Shotover, often described as a Lear-like figure. A retired sea captain who once braved nature and traveled the world, Shotover is now a half-mad drunken old man who flits about through the play offering comments in passing. He combines parody with a kind of prophetic brilliance; and while he articulates the importance of weathering storms, he is completely ineffectual, having no control over his physical house or his household. He spends his days preparing to blow up the world. At the same time, Shotover gives voice to the sense of drift and lack of responsibility or leadership that characterizes *Heartbreak House*, the ship of state, and the world itself on the brink of war. To Mazzini, who declares that nothing ever happens in politics, Captain Shotover provides this correction: "Nothing but the smash of the drunken skipper's ship on the rocks, the splintering of her rotten timbers, the tearing of her rusty plates, the drowning of the crew like rats in a trap." He advises

⁸² As quoted in Sonya Freeman Loftis, "Shakespeare, Shotover, Surrogation: 'Blaming the Bard' in *Heartbreak House*." *SHAW The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, vol. 29 (2009), pp. 50-65.

each man around him to “learn [his] business as an Englishman”: “navigation.”⁸³

Unfortunately, it is a plea that none heed.

Shotover’s words fall on deaf ears, and the play ends on a note of nihilism. No character effectively represents anything of value, and all embrace their own destruction. As Desmond Harding writes: “The play endures as a remarkable-- and even menacing—account of cultural-historical trauma precisely because, paradoxically, ‘little occurs except the end of civilization.’”⁸⁴

The utter disconnect between theory and practice, culture and politics, *Heartbreak House* and *Horseback Hall*, created an avoidable situation in which “the prime minister folk had to choose between barbarism and Capua. And of the two atmospheres it is hard to say which was the more fatal to statesmanship.”⁸⁵ And this was true not only in England, but across Europe. Chekov was a visionary who saw the decline of the cultured aristocracy in Russia; for Shaw, the same pattern existed in France and Germany as well. The crisis of leadership which had pervaded the “half-century of the drift to the abyss,”⁸⁶ was in large part due to the unwillingness of the educated to take control of the helm of the ship of state.

It is unclear how much weight should be given to Shaw’s understanding of the politics that led to the war. His assumption that the inhabitants of *Heartbreak House* should not have ceded their political power to those intellectually beneath them belies his socialist education and political commitments. Many in the aristocracy were aware that their way of life could not continue much longer; having lost their economic place as

⁸³ Shaw, *Heartbreak House*, in *Selected Plays*, pp. 731-32.

⁸⁴ Desmond Harding, “Bearing Witness: *Heartbreak House* and the Poetics of Trauma.” *SHAW The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, vol. 26 (2006), quoting Alfred Turco, p. 6.

⁸⁵ Shaw, *Selected Plays*, “Preface to *Heartbreak House*,” p. 616.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 620.

rulers of the economy, there was a logic to the way in which they retreated from politics – from the superstructure – that was sure to impact the materialist base of society. As a socialist, Shaw should not only have seen this, but been in support of it: the removal of the aristocratic class from political power was conventionally viewed on the left as a sign of healthy progress. Logically, then, his anger and disappointment should not be directed at the inhabitants of Heartbreak House for ceding power, but to the members of parliament who were in fact responsible for the war – i.e. the members of Horseback Hall, who played the game of imperialist “chicken” with no regard for the consequences.

This is where Shaw’s elitism becomes quite striking. As a Fabian socialist, he believed in economic equality, but not in democracy. His criticisms of democracy, though sometimes presented in his drama, are riddled throughout the prefaces to the plays and his other writings. The current electoral system was not conducive to pure democracy and the mass public not yet educated enough to rule itself. The Fabians were socialists not because they did not believe in aristocracy, but because they disagreed with the current ruling aristocracy – the plutocracy of the landed gentry and the wealthy capitalists. Shaw saw it as vital that those in power – especially those spearheading foreign policy – be educated, with high intellectual capability and an appreciation of the culture of all of European civilization. In short, the ruling class ought to be composed of people like Shaw himself and his Fabian friends. And yet, this group utterly failed, both to creatively address the political situation and to defend those, like Shaw, who spoke out against the war. The sudden and complete descent into barbarism left him heartbroken.

The Life Force Reborn

In retrospect, the dark belly of the 19th century became clearly visible to Shaw. The fervent belief in scientific progress which dealt a death blow to religious morality had devastating consequences. After his initial assessment of the war, Shaw developed a more complex – and less holistic – explanation which viewed the 19th century's obsession with progress as inevitably leading to large-scale destruction. The problem, in Shaw's opinion, was rooted in the popular understanding – or misunderstanding – of evolution. Neo-Darwinism, the popularized version of Darwin's theory of Circumstantial Selection, elevated humankind above (or beyond) the realm of morality: the "survival of the fittest" paved the way for political, economic, and social opportunism at the expense of any moral obligation toward others or toward society as a whole. The result was a godless world in which the European nations – each believing themselves the fittest – did not hesitate to engage one another in a contest of survival: once begun, the conflict was impossible to stop, for there was no logic or belief on which to base a cease fire. Only exhaustion could decrease the momentum of events, which would be played out until the German surrender in 1918.

In 1921 Shaw looked ahead to the future of Europe and saw the possibility for either great advancement on the one hand, or utter annihilation on the other. He was ultimately able to come to terms with the war by reconcentrating his energy on transcendental issues, most importantly the Life Force. Like many intellectuals reeling from the blows of the war, Shaw felt most comfortable retreating away from politics into the realm of possibility and imagination.⁸⁷ There he could revise his theories of human

⁸⁷ A classic account of the subjective turn that took place in the inter-war years is Adorno's *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Northwestern University Press, 1973[1964]). See also Bronner, *Ideas in Action: Political Tradition in the Twentieth Century* (Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), especially Chapter 10: "The Liberation of Subjectivity."

progress to fit a world in which the annihilation of the human species was a real possibility.

Realizing that society could return to the dark ages of religion as a reaction against the science and technology that led to war, and realizing also the inevitability of further destruction if a sense of moral purpose was not re-instated in society, Shaw decided to try again to share his vision of the Life Force. He had tried once before, in *Man and Superman*, but admitted himself that, because the religion was buried in a play of fluff, the message was lost.⁸⁸ *Back to Methuselah: A Metabiological Pentateuch*, his opus on the religion of Creative Evolution, would be different. Instead of adapting his message to fit the structure of a whimsical comedic genre, Shaw shrugged off theatrical convention and structured his message as he saw fit. As Maurice Valency writes, “This transition from political economy to theology necessarily put a different complexion on Shaw’s work as a dramatist.”⁸⁹ Widest in scope of any of Shaw’s plays, *Back to Methuselah* begins with a retelling of the story of Adam and Eve, and traces the development of the human species all the way through to 3000 A.D. In *Part 1: In the Beginning*, Shaw’s story of human creation, it is Lilith, not God, who creates Adam and Eve. Lilith imbues Eve with the greatest gift – curiosity – and the snake that comes to Eve in the garden provides her with the secrets of progress and advancement: having become aware of death on their own, Adam and Eve learn from the serpent that death can be overcome by the production of new life. Procreation will free Adam and Eve from the

⁸⁸ In the Preface to *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw writes of *Man and Superman*: “I took the legend of Don Juan in its Mozartian form and made it a dramatic parable of Creative Evolution. But being then at the height of my invention and comedic talent, I decorated it too brilliantly and lavishly. I surrounded it with a comedy of which it formed only one act, and that act was so completely episodic (it was a dream which did not affect the action of the piece) that the comedy could be detached and played by itself.” Shaw, *Collected Plays with their Prefaces, Volume V* (The Bodley Head, 1972), p. 338.

⁸⁹ Valency, p. 354.

constant toil of working the fields and protecting themselves from harm – by passing some of that burden on to their children, the couple can develop other faculties and advance their knowledge of the world. The couple takes the serpent’s advice and creates many children who have children themselves. When Cain kills Abel, Eve is revolted and confused, for he has violated the Voice that instructs them not to kill. Cain tells her that he hears another Voice which speaks to him of life after death, and he longs for something greater than what they have already achieved. Eve shares his longing, and it is that desire for advancement, for improvement and greatness, which will push the species further.

It is not merely God that is absent from Shaw’s tale of the beginnings of humankind, but also the Devil, “original sin,” banishment from the garden of Eden, and the emotion of shame. Shaw’s is a tale that highlights the human capacity for adaptation and advancement; that elevates the place of woman to one of high esteem; that sees Cain’s act not as evil, but as a rejection of dogma and an embrace of possibility; and that sets up the story to follow as one of fulfilling the glorious potential of humanity.

The Parts that follow deal with the evolution of the human species over time: *Part 2: The Gospel of the Brothers Barnabas* is set soon after the Great War, and depicts the human discovery of Creative Evolution by two brother biologists. The tale both celebrates man’s capacity for meta-cognition and explains the basics of the science to the audience: humankind advances because it wills its own advancement. Even death – a human habit, like any other – can be willed away; people are living increasingly longer lives and they will continue to do so, living for hundreds, perhaps thousands of years. The longer they live, the more wisdom they will acquire – men who live to be three

hundred years old will outgrow the impulse to war by their hundredth year. As the whole species lives longer, war and famine and all the threats to human life that we in the 20th century struggle over will be overcome.

Parts 3-5 take place at various points in the future and realize the prophecy foretold in Part 2. By Part 5, which takes place in 3000 A.D., people are realizing that the human body is the last hurdle to overcome in order for man to reach his full potentiality. This leads one character to assert that, “The day will come when there will be no people, only thought.”⁹⁰ The opus ends with a soliloquy by Lilith, who celebrates her creation, while at the same time providing a warning that the human species must continue to advance if it is to survive – human complacency and stagnation could lead the universe to replace mankind with a new creation.

Shaw wrote *Back to Methuselah* at the age of 63, when he was ill and assumed his remaining time on earth would be brief. Hence, it is the most all-encompassing work in his collection – what he hoped would be his best received gift for the next generation, his legacy. He closes the preface to the play with this charge: “It is my hope that a hundred parables by younger hands will soon leave mine as far behind as the religious pictures of the fifteenth century left behind the first attempts of the early Christians at iconography. In that hope I withdraw and ring up the curtain.”⁹¹ It is significant that Shaw wrote his *Methuselah* cycle assuming it would never be produced on a stage in his lifetime. Cycle plays were, at that time and place, prohibitively expensive to produce, and were it not for the willingness of the professional manager, Barry Jackson, to take a risk on the piece, Shaw’s assumption would have proved true. Shaw was content with having *Methuselah*

⁹⁰ Shaw, *Back to Methuselah*, as quoted in Michael and Mollie Hardwick, *The Bernard Shaw Companion* (John Murray Ltd, 1973) p. 62.

⁹¹ Shaw, “Preface to *Back to Methuselah*,” p. 339.

published – an indicator of his growing estrangement from the medium of theatre as his favored mode of expression.⁹²

It is also indicative of a major shift in the type of audience for whom he was writing. His pre-war plays were all aimed at the general audience, which ranged from petty bourgeoisie to the high aristocrat. Though his plays always contained an educational message expressed through clever dialogue and sharp satire, the acceptance, or even the comprehension of the message, was not essential to the enterprise, as *Man and Superman* clearly shows. With *Heartbreak House*, Shaw bid both the contemporary world and the conventional trope adieu, breaking with his own conventions to write pieces more appropriate to his current state of mind. The world as it was offered Shaw no solace, and the public who had supported the war no longer seemed to interest him. He wrote for himself and for the future public of the generations that would follow him. As an established playwright, he could afford this luxury. As a disillusioned and heartbroken member of the war generation, he needed the change.

Performed in Birmingham in 1921, The *Methuselah* cycle was not well received by the public.⁹³ The meaning behind the cycle was grossly misunderstood -- there was even speculation that Shaw had written the plays as a joke. As Margery M. Morgan says, “None of Shaw’s plays has been more strongly disliked than *Back to Methuselah*.” She cites negative criticisms from G.K. Chesterton, who “wrote of ‘those bloodless extravagances, which Bernard Shaw meant to make attractive,’” and Eric Bentley, who

⁹² Shaw, *An Autobiography: 1898-1950, The Playwright Years*, Stanley Weintraub, ed.

⁹³ On the critical reception of *Back to Methuselah*, see Peter Gahan, “The Achievement of Shaw’s Later Play’s, 1920-1939,” *SHAW The Annual of Bernard Shaw Studies*, vol. 23 (2003), pp. 27-35; Valency.

wrote that Shaw was “ ‘at his worst as a playwright’ ” in the Methuselah cycle.⁹⁴ Even for those who took Shaw seriously, the future presented in the plays that results from creative evolution was not seen as enticing. The great critic, Kenneth Tynan, writing after Shaw’s death, referred to it as “frankly repellent: creative evolution, [Shaw] enthusiastically predicts, will produce a race of oviparous Struldbruggs who live for ever and ever and whose only joy is pure celebration.”⁹⁵ Yet the fact that the public did not receive his gospel of Creative Evolution, the religion of the 20th century, as intended, did not change Shaw’s opinion of his own work.

As in so many other respects, Shaw was not alone in attempting to resurrect some sense of purpose and meaning after the Great War. He saw that “our will to live depends on hope; for we die of despair”⁹⁶ and he offered Creative Evolution as an alternative to “the bottomless pit of an utterly discouraging pessimism”⁹⁷ that threatened human survival. Shaw’s religion was a blend of science and metaphysics that substituted the human will for God. It was a benign version of Nietzsche’s vision of the Superman -- benign because it spoke of the will of the species rather than that of the individual and because, while the individual can improve herself, profound progress will occur only gradually, over the course of centuries. Shaw’s was a sensible religion, logical and, yes, backed up by complicated scientific theories that lent it the air of credibility. Yet it did not catch on as well as other attempts at the creation of hope and optimism created by his contemporaries.

⁹⁴ Margery M. Morgan, “Back to Methuselah: The Poet and the City,” *G.B. Shaw: A Collection of Critical Essays*, R. J. Kaufmann, ed. (Prentice-Hall Inc., 1965) pp. 130-142.

⁹⁵ Kenneth Tynan, *Curtains: Selections from the Drama Criticism and Related Writings* (Atheneum, 1961), p. 151.

⁹⁶ Shaw, “Postscript: After Twentyfive Years” in *Collected Plays with their Prefaces, Volume V*, p. 696.

⁹⁷ *Ibid*, p. 702.

Perhaps it was too abstract, or too removed from the common person's experience of the world. One had to be somewhat of an intellectual to appreciate the nuance of Shaw's argument and to understand the difference between Darwinian evolution, neo-Darwinian evolution, and Creative Evolution. More importantly, Creative Evolution was a doctrine devoid of conflict – with no force to oppose and a future that was guaranteed, if offered no opportunity for its supporters to *do anything*. And a religion without ritual, without sacrifice, and without prayer – in short, a religion in which human individuals are insignificant – is hardly attractive to those desperate to reclaim their sense of self and to experience salvation. Lamarck's biological works on evolution are a poor substitute for the Christian bible, and Shaw's *Methuselah*, however impressive when staged, is as obtuse a gospel as ever was written.

Shaw was an elitist intellectual aristocrat to the end. His sincere belief that Creative Evolution was “the genuinely scientific religion for which all wise men are now anxiously looking”⁹⁸ speaks to his inability to understand the psychological needs of the common man. If it ever occurred to him that there were other, more seductive and far more dangerous contenders for the crown of secular religion, he did not say so. If he ever considered nationalism to be a threat to the peace established after the Great War, he did not write about it in his typical manner. He was blind to the fact that the 20th century, built on the wreckage of European civilization, had created a situation of desperation in which what mattered to people was not scientific truth, but comfort and solace, and retribution and revenge. Perhaps some of his intellectual friends were swayed by his logical argumentation, but for the rest of the population, there was another truth: humans do not choose to die for things they understand, but rather, for things they love. There

⁹⁸ Shaw, “Preface to *Back to Methuselah*,” p. 269.

was no love – no place for affect at all – in Shaw’s religion of metaphysical-biology. It was a religion suited to an ever-decreasing number of intellectuals who could afford the luxury of science.

In 1945, 25 years after the cycle was originally published, Shaw proudly wrote that he still regarded the preface to *Methuselah* as “one of my most important writings,” and that the new postscript “enforces [the doctrine of Creative Evolution] much more confidently as the religion of the forthcoming century.”⁹⁹ In the new postscript, Shaw goes so far as to say that *Methuselah* “came straight from the Life Force operating as an élan vital through myself and Barry Jackson.”¹⁰⁰ It is shocking that a man who bore witness to both world wars, the holocaust, and Stalin’s acts of genocide could become even more confident over time in his scientific religion as revealing the path to enlightenment for the 20th century. Shaw wrote *Methuselah* as “a contribution to the modern bible” and referred to himself as a prophet, a revelator of the truth of science as a liberating force. Hubris – the force that condemned his statesmen back in 1914 to commit to the devastation of Europe – took hold of Shaw in his later years, as he himself became increasingly disconnected from reality.

Conclusion

At the age of 91, in his concluding entry in his autobiography, Shaw had this to say: “I am not at all dashed by the fact that my preachings and prophetisings, like those of the many sages who have said the same things before me, seem to have produced no political change – that . . . the world has been going from bad to worse since I gave

⁹⁹ From “Shaw Has Become a Prophet” in Shaw, *Collected Plays and Their Prefaces, Volume V*, p. 714.

¹⁰⁰ Bernard Shaw, “Postscript: After Twentyfive Years” in *Collected Plays with their Prefaces, Volume V* p.692.

tongue and pen.”¹⁰¹ He saw himself as an educator who gave his all to enlighten the average citizen as to the facts of political and social life, and was content with his efforts, for he believed that the wisdom he had imparted would be recognized in time. As one who “lived through two ‘world wars’ without missing a meal or a night’s sleep in my bed,” largely untroubled by the possibility of being struck from the sky by a bomb, knowing that “the risk of being run over by a motor bus...is greater,”¹⁰² Shaw’s psychological distance from the horrors of the 20th century is perhaps understandable. He lived a life of great privilege on the island of England: few of those who had survived the same events on the continent could say as he did that they never feared for their lives.

It makes sense, also, that one who had come of age in 19th century Europe and flourished in the culture of the *fin de siècle* would find himself at a terrible loss when faced with the annihilation of all he understood and held dear. Even a brilliant man like Shaw could not be expected to mentally adapt to life in the 20th century; some amount of denial was necessary for his psychological survival. There was no 19th century dramatic trope that could be used as a framework for the expression of Shaw’s experience, and no theory of social progress that survived the wars intact. Shaw did his best to pick up the pieces where they had been left in 1914, and he convinced himself that his theories were true in spite of the war – more true than ever before. Yet political reality belied his claims of progress and possibility.

In the end, Shaw lost his grip as a politically relevant thinker. Though prolific and socially revered until his death in 1950, there was no longer any political punch to his work after *Heartbreak House*. After WWI, he was out of his element, clinging to the past

¹⁰¹ Shaw, *Shaw: An Autobiography, The Playwright Years, 1898-1950*, p.221.

¹⁰² *Ibid*, p.216.

while believing he was looking to the future. Like many intellectuals of the *fin de siècle*, he existed in denial and confusion and slowly faded out in a world he could no longer understand and that no longer understood him.

Bertolt Brecht: The Theatre of Proletarian Revolution

Bertolt Brecht was born into a life of bourgeois privilege. His upbringing in the comfortable town of Augsburg was meant to prepare him for his life's path: university education and the beginnings of a prestigious career as a doctor. And while he was glad to accept certain aspects of his privileged position – his status allowed him to avoid military service in WWI – he rejected the life path that would have provided him a comfortable life as a member of the bourgeoisie. Indeed, his upbringing in Augsburg led him to disdain bourgeois values and relationships and left him especially sensitive to the hypocrisies of the economic and social order. His was a fine education; yet the lessons he learned were not the lessons explicitly taught. And so this young middle-class man came to identify with the plight of workers and, in time, became an organic intellectual of the German working class, pioneering a new theory and practice of proletarian theater.¹⁰³

Brecht came of age in Weimar Germany, in an atmosphere of intense intellectual and artistic radicalism. Drawn to a range of artists, musicians, poets and philosophers, he embraced the norm of creative collaboration, which influenced both his approach to dramatic production and to politics. Brecht was particularly drawn to the artists associated with *Neue Sachlichkeit*, or the New Objectivity, who rejected expressionism's emphasis on raw, uncontrolled emotion and subjectivity, and instead promoted a more intellectual, reality-based mode of artistic expression. In the late 1920s, Brecht began his experiments with the epic theatre, which represented an extension of the New Objectivity

¹⁰³ For Brecht's biographical information, see the following texts: Martin Esslin, *Bertolt Brecht: A Choice of Evils*, 4th Edition (Methuen, 1984); John Willett, *Brecht in Context: Comparative Approaches*, Revised Edition (Methuen, 1998); Henry Pachter, *Weimar Etudes* (Columbia University Press, 1982); Frederic Ewen, *Bertolt Brecht: His Life, His Art, and His Times* (Citadel Press, 1967); Peter Thomson and Glendyr Sacks, eds., *The Cambridge Companion to Brecht* (Cambridge University Press, 1994).

onto the stage. At around this time, responding to the turmoil created by the Great Depression, he turned to the study of Marxism, under the tutelage of Karl Korsch, a dissident communist and critical intellectual. Brecht's Marxist political convictions and his innovations in epic theatre came together in the development of his *Lehrstücke*, or didactic plays. Marxism furnished the substantive political content to his art's critical form. With the *Lehrstücke* he was able to produce theatre that was directly accessible to his intended proletarian audience. The period between Brecht's first discovery of Marx in 1926 and his escape from Germany in 1933 marks the moment of Brecht's greatest success in achieving the marriage of artistic form and revolutionary political content. Indeed, this was the only time when Brecht was able to produce works accessible to his intended proletarian audience; when unprofessional workers' theatres were able to use his work to educate their own; and when Brecht was allowed to witness the interplay between his work and his working class audience. Hitler's rise to power in 1933 forced Brecht into exile.

Deprived of his audience, separated from his homeland and the political battle waged there, Brecht was forced to focus his attention on other forms of theatre. He was an active opponent of fascism and penned three anti-fascist plays. Brecht's life as well as his work was shaped by the threat of fascism. But equally important was the shadow cast over the world communist movement by the consolidation of Stalinism. Brecht's work had always been stylized to some extent, and the Soviet decrees of socialist realism threatened his entire theatrical project. Refusing to abandon his life's work, Brecht set out for Los Angeles in 1941 to make a life for himself as bourgeois playwright.

At once horrified by and rejected by the American culture industry, Brecht gave up his plans to become a screenwriter, and returned to playwriting, hoping he would have better luck on the stage than he did in the film studios of Hollywood. Yet it was not to be. His minimal success combined with his expulsion from the US in 1947 after his appearance at the McCarthy hearings led him to embrace, for better or worse, the doctrine of “socialism in one country.” Morally defeated and politically castrated, Brecht eventually returned to East Berlin to produce plays for his very own Berliner Ensemble. Brecht spent the last 20 years of his life biding his time, waiting for an opening in which he could develop a useful political theatre for the working class. He bided his time and he bit his tongue. When he died he had nearly bitten it clean off.

Brecht was a great writer and an innovative playwright, but from the vantage point of political theory what was most interesting about his theatrical project was its political and proletarian character. The defining feature of his work, from the mid-1920's until his death in 1956, was the effort to write and produce plays that would highlight the injustices of capitalism and cause audiences to think critically about these injustices and become active in the working class movement. The high point of this project was the period of the *Lehrstücke*, in which his plays were both developed and performed in close proximity to proletarian movements. In this chapter I will explain the context in which Brecht's theater emerged (The New Objectivity); discuss the radical political innovations associated with his epic theater; and outline the way in which his *Lehrstücke* exemplified the potential of these innovations. I will then discuss the ways in which Brecht subsequently shifted and adapted his dramatic strategies in response to changing political

events. *The Measures Taken* epitomizes his Lehrstücke, and I will discuss both its power and the ways in which it failed to take hold.

I will then contrast two plays that Brecht wrote while in exile. *Señora Carrar's Rifles*, written in response to the Soviet crackdown against formalism, is Brecht's attempt to combine Soviet-approved Aristotelian drama with a strong political message. By juxtaposing this play with *The Mother*, an earlier Brecht play with a similar plot, I argue that Brecht's "formalism" was his greatest strength as a political playwright. While *The Mother* promotes critical thinking and informed political action, *Señora Carrar's Rifles* – ostensibly an anti-fascist play--promotes the kind of emotionally-driven political action epitomized by fascism. While Brecht's Communist commitments constrained him to adapt to the strictures of socialist realism, he knew better—a point I will make by discussing his written disputation of Georg Lukács regarding the dangers of formalism. Though Brecht may have won the battle against Lukács in retrospect, his defense of the epic theatre was rejected by the Soviet critics, the only ones Brecht trusted to inspire the workers to carry out the revolution. Though he continued to theorize about the benefits of the epic theatre until his death, it had failed to become a politically useful tool in the way he had hoped. Just as Shaw had done decades earlier, Brecht realized that the role of theatre had been forever changed in the 20th century; though he aspired to be a revolutionary, all Brecht could ever be was a bourgeois social critic.

New Objectivity and the Critique of Expressionism

It was in the context of industrialization and militarism, poverty and fear that the expressionist movement was born in Germany. Like *Sturm und Drang* and romanticism before it, expressionism was part of a wide German cultural tradition of adamant

individualism. More specifically, expressionism was a reaction to the alienation and mechanization of newly-industrialized fin de siècle Germany.¹⁰⁴ Beginning in the mid-1890s, artists, playwrights, musicians, and novelists of this period rebelled against material reality, escaping to a realm of imagination in which childlike impulses and animalistic desires were celebrated. Though each group emphasized certain aspects of the expressionist ethos over others, they all shared a few core sensibilities: “the alienation from established society, the yearning for a better world, the idealistic protest against a rotten materialism, the validity of the inner emotive response to a sterile rationalism, and the metaphysical despair over the ‘death of God.’”¹⁰⁵

In painting, the subjective turn manifested itself through the rejection of realistic portrayals (as the impressionists had done); the choice of “primitive” subject matter – animals, “primitive” peoples, nudes, rural landscapes; imaginative uses of color; the use of thick paints that left a texture to the canvas; intense imagery; expression of raw, untapped, uncontrolled emotion. “Die Brücke” in Dresden and “Der Blaue Reiter” in Munich are the two most renowned groups of expressionist painters. Franz Marc’s “Blue Horse” is emblematic of the movement: its bold, creative use of color and shape rejects “objective” perspectives of nature, privileging imagination and subjectivity.¹⁰⁶

Expressionism was not limited to the visual arts – as the zeitgeist of the time, it permeated all areas of the arts including the theatre and the opera house. Expressionist dramatists, whose plays were widely produced when Brecht came of age, presented the “New Man” who represented the post-revolutionary individual: defined in terms of

¹⁰⁴ Douglas Kellner, “Expressionism and Rebellion,” in *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage*, Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner, eds. (Columbia University Press, 1988).

¹⁰⁵ Stephen Eric Bronner, “Expressionism and Marxism: Towards an Aesthetic of Emancipation,” in *Passion and Rebellion*, p. 413.

¹⁰⁶ See Dietmar Elger, *Expressionism* (Taschen, 1989).

attitude rather than action or content, the New Man was a symbol of a renewed humanity.¹⁰⁷

Despite the intentions of some of its participants, in practical terms expressionism was inherently anti-political. It turned its gaze away from social and political reality, preferring to evoke images of a primitive utopia. While society was becoming ever more rationalized, expressionism was fantastic. Rather than contest reality, it ran from it. The movement represented a form of “political escapism” that would become increasingly prevalent among modernist avant-garde artists as the century unfolded. The writers of the expressionist cultural journals set their sights on a meta-political transformation of the totality of social relations -- transcendence from everyday politics to the ideal of “the ethical.” As Ludwig Rubiner expressed in *Der Mensch in der Mitte*, “Politics is the public manifestation of our ethical intentions.” Given that Rubiner’s definition of ethics was incredibly (and intentionally) vague – “there is only one ethical goal in life: intensity”¹⁰⁸ – for him, the material world of real politics was dismissed as irrelevant to the expressionist project. Nor was he the only one. Other major essayists, such as Kurt Hiller, Herwarth Walden, and Johannes Becher held similar views: they each believed that the path to political revolution was through art.¹⁰⁹ Yet, as Douglas Kellner points out, in politics as in art, “expressionist subjectivity was so intense that inter-subjectivity was neglected.”¹¹⁰ Individualism and politics are not readily reconcilable.

¹⁰⁷ See Kellner, “Expressionist Literature and the Dream of the ‘New Man,’” in *Passion and Rebellion*.

¹⁰⁸ As quoted in Barbara Drygulski Wright, “Sublime Ambition: Art, Politics, and Ethical Idealism in the Cultural Journals of German Expressionism,” in *Passion and Rebellion*, pp. 89-90.

¹⁰⁹ See Wright.

¹¹⁰ Kellner, “Expressionist Literature and the Dream of the New Man,” p.192.

Expressionist artists came from both the left and the right,¹¹¹ given that their idealist total revolution was based solely in the metaphysical realm, the eclecticism of the participants' political views was largely irrelevant, further evidence of the anti-political nature of the movement. With the outbreak of the Great War, the expressionist movement fell to pieces. The great upheaval they had joyfully anticipated came upon them, but it was not what they had expected. Many enlisted in the German army, longing to experience "that wonderful, magnificent noise of battle... (that) strange, weirdly magnificent music."¹¹² Many died in the trenches, while others were discharged. Unable to handle the terrifying horrors of war, they returned to their outdated art and utopian visions. Perversely, expressionism did not die from the war, but gained in popularity. By the 1920s, it had become so popular among the bourgeoisie that it had become cliché¹¹³.

Like many expressionists, Brecht himself was radicalized by the unfolding of the war. At the outbreak of war he wrote patriotic poems and volunteered to man the watch tower in his neighborhood in Augsburg. Yet it took only a few years of war for him to shift his political values to the left. By 1918 he had written "The Legend of the Dead Soldier," the anti-war poem that put him on Hitler's blacklist,¹¹⁴ about a dead soldier who is resurrected to fight (and die) again:

1
And when the war reached its final spring
With no hint of a pause for breath
The soldier did the logical thing
And died a hero's death.

¹¹¹ *Ibid*, p.4

¹¹² Max Beckman, in a letter to his wife from 1914, as quoted in Elger, p.13.

¹¹³ See Jean-Michel Palmier, "Expressionist Reviews and the First World War," in *Passion and Rebellion*; see also Elger.

¹¹⁴ According to Martin Esslin, as early as 1923, Brecht's name was number five on the Nazi liquidation list, largely due to the anti-German content of this particular poem. See Esslin, *Brecht*, p. 55.

2

The war however was far from done
 And the Kaiser thought it a crime
 That his soldier should be dead and gone
 Before his proper time.

After the medical board digs him up, they send him to a doctor:

5

Their doctor inspected what they'd found
 Or as much as he thought would serve
 And gave his report: "He's medically sound
 He's merely lost his nerve."

They then send the soldier off to march in the next day's parade, which he does with the help of a priest who provides incense to ward off the smell of decay, and two first-aid men who help prop him up and use the imperial flag to wipe the blood from his face. The poem ends as it began: "But the soldier goes off to a hero's death/ Just like the manual said."¹¹⁵ Emotionally cold and dripping with irony, "The Legend," like Brecht's parody, *Die Hauspostille* (or *Manual of Piety*) published in 1925, is as far removed from the romanticized visions of war as possible.

Brecht's rejection of the war went hand in hand with his dismissal of expressionism. He was too young and too well educated to have been taken in by the German nationalist sentiment of the time, or to have anticipated the coming apocalypse with a Nietzschean sense of glee. To him, the raw emotion saturating the canvases and theatrical scripts of the expressionists was absurd. He found the "O, Mensch!" (or "Oh, the humanity!") cries of playwrights such as Walter Hasenclever and Hans Johst to be absurdly melodramatic.¹¹⁶ Such art did not depict the world he saw around him, and

¹¹⁵ From Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Poems and Songs from the Plays*, John Willett, ed. and trans. (London, 1990).

¹¹⁶ Take, for example, a scene from Hasenclever's 1918 play, *Humanity*:

having been born into a society in the throws of industrialization, he had no patience with Expressionism's empty escapism and fantasy. Brecht wrote in his diary in 1920:

(T)he Expressionist vein will be exhausted and "expression" can be thrown on the dungheap. Expressionism represented a (little German) revolution, but as soon as a certain degree of freedom was permitted, it turned out that there were no free people around; as soon as one imagined one could say what one wanted, it turned out to be what the *new* tyrants wanted; and they had nothing to say. These striplings, while richer in words and gestures than earlier generations, displayed the whole trivial frivolity of any *jeunesse doree*, its habit of taking its own boredom for pessimism, its irresponsibility for boldness, and its impotence and unreliability for freedom and an urge to action.¹¹⁷

Brecht understood expressionism as a bourgeois art movement on its last legs. He longed for the opportunity to produce something new – "to mould the simple darkness of life –

First Act, Third Scene

The niche at the right becomes bright.
A ragged man sitting at a table covered with bottles.

THE TIPPLER. I am dreaming
The hall becomes dark.
ALEXANDER enters.
THE TIPPLER hands him the glass.
ALEXANDER drinks.
THE TIPPLER. You are starving!
ALEXANDER looks up.
THE TIPPLER. Brother!
Embraces him.
THE INNKEEPER enters. Money!
THE TIPPLER searches in his jacket.
THE INNKEEPER. Six bottles
ALEXANDER. I want work
THE INNKEEPER. As a waiter!
Points to the hall, goes.
LISSI enters. Men!
THE TIPPLER. You are sick
LISSI. I avenge myself
Goes.
ALEXANDER stretches out his arms. Love!!

Walter Hasenclever, *Humanity*, in *An Anthology of German Expressionist Drama: A Prelude to the Absurd*, Walter H. Sokel, ed. (Anchor Books, 1963).

¹¹⁷ Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Diaries 1920-1922*, Herta Ramthun, ed., John Willett, trans. (St. Martin's Press, 1979), p.8, emphasis in the original.

tough and servile, cruel and realistic – with a *love* of life.”¹¹⁸ His first play, *Baal*, was a parody of expressionist drama which articulated his opinion that the nihilistic impulse of expressionism would eventually be its undoing. Baal, the principle character, is so self-absorbed and obsessed with feeling that he uses up and discards every one in his life, eventually dying alone and miserable.¹¹⁹ Brecht had no sympathy for the expressionist approach to the world.

He was not the only one. Brecht’s rejection of the ethos of expressionism was increasingly common among the most creative artists of his generation for whom expressionism had lost both its creative verve and cultural relevance. These young artists initiated a new artistic movement against the subjectivism of the expressionists. In 1923, the museum director Gustav Friedrich Hartlaub sent out a notice to artists and art dealers announcing his newest exhibition:

I am interested in bringing together representative works of those artists who in the last ten years have been neither impressionistically relaxed nor expressionistically abstract, who have devoted themselves exclusively neither to external sense impressions, nor to pure inner construction. I wish to exhibit those artists who have remained unswervingly faithful to positive palpable reality, or who have become faithful to it once more.¹²⁰

He referred to the works of these artists as representing “Die Neue Sachlichkeit” (or “The New Objectivity”). Though other labels for the trend existed, this one took hold.

The New Objectivity was less a coherent movement than a trend, a designation that included all those who sought a return to realism in the arts. An outside observer of the movement could discern two general New Objectivity groupings: the naturalists and the Verists. In 1922, as New Objectivity was beginning to bloom, Gustav Friedrich

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.8, emphasis in the original.

¹¹⁹ For a discussion of *Baal*, see Kellner, “Expressionist Literature and the Dream of the New Man.”

¹²⁰ As quoted in Steve Plumb, *Neue Sachlichkeit 1918-33: Unity and Diversity of an Art Movement* (Rodopi, 2006), p.40.

Hartlaub articulated the two wings of the movement based on their aesthetic concerns and their corresponding political values:

I see a right and a left wing. The first, so conservative as to be equal to Classicism, rooted in that which is timeless, is seeking once again to sanctify that which is healthy, corporeal, sculptural, through pure drawing from nature, possibly even exaggerating the earthly, well-rounded element, after so much fantasy and chaos. It regards Michelangelo, Ingres, Genelli, and even the Nazarenes as its main authority. The other wing, incandescently contemporary in its lack of belief in art, born rather from a denial of art, is attempting to expose chaos, the true feeling of our days, by means of a primitive obsession with assessment, a nervous obsession with the exposure of the self.¹²¹

According to Hartlaub's schema, artists of the Neo-classical conservative wing include Carlo Mense, Georg Schrimpf and Alexander Kanoldt: such artists often chose images of the countryside and its inhabitants as their subjects, such as Schrimpf's 1923 "Swineherd," and simple still life paintings of orderly objects, such as Kanoldt's 1926 "Still Life against a Blue Background." The left wing is exemplified by Otto Dix and Georg Grosz, whose paintings of urban life visually take the underlying logic or psychology of the subject to its grotesque extreme. For example, Grosz's 1926 painting, "The Pillars of Society" depicts a grotesque caricature of an Academician, a social democratic parliamentarian, a journalist, and a clergyman as manipulative, stupid, and cruel. In the background houses burn and the military is mobilized.¹²² As Grosz wrote in 1925, "The Verist holds up a mirror to the faces of his contemporaries. My drawings and paintings were done as an act of protest; I was trying by means of my work to convince the world that it is ugly, sick and hypocritical."¹²³ Though the work of the Verists in particular was characterized by extreme caricature, its unsentimental depiction of its

¹²¹ *Ibid.*

¹²² See the discussion of this painting in Ralph Jentsch, *George Grosz: Berlin – New York*. Texts by Enrico Crispolti and Philippe Dagen. (Skira, 2008), p.142.

¹²³ As quoted in Sergiusz Michalski, *New Objectivity: Painting, Graphic Art and Photography in Weimar Germany 1919-1933* (Taschen, 1994), pp. 27-28.

subjects was common to all those on the left wing of New Objectivity. While the expressionists focused on the irreducible subjectivity of human experience, the left wing of New Objectivity sought to return to a focus on objective standards of truth and the commonality of everyday experience.¹²⁴ The grand goal of expressionist revolution was replaced with the practical one of resistance: the scale of the struggle against the capitalist totality was made comprehensible.

The left wing desired a return to realism, but not realism for realism's sake: indeed, the goal was not to reflect reality exactly as reality appeared, but to find the objective political or social truth contained within everyday moments of "reality." These artists sought to lift the veil of propriety from their subjects in order to depict them in their natural state: scars, warts, wrinkles and all.¹²⁵ The subject matter consisted of images from everyday life in the cities and the countryside. The view from one's window was a popular subject of the painters and photographers of the movement. Prostitutes, workers, industrial factories, subway trams, buildings, veterans, politicians, farmers, and fields – these were all subjects commonly depicted.¹²⁶

At its core, the left branch of New Objectivity was about gaining the necessary distance from reality in order to make intellectual judgments about it. The viewer or audience was encouraged to think rather than feel, and to confront directly the material

¹²⁴ Though it would be historically inaccurate to view Neue Sachlichkeit as a cohesive project, it is possible to identify key themes and trends among the art commonly identified with the movement.

¹²⁵ For example, Otto Dix's 1927/28 triptych painting, "Metropolis" depicts the odd juxtapositions common in everyday Weimar life: in the first panel, two war veterans (one dead or asleep, the other a double-amputee) are passed on the street by a group of grotesque prostitutes in fancy dresses and mink stoles. The second panel depicts a bourgeois dance party; the third, another group of prostitutes, ignoring the homeless at their feet. In three related images presented in the religious form of the triptych, Dix communicates the vast divide between the social classes of Weimar and the manner in which individuals will do anything possible to escape their reality, even if just for one night. See Michalski's discussion of the painting in *New Objectivity*, pp. 54, 59.

¹²⁶ See Michalski; John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period: The New Sobriety, 1917-1933*. (Pantheon Books, 1978).

circumstances that underlay his or her existence. In contrast, the Neo-Classicists of New Objectivity sought a return to realism in order to celebrate the beauty of German life.

The portraits of the Munich artists in particular are reminiscent of “the early paintings of the Madonna:”¹²⁷ indeed, Schrimpf and others were influenced by the work of Henri Rousseau, characterized by an elegant, post-impressionistic primitivism.¹²⁸ As the author Oskar Maria Graf wrote in 1923,

What is it then that gives these pictures, this simplicity, this quiet power, these mothers, children, animals and landscapes such a deep magic? . . . Let’s say it straight out for once and despite its being spoilt and distorted – let’s simply say it: it is the German element that works in the nature of this artistry, of these pictures; it is that quality which rings out so ever-present, eternally fresh, and reaching the uttermost depths of one’s soul, as in a poem by Claudius. It is the indestructible power of the German disposition.¹²⁹

There was a definite sense, then, in which the Neo-Classist wing of New Objectivity had a nationalistic bent that matched the social criticism of the left wing of the movement. New Objectivity was, unlike expressionism, inherently political. It makes sense, then, that Hartlaub, one of the renowned art critics of the time, would classify the artists of the movement along political lines. Of course Hartlaub’s schema is not exhaustive, nor does it accurately capture all of the artists of the movement. Yet it is interesting to note that the few artists that were either allowed to keep their teaching positions or given positions under National Socialism – Schrimpf, Kanoldt, Franz Radziwill, Albert Henrich, Georg Siebert, Werner Peiner, Bernhard Dörries, Franz Lenk, etc. -- exclusively fall in the right hand column of Hartlaub’s model.¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Michalski, p.73.

¹²⁸ See Michalski.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.74.

¹³⁰ See Michalski.

In 1925, another art critic, Franz Roh, developed a broad outline articulating the distinctions between Expressionism and New Objectivity.¹³¹ Though the distinctions he makes are most easily applied to painting, they can be applied in modified form to other modes of expression:

Schema

Expressionism	Post-Expressionism
Ecstatic objects	Plain objects
Many religious themes	Few religious themes
The stifled object	The explanatory object
Rhythmic	Representative
Arousing	Engrossing
Excessive	Rather strict, purist
Dynamic	Static
Loud	Quiet
Summary	Sustained
Obvious (close-range image)	Obvious and enigmatic (close- and long-range image)
Forward moving	Also flowing backward
Large size	Large size and many-columned
Monumental	Miniature
Warm	Cool to cold

¹³¹ As quoted in Plumb, pp. 44-45.

Thick colouration	Thin layer of colour
Roughened	Smoothed, dislodged
Like uncut stone	Like polished metal
Work process preserved (leaving traces)	Work process effaced (pure objectification)
Expressive deformation of objects	Harmonic cleansing of objects
Rich in diagonals	Rectangular to the frame
Often acute-angled	Parallel
Working against edges of image	Fixed within edges of image
Primitive	Civilized

Brecht's affinity with New Objectivity is clearly expressed in even his earliest poems, such as "The Legend of the Dead Soldier." Written in 1927, the last of his "Ten Poems from a Reader for Those Who Live in Cities" summarizes the critical attitude explicitly:

When I speak to you
Coldly and impersonally
Using the driest words
Without looking at you
(I seemingly fail to recognize you
In your particular nature and difficulty)

I speak to you merely
Like reality itself
(Sober, not to be bribed by your particular nature
Tired of your difficulty)
Which in my view you seem not to recognise.¹³²

¹³² In Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, John Willett and Ralph Manheim, eds. (Routledge, 1976).

The similarities between Brecht's aesthetic and that of the larger New Objectivity movement are clearly visible here.

It is interesting that, in spite of the obvious "objective" tendencies of his work, Brecht never considered himself a member of any artistic movement, including New Objectivity. In a fragmentary essay of 1928 he wrote,

of course i'm not in favour of that ghastly flabby lack of matter-of-factness that alone keeps the present-day bourgeois theatre on its legs i find these people's lack of matter-of-factness ludicrous but about your 'new matter-of-factness' i'm bitter i suppose it's bound to come it's already there in painting it'll have to come in the theatre. . . *sachlichkeit* will come and it'll be a good thing when it does* till then nothing more can be done but this quite necessary and inevitable step forward will be a reactionary affair that's what i'm getting at *neue sachlichkeit* is reactionary. . . .¹³³

On this issue, the Marxist literary critic and contemporary of Brecht, Hans Mayer, wrote, "Brecht was actually one of the forerunners of this movement (New Objectivity); yet, even though he agreed with its doctrines and creative methods, he could not bring himself to expand his interest and join the writers of this movement. Brecht never became an integral part of Neue Sachlichkeit. . . ." ¹³⁴ Mayer argues this is because, as with expressionism, Brecht believed New Objectivity to be a bourgeois art movement.¹³⁵ Whatever he may have felt, Brecht's work speaks for itself: even in the essay quoted above, he writes in the manner characteristic of New Objectivity, without punctuation or capitalization.¹³⁶

His plays also reveal his "Objective" tendencies. In the performing arts, the artists of the New Objectivity movement utilized new technology and combined multiple

¹³³ The footnote says "*i hope so by Lenin." Quoted in Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, John Willett, ed. and trans. (Hill and Wang, 1964), p.17.

¹³⁴ Mayer, p.73.

¹³⁵ See Mayer.

¹³⁶ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*.

forms of media in order to produce new works, which eschewed emotion in favor of objective reflection. Erwin Piscator's Agitprop theatre of the time was innovative in its use of projections, film, music, and narration to educate the audience according to Marxist principles. Musicians of the movement, such as Ernst Toch, Max Butting, Paul Hindemith, Hans Eisler, and Kurt Weill collaborated with playwrights to produce anti-culinary musical-theatre: the music and the drama were each given equal weight in the performance, with neither one being subsumed by the other.¹³⁷ The result was not opera or drama with music, but a strange new hybrid in which the music and drama were separate yet equal elements of performance that often contradicted one another in mood or theme. The resulting disconnect between the music and the drama forced a critical distance to emerge between the performance and the audience. Rather than consume a work in which the elements complemented one another, producing a cohesive whole easy to digest – what Brecht and others referred to as “culinary theatre” – the innovators of the movement sought to make their work difficult to digest, and hence, difficult to forget.¹³⁸

In this context, Brecht fit right in. At the time Brecht arrived in Berlin, Piscator was one of the principle innovators of New Objectivity theatre. According to Martin Esslin,

[Piscator's] aim was a theatre that would be political, technological – and epic. By the latter term he meant a drama which would be utterly different from the conventional “well-made” play: a kind of illustrated lecture or newspaper report on a political or social theme, loosely constructed in the shape of a serious revue: a sequence of musical numbers, sketches, film, declamation, sometimes liked by one or several narrators.¹³⁹

¹³⁷ Bryan Gilliam, ed. *Music and Performance during the Weimar Republic* (Cambridge, 1994).

¹³⁸ Esslin, *Brecht*; Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period*; Gilliam.

¹³⁹ Esslin, *Brecht*, p.23.

Indeed, Piscator's 1924 production of *Flags* was the first play to be billed as an "epic drama." Brecht was a great admirer of Piscator's work, acknowledging that "the theatre's conversion to politics was Piscator's achievement, without which the Augsburger's theatre [Brecht's epic theatre] would hardly be conceivable."¹⁴⁰ Yet Brecht took Piscator's idea of the epic to a higher level, both theoretically and technically. Brecht later described the theoretical differences between his work – here, specifically referring to *Die Mutter* (*The Mother*) (1933) -- and Piscator's agitprop work in this way:

Whereas the agit-prop theatre's task was to stimulate immediate action (e.g. a strike against a wage-cut) and was liable to be overtaken by changes in the political situation, *Die Mutter* was meant to go further and teach the tactics of the class war. Moreover play and production showed real people together with a process of development, a genuine story running through the play, such as the agit-prop theatre normally lacks. Features of the agit-prop theatre were interwoven with legitimate forms of the classical German theatre (that of the youthful Schiller, Lenz, Goethe, and Büchner).¹⁴¹

As the theory differed, so did the form. Technically, Piscator emphasized the production over the story-line or script, while Brecht shifted the focus back to the narrative. Brecht added lyricism where Piscator had provided only facts. Further, Brecht collaborated with musicians like Kurt Weill and Hans Eisler to produce works in which the music and the script were inter-dependent. Finally, Brecht created a fully formed theory of the epic theatre to complement its practice. Drawing on the work of Piscator and other innovators of the time, and grounded in the aesthetics of New Objectivity, Brecht created a mode of drama that transcended its moment of origin.¹⁴²

Brecht and the Epic Theatre

¹⁴⁰ Bertolt Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, John Willett, trans. (Methuen and Co Ltd., 1965), p.69.

¹⁴¹ As quoted in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, pp. 61-62.

¹⁴² Esslin, *Brecht*.

Though the epic theatre was not fully theorized until Brecht's time in exile, its origins can be found in Brecht's plays of the mid-late 1920s: *A Man's a Man*, *The Threepenny Opera*, and *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. Brecht further developed his epic style in the *Lehrstücke* of 1929-1933. The program notes of these plays are the beginnings of Brecht's attempts to theorize the epic theatre, the best example being "The Modern Theatre is the Epic Theatre," the title he gave to the *Mahagonny* notes.¹⁴³

Indeed, though Brecht's artistic work included poetry and prose, his theorization and innovations in theatrical form, content, and style, forged his legacy as that of a dramatist above all. The formulation of the *Verfremdungseffekt* (Estrangement-effect), the theorization of the importance of narrative techniques, and the rejection of catharsis in favor of critique are all elements that have contributed to his shattering effect upon the classical dramaturgical forms and to the establishment of a new Brechtian mode of theatrical production and experience. When understood as a method of practice, Brecht's dramaturgy bares a striking resemblance to Hannah Arendt's conception of politics: within the bounds of theatrical space, individuals present themselves publicly, interacting with others through speech and action in order to exercise their human capacity to engage a community of unique equals.¹⁴⁴ Indeed, Brecht revolutionized the theatre by reconstituting the relationship between form and content, theory and action, and actors and audience.

In line with the objectives of his artistic contemporaries, Brecht's over-arching goal was to construct a dramaturgy that would provide both the actors and the audience

¹⁴³ For the program notes see Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*.

¹⁴⁴ See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd Edition (The University of Chicago Press, 1998).

with the tools necessary to adopt a critical attitude towards the world both inside and outside the theatrical context. To impact the actors involved in this way required Brecht to focus on every aspect of the theatrical experience to conform to the overall shift in theatrical function. Brecht defined the critical questions for himself as follows: “How to found dramatics of contradictions and dialectical processes – a dramaturgy, not an objective theory. How should the new positive critical attitude of the new audience be induced by the producers?”¹⁴⁵ As he says, “The question implies its own answer. . . . Inadequate in itself, qua theatre, it must strive to alter its surroundings. From now on it could only hope to form its images of the world if it lent a hand in forming the world itself. . . .”¹⁴⁶ Through the construction of a self-contained dramaturgy, Brecht sought to represent the contradictions inherent in society in their starkest form in order to induce reflection. He rejected the conventional theatre’s goal of connecting with the audience members through empathy, seeking instead to actively engage the audience by inducing reflection. The new function of the theatre was to promote critique and judgment, not to pacify the audience with a purely fantastical anesthetic. As Brecht once remarked to a journalist who felt the dramatic events Brecht staged were too complicated to be understood, “I present (on stage) merely what happens in order to let the audience itself think. That’s the reason I need an attentive audience that knows how to observe and enjoys having its intellect challenged as in a game.”¹⁴⁷ Aware of the quizzical attitude held by critics and audience members alike, Brecht transformed the theatre into a political space in which critique and reflection would provide a new form of entertainment.

¹⁴⁵ From a speech given in 1951, quoted in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 240.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

¹⁴⁷ As quoted in Mayer, p. 61.

Brecht sought to plant the seeds of discontent in the minds of the citizens who filled his theatre by elucidating what they already knew but could not articulate: the existence of the material constraints which prevent the establishment of a truly human society composed of individuals celebrated for their uniqueness. By holding a mirror up to the audience, through which it is able to see the continuous and overwhelming character of social injustice, Brecht hoped to foster the desire for revolutionary social change. Brecht's faith in the power of human agency and his adherence to the principle of change directly impacted the way he constructed his dramaturgy. His project, with its search for emancipatory practice, is best understood as Brecht himself understood it: as a method, not as a doctrine or as an objective theory. As Brecht well knew, doctrines and theories are dead ends, promoting nothing more than obedience and adherence to man-made naturalized rules. Even the Marxism found in his plays functions in an unorthodox way. Instead of dictating the economic laws on which capitalism is based, Brecht focuses on revealing the agency that exists in constructing such laws, and on the agency needed to overcome them.¹⁴⁸ As Brecht himself said, what he seeks to teach is the act of teaching, itself. And so he devised his dramaturgy -- a bundle of techniques for producer, actor and audience that instructs in the arts of estrangement, critical thinking, and rational assessment. This is the Brechtian method.

The Actor's Method – Producing Distance through Estrangement

The conventional method of bourgeois acting, most comprehensively developed by the Russian theatre director Constantin Stanislavski, is based on the principle that the actor's goal is to "become" his character. In this vein, actors are taught to abandon their

¹⁴⁸ See the section, "The Philosopher's explanation of Marxism" in Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 36.

own sense of self and to uncritically adopt the experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the characters they portray. Stanislavski instructs his actors as follows:

Inside of you, parallel to the line of physical actions, you have an unbroken line of emotions verging on the subconscious. . . . Moreover you can speak for your character in your own person. . . . Bring yourself to the point of taking hold of a new role concretely, as if it were your own life. When you sense that real kinship to your part. . . your newly created being will become soul of your soul, flesh of your flesh.¹⁴⁹

This conventional method of acting places the emphasis on the subconscious instincts of the actor:¹⁵⁰ he is taught to suppress his rational criticisms of both his character and his character's actions, for they impede the process of identification by creating distance that must be overcome.

Brecht argues against Stanislavski's "naturalist" dramaturgy on the grounds that it derives from, and feeds into, the bourgeois culture that privileges stasis and supports the status quo. Stanislavski's principle dramaturgical tool is the development of empathy, both in the heart of the actor for the character he portrays and within the hearts of the audience members for the characters they observe. Brecht argues that the more empathy the actors and audience members feel, the less able they are to critique what they are being shown. The result is that they take the suffering they observe on stage to be natural. As Brecht's interlocutor, the Philosopher, says to the Dramaturg in *The*

¹⁴⁹ Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor's Handbook*, Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, ed., and trans. (Theatre Arts Books, 1963), p. 12. Stanislavski always placed the emphasis on the individual actor and his individual character. This is exemplified in the manner in which he instructs his actors in the art of observation: he advises them to "observe the facial expression, the look of the eye, the tone of the voice, in order to comprehend the state of mind of the persons with whom they talk" (p. 104). Brecht's instructions to his actors on observation are quite different, for he encourages them to observe people in their relation to others and to observe people in the context of their social environment: "In order to observe/ One must learn how to compare." The same individual, he says, will act differently within different contexts due to the difference in expectations that arise in varying social situations. See his poem, "Speech to Danish Working-Class Actors on the Art of Observation" in Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, pp. 233-238.

¹⁵⁰ See Stanislavski, pp. 149-150.

Messingkauf Dialogues, “The point of view you chose for your representations made genuine criticism impossible. People identified themselves with you and came to terms with the world. You were what you were; the world stayed as it was.”¹⁵¹ In the naturalist theatre of Stanislavski, the desire for realism encourages the dramatists to focus exclusively on the construction of familiar characters and situations; the audience accepts these as natural, and focuses on the actions of the individuals portrayed, unaware that in doing so they are tacitly accepting and validating the existence of the status quo.

Stanislavski saw his method of acting as capable of “transmitting the universal hopes and tribulations of man.”¹⁵² He explains: “The power of this method lies in the fact that it was not. . . invented. . . it is based on the laws of nature.” Furthermore, he says, “My system is for all nations. All peoples possess the same human nature: it manifests itself in varying ways, but my system is no deterrent to that.”¹⁵³

Brecht took a much different view of naturalism in general, and of Stanislavski in particular. As Brecht argues, Stanislavski’s method of acting did not assume conventional status by accident, nor is that status due to the method’s timeless universalism.¹⁵⁴ Brecht’s critique of Stanislavski mirrors the critique of expressionism he expressed a decade earlier. Such obsession with subjectivity and emotion encourages a level of self-absorption bordering on solipsism. As with expressionism, Brecht argues that Stanislavski’s success results from the fact that his method is a reflection of the

¹⁵¹ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p.27

¹⁵² Stanislavski, p. 10.

¹⁵³ Stanislavski, p. 160. Note the opposition between Stanislavski’s faith in the permanence of his method and Brecht’s understanding of the contingent nature of his own.

¹⁵⁴ Brecht does acknowledge the progressive character in Stanislavski: “When Stanislavski was at the height of his powers, the (Russian) Revolution broke out. They (the revolutionaries) treated his theatre with the greatest respect. Twenty years after the Revolution it was like a museum where you could still study the way of life of social classes that had meantime vanished from the scene” (Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 23). Like all closed systems, Stanislavski’s dramaturgy could not change with the times. Progressive in its origins, it has since become an obstacle to progress.

bourgeois worldview, which privileges the thoughts and emotions of individuals over both material circumstances and group relations. In both cases, Brecht's remedy is the same: to reject the naïve naturalism of bourgeois culture in the name of a more accurate, more useful naturalism.

Stanislavski's method of acting is based in the identification and establishment of the "through line of action" – the mapping of each character's intentions, both as they progress from moment to moment, and as they develop over the course of the play, all of which are aimed at achieving a single objective. It treats individuals as if they were objects to be "figured out" rather than as subjects whose motivations are illusive. The implication of Stanislavski's fixation on intention is that all of a character's actions and decisions can be easily understood, even predicted, if one is able to discern that character's intentions. Indeed, the Stanislavskian theatre resembles a grand social science experiment in which the behavior of individuals has been deconstructed down to its smallest unit or momentary intention. All that remains is for the individuals' characters to react against one another as if they were billiard balls, with each character's trajectory of movement mapped out in advance. There is no alternative result given the intentions of the characters, for in Stanislavski's world, intentions translate directly to actions. This is not to say that each character achieves his objectives; however, it is to say that the uncertainty that exists for each character derives from the interaction that results between the conflicting intentions of the other characters. As the characters' intentions are the same from night to night, the action consistently works itself out on the stage in the same way each time, producing identical results for each theatrical performance. Indeed, Stanislavski's methods call to mind Arendt's criticisms of the

behavioral sciences, of which Stanislavski's theatre seems to be a reflection: according to Arendt, the behavioral sciences "aim to reduce man as a whole, in all his activities, to the level of a conditioned and behaving animal."¹⁵⁵ This animal is exactly what Stanislavski captures and presents within his theatre.

The larger Western theatre tradition, which began with Aristotle and continues through to Stanislavski, encourages the uncritical acceptance of the protagonist's tragic end (when such an end occurs), further reflecting the view that socially determined processes are really the result of inescapable fate. Unquestioningly assuming the posture of the social system in which it operates, this conventional theatre tradition is capable of offering its spectators only a cleansing feeling of catharsis, at best, and at worst, a feeling of resignation. The truth of the modern age, that "nothing human can possibly lie outside the powers of humanity, and such tragedies have human causes,"¹⁵⁶ is lost, as the concepts of empathy and fate rule the day. Even bourgeois playwrights like Shaw, who choose to explore the ugly contradictions that exist just underneath the social order, offer critique that does not escape the reality of the social order in which their characters operate. Hence, critical bourgeois theatre resigns itself to a world in which true communication is impossible, alienation inescapable, and autonomy unattainable. The perhaps unintended result of such drama is more often than not a feeling of helplessness and cynicism in its audience, and the dismissal of any notion that human agency is meaningful in the modern world.

¹⁵⁵ Arendt, *The Human Condition*, p. 45.

¹⁵⁶ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p.32. Brecht argues that the Aristotelian view of tragedy is outdated, but should not (yet) be abandoned. There could be hope for the tragic form if the notion of tragedy could be updated for modern times: "The ancients thought that the object of tragedy was to arouse pity and terror. That could still be a desirable object, if pity were taken to mean pity for people and terror of people, and if the serious theatre accordingly tried to help eliminate those circumstances which make people fear and pity one another. For man's fate has become man himself" (*The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 31).

In a situation in which the conventional dramaturgy is socially uncritical and politically hamstrung, Brecht offers a different method of acting to his performers, which is meant to maximize their feelings of power and agency, in order to help others do the same: “Our critical attitude springs from the fact that we have developed great faith in humanity’s powers of work and invention, and have grown skeptical of the idea that everything must remain as it is. . . .”¹⁵⁷ To maximize the actors’ and audience members’ experience of their own agency, Brecht rejects the conventional goal of annihilating emotional distance between the actor and the character, and instead seeks to create it.¹⁵⁸ His acting method is defined by the systematic adoption of techniques that produce estrangement from the characters portrayed, such as

1. Transposition into the third person.
2. Transposition into the past.
3. Speaking the stage directions out loud.¹⁵⁹

In contrast to the conventional demand for identification, Brecht’s method encourages the actor to see his character as a separate individual whose words he quotes and whose actions he demonstrates.¹⁶⁰ This technique of “third-person acting,” or epic drama, produces the main form of distance or estrangement. Brecht’s admonition to transpose the action into the past amounts to the addition of another level of estrangement: here the actor is encouraged to demonstrate the actions of the separate individual as if they have already happened. This technique is based on the principle reflected in Freud’s model of psychoanalysis: that from the act of narration, or telling, distance necessarily results.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁷ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 53.

¹⁵⁸ See Walter Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, Anna Bostock, trans., with an Introduction by Stanley Mitchell (NLB, 1973).

¹⁵⁹ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 138.

¹⁶⁰ Frederic Jameson, *Brecht and Method* (Verso, 1998), p.53.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

Here the actor's re-telling of past events is not the only possible telling of the action, nor should it be seen as the first.¹⁶² The more conscious the actor is of the alternative ways in which he could re-tell the tale, the more distance he adds between himself and the character, and the better his performance. The last injunction Brecht offers, to read the stage directions out loud, provides a third level of estrangement between character and actor, by providing a continual reminder to the actor that he is acting in a play and that his character's actions have been predetermined by the playwright. The actor is thus made hyper-aware of the historical nature of the world and of the situation in which his character functions. He can therefore become critical, not only of his character's actions, but of the structure in which he is made to act, and of the playwright's decisions as author.

The Brechtian actor is encouraged to demonstrate the decisions he has made as an actor. He is taught to show the audience that for every choice he has made, and for every one his character makes, an alternate choice could have been made. As Brecht says, "People ought never to be treated as if they can only act one way; they could act differently. Our houses have fallen about our ears; they could be standing."¹⁶³ This demonstration helps the actor and the audience to realize that agency is contained within every action, and that that agency could eventually be used to deconstruct the system in which the action is contained

In the context of Brecht's theatre, the master-class constitutes the fulfillment of the actor's method, through the continuous application of epic acting techniques: undertaken without the presence of either an audience or a director, it is a never-ending

¹⁶² Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 194.

¹⁶³ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 44.

rehearsal in which the actors continually alternate roles.¹⁶⁴ In this context, free from the material constraints of time and money, and from the demands of outsiders and managers, the actors are able to explore, critique, and judge the characters under study for as long as they desire. As the actors trade roles, eventually returning to their original role assignments, they are able to gain critical distance, not simply from one character and his choices, but from the entire group of characters – from the totality of social relations. This allows them to better understand the social constraints and possibilities affecting each character's actions and to witness the ways in which the social structure acts to pit individuals and groups against one another, destroying the continuity of the social group as a whole. Though ultimately impractical as income-producing theatre, the master-class represents for Brecht the eminently practical acting process, for it privileges the acts of social interaction and reflection.

It becomes clear when viewed within its political context that Brecht's method of acting is meant to shatter both the conventional mode of theatre and the bourgeois worldview that it reflects.¹⁶⁵ Brecht's rejection of the conventional method of acting amounts to a rejection of the system from which it emerged. His acting techniques are tools that can be used to counteract the modern tendency towards resignation and defeat through the development of critical distance and rational judgment. As Jameson argues, Brecht's message is that "we are all actors, and that acting is an inescapable dimension of everyday life."¹⁶⁶ Utilizing the techniques that Brecht prescribes for his actors within the context of the everyday would provide us with the distance necessary to think critically about the decisions we make and the actions we engage in in our own lives. Attempting

¹⁶⁴ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p. 63, 113.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p.,25.

to see our “self” as a character with which we have been taught to identify – a socially constructed description of reified characteristics – rather than as a natural, autonomous entity will allow us to reevaluate our place in the world and the world’s impact on us. Re-telling our lives as if they were historical tales will allow us to see them in their proper historical context, and this, combined with our recognition that they could have occurred differently, will remind us simultaneously of the agency contained in our every decision and of the social constraints on that agency.

The adoption of the Brechtian actor’s mindset will offer us a fresh perspective on many aspects of our lives that we uncritically take for granted. At a minimum, we may gain some small pleasure from the newness that comes from viewing our lives as an outsider would. Yet the potential for a revolution in subjectivity also exists. Once we are able to be critical of our own lives and of our own experiences, we gain the ability to pass informed judgment on our fellow citizens and on the broader world around us, judgment being the first step to remaking that world in a conscious, pro-active way.

The Spectator’s Method – Critical Observation

Action consists of two parts, both of which are equally important in the relationships that exist between people: presentation and judgment. When we are not presenting ourselves to the world, we are observing the presentations of others and making judgments about them. Brecht’s goal within his theatrical method is to force his theatrical audience to become engaged in the act of judgment: he compels them to think critically about what they are observing on stage with the hope that they will carry their critical attitude into the outside world.

Just as he rejects the conventional methodology of the actor, with all of its bourgeois origins and assumptions, Brecht also rejects the conventional understanding of the function of the theatrical audience. In the capitalist system, theatre is meant to produce entertainment for entertainment's sake.¹⁶⁷ Within "low" culture, theatre involves the pleasing of the senses. Within "high" culture, theatre as art is meant to provide not only sensual, but also intellectual pleasure. In either case, the audience takes on the role of the consumer, leading Brecht to describe conventional theatrical modes as those of "culinary theatre:" "theatre which produces plays as though they were goods to be consumed by the audience, digested, deposited, and then forgotten."¹⁶⁸ The culinary audience extracts its pleasure from the emotional identification it feels with the characters portrayed; the more the spectator is able to assume the position of someone else, the more he enjoys himself and the better his theatrical experience. In Brecht's words,

The dramatic theatre's spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too – Just like me – It's only natural – It'll never change – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are inescapable – That's great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world – I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.¹⁶⁹

The audience as consumer accepts the theatrical action unquestioningly; neither does it judge the character's decisions, nor does it question the "naturalness" of the social circumstances. The audience's focus is at all times on the character – but on his feelings and his subjective experience, not on his objective function within the drama.

Brecht forcefully rejects this conception of the audience as consumer, replacing it with the new conception of the audience as active witness and judge. The disparate

¹⁶⁷ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 181.

¹⁶⁸ Mayer, p. 139.

¹⁶⁹ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p.71.

elements of his dramaturgy all combine into a “dissonant clarity”¹⁷⁰ meant to draw the audience out of its comfortable role as consumer and to compel it to assess the events and characters portrayed. Before the audience is asked to judge, however, it is presented with the tools it needs to think critically about what it is seeing, so that its evaluation will be based in thought as opposed to emotion or to some general notion of idealist ethics.

In order for the audience to be able to think critically about the theatrical action, it must first be prevented from identifying too closely with the characters portrayed. “If empathy makes something ordinary of a special event, [estrangement] makes something special of an ordinary one.”¹⁷¹ The estrangement-effect (*Verfremdungseffekt*) is used as the principle method by which distance is created between the audience and the characters.¹⁷² Here “third-person acting” is combined with other elements – music, costumes, makeup, lighting, and signs – to produce a theatrical world which the audience is compelled to confront rationally. The shock effect, produced when Brecht presents a normal line or scenario punctuated by an unexpected ending, rouses the spectator from his comfortable position as observer. Just when the spectator begins to feel somewhat relaxed again, that comfort is again shattered by another shock. The quotation of lines – and sometimes of entire scenes – taken from classical drama underlines the obvious disjunction between the lines’ function within its original context and their new function within Brecht’s play.

¹⁷⁰ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p.71.

¹⁷¹ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 76.

¹⁷² Brecht describes the Estrangement-effect as follows: “The achievement of the [estrangement-effect] constitutes something utterly ordinary, recurrent; it is just a widely-practiced way of drawing one’s own or someone else’s attention to a thing, and it can be seen in education as also in business conferences of one sort or another. The [estrangement-effect] consists in turning the object of which one is to be made aware, to which one’s attention is to be drawn from something ordinary, familiar, immediately accessible, into something peculiar, striking, and unexpected.” See Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 143.

Brecht leaves his production rough – unfinished – so that the choices made by the actors, the director, and all those who helped to produce the drama will be left clearly visible.¹⁷³ This is to ensure that the audience never forgets that it is watching a play, so that it will always be left in a critical frame of mind. Every choice is left visible because Brecht wants the audience to critique every choice. His drama is filled with scenes of judgment and scenes of pedagogy¹⁷⁴ because he wants the audience to judge, not only the specific scenes being portrayed, but the principle of judgment, the principle of pedagogy.¹⁷⁵ Brecht also fills his drama with scenes that highlight the contradictions inherent in modern life: those between proletariat and capitalist, need and desire, and the possibility of establishing a just world and the necessity of functioning within an unjust one.¹⁷⁶

If his theatre is effective, the audience will be transformed from the culinary spectator described above into an audience engaged in action:¹⁷⁷

The epic theatre's spectator says: I'd never have thought it – That's not the way – That's extraordinary, hardly believable – It's got to stop – The sufferings of this man appall me, because they are unnecessary – That's great art: nothing obvious in it – I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh.¹⁷⁸

Such a spectator will no longer be able to watch conventional drama in the old manner.¹⁷⁹

Though he will still take pleasure in the old drama, his pleasure will be of a qualitatively different sort: where before, it was a product of sensory experience, now it will emerge

¹⁷³ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p.11.

¹⁷⁴ Mayer, p. 43. See for example Brecht's *The Life of Galileo* and *The Mother*.

¹⁷⁵ Jameson, *Brecht and Method*, p.121.

¹⁷⁶ See for example *Saint Joan of the Stockyards* and *The Good Person of Szechwan*.

¹⁷⁷ Brecht recognizes that his method will necessarily divide the audience in two: there will be those who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and who therefore have no need for critical skepticism, and those who have every interest in changing the current system. He is writing for the latter.

¹⁷⁸ Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 71.

¹⁷⁹ Mayer, p.44.

from the spectator's active engagement with the drama – from the activity of critique.¹⁸⁰

The Brechtian spectator sits in judgment on everything presented: the playwright's presentation, the decisions of both the actor and the character, and the relationships as they function within the given social situation, with its inherent inequality and injustice. Brecht transforms the spectator into an expert.¹⁸¹ All of the choices presented must be validated, the actors held accountable, and the alternatives considered. Through Brecht's theatrical method, the agency of the characters on stage becomes visible, as do the constraints on that agency. At the same time, the audience confronts and accepts its own agency, as it is both instructed and encouraged to develop its own views on the situations presented to it and to act upon those views in the outside world.¹⁸² Indeed, Brecht saw his theatre as a place – both physical and symbolic – of great empowerment:

In this new theatre I shall be free to transform my audience into kings. Not only into the semblance of kings, but into the real thing. Into statesmen, thinkers and engineers. What an audience I'll have! What goes on in the world I shall bring before their judgment seat. And what a distinguished, useful and celebrated place my theatre will be if it is to become a laboratory for this great mass of working people. I too shall act according to the classic principle: Alter the world; it needs it.¹⁸³

Through his theatre Brecht believed he could succeed in convincing people of their abilities as human beings: to take power over their lives, to critically judge the world around them, and to alter that world in ways that contribute to the empowerment of all.

To understand Brecht's dramaturgical method in a political fashion means to consider its applicability to the world outside the theatre. We can begin to do this by acknowledging one of the principle goals of the method as it works within the theatre: to

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 89.

¹⁸¹ Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 16.

¹⁸² Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 10.

¹⁸³ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 100.

annihilate the formal distinction that exists between performer and spectator. As Benjamin says, epic theatre “encourages the interchangeability of actors and audience, audience and actors. Every spectator can become one of the actors,”¹⁸⁴ for both are engaged in the process of critical reflective action. In the world outside the theatre, and especially in the political world of which Arendt speaks, we continually alternate between acting and observing – there is almost no distinction. The same is true within Brecht’s theatre. What is true for those actors engaged in Brecht’s master-classes can be true of ordinary citizens: once they develop the necessary critical skills, they can develop for themselves a Brechtian world of critical practice without Brecht.

Something else deserves to be said here about Brecht’s role as producer within the theatrical context: although Brecht sets up the theatrical experiment, it is up to the people involved in it – the actors and the audience – to do the work themselves. The experiment is successful only when those involved reflect upon themselves for themselves; nothing Brecht could do could overcome the need for their engagement in the process. Nor would he desire it to be otherwise; Brecht had no intention of manipulating those involved in the process towards any particular end. On the contrary, he sought to construct a dramaturgy that would promote change and reflection so that human beings could discover their own ends. His method is powerful because it relies on the need for human agency while providing the circumstances and the tools for that agency to be exercised. When taken outside of the theatrical context, Brecht’s method contributes to the empowerment that is meant to derive from and contribute to a healthy experience of politics.

¹⁸⁴ Benjamin, *Understanding Brecht*, p. 20.

Indeed, Brecht's interest in politics contributed to his desire to recreate theatre from the ground up. Though he borrowed the term and the general gist of the epic theatre from those around him, he made it uniquely his own. The epic theatre became uniquely Brecht's due to his Marxist political education, beginning in 1926. What truly set Brecht's work apart from all other developments initiated by New Objectivity was its introduction of revolutionary content into the revolutionary form. The Marxist political element both within and behind his work was essential for its success.

Lehrstücktheorie

The crucial moment in the evolution of Brecht's drama was his exposure to, and eventual embrace of, Marxism. He began attending classes on Marxist theory in 1926, after a failed attempt to gain an understanding of the world wheat market in spite of extensive research. He had planned to write a play, *Joe P. Fleischhacker* from Chicago, in which the speculative wheat market would function as the background. As Brecht later recounted,

i imagined i would be able to get the necessary information quickly by consulting specialists and practitioners in the field. things turned out differently. nobody, neither a number of well-known economic journalists nor any of the businessmen . . . could adequately explain what went on at the grain exchange. i gained the impression that the dealings were downright inexplicable, that is, not accessible to rational understanding. in other words plainly irrational.¹⁸⁵

Utterly frustrated, Brecht gave up on the play. He had discovered how mystifying was the logic of capitalism even to its sharpest participants. This is what led him to Marxism. For him Marxism furnished the key to understanding this logic. But even more importantly, it helped him to understand fundamental aspects of his own playwriting.

¹⁸⁵ Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Journals 1934-1955*, John Willett ed., Hugh Rorrison, trans. (Routledge, 1996), p. 4.

“When I read Marx’s *Capital* I understood my plays. . . . It wasn’t of course that I found I had unconsciously written a whole pile of Marxist plays; but this man Marx was the only spectator for my plays I’d ever come across.”¹⁸⁶ Marxism provided Brecht the analytical tools and methodology that would elevate his work from the level of intelligent art to that of art with a political usefulness and purpose. The concern with usefulness had been with Brecht since the beginning of his career.¹⁸⁷

According to Brecht’s friend, Fritz Sternberg, it was the experience of witnessing the violent suppression of the May Day demonstrations in 1929 that led Brecht to openly support the Communist Party. Reportedly, the murder of at least 30 peaceful demonstrators under the orders of the SPD-led government was both shocking and motivating.¹⁸⁸ It reinforced the belief already brewing that the movement towards political change should be the dominant force behind his art.

If Brecht’s experience of the intensification of class struggle was one source of Marxism’s appeal, another was his exposure to his teacher, Karl Korsch, a Leninist who had been expelled from the Communist Party for his “unorthodox” understanding of Marxism, and who would prove to be a formidable influence on Brecht’s view of the world.

Brecht’s exposure to Marxism led him to expand upon the innovations of epic theatre to incorporate a more radical and proletarian dimension. Though he had

¹⁸⁶ Quoted in Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 24.

¹⁸⁷ In 1926, Brecht served as judge of a poetic competition sponsored by a literary review. Hundreds of poems were submitted, none to Brecht’s liking. Brecht rejected them all, awarded no prize, and printed an amateur poem about a cycle race champion, “He! He! The Iron Man!” instead. His explanation for this was that, unlike any of the contest submissions, the cycling poem had a purpose: “At the very least, poems should provide an “original gesture [Geste] of communication of a thought or feeling which is also beneficial for strangers” (as quoted in Mayer, p. 74). In a related quote, Brecht wrote that “Poetry must surely be capable of being examined from the point of view of its practical value. . . . All great poems have the value of documents” (as quoted in Esslin, *Brecht*, p. 28).

¹⁸⁸ See Willett, *Brecht in Context*.

originally hoped to reach out to the working class with his art, the proletariat simply could not afford tickets to *The Threepenny Opera* or to any other of Brecht's professionally produced plays. And although the codification of the *Verfremdungseffekt* seemed like an effective way to promote critical thinking among the working class in theory, it had never been tested on the audience for whom it was meant.

And so, Brecht introduced a new type of play that incorporated his earlier thinking but extended the reach of his drama: the *Lehrstück*, or didactic play. These plays were short, required no acting training to be performed, and were parabolic in nature; in other words, they were ideal pieces to be performed by non-professional acting groups of workers or students. The first of these, *Lindbergh's Flight* (soon to be renamed *The Flight of the Lindberghs: A Radio Lehrstück for Boys and Girls*), was performed as a radio piece with music by Kurt Weill and Paul Hindemith. By the late 1920s, radio technology had progressed to the point that listeners no longer had to use headsets: the introduction of amplifier tubes and speakers that allowed more than one person to listen to a program elevated radio listening to a social activity and extended the radio's reach to the working class.¹⁸⁹ Brecht and others tapped into this resource as a way to reach their proletarian audience.

By narrating the historical pan-Atlantic flight of Charles Lindbergh, *The Flight of the Lindberghs* was meant to inspire a collaborative spirit and faith in the human spirit to overcome obstacles.¹⁹⁰ Brecht's Marxism is a critical component of the piece, which

¹⁸⁹ Christopher Hailey, "Rethinking Sound: Music and Radio in Weimar Germany," in Gilliam, ed., *Music and Performance during the Weimar Republic*, pp. 13-36.

¹⁹⁰ Due to Lindbergh's associations with the Nazis in World War II, Brecht later changed the name of the play to *The Ocean Flight*. In 1950, Brecht wrote a letter to the South German Radio in Stuttgart, regarding their desire to produce the play. He gives his permission, provided they remove any and all reference to Charles Lindbergh. The line, "My name is Charles Lindbergh" was to be replaced with the line, "My name

presents Lindbergh's story, not as the tale of one individual's achievement, but as the collaborative achievement of all those involved in providing Lindbergh with the materials necessary to begin his journey and all those who supported his quest. When confronted with the threatening fogbank, Lindbergh comforts himself with these words:

Seven men built my machine in San Diego
Often twenty-four hours without a break
Using a few metres of steel tubing
What they have made must do for me
They have done their work, I
Carry on with mine, I am not alone, there are
Eight of us flying here.¹⁹¹

In Brecht's version of history, the workers who built Lindbergh's plane and the citizens of the world who cheered him on to victory deserve to take as much pride in his accomplishment as Lindbergh himself – hence the reference to the plural, Lindberghs. The lesson is that without the collective, an individual can do nothing; with dedicated individuals, the accomplishments of the collective are boundless.

Lindbergh's Flight was composed -- with music by Kurt Weill and Paul Hindemith -- for the Baden-Baden Festival of Modern Music, an annual festival that in the 1920s became a home for musical experimentation in line with the trends of New Objectivity. With a focus on *Gebrauchsmusik* (or, useful music) and amateur music, the festival catered to the younger generation of musicians who “no longer want concerts that release listeners *from* life but music-making that redeems the listener *in* life.”¹⁹²

doesn't matter.” When referring to Lindbergh in the third-person, he was to be referred to “the Flier.” The letter is included in Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*, John Willett, ed.

¹⁹¹ Bertolt Brecht, *Lindbergh's Flight*, translated by John Willett, in *Collected Plays: Volume Three Part Two*, John Willett, ed. (Methuen, 1997), p 7. It should be noted that the quoted passage was not part of the original script, but was added soon after the first production.

¹⁹² Karl Laux, as quoted in Stephen Hinton, “Lehrstück: An Aesthetics of Performance” in Bryan Gilliam, ed., *Music and Performance in the Weimar Republic*, p. 67.

Along with *Lindbergh's Flight*, Brecht sent a companion piece, *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent* -- with music by Hindemith only -- that complemented Lindbergh's success by presenting the case of four crashed airmen who request help from a chorus. The three mechanic-airmen lay their egos aside and accept their fates. Yet the fourth airman in this case sees himself as a great individual achiever -- he will not yield his pride or acknowledge that he is merely one man among millions. The chorus chooses to save the mechanics and leave the fourth airman to die alone. It then sends the three mechanics on a new quest: "Having improved the world, then/ Improve the improved world/. . . In altering the world, alter yourselves/ Lay yourselves aside!"¹⁹³ The lesson in both pieces is the same -- that an individual needs the collective more than the collective needs the individual -- though here it is learned by the protagonist the hard way.

He Who Said Yes, Brecht's next didactic piece, was written in collaboration with Kurt Weill specifically to be performed in schools, where the students were to serve as both actors and audience members.¹⁹⁴ This play depicts the dilemma of a young man who finds himself too weak to continue on his group's journey in search of medicine; he must decide whether to follow the group's custom of selfless sacrifice or demand that the group give up their quest and carry him home. He decides to follow through with the group's "Great Custom," asking only that his death should be swift. The group throws him off a cliff and then continues its mission. According to Martin Esslin, the students who liked the piece when it premiered in 1930 were drawn to its seeming endorsement of traditional Prussian virtues such as obedience to authority and self-sacrifice. At other

¹⁹³ Bertolt Brecht, *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, translated by Geoffrey Skelton, in *Collected Plays: Volume Three Part Two*, John Willett, ed., p. 43.

¹⁹⁴ Brecht, *Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*.

schools, such as The Karl Marx School in Neukölln, the students reacted negatively to the play's ending for the same reason it was praised by others.¹⁹⁵

The students were encouraged to provide feedback to Brecht, which they did. In the words of one class representative from The Karl Marx School,

There was considerable support for the view that *the fate of him that said Yes is not portrayed in such a way that one sees its necessity. Why didn't the whole group turn back to save the stricken member instead of killing him? . . .* This led to the suggestion that the scene of the climb and the fall should be more strongly depicted in the hope of creating the essential understanding. *The mysticism that permeates the opera is a cause of discomfort. . . . The story's motivation is not sufficiently clear (i.e. real).*¹⁹⁶

Many professional critics also disliked the play for similar reasons.¹⁹⁷ Yet Brecht paid them little mind, and focused instead on the students' criticisms, which he took very seriously. With them in mind, he wrote a counter-piece that provided an alternate ending: *He Who Said No*. In this version, the young man rejects the group's custom by refusing to sacrifice himself – he convinces them that “Whoever says A does not have to say B. He can recognize that A was wrong. . . . And as for the ancient Custom I see no sense in it. What we need far more is a new Great Custom, which we should bring in at once, the Custom of thinking things out anew in every new situation.”¹⁹⁸ From then on, Brecht's

¹⁹⁵ For excerpts from the students' reports, see *ibid*.

¹⁹⁶ Quote from “Group from Upper I, age 18,” as found in Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*, p. 226. The italics are in the original and are meant to indicate the points that Brecht specifically took into account when writing the counter-piece.

¹⁹⁷ Perhaps the harshest criticism came from the critic Frank Warschauer, who wrote in *Die Weltbühne* that the play contained “[a]ll the evil ingredients of reactionary thinking, founded on senseless authority.” He went on to say that “This Yes-sayer reminds us strongly of the Yes-sayers during the War.” As quoted in Ewen, p. 246.

¹⁹⁸ Bertolt Brecht, *He Who Said Yes/He Said No*, in *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*, John Willett, ed., p. 59.

position was that, “If possible the two little plays should always be performed together.”¹⁹⁹

The practice of having the *Lehrstücke* plays performed in pairs seemed greatly appealing to Brecht, perhaps because pairing them highlighted the dialectical nature of the issues they portrayed. In the first pairing, *Lindbergh’s Flight* and *The Baden-Baden Lesson on Consent*, the tension between hyper individuality and hyper collectivity is clearly displayed. Neither extreme produces a satisfying result: without the collective Lindbergh could not have flown; yet the vulnerability of the individual to the whims of the collective is disconcerting, as is demonstrated when the individualist airman is left to die. Further, in the second pairing of plays, the tension between the interests of the one and the interests of the many reasserts itself, and neither solution is fully satisfying. If the boy sacrifices himself, he allows the collective to transport the necessary medicine to the waiting village, thereby warding off a plague. Yet by asserting his intention to live, he institutes a new custom based on rationality and critical thinking – both of which are indispensable for the kind of world Brecht most desires. Indeed, as Michelle Matson argues, it is the gaps between the plays – their lack of a satisfying solution – that gives them their power as didactic works. In participating in the *Lehrstücke*, as performer or observer, one is engaged in the practice of politics.²⁰⁰ In either play of the pair, the participant faces a moral dilemma, in which any decision made will lead to loss of life and the sacrifice of a valued principle.

¹⁹⁹ From a 1931 note introducing the two texts, reprinted in Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*, p. 221.

²⁰⁰ See Michelle Matson, “Brecht and the Status of the Political Subject,” in James K. Lyon and Hans-Peter Breuer, eds., *Brecht Unbound*. (University of Delaware Press, 1995).

In no Brecht play is the tension between the individual and the collective more starkly represented than in *The Measures Taken*, his most famous – and most controversial – Lehrstück. It was written with the collaboration of Hans Eisler, a composer dedicated to the development of communist culture in Berlin. Originally written as the intended counter-piece to *He Who Said Yes*, it was rejected by the producers of the 1930 Baden-Baden Festival of Modern Music, presumably due to its political content. In an angry letter of reply, Brecht expressed bafflement at the committee's decision:

[W]e have at last reached the position we always wanted; didn't we always call for amateur art? Haven't we long had our doubts of these huge institutions whose hands are tied by a hundred reservations?

*We are cutting these important performances clear of all kinds of dependence, and allowing them to be realized by those they are meant for, who alone have a use for them: by workers' choruses, amateur dramatic groups, school choruses and school orchestras, in other words those people who neither can pay for art nor are paid for art, but just want to take part in it.*²⁰¹

Upon its rejection, Weill pulled *He Who Said Yes*, which had already been accepted, from the festival. At that point they were separated, with *He Who Said Yes* headed straight for the schools, and *The Measures Taken* to be given a professional performance at the Philharmonie in Berlin.²⁰²

The Measures Taken would have made a fine counter-piece to *He Who Said Yes*, as it also centers on the tension between the individual and the collective. The plot concerns the decision of a communist cell of four workers to kill one of their comrades due to the disastrous results of his continual deviations from the party line. The play is structured in such a way that the members of the cell must explain their reasoning to their

²⁰¹ Quoted in Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays: Volume Three, Part Two*, p. 231, italics in the original.

²⁰² Klaus Völker, *Brecht Chronicle*, with an Introduction by Carl Weber (The Seabury Press, 1975).

superiors; they do this by acting out each scenario in which their comrade made a choice, and they portray the consequences of that choice. They then act out the moment at which they made their final decision.²⁰³ At the end of the play, their superiors declare that what they have done was not wrong: “Nor was it you who judged him, it was/ Reality.”²⁰⁴

The play’s exploration of the theme of *Einverständnis*, self-sacrifice of the individual for the cause of revolution, this time was expressed in the context of Communism. *The Measures Taken* was not like the previous *Lehrstücke*, parables set in unspecified locations, meant to apply to everyone and to no one in particular. Its setting in a particular town (Mukden, a Chinese town on the border with Russia) and, more fundamentally, its endorsement of a specific creed – Soviet Communism – made the play more politically relevant than the previous *Lehrstücke*. At the same time, the play’s explicit political nature led Brecht’s critics to ignore its function as parable and to read it instead solely as a piece of propaganda.

The criticism came from the center and the far left alike. The play was seen by many as an apology for Stalinism – or worse, as an apology for all forms of political

²⁰³ Due to the onslaught of criticism against the piece that immediately followed the premiere, Brecht altered the ending so that the Comrade is asked to consent to his own death, in the manner of *He Who Said Yes*. Their final conversation with him goes as follows:

THE FIRST AGITATOR *to the Young Comrade*: If you are caught they will shoot you, and because you will be identified our work will be betrayed. So we must shoot you and throw you into the lime pit so that the lime burns you up. But let us ask you: can you see any other way?

THE YOUNG COMRADE: No.

THE THREE AGITATORS: Let us ask you: are you in agreement?

Pause.

THE YOUNG COMRADE: Yes.

THE THREE AGITATORS: Where would you like us to take you? We asked.

THE YOUNG COMRADE: To the lime pit, he said.

(In Bertolt Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, in Bertolt Brecht: *Collected Plays: Volume Three, Part Two*, p. 88).

A written version of the original script, according to Ewen, no longer exists. See his discussion of the play in Ewen.

²⁰⁴ Brecht, *The Measures Taken*, p. 87.

dogma that advocate violence, including Nazism. In the words of Henry Pachter, “Even under Stalin the Communist party was never such a caricature. With just a few words changed, the Nazis might produce the entire oratorio as a justification of their *Fehme* murders.”²⁰⁵ The play was also criticized by Stalinists, on the grounds that Brecht fundamentally misunderstood Communist practice.²⁰⁶ Yet most of Brecht’s critics misunderstand the play’s purpose and ignore the context in which it was written. With this piece Brecht shifted his understanding of the process of didacticism from one of teaching to one of learning: from producing *Lehrstücke* to producing *Lernstücke*.

The Measures Taken represents the highest point of Brecht’s creation of political drama – a drama meant for the workers rather than the bourgeoisie, performed in a context in which the audience and the actors are one and the same. The rehearsal process for the Berlin production was truly unique. According to Eisler, the play was

not just a musical work for performance to listeners. It is a special kind of political seminar about questions of party strategy and tactics. Members of the chorus will discuss political questions at rehearsals, but in an interesting and memorable form. The Lehrstück is not intended for concert use. It is rather a means of striving to educate students of Marxist schools and proletarian collectives. . . .²⁰⁷

As Brecht wrote in his “Note to the Audience,” “The Lehrstück aim is to show incorrect attitudes and thus to teach correct ones. The performance is meant to provoke discussion of the political usefulness of this type of event.”²⁰⁸ Indeed, *The Measures Taken* was not a piece of political propaganda – despite what its critics may think, its purpose was not to dictate dogma, but to create room for discussion, critical reflection, and informed

²⁰⁵ Pachter, p. 232.

²⁰⁶ Karl Thieme, in his paraphrasing of the Communist position on the play after the premiere, states that “the Communists would not agree that this [the killing of the Comrade] was Communist practice.” The Comrade would merely have been expelled from the Party. (As quoted in Ewen, p. 254.) Other Communists disliked the play because it turned a political issue into a moral one.

²⁰⁷ As quoted in Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*, p. xv.

²⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 232-33.

decision making. It depicts the objective facts of political organization, the moral conflicts that often exist in difficult situations, and the consequences of decisions made with the best of intentions. Brecht never openly declared that the decision of the cell members was right or wrong. He was careful to avoid such unambiguous claims, as his careful phrasing above demonstrates. By having the workers engage in the actions being depicted, instead of merely observing them from afar, Brecht transcends the bounds of the conventional theatre with his *Lehrstücke* dramaturgy. As Brecht says in the *Messingkauf Dialogues*, “[I]t’s not the play but the performance that is the real purpose of all one’s efforts.”²⁰⁹ *The Measures Taken* cannot be correctly understood from the outside; one must engage in the practice of the play in order to appreciate its dialectical approach.

Brecht’s *Lehrstücke* not only instruct about the politics of Marxism but *enact* the very method of Marx’s critique through the engagement of workers in real-life political debates. Following Korsch, Brecht understood Marxism as a useful method for critique and analysis rather than a doctrine of laws. The explanation he provides of Marxism in *The Messingkauf Dialogues* is worth quoting at length, as it is perhaps the clearest of Brecht’s statements on the subject:

It’s important that you should understand the difference between Marxism, which recommends a particular way of looking at the world, and what is normally called a *Weltanschauung* or outlook. Marxism posits certain methods of looking, certain criteria. These lead it to make certain judgments of phenomena, certain predictions and suggestions for practical action. It teaches a combination of thinking and active intervention as a means of dealing with reality in so far as social intervention is able to deal with it. It is a doctrine that criticizes human action and expects in turn to be criticized by it. A true *Weltanschauung*, however, is a picture of the world, a hypothetical knowledge of the way in which things happen, mostly moulded in accordance with some ideal of harmony. . . . [I]t’s important for you [to know the difference] because when you imitate incidents

²⁰⁹ Brecht, *The Messingkauf Dialogues*, p. 74.

you ought on no account to imagine that you are illustrating any of the numerous principles which the Marxists, as I have explained, put forward. You must examine it all and prove it all.²¹⁰

With the *Lehrstücke*, Brecht was able to merge Marxist content with a form that could accomplish his ends.

Following Korsch's vision of the workers' councils,²¹¹ Brecht's *Lehrstücke* workshops functioned as theatrical master-classes without a director. The actors performed the play repeatedly, switching parts as they went along, so that each could experience both judging and being judged. Further, in an interview with the reporter Reiner Steinweg regarding *The Measures Taken*, Brecht told him ““that the play was so constructed that changes could be made at any time. Sections could be added or taken out, as in a montage.””²¹² Brecht saw his *Lehrstücke* as superior to his previous work, for it revolutionized the theatre by abolishing the distinction between the actors and the audience.

Unfortunately, Brecht's development of his didactic theatre was cut short by Hitler's rise to power. Brecht fled Germany for Denmark the day after the Reichstag fire of 1933. Leaving his homeland meant leaving behind his audience, his *Lehrstücke*, and his hopes for taking part in a German communist revolution. His greatest achievement in terms of the development of a truly unique political theatre was over only four years after it had begun.

Exile and After

²¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36.

²¹¹ Douglas Kellner, “Brecht's Marxist Aesthetic: The Korsch Connection,” in *Bertolt Brecht: Political Theory and Literary Practice*, Betty Nance Weber and Hubert Heinen, eds., pp. 29-42.

²¹² As quoted in Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*, p. 234.

With no access to his proletarian audience and limited contact with his comrades in Germany, Brecht was at a standstill. Further production opportunities for his Lehrstücke were non-existent. In 1934 he completed his final Lehrstück, *The Horations and the Curations*, which, though commissioned by the Red Army, was never performed during his lifetime.²¹³ The Nazis were successfully breaking down the communist groups of Germany and many of Brecht's collaborators had fled to the Soviet Union. Wary of Stalinism, Brecht and his family moved to Scandinavia instead. From his perch in Svendborg, he tried to make himself useful by writing overtly anti-Nazi plays and codifying his theory of epic theatre.

In 1941, Brecht left Scandinavia for Los Angeles, hoping to have some impact on the American theatre and film industries. Though he had some success with *Galileo Galilei*, he was eventually forced to leave the United States after being questioned by the House Un-American Activities Committee. He returned to Berlin in 1949 and was given his own theatre by the East German Government; he directed plays with his Berliner Ensemble until his death in 1956.²¹⁴

If Fascism forced him into exile, and if American capitalism had been inhospitable,²¹⁵ the fundamental challenge confronting Brecht during his time in exile was how to deal with the cultural policies of Stalinism. Indeed, it was his version of

²¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. xvi-xvii.

²¹⁴ Again, his biographical information can be found in Esslin, *Brecht*.

²¹⁵ Brecht's disgust of the American culture industry is beautifully expressed in his poem, "On Thinking About Hell." The first stanza reads as follows:

On thinking about Hell, I gather
 My brother Shelley found it was a place
 Much like the city of London. I
 Who live in Los Angeles and not in London
 Find, on thinking about Hell, that it must be
 Still more like Los Angeles.

From Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Poems 1913-1956*, p. 367.

Marxism, taken from Korsch, that would cause him trouble with the cultural policies of the USSR.

Brecht's hope, as always, was to make his plays accessible to the public that could most benefit from them. In his mind, it was still the working class to whom and for whom he was writing. Yet there developed in the 1930s another tremendous stumbling block preventing Brecht's desired communication with his public. Just as damaging as exile was to the development of his theatre of revolution, the Communist ban on formalist art posed problems even for a Brechtian theatre of resistance. Indeed, in the 1930s Brecht was up against not just the Nazis, but the Soviet culture czars as well.

In 1934 the USSR joined the Popular Front movement, and defending the world against fascism became priority for the Communists, both politically and culturally. The idea was to forge an alliance with all anti-fascist groups and parties, regardless of the class they may represent. In this context Georg Lukács, the former "ultra-leftist" cultural critic turned Stalinist, delineated the appropriate forms of artistic expression for those Communists both inside and outside the Soviet Union. This began with the publication of his "'Grosse und Verfall' des Expressionismus" in *International Literatur* in 1934 and continued in the pages of *Das Wort* in 1938. Though Lukács was not the only cultural apparatchik involved in deciding what parts of bourgeois culture had positive political value and which did not, he was the most prominent.²¹⁶ And in the "Expressionism Debate" that took place in *Das Wort*, it was specifically Lukács' proclamations that came

²¹⁶ Two others were Andrei Zhdanov and Alfred Kurella. See Pachter.

under attack and Lukács himself who defended the logic of “socialist realism” as the only acceptable form of artistic expression.²¹⁷

The cultural policy of socialist realism hit Brecht especially hard. It openly rejected all “formalist art,” a category wide enough to encompass not only expressionism, but New Objectivity as well.²¹⁸ Brecht’s entire body of work – from his poems to his epic drama and his *Lehrstücke* – was under attack. Granted, he was in no physical danger if he failed to follow the Party line – by safely ensconcing himself in Scandinavia, Brecht had made sure of that. He was not even an official member of the Communist Party.²¹⁹

Nonetheless, a great deal was at stake here, not only for Brecht, but for the entire socialist project. “The Great Terror” had begun in the Soviet Union, with hundreds of thousands of “state enemies” being either killed, deported, or sentenced to the Gulag. Many of Brecht’s friends who had taken refuge in Russia had “disappeared.” It was becoming more and more evident that the Soviet Union was being governed according to Stalin’s personal whims.²²⁰

The cultural policy of socialist realism was part of a larger – and much more dangerous – tendency towards authoritarianism, cultural stagnation, and a requirement of

²¹⁷ Indeed, it was Alfred Kurella’s piece that initiated the debate; yet in Ernst Bloch’s reply to the piece, he directed his remarks specifically at Lukács, which led Lukács to then join the debate. See Frederic Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics: The Key Texts of the Classic Debate within German Marxism*, translations edited by Ronald Taylor. (Verso, 1980).

For a thorough discussion of “socialist realism” and the Expressionism debate, see Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*; Stephen Eric Bronner, “Expressionism and Marxism: Towards an Aesthetic of Emancipation,” in Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner, eds., *Passion and Rebellion*, pp. 411-453.; Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and its Theorists*, 2nd Edition. (Routledge, 2002); Eugene Lunn, “Marxism and Art in the Era of Stalin and Hitler: A Comparison of Brecht and Lukács,” *New German Critique*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 12-44.

²¹⁸ Jameson, *Aesthetics and Politics*.

²¹⁹ As Henry Pachter notes that his lack of official Party ties may have been intentional, as the Party felt it useful that some outside artists should remain “fellow travelers.” See Pachter.

²²⁰ In 1938, Brecht said to Benjamin that, “Russia is now under personal rule. Only blockheads can deny this, of course.” And yet even then he stayed loyal to the cause. As quoted in Walter Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht,” in Frederic Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 95.

dogmatic allegiance to a Party veering further and further away from its original intentions. If the choice was once between “socialism or barbarism,” it now seemed to be between barbarism and barbarism.

Brecht had already lost his greatest accomplishment -- his revolutionary workers' theatre – to fascism. In 1934 the question for him was whether or not to accept the Stalinist strictures on his art in the name of combating a greater evil. The question for Brecht was, which type of sacrifice do I accept? Which enemy of Nazism is the more progressive: Soviet Communism or Western capitalism? Where can I be the most useful?

Retaining his skepticism as to Stalin's intentions, Brecht sided politically with Soviet Communism in its fight against fascism;²²¹ at the same time, he was not willing to give up his aesthetic. He began the dual practice of writing epic works for production in bourgeois theatres on the one hand, and more “realistic” pieces for the Popular Front movement on the other.

Indeed, it was during his time in Svendborg that Brecht really began the process of elucidating his “Brechtian” theory of drama: “It is worth remarking . . . that this was the period of Brecht's first formulation of the notions of ‘Verfremdung’ (alienation) and ‘Gestus’ One might go so far as to say that it was only now, in exile, that Brecht fully formulated his theory of epic theatre.”²²² In these first years of exile, he wrote his last *Lehrstücke*, *The Horations and the Curations*; his first anti-fascist play, *Round Heads*

²²¹ Though Brecht expressed suspicion about Stalin's intentions and actions to his close friends, he was not willing to abandon Soviet Communism. See Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht” pp. 86-99.

²²² Tom Kuhn and John Willett, “Introduction,” in Bertolt Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Four* (Methuen, 2001), p.viii.

and *Pointed Heads*, which was performed in 1936; and began his Me-ti poems which expressed his growing concerns about Stalinism.²²³

In 1933, he had begun work on a series of short scenes that exposed the everyday terrors of living under National Socialism: *Fear and Misery in the 3rd Reich*, one of his major contributions to the Popular Front movement. These scenes could be performed a few at a time or all together depending on the needs and means of those in charge of production – Brecht hoped that they would be taken up by workers’ groups as well as by professional theatres.²²⁴ They represent what seems to be a compromise between Brecht’s epic style and the demands of socialist realism: each scene represents a realistic experience under Nazism, written with few explicit epic elements – while there was music, there were no projections and no stylized dialogue. Yet given the length of the scenes – some are no longer than a page – and the montage-form of the whole production, *Fear and Misery* is able to estrange the events portrayed from the audience to the degree that the audience’s capacity for empathy is challenged. The group of plays was performed throughout France in 1938, and Brecht had high hopes that it would be taken up in American, too.

Much to Brecht’s chagrin, *Fear and Misery* passed Lukács’s inspection. Brecht wrote in his journal on 15 August, 1938, that

FEAR AND MISERY OF THE THIRD REICH has now gone to press. lukács has already welcomed the SPY as if i were a singer returned to the bosom of the salvation army. here at last is something taken straight from life! he overlooks the montage of 27 scenes, and the fact that it is actually only a table of gests, the gest of keeping your mouth shut, the gest of looking about you, the gest of sudden fear, etc. the pattern of gests in a dictatorship. now epic theatre can show that

²²³ For more on the Me-ti poems, see Kellner, “Brecht’s Marxist Aesthetic”; Klaus-Detlef Müller, “Me-ti” in *Bertolt Brecht: Political Theory and Literary Practice*, Betty Nance Weber and Hubert Heinen, eds., pp. 43-59.

²²⁴ Tom Kuhn and John Willett.

both ‘interieurs’ and almost naturalistic elements are within its range that they do not make the crucial difference.²²⁵

In Brecht’s view, *Fear and Misery* represented the expansion of epic theatre into new territory – by adding naturalistic elements to the epic form, Brecht was able to address the war-wary citizens of Europe in a more effective manner than if he had stuck insistently to the *Verfremdungseffekt*. As Benjamin pointed out, the émigrés who made up Brecht’s audience for this play were already estranged from the events being shown – Brecht did not need to add much in order to elicit critical thinking from them.²²⁶ *Fear and Misery*, then, represents the adaptation of Brecht’s aesthetic elements to a political situation in which the audience was already politicized. Since the audience had performed the work necessary to appreciate the political purpose of the play, Brecht as playwright could relax a little, allowing natural elements to exist with little danger that empathy would overcome the audience members’ rational thought processes.

Brecht crusaded against fascism in his own, characteristically “Brechtian” fashion. He agreed that fascism was the greatest evil, but was not willing to overlook the fundamental differences that existed between capitalist states and the USSR. The point of the Popular Front was to find – and even create – common ground between all the anti-fascist groups of Europe. Yet Brecht, ever the dialectician, sought to emphasize the divisions that existed between them. Hence, even as he aided the Popular Front through his anti-fascist plays, he rejected socialist realism as the one legitimate form of progressive art.

Hence, during the expressionism debates of 1938, Brecht wrote several rejoinders to Lukács’s attacks on formalism for *Das Wort*, the magazine he officially co-edited with

²²⁵ Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Journals, 1934-1955*, p. 13.

²²⁶ As discussed in Tom Kuhn and John Willett.

Willi Bredel and Leon Feuchtwanger. Brecht had never been included in editorial decisions for the magazine, and his essays on the debate were never printed there or anywhere else during his lifetime. Still, the pieces serve as a strong defense of his own work and provide a razor sharp critique of Soviet formalism.²²⁷

In his response to Ernst Bloch, Lukács states that “the terms of the debate are not classics versus modernists; discussion must focus instead on the question: which are the progressive trends in the literature of today? It is the fate of realism that hangs in the balance.”²²⁸ The root of Lukács’ critique of expressionism is articulated by Stephen Bronner:

[F]or Lukács the expressionist opposition to the bourgeoisie was in fact nothing better than “romantic” and “petty bourgeois.” In this revolt, social reality was turned into either a realm controlled by mystical forces or a “chaos” which was inherently indecipherable. Thus a confusion necessarily occurred wherein it was no longer capitalist society which had to be overcome, but rather chaos as such. . . . For, in the mysticism, in the abstract and arbitrary use of categories, the attack on the status quo could easily take on a reactionary form.²²⁹

Hence, according to Lukács, this type of “formalist” art, which obscures the distinction between appearance and essence, ignoring the material base of the society in which it is constituted, is dangerous to the cause of socialism. Brecht’s work is included in Lukács’ category of formalist art, because, like the expressionists, Brecht does not focus on the psychology of individual characters, but on the relationships between abstract classes. Lukács sees the *Verfremdungseffekt* as inhibiting the ability of the audience to decipher the difference between appearance and essence.²³⁰ His solution is to adapt bourgeois realism – which depicted individual characters dealing with the contradictions inherent in

²²⁷ The pieces are collected in Jameson, *Aesthetics and Politics*.

²²⁸ Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 30.

²²⁹ Bronner, “Expressionism and Marxism,” p. 419.

²³⁰ Lunn.

bourgeois society – to fit a socialist world. Hence, socialist realism, rooted in specific material circumstances and depicting the contradictions between appearance and essence, should be the only acceptable art form.

In his response to Lukács' argument, Brecht points out that a ban on "formalism" is inherently meaningless as all works of art utilize an existing form: "since the artist is constantly occupied with formal matters, since he constantly forms, one must define what one means by *formalism* carefully and practically, otherwise one conveys nothing to the artist."²³¹ Indeed, the very terms of the debate – "formalism" and "realism" – are problematic from the get-go. Further, Lukács bases his judgment of aesthetics entirely on the genre of the novel, which is not representative of art in general. Lukács' tendency to define realism in narrow terms taken from an artistic genre – a genre from a particular period, no less -- is itself formalistic.²³²

Brecht's most powerful argument against socialist realism is that it prevents art from functioning in a progressive way by attempting to freeze time. To be effective, art must be allowed to keep up with history -- to embrace change and innovation in order to be able to depict human reality, which is always changing.

For time flows on, and if it did not, it would be a bad prospect for those who do not sit at golden tables. Methods become exhausted; stimuli no longer work. New problems appear and demand new methods. Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change. Nothing comes from nothing; the new comes from the old, but that is why it is new.

The oppressors do not work in the same way in every epoch. They cannot be defined in the same fashion at all times. . . . What was popular yesterday is not today, for the people today are not what they were yesterday.²³³

²³¹ Bertolt Brecht, "On the Formalistic Character of the Theory of Realism" in Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 71.

²³² *Ibid.*

²³³ Bertolt Brecht, "Popularity and Realism," in Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, pg. 82-83.

Because art functions differently over time, our definition of realism should not be based on the fossilization of what functioned as realism at one particular moment. Brecht proposes an alternative definition of realism, based on the more flexible notion that the purpose of realism should be “to render reality to men in a form they can master.”²³⁴

For Brecht,

Realism means: discovering the causal complexes of society/ unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power/ writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up/ emphasizing the element of development/ making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.²³⁵

Under this definition Brecht’s work would be considered realistic, and much of socialist realism would be considered formalist.

Through his critique of Lukács, Brecht is taking on not merely the cultural policies of the Soviet Union, but their underlying logic. Dictating standards of production from the top down, regardless of the industry, smacks of authoritarianism, not socialism. In a conversation with Benjamin, Brecht reportedly referred to Lukács, Gabot and Kurella as

enemies of production. Production makes them uncomfortable. You never know where you are with production; production is the unforeseeable. You never know what’s going to come out. And they themselves don’t want to produce. They want to play the apparatchik and exercise control over other people. Every one of their criticisms contains a threat.²³⁶

Coming as Brecht does from the Marxist tradition of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Korsch -- two thinkers who believed in spontaneous organization, organic development, and worker control – it makes sense that he would find Lukács’ static and dogmatic approach to art to

²³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

²³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

²³⁶ As quoted by Walter Benjamin, “Conversations with Brecht,” in Jameson, ed., *Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 97.

be politically perverse. Even though his rejoinders to Lukács were not printed, Brecht carried out his theories of aesthetics in practice.

The power of Brecht's critique can be demonstrated through a comparison of two works of similar content that are presented in radically different forms. *The Mother*, written in 1931, during Brecht's *Lehrstücke* phase, was one of Brecht's attempts to educate the workers about the ABCs of Communism. In 1937, Brecht wrote *Señora Carrar's Rifles*, a piece in support of the Republicans fighting in the Spanish Civil War. These plays have similar plots: they both center on the conversion of a non-political mother to the communist movement during a time of crisis. Yet the difference in the way the transformations are depicted reveals the dangers of adopting the socialist realist position on aesthetics.

The Mother, adapted from Maxim Gorki's novel of the same name, is written in Brecht's epic style: the language is austere, the characters unemotional, and the lessons explicit. Further, the play comes complete with a musical score by Hans Eisler, suggested projections, and numerous choruses. From the beginning, the audience is shown the mother's behavior from a distanced position. The first lines of the play are spoken by Pelagea Vlassova – “the mother” – to herself, to the audience, and to no one in particular:

I am quite ashamed to offer this soup to my son. But I've no dripping left to put in it, not even half a spoonful. Only last week they cut a kopeck an hour off his wages, and I can't make that up however hard I try. . . . What am I to do, Pelagea Vlassova, forty-two, a worker's widow and a worker's mother? I count the pennies over and over again. I try it this way and I try it that. One day I skimp on firewood, another day on clothing. But I can't manage. I don't see an answer.²³⁷

²³⁷ Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*, p. 95.

Immediately, the audience is presented with all the information it needs to understand the play's plot. The main character provides it clearly and succinctly, by narrating her own life situation and referring to herself in the third person. There is no mystery here for the audience to solve, only a situation on which to critically reflect.

As the plot unfolds, Pelagea Vlassova expresses grave concern that her son is becoming involved in the workers' movement, as she does not want her son to be arrested. In the fourth scene, entitled "Pelagea Vlassova Gets Her First Lesson in Economics," she argues critically with the logic of the workers over their political position, and in doing so learns how exploitation works and why strikes are necessary:

PELAGEA VLASSOVA: Why shouldn't Mr. Suchlinov be able to cut the wages he pays you, just as he pleases? Does his factory belong to him, or doesn't it?

PAVEL: . . . His factory belongs to him, but if he closes it then he is taking our tools away from us.

PELAGEA VLASSOVA: Because your tools belong to him the same way my table belongs to me.

ANTON: Right, but do you think it's right that our work tools should belong to him?

PELAGEA VLASSOVA *loudly*: No! But whether or not I think it's right, they belong to him just the same. And somebody might think it's not right for my table to belong to me.

PAVEL: You see, that's where we'd say: it's not the same thing for a table to belong to you as for a factory. Of course a table can belong to you, or a chair for that matter. It harms nobody. If you store it in the loft, what harm can it do? But if a factory belongs to you, you can harm several hundred people. Because their work tools are in your possession, and this gives you the power to exploit them.

PELAGEA VLASSOVA: Right, so he can exploit us. Don't act as if I wouldn't have realized that after thirty years' experience. There's just one thing I didn't realize – *something could have been done to stop it.*²³⁸

The workers go on to explain that the factory owner is dependent on the workers for his profit, and through the strike, they can exercise their power over him. Through conversations such as this, Pelagea Vlassova uses her reason to come to the conclusion

²³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 109-110, my emphasis.

that life does not have to be as it has always been; critical reflection allows her to understand the social world in a new way, and to change the way she acts within it. As she makes a series of decisions that lead her to support her son's activity in the Party and to take part in revolutionary action herself, the audience is encouraged to judge her actions and to think critically about the issues involved. The character's lack of expressed emotion, her cold intellectual stance, the matter-of-fact way in which the events are depicted – all of these elements prevent the audience from empathizing too deeply with her.

Even when her son is killed and her Landlady comes to comfort her, Pelagea Vlassova expresses an unwavering stance towards the Party and towards the power of reason. Her stoicism surprises her Landlady, who had brought her Bible to provide the grieving widow comfort. The mother respectfully declines the offer to borrow the Bible, for she doesn't need comfort:

LANDLADY: But the other night through the wall I heard you weeping.

PELAGEA VLASSOVA: I apologise for that.

LANDLADY: There's no call to apologise, of course I didn't mean it that way.

But was it reason that made you weep?

PELAGEA VLASSOVA: No.

LANDLADY: Well, you see how far reason gets you.

PELAGEA VLASSOVA: It wasn't reason that made me weep. But when I stopped, reason had something to do with that. What Pavel [her son] did was right.²³⁹

The mother then goes on to debate the importance of religion with the women who have come to comfort her. Even in her darkest moment, Pelagea Vlassova engages in political critique based on rational principles and material reality, saying, "Your God's no good to me if I can't see the evidence!"²⁴⁰

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 140.

²⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p.141.

The play ends with Pelagea Vlassova heading a demonstration of workers. Now in her sixties, she leads the procession carrying the red flag. Like many scenes in the play, this one is written like a report about the past, with each character narrating the events as if they had already happened.²⁴¹ Only the mother speaks in the present tense. As with the opening scene, the closing scene is written in such a way as to distance the audience from the action, ensuring that the lessons taught stand out, rather than the story itself.

In contrast to *The Mother*, *Señora Carrar's Rifles* is a piece of propaganda. According to Brecht himself, it was the only play Brecht wrote in the Aristotelian style, completely without epic elements: there are no projections, no choruses, no obvious exposition of events, no lines spoken in the past tense, and – most importantly – no music.²⁴² The Aristotelian elements of tragedy take their place: the play centers on the character of Señora Carrar, a classical hero figure, whose tragic flaw is her over-protection of her children. When her son dies due to her decision to send him out fishing, the characteristic tragic “turn” occurs: she has a change of heart, and sacrifices herself to the cause to make up for her mistake.

All the elements are in place in order for the audience to emotionally identify with Señora Carrar – to experience her story along with her, unhindered by epic distractions. To begin, the opening of the play occurs with the story in medias res. In contrast to Pelagea Vlassova's unnaturally descriptive monologue of facts, we find Señora Carrar and her son engaged in the midst of a “natural” conversation:

²⁴¹ For example, the opening line of the scene, spoken by “A Worker” reads as follows: “As we came along the Lybin-Prospekt there were already several thousand of us. More that fifty firms were on strike, and the strikers joined us to demonstrate against the war and against Tsarist domination,” p. 150.

²⁴² It was one of only three Brecht plays not to have music, the other two being his adaptation of *Antigone* and certain scenes of *Fear and Misery in the Third Reich*. See Willett, *Brecht in Context*, p. 167.

THE MOTHER: Can you still see Juan's boat?
 JOSÉ: Yes.
 THE MOTHER: Is his lantern still burning?
 JOSE: Yes.
 THE MOTHER: No other boat joined him?
 JOSE: No.
 Pause.
 THE MOTHER: That's strange. Why isn't anybody else out?
 JOSE: You know why.
 THE MOTHER patiently: If I knew, I wouldn't be asking.
 JOSE: There's no one out but Juan; they've other things to do than catch fish
 these days.
 THE MOTHER: I see.²⁴³

At this point, the unrevealed facts about the situation provide a mystery for the audience to solve – why isn't anyone else fishing, and why won't Jose just say why, instead of offering the cryptic, "You know why"? The opening dialogue leads the critical mind to solve the puzzle the characters present, rather than to reflect on the play as a play or the actions in terms of the life outside the theatre.

Gradually the answers to the questions raised become clear: the other young people are preparing to leave, or have already left, to join the Republican forces against Francisco Franco. Teresa Carrar has sent her son, Juan, out to fish so that he would miss the fact that the International Brigade is heading for the Motril front; oblivious, Juan would be unable to join them. Teresa Carrar's younger son, Jose, thinks he and his brother should be allowed to join the revolutionaries in spite of their mother's desire to keep them home.

As visitors come to the door to encourage Señora Carrar to change her mind about letting Juan go, we learn through the dialogue that her husband, Carlos Carrar, "was a hero" who gave his life fighting for the Republican cause. This choice of wording is

²⁴³ Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays Volume Four*, Tom Kuhn and John Willett, eds., p. 210.

especially interesting. Nowhere in *The Mother* is the word “hero” used to describe any of the workers involved in the socialist movement, not even Pelagea Vlassova’s son who gave his life in the fight, or Pelagea Vlassova herself. The chorus, “Praise of the Vlassovas” is actually a song in honor of all those who work to oppose capitalism – “All those Vlassovas of all countries, in their mole-burrows/ Unknown soldiers who serve the Revolution/ We can’t do without them!”²⁴⁴ In *The Mother* the individual revolutionary is honored as part of a group, and may go “unknown,” fighting for the cause because it is reasonable and knowing that he or she will probably never be considered “a hero.” In *Señora Carrar’s Rifles*, in contrast, the individual is honored for his individual sacrifice. The emphasis is on the sentimental element of Carlos Carrar’s death, rather than on the reasonableness of the cause for which he died.

The sentimental and the subjective appear again when the character of Old Mrs. Perez explains her situation to Señora Carrar: “You know, you can’t really understand my family unless you keep in mind that we’re all in great sorrow over [my daughter] Inez’s death.”²⁴⁵ Here it is the experience of family sacrifice that separates those who really understand the situation from those who do not. It is the subjective experience of sorrow that binds the revolutionaries together, not the cause for which they fight.

It is the ending to *Señora Carrar’s Rifles* that is the most strikingly “un-Brechtian.” Throughout the play, the Mother maintains her stance that she will give up neither her sons nor her late husbands’ rifles to the cause of the revolution. Right up until the revelation of Juan’s death, Teresa Carrar is openly hostile to the cause and all who

²⁴⁴ Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Three Part Two*, p. 132.

²⁴⁵ Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume Four*, p. 229.

take part in it. When Juan's boat can no longer be seen and the possibility exists that he may have joined the revolutionaries, Teresa Carrar releases her longest tirade:

If [Juan] has done this to me and joined the militia I'm going to curse him. Let them hit him with their bombs! Let them crush him with their tanks! To show him that you can't make a mockery of God. And that a poor man can't beat the generals. . . . When he comes back telling me he's defeated the generals, it's not going to make me open the door to him. I'll tell him from behind the door that I won't have a man in my house who has stained himself with blood.²⁴⁶

Right after she finishes her speech, Juan's body is brought in by two fishermen: the enemy shot Juan with machine guns while he was fishing, not bothering to check whether he was a rebel or not.

Instantaneously Teresa Carrar's attitude towards herself and her world is transformed. She is now a revolutionary: "They're not human. They're a canker and they've got to be burned out like a canker."²⁴⁷ After covering her son's body, she yells, "Take the guns! Get ready, Jose!" The last lines of the play occur as Teresa Carrar "reaches for one of the rifles."

JOSE: What, you coming too?
THE MOTHER: Yes, for Juan.²⁴⁸

Here it is the personal loss of her son that alters her position towards the revolution, rather than any rational evaluation of the political cause under discussion. And it is "for Juan," and his memory, rather than for the masses or the belief in a better life, that lead her to join the fight.

As it is an Aristotelian play, *Señora Carrar's Rifles* is governed by emotion. It is a work, not about objective material conditions, but about honor, fear, pride, and loyalty – elements that play upon the emotions of the audience, leading them to support Señora

²⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 234.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 235.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 235-236.

Carrar and her son out of empathy rather than intellectual understanding. The play contains no substantive discussion of the political issues behind the Civil War; they are not even mentioned. No one learns anything. And the transformation that takes place is instantaneous – there is no reason behind it, only pain.

And yet, not surprisingly, the play is effective.²⁴⁹ It is difficult not to share Señora Carrar's pain at learning that the son she had worked so hard to protect has died in vain. And it is hard to want to argue with her about her decision – what can be said to a grieving mother? In the face of such an emotionally overwhelming situation, what role can reason be expected to play? During one performance of its first production, even Brecht's greatest actress, Helene Weigel, who played Señora Carrar, could not hold back her tears, try as she might.²⁵⁰ Indeed, it is the play's emotional power which makes it so dangerous. The time and place of the events could, with minimal effort, be altered to fit any historical situation, whether it be the Russian Revolution, World War I (for any country involved), or Hitler's Germany. And since the specific politics are not discussed and no reasons are given for the desire to go to war, the play could work just as well for the right as for the left.

And yet, ironic though it may seem, *Señora Carrar's Rifles* was accepted by the Communists as sufficiently meeting the demands of socialist realism, and was produced 15 times between its premiere in 1937 and 1945. It was performed by Communist and Popular Front theatre groups throughout Europe, and its success enhanced the director, Slatan Dudow's, career.²⁵¹ Brecht himself was not entirely happy with the play's realist character. He wrote that *Señora Carrar's Rifles* "is Aristotelian (empathy) playwriting.

²⁴⁹ For discussions of the play's effectiveness as drama, see Esslin, *Brecht*; Ewen.

²⁵⁰ See Ewen, p. 320.

²⁵¹ Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume 4*.

The drawbacks of this technique can be compensated, up to a point, by presenting the play together with a documentary film on the events in Spain, or by linking it with some propagandistic occasion.”²⁵² He added an epic-style prologue and epilogue to the piece after the fall of the Spanish Republic that consisted of a few new characters reading the newspaper and reporting what they read to the audience. In the epilogue, the case of Señora Carrar is reported on.²⁵³ Brecht did what he could to mitigate the impact of empathy on the audience.

As Brecht was fond of saying, “the proof of the pudding is in the eating.” With his “realist” play, *Señora Carrar’s Rifles*, Brecht demonstrated that realism is just as dangerous as any formalist mode of expression. Perhaps this was partly why, after *Señora Carrar’s Rifles*, he abandoned his attempts to fit in with the socialist realists and returned to the epic theatre. After all, it was the following year that he wrote his attacks on Lukács. Indeed, once the battle against fascism shifted from the cultural plane to that of global war, Brecht ceased writing anti-fascist plays. And the shock of the Nazi-Soviet pact increased his concerns about the fate of Communism. The result was a retreat for Brecht back into the epic theatre, which could now serve only as a form of resistance. His return to Berlin in 1949 was bittersweet. He was home, but home was unrecognizable. Even in his own sheltered place in the GDR, he expressed his discontent through slave language, careful not to explicitly critique the powers that be.

Conclusion

Bertolt Brecht was a pioneer who developed a revolutionary proletarian theatre that culminated in his *Lehrstücke*. Yet just as he had begun to hit his artistic stride, the

²⁵² Brecht, as quoted in Esslin, *Brecht*, p. 60.

²⁵³ Brecht, *Bertolt Brecht: Collected Plays, Volume 4*.

rise of Hitler and the development of Stalinism forced him to abandon the revolutionary elements of his project. Deprived of a “public” with which to experiment, he attempted to enrich his political theatre through theorization. Though he developed a groundbreaking theory of epic theatre while in exile, the link between revolutionary theory and practice had been severed. The limits of the culture industry in the West and Stalinist cultural policies in the USSR prevented him from re-engaging in the political-theatrical praxis of his youth. To the extent that his dramaturgy and his plays are still taken seriously, they are stripped of their pedagogical and political context. Revolutionary proletarian theatre has reached its dead end. The ultimate irony for Brecht is that his plays, once revolutionary, now function as bourgeois culinary theatre.

Jean-Paul Sartre: The Theatre of Situations: Existentialism and the Politics of Resistance

Though only seven years Brecht's junior, Jean-Paul Sartre came of political age in a political space far more advanced than Brecht's Germany. The French Third Republic, instituted in 1870, had been in existence for almost half a century when Sartre entered the Lycée Henry IV. Born into a well-established bourgeois family -- his maternal grandfather, who helped to raise him, was a high school teacher of German literature and a relative of Albert Schweitzer -- and living in a relatively stable liberal democratic state which valued human rights and the rule of law, the young Sartre had the opportunity to dedicate himself to education and to the development of a personal scholarly agenda. Educated at the elite Ecole Normale Supérieure, he was drawn to the study of philosophy and especially to the phenomenological writings of Henri Bergson, Edmund Husserl, and Martin Heidegger. From 1933-35 he was a research student at the Institute Français in Berlin and at Freiburg University, where he further immersed himself in the writings of Husserl. Upon his return to France he taught philosophy at a lycée in Le Havre. While Sartre abandoned teaching after WWII for a life as an independent scholar and intellectual, he remained since his twenties a member of the French intellectual elite. And from the outset Sartre was above all a philosopher of consciousness and a theorist of subjectivity. His youthful reflections neatly sum up the intellectual itinerary of his life: "The phenomenologists have plunged man back into the world; they have given full measure to man's agonies and sufferings, and also to his rebellions. . . . No more is needed in the way of a philosophical formulation for an ethics and a politics which are

absolutely positive.”²⁵⁴ Throughout his life, Sartre sought to overturn the false dichotomy that existed between subject and object, and to re-unite theory with practice through the political philosophy of existentialism. Sartre was drawn to both abstract metaphysical speculation and literature as vehicles of philosophical reflection. The publication of the novel *Nausea* in 1938, and of the short story collection, *The Wall*, in 1939, established him as an artist-philosopher of high esteem.

Of course the France of the 1930’s was far from idyllic: the Algerian crisis was in full swing and the rise of Hitler’s Germany cast an increasingly dark shadow on the European continent and especially on neighboring France. The Nazi invasions of Czechoslovakia and Poland led to the outbreak of World War II in 1939. Sartre was quickly conscripted into the French army and, captured by the Germans in 1940, he spent nine months as a German prisoner of war. This experience of German Occupation and then French Resistance profoundly influenced the political formation of Sartre and his entire generation.²⁵⁵ In *Between Past and Future*, Hannah Arendt quotes Rene Char, the French resistance poet, who describes the experience of the French people that resulted from the Occupation:

The collapse of France, to them a totally unexpected event, had emptied, from one day to the next, the political scene of their country, leaving it to the puppet-like antics of knaves or fools, and they who as a matter of course had never participated in the official business of the Third Republic were sucked into politics as though with the force of a vacuum. Thus, without premonition and probably against their conscious inclinations, they had come to constitute willy-nilly a public realm where—without the paraphernalia of officialdom and hidden

²⁵⁴ My biographical profile is drawn heavily from Annie Cohen-Solal’s *Sartre: A Life* (Pantheon, 1987), who quotes Sartre on pp. 92-3. Original quote from Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Transcendence of the Ego: An Existentialist Theory of Consciousness*, Forrest Williams and Robert Kirkpatrick, trans. (Hill and Wang, 1991 [1957]).

²⁵⁵ See James Wilkinson, *The Resistance Generation in Europe*, 2nd Edition. (Harvard University Press, 1981).

from the eyes of friend and foe—all relevant business in the affairs of the country was transacted in deed and word.²⁵⁶

Arendt goes on to say that, “It did not last long. After a few short years they were liberated from what they originally thought to be a ‘burden’ and thrown back into what they now knew to be the weightless irrelevance of their personal affairs. . . . [or] the old empty strife of conflicting ideologies. . . . They had lost their treasure.”²⁵⁷

It was in the situation of Occupation that Sartre was thrust into the public domain, first as an imprisoned playwright seeking to inspire his comrades, and then as a writer obsessed with the theme of resistance, the theme that defined his literature, his philosophy, and his activism for the rest of his life. In his essay “Situation of the Writer in 1947,” Sartre reflected on his generation’s experience of war and Occupation:

The destiny of our works themselves were bound to that of a France in danger. Our elders wrote for idle souls, but for the public which we, in our turn, were going to address the vacation was over. It was composed of men of our sort who, like us, were expecting war and death. For these readers without leisure, occupied without respite with a single concern, there was only one fitting subject. It was about their war and their death that we had to write. Brutally reintegrated into history, we had no choice but to produce a literature of historicity.²⁵⁸

This “literature of historicity” of necessity addressed the pressing themes of the age -- war, imprisonment, torture, murder, complicity, victimization, and revolt. It was, as Sartre put it, a literature of “extreme situations,” in which the very identity and integrity of human beings was placed in question. Sartre was very clear that this literature involved new themes, new methods, and a new, experimental approach to writing. He is worth quoting at length:

²⁵⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (Penguin, 1978), p. 3.

²⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.4.

²⁵⁸ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Situation of the Writer in 1947,” in *What is Literature?*, Bernard Frechtman, trans. (Washington Square Press, 1966), p. 148.

In the stable world of the pre-war French novel, the author, placed at a gamma point which represented absolute rest, had fixed guide-marks at his disposal to determine the movements of his characters. But we, involved in a system in full evolution, could only know relative movements. Whereas our predecessors thought that they could keep themselves outside of history and that they had soared to heights from which they could judge events as they really were, circumstances have plunged us into our time. But since we were in it, how could we see it as a whole? Since we were situated, the only novels we could dream of were novels of situation, without internal narrators or all-knowing witnesses. In short, if we wished to give an account of our age, we had to make the technique of the novel shift from Newtonian mechanics to generalized relativity; we had to people our books with minds that were half lucid and half overcast, some of which we might consider with more sympathy than others, but none of which would have a privileged point of view either upon the event or upon himself. We had to present creatures whose reality would be the tangled and contradictory tissue of each one's evaluations of all the other characters, himself included, and the evaluation by all the others of himself, and who could never decide from within whether the changes of their destinies came from their own efforts, from their own faults, or from the course of the universe. Finally, we had to leave doubts, expectations, and the unachieved throughout our works, leaving it up to the reader to conjecture for himself by giving him the feeling, without giving him or letting him guess our feeling, that his view of the plot and the characters was merely one among many others.²⁵⁹

It was in this context of political turmoil and existential challenge that Sartre discovered the medium of theatre as a useful political and philosophical tool. The war had rendered the bourgeois literature of “average situations” an anachronism. It called forth a new, public, and yet subterranean sphere of resistance, and it encouraged more innovative approaches to writing. What Sartre says above about “the novel” was true more generally for the writing of fiction, including drama. Sartre recognized the new potentiality of theatre during this time and made the most of it. Thus was born his “theater of situations.”

In this chapter I will analyze Sartre’s “theater of situations,” paying attention both to Sartre’s dramatic approach and to the ways in which he employs this method to dramatize the themes of existential challenge and resistance. This will require me to

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

outline Sartre's distinctive version of "existentialism" and explain how his plays represent dramatic representations of this philosophy. But my focus will be primarily on the plays themselves. I will treat *Bariona* and *The Flies* as examples of the brilliance of Sartre's Resistance drama, and then move to a discussion of *Dirty Hands*, which represents the complication of Sartre's political philosophy and its impact on his drama. My central concern is the way that Sartre's plays exemplify existentialist themes. The high point of this accomplishment was the period of the Resistance and its immediate aftermath. As Restoration ensued at the war's end, Sartre's plays acquired a darker cast, and focused less on the nobility of resistance than on the "traps" of political radicalism. Eventually Sartre moved away from the theatre for the sake of more directly philosophical and polemical writing. While this quite obviously did not represent an abandonment of his political radicalism -- and indeed his post-dramatic period was the period of his greatest celebrity as a contributor to the discourses of Marxism and anti-colonial liberation -- it did represent an abandonment of theatre as a potential public sphere in which an audience of citizens might be reached and moved. Indeed, Sartre was increasingly aware of the obstacles to functioning as a political artist and public intellectual in the age of the culture industry. The story of Sartre's abandonment of the theatre clearly relates to broader questions of his specific intellectual trajectory and the trajectory of the French left after WWII.

For the purposes of this dissertation, Sartre figures as a transitional figure. If Shaw was a playwright of the bourgeois in a period of crisis, and Brecht was a playwright of the working class movement at a moment of hope and then disillusionment, Sartre, as a playwright and philosopher of existentialism, highlights the themes of existential

challenge and authenticity. He thus points away from a class-based politics and towards a concern with individual consciousness, choice, and dignity. For Sartre these themes underwrote a politics of resistance. But, as we will see, these existential themes could just as easily point away from politics altogether, towards an absurdist individualism exemplified in the plays of Eugène Ionesco.

The Theatre as a Tool of Political Communication

Sartre was not initially a political man; his original interests in ethics were primarily abstract and philosophical. In his War Diary he reports that by 1924 (the age of nineteen) he had become “anti-militarist,” but that this stance lacked any political content or conviction. As he writes: “I never envisaged getting involved in any kind of action for disarmament, or of making actual gestures of commitment (refusal of military service on grounds of conscientious objection, etc.). I repeated pacifist arguments like the rest. . . . I thus retreated to stoicism as the sole possible moral attitude.” Regarding the onset of fascism and war as a “passing madness,” he remained aloof, observing that “I’ve never wanted to get involved in politics.”²⁶⁰

This aloofness no doubt helps to explain why the rise of Nazism in Germany did not deter his decision to study there in 1933-35. At the same time, Sartre also notes that the war increasingly became both the material and the object of his thinking, and that by 1940 he had found himself at an existential “crossroads,” and came to see that “stoical refusal” was insufficient, and “authenticity” required him to understand and live war as “one of the modes of man’s being-in-the-world.”²⁶¹ His capture by German troops in 1940, and the circumstance of incarceration and solidarity that this enforced, clearly

²⁶⁰ Jean-Paul Sartre, “War Diary, September-October 1939.” *New Left Review* 59 (September-October 2009), pp. 108-9.

²⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 111.

played a large part in this awakening to the importance of politics and especially to the imperative of resistance. Sartre composed his first serious play, *Bariona, or the Son of Thunder*, in December 1940 while living in a POW camp at Trier.²⁶²

In a 1940 letter to Simone de Beauvoir, he is open about the fact that he originally joined the camp's group of playwrights in order to avoid the heavy physical labor of the rest of the camp: the thespians were exempt from such labor, as their role was to write plays which would entertain their fellow prisoners in order to keep their morale up (and, coincidentally, their desire for rebellion down). In his letter to Beauvoir, Sartre reveals his enthusiasm for the thespians' projects, and his joy that his own play, *Bariona*, is to be performed in the near future. "Please believe," he writes, "that I *most undoubtedly* have talent as a dramatist." Sartre was pleased with his play, declaring in the same letter that "[l]ater on, I shall write plays."²⁶³

The plot of *Bariona* centers on the birth of Christ, a theme that allowed Sartre to accomplish two tasks simultaneously: the familiarity of all of the prisoners with the story, and the timing of the production – Christmas Eve – ensured that Sartre was to have a large and enthusiastic audience. At the same time, the fact that the play's setting was so far removed from their immediate situation allowed Sartre to be as politically and philosophically provocative as he desired. As he told Paul-Mignon in 1968, "What was important to me in this experiment was that as a prisoner I was going to be able to address my fellow prisoners and raise problems we all shared. The script was full of allusions to the circumstances of the moment, which were perfectly clear to each of us. The envoy from Rome to Jerusalem was in our minds the German. Our guards saw him

²⁶² Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p. 183.

²⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

as the Englishman in his colonies!”²⁶⁴ Indeed, Sartre’s seemingly benign Christmas play was actually an act of resistance performed in the public space of the camp; the fact that the communication that occurred between Sartre, the other actors, and the audience was shared in the open made the event all the more powerful.

While the play’s performance was itself an act of covert resistance, the script contained a message of hopefulness and solidarity. The character of Bariona is the chief of a small village near Bethlehem who takes a stand against the Romans. He knows that the envoy’s command that they pay more taxes than they can afford leaves the villagers two choices: they can either refuse to pay the taxes, which will lead to the Roman plundering of their land and the rape of their women; or they can pay it, and having nothing more to live on, become wage slaves in the factory town of Bethlehem. Bariona leads his village to pursue a third course – they will pay the tax, and will vow to have no more children to be born into Roman servitude. The distinction between resignation and free choice is the crux of the issue for Bariona: “resignation is not worthy of a man. That is why I say to you all that we must make up our minds to despair. . . for the dignity of man lies in his despair.”²⁶⁵

The announcement of the Messiah’s birth causes the villagers to abandon Bariona and his plan. As everyone travels to Bethlehem to visit Christ, Bariona is left alone with his thoughts of resistance. After being told by a witch doctor of Christ’s future life and crucifixion, Bariona vows to murder the child, for he views Christ’s message of resignation, humility, and forgiveness as the death of Jewish political resistance. He

²⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 185.

²⁶⁵ Jean-Paul Sartre, *Bariona, or the Son of Thunder*, in *The Writings of Jean-Paul Sartre: Volume 2, Selected Prose*, Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka, eds., Richard McCleary, trans. (Northwestern University Press, 1974), p. 86.

stops himself from killing the child only when he sees the look in Joseph's eyes and imagines the pain he will cause the baby's father. It is then that "the real good news" is revealed to Bariona – and only Bariona -- by one of the wise men: it is not Christ's arrival on earth that holds the blessing, for "he'll disappoint them all" by not creating heaven on earth.²⁶⁶ The true gift in store for them all is something Bariona can immediately grasp.

As the wise man tells him,

[Y]ou will discover the truth which Christ came to teach you and which you already know: you are not your suffering. Whatever you do and however you look at it, you surpass it infinitely; because it means exactly what you want it to. . . . [I]t is you who give it its meaning and make it what it is. For in itself it's nothing but matter for human action and Christ came to teach you that you are responsible for yourself and your suffering. . . . And if you accept your share of suffering as your daily bread, then you are beyond. And everything that is beyond your lot of suffering and your cares, all of that belongs to you – all of it – everything that's light, I mean the world.²⁶⁷

The wise man tells Bariona that he ought not pity the suffering of others or prevent new life from being born; even the prisoners of Rome can find joy beyond their suffering.

The play ends with Bariona gathering his men together to ward off Herod's soldiers who mean to kill Christ. Having moved beyond his suffering, Bariona is prepared to die to defend the Messiah, and to die joyfully.

The play's last monologue is spoken by Bariona directly to the prisoners in the audience: "And you prisoners, this is the end of this Christmas play which was written for you. You are not happy, and maybe there is more than one of you who has tasted that taste of gall in his mouth, that bitter salty taste I'm talking about [the taste of hate]. But I

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 128.

²⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-130.

think that for you, too, on this Christmas day – and every other day – there'll still be joy!"²⁶⁸

The theme of political resistance is dealt with in *Bariona* in an unconventional, yet philosophically sophisticated way. *Bariona* and his villagers are in a situation analogous to Sartre and his comrades: there is no way to escape the domination of their oppressors, and the methods of resistance open to them are extremely limited. Resignation is the end of resistance; yet, choosing to despair – perhaps a valid existential choice – has political consequences for the individual and the community that help no one. Further, relying on the promise of liberation is like waiting for a messiah whose actions may not lead to the expected effects. The only move available to those who rely only on themselves and their interior community is to accept their situation and to find the freedom that hope contains. Hope, like suffering, is something that neither god nor man can take away; it can be extinguished only by the individual himself. The political consequences of hope – meaning, in this circumstance, the consequences for the way the prisoners interact with one another and with their guards – are undefined, yet filled with possibility unavailable to those who choose to despair.

Decades later Sartre spoke to Paul-Louis Mignon of the chief accomplishments of *Bariona* – that it had been well received by its audience, connecting Sartre to his fellow inmates and his fellow inmates to one another; that he was able to secretly communicate his message of resistance to his inmates through the standard, benign story of the birth of Christ; and that, through the play he was able to express his existentialist philosophy to a wide group.²⁶⁹ Sartre's comments to Bouveiour and to Mignon encompass, yet by no

²⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 136.

²⁶⁹ Sartre, *Sartre On Theatre*, p. 185.

means exhaust, the principal reasons why Sartre continued to write plays after his release from the POW camp.

The situation in France in the early 1940s was one of political uncertainty and fear. In the words of Sartre, “everything is unforeseen and disordered.”²⁷⁰ Within this atmosphere, individual French citizens were isolated from one another politically, morally, and philosophically. The Nazis had instituted a cult of repentance, which led the French to believe that the Occupation was their fault and that they deserved to suffer endless feelings of guilt and pain. As Sartre recalls “to cap it all, we could not take a step, eat or even breathe without colluding with the occupier. . . . Every one of our acts was ambiguous; we never knew whether to condemn ourselves totally or fully approve our actions; a subtle poison infected the best of undertakings.”²⁷¹ Elsewhere, Sartre explains that “the aim was to plunge us into such a state of repentance, of shame, that we would be incapable of putting up any resistance. We were to find satisfaction in our repentance, even pleasure in it. All the better for the Nazis.”²⁷² This emphasis on repentance succeeded in inoculating the French from true responsibility, a force Sartre believed would have led to their resistance.²⁷³

In a time when all French were “guilty,” yet few took responsibility for their situation and their own lives, Sartre turned to the theatre to take the French public “by the throat.”²⁷⁴ At the time he wrote:

I think that today philosophy is dramatic It is concerned with man, who is both an agent and an actor, who produces and plays his drama, as he lives the

²⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 96.

²⁷¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Paris Under the Occupation,” in *The Aftermath of War*, Chris Turner, trans. (Verso, 2010), pp. 32-33.

²⁷² Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p. 193.

²⁷³ *Ibid.*, pp.193-4. See also Andrew Ryder, “Sartre’s Theater of Resistance: *Les Mouches* and the Deadlock of Collective Responsibility,” *Sartre Studies International*, 15 (2), 2009: pp. 78-95.

²⁷⁴ Sartre, “Situation of the Writer in 1947,” p. 156.

contradictions of his situation until his person explodes or his conflicts are solved This is why the theatre is philosophical and philosophy is dramatic.²⁷⁵

For Sartre, both the theatre and philosophy privilege the act above all else. The contradictions in existence force each individual to make choices and commit acts that will constitute the person as an individual. The role of drama, like the role of philosophy, is to elucidate the material constraints and moral dilemmas that shape an individual's choices, and to interrogate his actions. In the dramatic and philosophic realms, deeds must speak for themselves, while actors must be prepared to judge and to be judged by others. Responsibility, authenticity, and (self-)judgment are the elements that constitute human freedom.

Through his second play, *The Flies* (1943), written after his release, Sartre encouraged the Occupied French public to reconceptualize its notions of guilt, responsibility and freedom. During the Occupation, the German forces began retaliating against the Resistance by taking and murdering hostages for every German soldier the Resistance killed. In this way the Germans played upon French moral sentiment, believing – often correctly – that Resistance members would not be willing to sacrifice innocent life in their fight against the Nazis. Hence, for the public in Occupied France, guilt was inescapable: collaborators felt guilt for not resisting, and the Resistance fighters felt guilt for causing innocents deathly harm. Sartre was responding to this moral dilemma, in which there existed no clear “moral” choice, for both action and inaction were contemptible on ethical grounds. As Sartre said later, “By writing my play I was trying by my own unaided effort, feeble though it may be, to do what I could to root out

²⁷⁵ Sartre, quoted in Robert Champigny, *Sartre and Drama* (French Literature Publications Company, 1982), p. 15.

this sickness of repentance, this complacency in repentance and shame. . . . I was saying to my fellow Frenchmen: You do not have to repent, even those of you who have in a sense become murderers; you must assume your own responsibility for your acts, even if they have caused the deaths of innocent persons.”²⁷⁶ Precisely because there is no way out of the moral dilemma, one must re-conceptualize what it means to live responsibly. He differentiates between responsibility and repentance, concepts which the Nazis had successfully confused:

I say that a sense of responsibility is necessary, that it is the key to the future. When various different elements are combined into repentance, concepts become confused, and that leads to misconceptions about the content of guilt or the recognition of the feeling of guilt. I am aware of my guilt, and my conscience suffers from it. This induces the feeling that is called repentance. Perhaps I have also felt an inner complacency in my repentance. That is simply passivity, looking backward; I can get nothing out of it. On the other hand, the sense of responsibility can conduce to something else, something positive, that is to say the necessary rehabilitation, action for a fruitful, positive future.²⁷⁷

Responsibility is a critical component of a just society, for it encourages both self-reflection and rehabilitation. While repentance leads to inaction, passivity, (and often) helplessness, responsibility is a catalyst for forward movement and constructive action.

As Sartre demonstrates in *The Flies*, the cult of repentance can lead to the annihilation of the self through the ossification and petrification of the mass. As with *Bariona*, Sartre chose a story already familiar to his audience in order to disguise his political commentary from the Nazis. This time, he chose the Greek tragedy, *Orestia*, as his subject. In Aeschylus’ version, Orestes returns to his native land of Argos to find his long lost sister, Elektra, and to avenge the death of his father, Agamemnon, at the hands of his mother and step-father. After he murders them both, the Furies, feminine spirits of

²⁷⁶ Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, pp. 193-4.

²⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 195.

vengeance and guilt, surround him, for his crime must now be avenged by another. The classic drama ends with Athena coming to earth and making a judgment in favor of Orestes, thereby ending the cycle of blood-lust that has ruled the community for generations. A rational judicial system is established to take its place, and Orestes is set free.

Sartre's retelling transforms the founding myth of procedural justice into "a tragedy of freedom."²⁷⁸ His version focuses on the collective guilt that has consumed the people of Argos since the death of Agamemnon. They have been brainwashed by Aegistheus, the current king and Orestes' step-father, into believing that they are responsible for Agamemnon's murder, as they knew it was immanent and did nothing to prevent it. For 15 years, the townspeople have been mourning their king, living their daily lives dressed all in black, never laughing, and always begging the gods and the dead for forgiveness. Repentance has become the greatest virtue, and resignation the only means to salvation. Zeus, "god of flies and death,"²⁷⁹ has aided Aegistheus by releasing hordes of flies among the townspeople as symbols of their sin.²⁸⁰ At the annual ceremony of Dead Men's Day – based on Aegistheus' lie that the dead supposedly come back to terrorize the living one day a year – Orestes bears witness to the impact this constant grief has upon the townspeople:

A WOMAN [kneeling before her little son, as she straightens the kerchief round his neck]: There! That's the third time I've had to straighten it for you. [She dusts his clothes.] That's better. Now try to behave properly, and mind you start crying when you're told.
THE CHILD: Is that (indicating the cavern of the dead) where they come from?
THE WOMAN: Yes.

²⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 186.

²⁷⁹ Jean-Paul Sartre, *The Flies*, in *No Exit and Three Other Plays*, S. Gilbert, trans. (Vintage International, 1989), p. 49.

²⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

THE CHILD: I'm frightened.

THE WOMAN: And so you should be, darling. Terribly frightened. That's how one grows up into a decent, god-fearing man.²⁸¹

Another bystander, a man, falls to his knees, proclaiming, "I stink! Oh, how I stink! I am a mass of rottenness. See how the flies are teeming round me, like carrion crows. . . . That's right, my harpies, sting and gouge and scavenge me; bore through my flesh to my black heart. I have sinned a thousand times, I am a sink of ordure, and I reek to heaven." At this point, Zeus, god of death, proclaims approvingly, "O worthy man!"²⁸² The men beg of the dead to "Forgive us for living while you are dead,"²⁸³ as the ceremony continues and the dead are believed to emerge from the cavern.

While Sartre exaggerated his depiction of the cult of guilt for the stage, it was meant to be recognizable to his audience as akin to their own experiences, which were imposed upon them and encouraged by the Nazis. As an outsider to this spectacle, Orestes is shocked and horrified by the sufferings of the townspeople over a crime they had little part in. He rejects the cult of repentance that Zeus supports, and – more radically – the idea that he must subject himself to the will of the gods. In asserting his individual will, he has found the only way possible of transcending his situation. Zeus and Aegistheus, partners in perpetuating eternal repentance, discuss the situation:

ZEUS: Orestes knows that he is free.

AEGISTHEUS: [eagerly]: He knows he's free? Then, to lay hands on him, to put him in irons, is not enough. A free man in a city acts like a plague-spot. He will infect my whole kingdom and bring my work to nothing. Almighty Zeus, why stay your hand? Why not fell him with a thunderbolt?

ZEUS: [slowly]: Fell him with a thunderbolt? [A pause. Then, in a muffled voice] Aegistheus, the gods have another secret.

AEGISTHEUS: Yes?

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 73.

²⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 75

²⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 78.

ZEUS: Once freedom lights its beacon in a man's heart, the gods are powerless against him. It's a matter between man and man, and it is for other men, and for them only, to let him go his gait, or to throttle him.²⁸⁴

As Zeus is not free to intervene, Orestes murders his mother, Clytemnestra, and Aegistheus to avenge his father's death. After murdering Aegistheus and Clytemnestra, Orestes and his co-conspirator, Elektra, are hounded first by the flies, and later by the Furies, who take their youth and hound them with guilt. It is the difference between the decisions, and hence, the fates of Orestes and Electra that form the climax of the play and the culmination of Sartre's message of resistance through responsibility. Zeus offers each of them a way out of the life of suffering that is to be their fate: all they must do is repent and give themselves over to the cult of repentance, and they will be anointed King and Queen of Argos, taking the place of their victims.²⁸⁵ Though she resists the offer at first, ultimately Electra accepts, crying out to Zeus: "I will obey your law, I will be your creature and your slave, I will embrace your knees. Save me from the flies, from my brother, from myself! Do not leave me lonely and I will give up my whole life to atonement. I repent, Zeus. I bitterly repent."²⁸⁶ These are her final words in the play. She rejects her freedom and the possibility of the future, accepting instead the static world of guilt and repentance in which she will assume her mother's role, thereby maintaining the order of Argos.

In contrast to his sister, Orestes rejects Zeus' offer, and it is through that act that Sartre's message is revealed: as Sartre wrote at the time, "freedom is not some vague abstract ability to soar above the human predicament; it is the most absurd and the most inexorable of commitments. Orestes will go onward, unjustifiable, with no excuse and

²⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

²⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 121.

with no right of appeal, alone. Like a hero. Like all of us.”²⁸⁷ Orestes proclaims that “[t]he most cowardly of murders is he who feels remorse,”²⁸⁸ for remorse is a means of escaping freedom. There is comfort in guilt: the comfort of giving oneself over to a moral absolute and allowing oneself to be judged by its standards. True freedom means never knowing whether one’s action was justified or not – it means living with the uncertainty that comes from having to make choices and stand by those choices without the security of a final judgment. Redemption is closed to the free, for it implies a judge higher than man himself; free individuals are confined to the world of human judgment, which, because it is always shifting, leaves the individual as the final judge of his own actions. Hence, Orestes declares that “I am doomed to have no other law but mine.”²⁸⁹ Before leaving Argos, he does his best to free the townspeople from the weight of their guilt by revealing to them the truth that “human life begins on the far side of despair.”²⁹⁰ He leaves alone, taking the flies with him, content to be “a king without a kingdom, without subjects,” ready to begin his “strange” new life.²⁹¹

Orestes can be considered a hero – not one in the Aristotelian sense of an exceptional individual with a tragic flaw who must accept fate, but a Sartrean hero: a common individual who asserts his freedom by committing a morally ambiguous act and taking responsibility for the consequences of that act, no matter what they may be.²⁹² He is the character from Sartre’s plays who best embodies Sartre’s idea of a free man.

Orestes is what Sartre presented to the French public of 1943 as an example, an ideal, a

²⁸⁷ Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p. 186.

²⁸⁸ Sartre, *The Flies*, p. 116.

²⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 119.

²⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 123.

²⁹² This is perhaps what Sartre meant when he said, in 1948, that “In my view, Orestes is not a hero at any point.” Indeed, Orestes is not a classical hero, but an exemplary individual of the new age. (Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p. 196).

model, or better still, a reminder that, in spite of their political situation, they are human beings who exist only insofar as they act and take responsibility for those actions.

Sartre's early plays bear the imprint of his emerging existentialist philosophy. *The Flies* was indeed completed in 1943, the same year that Sartre completed his philosophical magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Philosophical Ontology*. The central theme of this essay, and of Sartre's existentialism more generally, is the ontological and moral freedom of the individual human subject. Building on the previous efforts of Kierkegaard, Husserl, and Heidegger, Sartre develops an account of the human being centered on negation/transcendence; man, Sartre contends, makes himself or *becomes* himself by surpassing the given. Man, in other words, has no essence, fixity, or nature except for the fact that his existence is always in question. Man is thus "nothing" in two senses. First, he lacks a positive, substantial identity, purpose, or essence. And second, he becomes what he (contingently) becomes by enacting this "nothingness" in the form of *negation* of what exists. Sartre acknowledges that humans are part of a broader material world; that this world is partly constituted by prior human decisions and actions; and that humans are shaped by this world. But he also maintains that the givenness or "facticity" of this world is partial and contingent, for the world and the individuals who inhabit it are always in a process of *becoming*, and this process is driven by the fact that the human individual has the quality of being always "for-itself."

As he writes:

The For-itself, in fact, is nothing but the pure nihilation of the In-itself; it is like a hole of being at the heart of Being. . . . The for-itself has no reality save that of being the nihilation of being . . . The for-itself . . . is purely *interrogative*. If it can posit questions this is because it is itself always *in question*; its being is never *given* but *interrogated* since it is always separated from itself by the nothingness of otherness. The for-itself is always in suspense because its being is a perpetual

reprieve.²⁹³

Sartre clarifies his meaning in the essay “Existentialism is a Humanism.” Man, he writes, is unlike a “paper-knife” or any other object; for he is

a being which exists before it can be defined by any conception of it. . . to begin with, he is nothing. He will not be anything until later, and then he will be what he makes of himself. . . Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism. . . man is, before all else, something which propels itself towards a future and is aware that it is doing so.²⁹⁴

Perhaps Sartre’s clearest exposition of the ethical consequences of this approach is his essay “Antisemite and Jew,” also published in 1943. Here too he centers his discussion on the distinctive ontological *subjectivity* of human beings, which sets them apart from objects in the world and presents them with a distinctive *responsibility* that is both a challenge and an opportunity.

Sartre develops this theme through two key concepts—“situation” and “authenticity.” As he writes of the first:

For us, man is defined first of all as a being “in a situation.” That means that he forms a synthetic whole with his situation—biological, economic, political, cultural, etc. He cannot be distinguished from his situation, for it forms him and decides its possibilities; but, inversely, it is he who gives it meaning by making his choices within it and by it. To be in a situation, as we see it, is to *choose oneself* in a situation, and men differ from one another in their situations and also in the choices they themselves make of themselves. What men have in common is not a “nature” but a condition, that is, an ensemble of limits and restrictions: the inevitability of death, the necessity of working for a living, of living in a world already inhabited by other men. Fundamentally, this condition is nothing more than the basic human situation, or, if you prefer, the ensemble of characteristics common to all situations.²⁹⁵

²⁹³ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Being and Nothingness: An Essay in Phenomenological Ontology* (Citadel Press, 2001), pp. 535-7.

²⁹⁴ Sartre, Jean-Paul. *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Carol Macomber, trans. (Yale University Press, 2007), pp.22-23.

²⁹⁵ Sartre, Jean Paul. *Anti-Semite and Jew: An Exploration of the Etiology of Hate*, George J. Becker, trans. (Schoken Books, 1995), pp.59-60.

Yet if humans are always “in situation,” i.e., situated in a historical, institutional, and intersubjective context, they are also always responsible for the way they deal with their situation and for whether or not they fully embrace their responsibility for being either complicit in the status quo or engaged in the attempt to *surpass* it. And this leads to the notion of “authenticity”:

If it is agreed that man may be defined as a being having freedom within the limits of a situation, then it is easy to see that the exercise of this freedom may be considered as *authentic* or *inauthentic* according to the choices made in the situation. Authenticity, it is almost needless to say, consists in having a true and lucid consciousness of the situation, in assuming the responsibilities and risks that it involves, in accepting it in pride or humiliation, sometimes in horror and hate. . . . There is no doubt that authenticity demands much courage and more than courage Thus the authentic Jew is the one who asserts his claim in the face of the disdain shown toward him.²⁹⁶

The authentic Jew, and the authentic man more generally, thus refuses his oppression, asserting a sense of integrity in the face of his oppressor, and assuming responsibility for surpassing his oppressive situation. As Steven Crowell notes, the concept of authenticity thus has a strong evaluative component. As he writes:

Thus the norm of authenticity refers to a kind of ‘transparency’ with regard to my situation, a recognition that I am a being who *can be* responsible for who I am. In choosing in light of this norm I can be said to recover myself from alienation, from my absorption in the anonymous ‘one-self’ that characterizes me in my everyday engagement in the world. Authenticity thus indicates a certain kind of integrity—not that of a pre-given whole, an identity waiting to be discovered, but that of a project to which I can either commit myself (and thus ‘become’ what it entails) or else simply occupy for a time, inauthentically drifting in and out of various affairs.²⁹⁷

Over the course of his long career Sartre continued to develop, refine, and modify this basic philosophical perspective, culminating in his 1960 *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, an extensive effort to synthesize the core themes of existentialism with a version

²⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.90-91.

²⁹⁷ Steven Crowell, “Existentialism,” in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.
<<http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/existentialism/#Aut>>

of Marxism. But it is in these earlier essays that his fundamental philosophical convictions were expressed, and it is in his contemporaneous plays of the 1940s that he sought to dramatize these convictions. As Crowell sums them up: “Commitment—or ‘engagement’—is thus ultimately the basis for an authentically meaningful life, that is, one that answers to the existential condition of being human and does not flee that condition by appeal to an abstract system of reason or divine will.”²⁹⁸

The “Theatre of Situations:” Sartre’s Vision Realized

In the European situation of the 1940s, there were already several well-established schools of modern drama, and more were emerging every year. Sartre took part in the creation of the modern dramatic world by offering his theatrical model to the people of Paris. His vision of the modern theatre differed greatly from the current trends. While Stanislavski’s realist heirs sought to recreate a mirror image of society for the purposes of social critique; while the fledgling playwrights of the absurdist movement took part in language games in order to reexamine human relationships; and while Brecht developed his notion of estrangement as a tool to teach the public to be critical of their political situation, Sartre developed something wholly different.

In 1946, Sartre delivered a lecture to a New York audience with little understanding of the developments that had taken place within French theatre since the Occupation. Here he explicitly identified himself as one of “the young French playwrights” who were, together, re-creating French theatre: the works of Sartre, Jean Anouilh, Simone de Beauvoir, and Albert Camus are explicitly referenced. In the lecture he explains their decision to reject realistic drama:

²⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Since it is their aim to forge myths, to project for the audience an enlarged and enhanced image of its own sufferings, our playwrights turn their backs on the constant preoccupation of the realists, which is to reduce as far as possible the distance which separates the spectator from the spectacle. . . . To us a play should not seem too *familiar*. Its greatness derives from its social and, in a certain sense, religious functions: it must remain a rite; even as it speaks to the spectators of themselves it must do it in a tone and with a constant reserve of manner which, far from breeding familiarity, will increase the distance between play and audience.²⁹⁹

Sartre's fascination with the theatre began with his experience with Bariona. Playing the part of one of the wise men, Sartre had a revelation: "on this occasion, as I addressed my comrades across the footlights, speaking to them of their state as prisoners, when I suddenly saw them so remarkably silent and attentive, I realized what theater ought to be – a great collective, religious phenomenon."³⁰⁰ Theatre as a religious rite – as a way for individuals to find the god-like power within themselves – is a long way off from the goal of emotional identification sought by the realists. In rejecting their theatrical purpose, Sartre and the other young playwrights of Europe with whom he identified, rejected their theatrical techniques as well.

Sartre later dismissed the absurdist avant-garde theatre of the 1950s as well. In an interview, he spoke of the works of Beckett, Ionesco, and Adamov, as

profoundly, essentially, bourgeois in origin. Take Beckett. I liked *Waiting for Godot* very much. I go so far as to regard it as the best thing that has been done in the theater for thirty years. But all the themes in *Godot* are bourgeois – solitude, despair, the platitude, incommunicability. All of them are the product of the inner solitude of the bourgeoisie. . . .

And it is the same with Ionesco. . . . Ionesco's whole work is the proverbial society of union among men, but seen in reverse. And these writers' problem is the problem of integration – in this respect they are the only dramatists of our time (they shatter the bourgeois theatre in which this integration is taken for granted beforehand) – but the problem of integration as such, of any

²⁹⁹ Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p. 41.

³⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 39.

integration at all, of their integration with any sort of society; while they are nonpolitical in this sense, they are also reactionary.³⁰¹

While Sartre admired the absurdists' dramatic achievements, he recognized that politically their work served a negative function: the individual depicted as completely cut off from society with no hope for camaraderie or human connection is both anti-social and anti-political.

And while Sartre had great admiration for Brecht, he had no desire to give his work over to theatrically depicting a political dogma. Furthermore, Brecht's project of demystification – of presenting the naked truth of bourgeois society through a theatre devoid of pageantry and symbolism – was directly counter to Sartre's notion of theatre as a religious rite. Sartre also saw that Brecht's success hinged on the fact that "his audience has already been politicized," whereas, a post-war French audience, "a public so lacking in backbone," would probably view his work as formalist.³⁰²

The development of Sartre's theatre, from *Bariona* to his time of camaraderie with the new generation of French playwrights, to the end of his theatrical career, hinged on the specificities of the French experience. His audience – a generation of individuals who could no longer find solace or guidance in the examples of their parents; who, seemingly overnight, were forced to confront the limits of humanity; who lived in a world of inescapable moral dilemmas never-before experienced – needed a new literature and a new theatre to which it could relate. As Sartre reflects upon the experience of his generation of writers,

³⁰¹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

³⁰² *Ibid.*

[O]ur life as an individual which had seemed to depend upon our efforts, our virtues, and our faults, on our good and bad luck, on the good and bad will of a very small number of people, seemed governed down to its minutest details by obscure and collective forces, and its most private circumstances seemed to reflect the state of the whole world. All at once we felt ourselves abruptly *situated*.³⁰³

He goes on:

Since we were *situated*, the only novels we could dream of were novels of *situation*, without internal narrators or all-knowing witnesses. . . . We had to present creatures whose reality would be the tangled and contradictory tissue of each one's evaluations of all the other characters – himself included – and the evaluation by all the others of himself, and who could never decide from within whether the changes of their destinies came from their own efforts, from their own faults, or from the course of the universe.³⁰⁴

In other words, Sartre's "theatre of situations," like his literature, was itself situated in a context in which the old guides provided no wisdom, and the only thing open to an individual's control – to the extent that control could be exercised at all – was his action.

In Sartre's theatre of situations, there are "no more characters; the heroes are freedoms caught in a trap, like all of us." As in the outside world, the psychology and personality of the individual become irrelevant once his life is reduced to a single moment, a single choice. "What are the issues? Each character will be nothing but the choice of an issue and will equal no more than the chosen issue."³⁰⁵ In this theatre, "*doing reveals being*."³⁰⁶ The bourgeois theatre of characters is thus replaced with a theatre of deeds.

Acts *create* being – this is perhaps the main philosophical premise underlying Sartre's work, existing in direct contrast to Aristotle's assertion that acts *reveal* being.³⁰⁷

³⁰³ Sartre, "Situation of the Writer in 1947," p. 147, emphasis in original.

³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 155, emphasis in original.

³⁰⁵ Ibid., p. 203.

³⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 165.

³⁰⁷ Robert Norman Scanlan, "Complete Action: An Examination of Three Modern Plays in the Light of Aristotle's Poetics." Diss. Rutgers University, 1976, p.73.

Orestes is a key example of a character who comes to realize this and who acts on his knowledge in a positive way. Yet in *No Exit*, Sartre establishes the same principle, though through the development of a figurative situation. The three characters of *No Exit* are dead, and hence, they can no longer act. Their “beings” or personalities are thus complete and can no longer be changed; this is the reason why their “hell” is hell. They are caught in a static world, doomed to engage in the same cycle of attempted manipulation as before.³⁰⁸ Through *No Exit* Sartre demonstrates that one should never wish to be a “completed” person, for completeness can exist only in death, when the possibility of action is removed. The construction and reconstruction of the self through action is a necessary process, one which should be perceived as an opportunity.³⁰⁹

Most of Sartre’s plays are constructed around a critical action that a character must decide whether or not to commit. No matter what choice he makes or what the consequences that result, the character has created his freedom and his being by engaging in the act of decision. As one scholar says, “Since for Sartre man is what he does, the crux of the typical Sartrean plot concerns the individual in an extreme situation, forced to make a choice of action which calls his whole existence into question.”³¹⁰ Yet Sartre shows us that even after a monumental decision has been made or an act committed, there is always more to be done. The act succeeds only in altering the situation, not in completing it, as the issue of responsibility must still be confronted. Indeed, Sartre’s plays do not end with the character’s key decision or action; they sometimes begin with it.

308 Dorothy McCall, *The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre*. (Columbia University Press, 1971).

309 Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p. 200.

³¹⁰ McCall, p. 5.

In *Dirty Hands*, the audience is aware from the beginning that Hugo has murdered Hoederer and that this action was the defining moment in Hugo's life. The focus of the play is not on Hugo's act of murdering Hoederer, but on his motivations for doing so. In constructing this situation in the way that he does, Sartre is able to demonstrate another key element of his philosophy: the role of intentions. The play proceeds in linear fashion as Hugo and his wife move into the home of Hoederer with the intent of killing him. Through the course of the play, many different motives for murdering Hoederer are presented: Hugo's orders dictate it; Hugo does not like Hoederer; Hugo is afraid Hoederer will convince him that the Party's ideas are incorrect; Hugo desires above all else to be a hero; and Hugo catches Hoederer and his wife in an embrace. At the end of the play neither Hugo nor the audience is any closer to determining Hugo's intention at the time of the crime than when the play began. As Hugo opens the door allowing himself to be murdered by his own party, the audience is again confused as to why he has acted in such a way. Again there are several possible motivations that could be behind his choice. Sartre has the audience engage in a two-hour exploration of motivations in order for them to realize that a particular motivation is impossible to determine for "it is born simultaneously with the act itself."³¹¹ Sartre wants them to realize that "intentions" are human constructs that exist in order for people to shield themselves from responsibility. As instruments of "bad faith," intentions serve to confuse the relationship between being and action. In reality, action cannot be drawn from motivation, for action defines being, which is the source of motivation. Hence, to concern oneself with motivation is to ignore the reality that the individual actor creates. In truth, "to find the

³¹¹ Scanlan, p. 74.

real motive is to invent it.”³¹² As Sartre demonstrates, the focus on motivation is a distraction from reality and from responsibility. What matters is how one acts in the world, not why one does so.

This is in direct contrast to classical Aristotelian drama, in which intentions and actions are intrinsically linked and, because of this, certain actions, such as those that are “accidental” or that run against one’s intentions, are separated from those actions that follow directly from their related intentions.³¹³ In this world, humans are not required to take responsibility for everything they do, only everything they intend to do. Sartre rejects this, arguing instead that, because there is a separation between intention and action, intentions cannot be used to determine what deeds we are responsible for and what deeds we are not. In fact, as men are free and as they create their freedom through their actions, it follows that they are responsible for every action they take and every decision they make.³¹⁴ Those that follow Aristotle’s logic and disown acts they have committed on the basis that those acts were “unintentional” operate in “bad faith” as cowards, deceiving themselves into believing that they are only sometimes free and that they are only sometimes responsible for themselves. Sartre’s implicit rejection of Aristotelian notions of responsibility and intentionality is a rejection of the foundations of classical drama, which had existed, untouched and sacrosanct, for centuries.

Though in terms of technical form Sartre did little to alter the theatrical traditions with which he was raised,³¹⁵ Sartre created a theatre that was philosophically and politically different from all other types. Dramatically and philosophically Sartre battled

³¹² Champaigny, p. 69.

³¹³ Scanlan.

³¹⁴ Scanlan.

³¹⁵ McCall, pp. 160-1

against Aristotle, deconstructing and ultimately rejecting each of the philosophical tenets underlying the ancient theatre.³¹⁶ Though perhaps progressive and necessary at the time in which it was constructed, Aristotelian drama could not speak to the needs of the French in the 1940s and 50s. Nor could Brecht's theatre of estrangement, bourgeois and/or socialist realism, or, ultimately in Sartre's judgment, the theatre of the absurd. The French public at this time – stripped of its illusions, living without examples to follow, and relying on nothing but their individual consciences – needed a philosophy and a theatre that it could understand and that could understand them. Sartre provided both.

Falling Action: Sartre's Decision to Leave the Theatre

Though he later adapted Euripides' *Trojan Women*, Sartre wrote his last original play, *The Condemned of Altona*, in 1959.³¹⁷ After *Trojan Women*, Sartre neither wrote nor adapted any more plays; he discarded the theatrical medium, returning to more traditional forms for his works *The Words* and *Flaubert*. Compared to the playwrighting careers of Shaw and Brecht – and even compared to Sartre's own career as a philosopher – Sartre's playwrighting period was brief. This is all the more interesting considering that many still consider him to be one of the best playwrights of the 20th century.

Though at first puzzling, Sartre's decision to abandon the theatre is relatively simple to understand. Beyond the obvious observations one could make – that his plays were often poorly received and even more often completely misconstrued – lie both philosophical and technical explanations for Sartre's decision which are perhaps more

³¹⁶ Irrelevant as they were, however, the tropes and tenets of the Aristotelian theatre were familiar to the French public, and it was their knowledge of tradition which Sartre depended upon for his dramatic success.

³¹⁷ Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p. 253.

salient. From a technical and aesthetic perspective, Sartre's work was not terribly interesting. In the lecture later titled, "Forgers of Myths: The Young Playwrights of France," Sartre is able to outline the structure of his theatre (here conceived as a joint project) in a few sentences:

Our plays are violent and brief, centered on one single event; there are few players and the story is compressed within a short space of time, sometimes only a few hours. As a result they obey a kind of "rule of the three unities," which has been only a little rejuvenated and modified. A single set, a few characters, a few exits, intense arguments among characters who defend their individual rights with passion – this is what sets our plays at a great distance from the brilliant fantasies of Broadway.³¹⁸

Though philosophically complex and rich with meaning, structurally Sartre's plays are "austere,"³¹⁹ as he puts it, and formulaic. His theatre of situations is primarily based on the formula of forcing characters to create themselves through a series of decisions. Even *No Exit*, though not based strictly upon this formula, nevertheless emphasizes the importance of action and responsibility through its notable absence on stage.

There is another major problem with Sartre's theatre, which is related to the first. Sartre's principal message of his drama – that real freedom can be found only individually, through the acceptance of responsibility – is difficult to stage. What is required to do so is to artificially create a situation on stage in which a character's internal gestalt shift can be made clear to the audience. The understanding of the meaning of responsibility is just as important philosophically as the act committed; therefore, portraying the action is not enough. The audience must also have access to the character's inner experience. The outward portrayal of inner experience is problematic in the theatre, a medium in which deeds are just as important – if not more so – than words.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*

To express his protagonists' gestalt shifts, Sartre has them utter lengthy monologues in which they explain themselves to the best of their ability. Yet because these individual characters are just beginning to understand their situation, Sartre cannot have them speak as articulately or as emphatically as he himself might; hence, the monologue – which forms the climax of the play more than the action does – insufficiently communicates Sartre's complex philosophical message to the general public.

Furthermore, as the political context of Sartre's theatre changed from the Resistance to the morally ambiguous situation of the Cold War, Sartre's theatre became darker and harder to penetrate. While *Dirty Hands* is an innovative exploration of intentionality and responsibility, it is also a reflection of the increasingly complicated nature of Sartre's politics. Instead of focusing on the nobility of resistance, *Dirty Hands* deals with the ethics of resistance in a context in which the official resistance movement oppresses its own members. Here, truth, responsibility, and intentionality are obfuscated, both objectively and subjectively. Bad faith is an epidemic, and the one character operating in good faith – Hoederer – is killed. A darkness not present in Sartre's resistance drama emerges here and remains present throughout his later works, culminating in the torturous existence of Franz in *The Condemned of Altona*. It is no longer enough to make a decision and take responsibility for the consequences; now the moral ambiguity of the situations presented is so thick as to be impenetrable.

As a result of these difficulties, the public reception of his plays was always mixed. Even *Bariona*, which was by-and-large a success with his fellow prisoners, was misinterpreted as anti-Semitic by one of them.³²⁰ The reception of *The Flies* was even

³²⁰ Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Life*, Norman Macafee, ed., Anna Cancogni, trans. (Pantheon Books, 1987), p. 156.

worse: according to one of Sartre's biographers, "The production is a failure, the theater almost always empty, the performances are often interrupted, the reception generally lukewarm." The play was ridiculed in the papers of the collaborators. The general audience found it perplexing, as did most of the critics. *The Devil and the Good Lord* was misinterpreted as an anti-Catholic play; *Dirty Hands* as anti-communist; and *Nekrassov* as a condemnation of the press as a whole. *No Exit* and *The Condemned of Altona* were the only plays to receive generally high praise from the press. A general sense of Sartre's reception as a playwright by his French public is provided by another biographer: "The immediate success of [*No Exit*] offers a microcosm of the mixture between popularity and notoriety which Sartre enjoyed in post-war France. His critics found it morbid; his admirers brilliantly written and morally challenging; and the public at large stimulating as well as occasionally annoying by its metaphysical pretensions." As time went on and Sartre became more politically engaged as a Marxist, his plays became more polemical and less universal, as *Nekrassov* demonstrates.

For Sartre, nothing was more important for an author than to take his own and his audience's "situation" fully into account. As he wrote in *What is Literature?*, the specific problems that the author and the audience share due to the specific historical and material circumstances of their experience – these are the driving forces behind the author's work. His role is to demonstrate to his readers the possibilities that exist within those circumstances and through which they can create their freedom. It was Sartre's ability to communicate with his fellow Parisians in this way that made his first few plays successful, and it was this concern for the "situation" which separated his plays from those of his peers.

Yet over time the situation of France and its citizens began to change. After the war, new political and philosophical challenges emerged which forced Sartre and his audience to re-evaluate their opportunities and limitations. Already in 1947, Sartre realized that the role of literature and drama would have to change: "literature is dying. Not that talent or good will is lacking, but it has no longer anything to do in contemporary society. At the very moment that we are discovering the importance of praxis, at the moment that we are beginning to have some notion of what a total literature might be, our public collapses and disappears. We no longer know literally for whom to write."³²¹ The audience Sartre sought after the war had shifted from the individual French citizen suffering under the weight of Nazi oppression to the European worker being exploited by the bourgeoisie. As a result,

The wider the public that the author reaches, the less deeply does he affect it, the less he recognizes himself in the influence he has; his thoughts escape him; they become distorted and vulgarized. They are received with more indifference and scepticism by bored and weary souls who, bemused the author can not speak to them in their "native language" still consider literature as a diversion. What remains is formulas attached to names.³²²

He sadly came to the conclusion that he and his fellow artists "have readers but no public."³²³ The proletariat had not yet developed the class-consciousness in France for it to exist as a group for-itself, leaving Sartre with an audience composed of bourgeois individuals to which he had "nothing to tell."³²⁴ Even worse, at that time, Sartre felt that the alternative between the US and the Soviet Union left the French in a no-win situation:

Since our historical perspective is war, since we are asked to choose between the Anglo-Saxon and the Soviet blocs, and since we refuse to prepare for war with either one or the other, we have fallen outside of history and are speaking in the

³²¹ Sartre, *What is Literature?*, p.240.

³²² *Ibid.*, p.245.

³²³ *Ibid.*, p.170.

³²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.174.

desert. We are not even left with the illusion of winning our case by means of an appeal; there will be no appeal, and we know that the posthumous fate of our works will depend neither upon our talents nor our efforts, but upon the results of future conflicts.³²⁵

Yet even while Sartre admitted his doubts about the future in *What is Literature?*, he laid out his distinctive understanding of how literature and drama should operate. He maintained his vision throughout the 1950s, until finally, in 1959, he concluded that, within his current situation, the theatrical medium could not serve its purposes. During the first run of *The Condemned of Altona*, an exasperated Sartre resigned himself to the reality of the time:

Nowadays, the audience is drawn from too many different social groups and sometimes has too many conflicting interests for anyone to be able to foretell how such a diversified public is likely to react. In any case, the theatre belongs, by and large, to the bourgeoisie. It's the bourgeois who support and fill the theatres by acquiescing in the constant rise in box-office prices. There are so many inner contradictions within the middle classes, and even within the ruling class, that part of the audience would probably be shocked if the drama showed an image of our society that pleased other parts of it. The result of this compromise is that theatre seldom shows the changes in man and the world, but rather the image of man as eternally unchanging in a universe that never changes.³²⁶

It became clear to Sartre that within the current situation and the situation of the foreseeable future, the theatre would be useless to him as a tool of communication. Those to whom he desired to speak could not and did not attend the theatre, and the bourgeoisie who did attend had no interest in his philosophy or his creativity. They sought a "theatre of characters" rather than one of "situations" – a static world that would allow them to feel secure within their social class and their society. Faced with the realities of the time, Sartre had little choice but to return to the world of the bourgeois intellectual philosopher, isolated from an immediate public.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

³²⁶ Sartre, *Sartre on Theatre*, p.69.

Given his philosophy of situation and motion, had Sartre stayed with the theatre in spite of its practical irrelevance, he would have violated his own precepts. A fundamental aspect of his philosophy of the “situation” is that, when the situation changes, the individual must change with it if he is to be in touch with his freedom. Those who stay behind, dreaming of a past in which they feel comfortable and continuing to write for an audience and a situation that no longer exist are operating in bad faith. They are cowards who deny themselves access to their own freedom by refusing to take control of their lives and act in the present tense.

Conclusion: Lessons Gained from Sartre’s Experience

Sartre’s importance as a philosopher cannot be overstated. As one theorist has said, “Sartre’s engagement in the cause of human freedom is the greatest intellectual adventure of the century.”³²⁷ As political theorists interested in the intersection between art and politics, we have a great deal to learn from Sartre’s experience as a philosophical dramatist. Sartre’s experience emphasizes the need for a public that is at least loosely united, for as his captive audience disappeared with the end of the Occupation, so did the power of his theatre. The challenges he faced in writing plays for a heterogeneous, largely bourgeois audience still remain.

Sartre’s most successful play, *No Exit*, is often performed to this day. It remains relevant to modern audiences because its scope is larger than that of the other plays. Though Sartre composed it for the French audience of the Occupation, the play’s setting and its characters enable it to maintain its potency beyond the situation in which it was written. This demonstrates that Sartre’s “theatre of situations,” though philosophically interesting and dramatically unique, serves no long-term political purpose. This poses an

³²⁷ Kellner, p.201.

interesting conundrum to political dramatists of today: if they speak to the specifics of their audience's situation, their drama will not survive that situation. However, if they seek to compose works that would be useful in the long term, they risk falling back on the tropes and formulas of character drama or Aristotelian drama, employing universals which deny the existence of individual freedoms. This is the dilemma that Sartre leaves us with as political theorists in search of a useful dramatic model. We will have to make the choice ourselves and confront the consequences. The only certainty is that Sartre's model, confined to the situation in which it was constructed, cannot and should not be resurrected. The political dramatic model of the future will have to be constructed within the context of the future "situation," which ultimately no philosopher or dramatist can foresee.

Eugène Ionesco: The Eclipse of Political Theatre

While Sartre was exhausting the utility of his existentialist philosophy, and ultimately abandoning it – and the theatre with it – in favor of a more complex, more political philosophy that privileged Marx and Freud, there was in Paris a new theatrical movement emerging. This “Theatre of the Absurd,” which dealt exclusively with the subjective experience of life in a world of absurdity and contingency, seemed to pick up the existentialist cause where Sartre left off. Yet, the major dramatists of this group – Eugène Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, and Samuel Beckett – took existentialism in an explicitly anti-political direction, abandoning didacticism and rational communication in favor of dramatic imagery that emerges from the subconscious and the mythic, and promoting the deconstruction rather than the reconstruction of social life.

In this chapter I will discuss the work of Eugène Ionesco, the celebrated playwright whose work exemplifies both the brilliance of the absurdist critique of social convention and the political dead-end of this critique. Ionesco’s career offers a useful contrast with that of Sartre. For while the latter epitomized the engaged intellectual for whom literature was a means of political liberation, the former explicitly rejected this stance, regarding it as both a source of political arrogance and an affront to the dignity of art. Ionesco’s plays depict a world without political hope, and his non-dramatic writings – essays, journals, and responses to dramatic critics – consistently refuse the political criteria on which many sought to judge him.

Using Ionesco’s theatre as exemplary, I will argue that the absurdist movement signals the end of theatre as a form of didactic pedagogy and political engagement. Ionesco is the perfect figure on which to conclude this dissertation because he both

dramatizes this “eclipse of the public” and embraces it. His absurdism is the culmination of theater’s loss of political traction in the 20th century. The horrors of war, the terror instilled by totalitarian regimes, the annihilation of the open public sphere, the destruction of language through double-speak, the growth and flourishing of the culture industry and its co-option by battling ideologies – for writers such as Ionesco these developments signaled the absurdity of any conception of “authenticity” or “liberation.” In such a worldview politics is to be distrusted and feared, and artistic creation is a means of self-expression and indiscriminating social commentary. Absurdist theatre pierces through the pretenses of all social values and aspirations. Adopting a posture of ironic detachment, it epitomizes a “post-ideological” and deeply anti-political sensibility. In the world of the culture industry, there is only a small step separating absurdism’s clever word play and parodic drama, on the one hand, and theater as pure entertainment on the other.

In this chapter I will discuss Ionesco’s theater and its anti-political impulses, focusing on three of Ionesco’s most well known plays: *The Bald Soprano*, *The Chairs*, and *Rhinoceros*. My main point will be that in spite of some interesting differences between these plays, Ionesco’s work is consistently absurdist in ways that call into question meaningful political engagement. In the first part, I will provide an overview of the theatre of the absurd, drawing heavily from Martin Esslin’s famous 1961 book which coined the phrase, and treating *The Bald Soprano* and *The Chairs* as exemplary absurdist plays in their social cynicism and lack of a politics. I will then turn to the famous “London Controversy” between Ionesco and the critic Kenneth Tynan in the pages of the London *Guardian*, centered on the proper relationship between politics and theatre.

Tynan's critique of Ionesco's lack of a politics set the terms of much subsequent criticism of the playwright. It also cut Ionesco to the core, calling forth an acrimonious response. And while Ionesco offers some telling criticisms of what might be called "left political correctness," the controversy also reveals the bankruptcy of his understanding of politics. Finally, I will discuss what is perhaps Ionesco's most famous play, *Rhinoceros*. Written in the wake of the London Controversy, the play is a clear allegory of the rise of fascism. And yet even here Ionesco's absurdism evinces a cynicism about politics which marks the clear limits of absurdist drama.

Ionesco's Anti-Theatre and the Theatre of the Absurd

Ionesco was a product of a unique cultural synergy between French and Romanian intellectual elites during the interwar period. Born in Romania, he spent most of his childhood in France, and only returned to Romania in 1925, at the age of 16. He lived in Romania for only 13 years -- though these were intellectually formative years -- returning to France in 1938, where he lived until his death in 1994.³²⁸ This brief biographical detail is relevant primarily because it underscores the extent to which Ionesco was shaped by two overlapping intellectual currents which had in common a profound and perhaps overdeveloped aesthetic sensibility and an aversion towards the main tendencies of modern social life.

The first of these was the so-called Romanian "Young Generation of 1927," whose most famous members, along with Ionesco himself, were the philosophers Emil

³²⁸ The sources used for Ionesco's biographical information were primarily Deborah B. Gaensbauer, *Eugène Ionesco Revisited* (Twayne Publishers, 1996); Martin Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, 3rd Edition (Vintage Books, 2001); as well as Ionesco's own writings: Eugène Ionesco, *Fragments of a Journal*, Jean Stewart, trans., with an Introduction by Donald Watson (Quartet Books, 1968); Eugène Ionesco, *Present Past / Past Present: A Personal Memoir*, Helen R. Lane, trans., with a new Introduction by Robert Brustein (Da Capo Press, 1998).

Cioran and Mircea Eliade. As Matei Calinescu characterized this group, they shared “a common feverishness . . . an impatience with the (‘bourgeois’) values of the older generation . . . a profound contempt for politics and a corrupt political establishment. . . [and a] sense of spiritual quest.”³²⁹ Drawn to modernist forms of expression and avant-garde art and literature, most of Ionesco’s intellectual circle—including his most famous friends, Eliade and Cioran—came to be so alienated from modern Romanian society that they became supporters of the fascist Iron Legion. Ionesco was one of only a small number who resisted this fascist temptation. Indeed, one of the reasons for his eventual migration and decision to remain in France as an émigré was his aversion to the growing parochialism, anti-Semitism, and fascism in mid-1930’s Bucharest. At the same time, he maintained his ties to many of his former associates, and indeed resumed friendships with Eliade and Cioran after the war and, political differences aside, these intellectuals were bound by a shared sense of the essential meaningless of modern social life.³³⁰

Upon his emigration to Paris, Ionesco became immersed in another circle of avant-garde intellectuals, closely linked to André Breton, who became a personal friend, and the surrealist and dadaist movements. As he later commented in an interview on his plays and those of the other “absurdist”: “None of us would have written as we do without surrealism and dadaism. By liberating the language, those movements paved

³²⁹ Matei Călinescu, “Ionesco and Rhinoceros: Personal and Political Backgrounds,” *East European Politics and Societies*, 9 (3), Fall 1995, p. 408. See also his “The 1927 Generation in Romania: Friendships and Ideological Choices: Mihail Sebastian, Mircea Eliade, Nae Ionescu, Eugène Ionesco, E. M. Cioran,” *East European Politics and Societies*, 15 (3), 2002, pp. 649-77.

³³⁰ On Ionesco’s refusal of fascism, his emigration, and his enduring ties with his Romanian compatriots see, in addition to the two pieces by Călinescu cited above, the following: Cristina Bejan, “The Paradox of the Young Generation in Inter-War Romania,” *Slovo*, 8(2), Autumn 2006, pp. 115-128, and Anne Holloway Quinney, “Excess and Identity: The Franco-Romanian Ionesco Combats Rhinocerotis,” *South Central Review*, 24 (3), Fall 2007, pp.36-52.

the way for us.”³³¹ Particularly important was Ionesco’s involvement in the so-called Collège de ‘Pataphysique founded by avant-garde writer Raymond Queneau. Ionesco’s description of this group is worth quoting at length, for it gives a clear sense of one important source of his own literary sensibility:

The collège was an enterprise dedicated to nihilism and irony, which in my view corresponded to Zen. Its chief occupation was to devise commissions, whose job it was to create subcommissions, which in turn did nothing. There was one commission that was preparing a thesis on the history of latrines from the beginning of civilization to our time. The members were students of Dr. Faustrol, who was an invented character and the prophet of Alfred Jarry. So the purpose of the collège was the demolition of culture, even of surrealism, which they considered too organized. But make no mistake, these people were graduates of the Ecole Normale Supérieure and highly cultured. Their method was based on puns and practical jokes—*le canular*. There is a great tradition of puns in Anglo-Saxon literature—Shakespeare, *Alice in Wonderland*—but not in French. So they adopted it.³³²

Indeed, it was “by writing *The Bald Soprano* and *The Lesson*, since the plays made fun of everything,” that Ionesco secured his exalted status as a “Satrap” within this group.³³³

Ionesco thus emerged from two important streams of avant-garde philosophical speculation and artistic experimentation. And his absurdist drama gave expression to a widespread sense of the surrealism of existence shared by a range of important Continental writers. Martin Esslin’s 1961 classic *The Theater of the Absurd* neatly sums up this sensibility and the new form of theater to which it gave rise. As Esslin points out, this genre of theater was less the result of a conscious movement than it represented a convergence of strikingly similar styles. The playwrights in question -- Ionesco, Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Jean Genet -- did not consider themselves as part of a

³³¹ Shusha Guppy, “Eugène Ionesco: The Art of the Theater No. 6: Interviewed by Shusha Guppy.” *The Paris Review*, no. 93 (Fall 1984), p. 6.

³³² *Ibid.*, pp. 8-10.

³³³ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

common enterprise, and each indeed privileged their individualism and their uniquely personal view of the world and the theatre. This experimentation was centered in Paris, whose cultural life -- particularly its hospitality to émigré artists such as Adamov, Beckett, and Ionesco -- allowed extensive creative freedom. Despite the individual experiences of isolation and marginality which these writers shared, the plays of these “absurdist” bore striking resemblances to each other. And if they gave voice to a sense of the contingency of things powerfully articulated by the existentialists, they also sounded this theme in a way dramatically different from existentialism with its humanistic hopefulness.

At the root of their commonality lay their concern with the absurd, a concept previously identified by Albert Camus and discussed by the existentialist philosophers. For Camus, “[the] divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feelings of Absurdity.”³³⁴ The situation of the exile, caught between his homeland, to which he cannot return, and the promise of a new home, which is not to be found, is absurd. And for the absurdist this experience -- which many of them, especially Ionesco, Adamov, and Beckett, experienced first-hand -- was the essential and inalterable human experience. As Ionesco wrote, echoing Camus, “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose. . . . Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost; all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless.”³³⁵ A world without God, without roots, without a reason for existing – this is modern man’s situation, one in which anything is permissible and nothing forbidden.

³³⁴ Albert Camus, as quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.23.

³³⁵ Eugène Ionesco, as quoted in Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p.23.

Yet while the existentialists sought to create new meaning and impose man-made structure onto the chaos of existence, the absurdists rejected any and all attempts to move beyond man's original position. As Esslin explains, the existentialist dramatists (including Sartre, Camus, Jean Giraudoux, Jean Anouilh, and Armand Salacrou) differ from the absurdists in that

they present their sense of the irrationality of the human condition in the form of highly lucid and logically constructed reasoning, while the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of rational devices and discursive thought. While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of the Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed.³³⁶

In other words, the form of absurdist plays is a direct reflection of their content: conventional narrative structure is jettisoned in favor of metaphor and poetic imagery; well-developed characters are replaced by interchangeable bodies and cartoon-like caricatures; pedagogy is rejected in favor of provocation; reason is replaced by feeling; and the logic of everyday life is usurped by the alternative logic of the unconscious world of dreams and its surreal experience.³³⁷ The theatre of the absurd is a proto-postmodern theatre, a place where the real is defined exclusively by the subject, where human agency is in constant question, where identity is dependent on the specific situation at hand, where meaning is everywhere contested, and where "there is no there there," in the sense that the boundary separating the real from the fictive is completely effaced.

Ionesco's early plays epitomize this absurdist approach to theater, and earned him notoriety and fame as one of the leaders of this theatrical "movement." The action

³³⁶ Esslin, *The Theatre of the Absurd*, p. 24.

³³⁷ For more on the differences between the existentialist playwrights and Ionesco, see David I. Grossvogel, "Ionesco: Symptom and Victim." *The Dream and the Play: Ionesco's Theatrical Quest*, Moshe Lazar, ed. (Undena Publications, 1982); L.A.C. Dobrez, *The Existential and Its Exits: Literary and Philosophical Perspectives on the Works of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, & Pinter* (St. Martin's Press, 1986).

presented in each of these early plays exists in a social void. And it is a void of a certain type – in which death is immanent, communication is (almost) impossible, language is a trap, progress is never achieved, and human beings are alienated, not only from one another, but from themselves. The absurdism of this prototypical social situation can be seen by looking at two of Ionesco's earliest and still acclaimed plays: *The Bald Soprano* and *The Chairs*

Ionesco's first play, *The Bald Soprano* was first produced in Paris in 1950. In his memoirs, Ionesco reveals that he began writing for the theatre by accident. As a young writer he initially hated the theatre as an artistic medium, finding it false and vulgar, as it was incapable of encapsulating the essential contradictoriness of the human experience.³³⁸ In his view, realism in both its forms, bourgeois and socialist, stripped the human experience of wonder; Brechtian drama was even more smothering, as it took agency away from even the actors on stage: "to squash the actor's initiative, to kill the actor, is to kill both life and drama."³³⁹ He wrote *The Bald Soprano* in 1948 as a parody of the theatre, "with the intention of holding it up to ridicule."³⁴⁰ A producer who became aware of the script decided to produce it, and it was to Ionesco's great surprise that the play became a success.³⁴¹ His comic "anti-play" is about two bourgeois couples who speak in clichés that degenerate into nonsense syllables. Of his own account, Ionesco drew his inspiration from the textbooks he was using at the time to learn English. He set out to memorize the sentences provided and was struck by their silliness – instead of helpful English phrases, they were lists of self-evident truths, such as "there are seven

³³⁸ See Ionesco's discussion of the theatre in Eugène Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes: Writings on the Theatre*, Donald Watson, trans. (Grove Press, 1964).

³³⁹ "Experience of the Theatre," in Ionesco, *Notes and Counter Notes*, p.19.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid*, p.25.

³⁴¹ Ionesco, "The Birth of *The Bald Soprano*," in *Notes and Counter Notes*, pp.183-185.

days in a week,” and “the floor is down [while] the ceiling is up.” This English primer became more ridiculous when the phrases were put into a dialogue between two English couples, who earnestly related obvious facts about their lives to one another.³⁴² Ionesco begins his play in the manner of these dialogues, and then allows the absurd logic of the situation – a world in which language is used to communicate things already known – to unfold to its conclusion: once all that is easily recognizable has been reported, language ceases to perform a function.

At first blush the play is comical merely for the reason that made Ionesco’s English primer funny – the seriousness of the speakers and the nonsense of the speech provide an amusing contrast. Its title comes from one such moment in the dialogue: the Fire Chief asks about the bald soprano who, according to Mrs. Smith, “always wears her hair in the same style.”³⁴³ As funny as the play is, it has a deeper, darker humor to it. The absurdity of the dialogue is a reflection of the stilted nature of communication in a world of social clichés and ideologies, while the nonchalance of the speakers mirrors the self-satisfied, oblivious nature of the bourgeoisie who are comfortable in such a world at the same time that they are stuck in it.

The setting for *The Bald Soprano* is itself a parody of bourgeois life. Ionesco’s stage directions introduce the scene read as follows:

A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles and a small gray English mustache. Beside him, in another English armchair, Mrs. Smith, an

³⁴² Ionesco, “The Tragedy of Language,” in *Notes and Counter Notes*, pp.175-180.

³⁴³ Ionesco, *The Bald Soprano*, in *The Bald Soprano and Other Plays*, Donald M. Allen, trans. (Grove Press, 1958), p. 37.

Englishwoman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes.³⁴⁴

Here not only does Ionesco evoke a stereotypical bourgeois home, he exaggerates the importance of the bourgeois sense of nationalism by importing a sense of English-ness even to the silence. Everything about the setting is so *generic* that its very typicality seems absurd.

The opening dialogue is similar to the language which Ionesco described from his primer: Mrs. Smith has a long monologue in which she reports to her husband who they are, where they are, that they have just had dinner, that their daughter is two and her name is Peggy, etc. Once Mr. Smith engages her in dialogue, the absurdity is increased, as the two discuss a family in which every member is named Bobby Watson, one of whom has died. When Mrs. Smith asks her husband what the widow Watson looks like, he gives the following description: “She has regular features and yet one cannot say that she is pretty. She is too big and stout. Her features are not regular but still one can say that she is very pretty. She is a little too small and too thin.”³⁴⁵ The Smiths contradict one another, and themselves, throughout the conversation in this manner, stripping the words of their meaning. Yet the conversation continues – and grows more complicated, with the arrival of Mr. and Mrs. Martin and the Fire Chief – without any of the characters becoming conscious of its degeneration into absurdity. Gradually, the dialogue is overtaken by ridiculous statements that take the form of axioms, such as “He who sells an ox today, will have an egg tomorrow,” and “One can sit down on a chair, when the chair doesn’t have any.”³⁴⁶ After two pages of this, there is a silence, after which the language

³⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

³⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.12.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.38.

breaks down completely, and with it, the semblance of bourgeois propriety. The stage directions note that “At the end of this scene, the four characters must be standing very close to each other, screaming their speeches, raising their fists, ready to throw themselves upon each other.”³⁴⁷ For the play’s closing scene, which takes up three pages of text, the characters take turns shouting gibberish until they manage to come together at the end:

MR. SMITH: The pope elopes! The pope’s got no horoscope. The horoscope’s bespoke.

MRS. MARTIN: Bazaar, Balzac, bazooka!

MR. MARTIN: Bizarre, beaux-arts, brassieres!

MR. SMITH: A, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, a, e, i, o, u, i!

MRS. MARTIN: B, c, d, f, g, l, m, n, p, r, s, t, v, w, x, z!

MR. MARTIN: From stage to stooge, from stage to serge!

MRS. SMITH: [*imitating a train*]: Choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo, choo!

MR. SMITH: It’s!

MRS. MARTIN: Not!

MR. MARTIN: That!

MRS. SMITH: Way!

MR. SMITH: It’s!

MRS. MARTIN: O!

MR. MARTIN: Ver!

MRS. SMITH: Here!

[*All together, completely infuriated, screaming in each others’ ears. The light is extinguished. In the darkness we hear, in an increasingly rapid rhythm:*]

ALL TOGETHER: It’s not that way, it’s over here, it’s not that way, it’s over here, it’s not that way, it’s over here, it’s not that way, it’s over here!³⁴⁸

At this point, there is silence, and as the lights come back up, the characters return to their original positions in the scene, and the dialogue begins from the beginning. The play ends.³⁴⁹

³⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.39.

³⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, pp.41-42. The text is obviously different in the original French text, yet it is equally bizarre and nonsensical.

³⁴⁹ Ionesco’s original idea for the ending was, by his own admission, too complicated too be produced. Policemen were to take the stage and fire into the crowd after planted actors in the audience begin wrecking havoc. His alternative ending was to take the stage after the actors were finished and shout at the audience, “You bastards, I’ll skin you alive!” This didn’t seem to fit the piece dramatically. Having the play begin

This play, like Ionesco's other early works, takes place in an entirely generic setting. Also like the others, it is not structured in a traditional manner: There is little to no narrative structure; no story arc; and the characters exist both as archetypes and as interchangeable objects. Like *The Lesson*, another early play, *The Bald Soprano* ends exactly as it begins, with slight variation due to the interchangeability of the characters. The endless loop of life and death that exists without hope of progress or resolution is a major theme throughout Ionesco's plays, and begins here with his first. *The Bald Soprano* was successful for its newness, its originality, its imagination, and its sharp critiques of modern society. It struck a chord among an audience exhausted by a century of displacement, war, occupation, and restoration, and lacking a sense of political hope.³⁵⁰

The Chairs, another of Ionesco's most famous early works, revolves around the preparation by an old couple for a meeting in which the Old Man's "message" will be revealed to the public by an orator. The characters have no names, and are referred to in the script simply as "Old Man" and "Old Woman." This lack of identity exists throughout Ionesco's work. The Old Man, feeling he "lack(s) the talent" to communicate his message himself, hires an orator to speak on his behalf. The old couple greets their guests – who are all invisible – as they arrive, each arrival causing them to locate and set up chairs for their guests to sit in. By the end of the play, the stage is overwhelmed by rows of empty chairs that force the couple to physically constrain their movements for

again seemed to be the best ending. Later, Ionesco had the idea to have the Martins and the Smiths change roles at the end of the play, to further emphasize the inter-changeability of the characters. See his discussion of the ending in "The Birth of *The Bald Soprano*," in *Notes and Counter Notes* and in the footnote on p. 42 of *The Bald Soprano* text.

³⁵⁰ Of course, Ionesco did not become a success over night. As Esslin reports, *The Bald Soprano* and *The Chairs* were received poorly by the critics during their first runs. It took about four to six years after the premiere of *The Bald Soprano* for the public to develop a taste for Ionesco's vision.

lack of room. Once the Orator arrives, the couple declares that they have completed their mission on earth, and each jumps out a balcony window, finding freedom and transcendence in death. The Orator is left to deliver the Old Man's message, which has only been alluded to in a vague way -- the only thing he has revealed is that "I've invited you . . . in order to explain . . . that the individual and the person are one and the same."³⁵¹ We are left to discover that the Orator is both deaf and dumb, and though he tries to communicate the message through pantomime and written words, all we are left with is the word "ANGELFOOD" and the letters "NNAA NNM NWNWNW V," followed by "ΛADIEU ADIEU ΛΡΑ" written on a chalkboard.³⁵² Seeing that the audience does not understand him, he exits, and the play comes to an end.

The Chairs was artistically radical when it was first produced, and it encapsulates the themes that pervade Ionesco's imagination. From the content of the old couple's conversations with each other, the audience is given the impression that the old couple has been waiting to die for quite a while, and that the delivery of the Old Man's message was the one task – the one mortal burden – that was keeping them from pursuing their freedom in death. Ionesco builds up the importance of the message throughout the play, only to exasperate the audience by thwarting its delivery – the audience experiences both the hope and joy of the old couple and the death of that hope. The title of the play signals another trademark of Ionesco: the play is not named for the characters, whose lives are shown to be meaningless, but for the furniture that crowds the stage, almost forcing the characters off. Material objects are more permanent, and perhaps more significant, in

³⁵¹ Ionesco, *The Chairs*, in *The Bald Soprano and Other Plays*, p.145.

³⁵² *Ibid.*, pp.159-60.

Ionesco's world than are human beings. Certainly visually, the chairs are the focus of the play's attention.

In Ionesco's dramatic universe, the human being is so degraded that he cannot even be redeemed through tragedy. Going back to Aristotle, traditional tragedy is based around a protagonist with a tragic flaw that prevents him from living up to his heroic potential; the protagonist realizes his mistakes when it is too late to fix them, and he then makes a great sacrifice – often his life – to make amends for what he has done to his community. Through his sacrifice, the protagonist becomes a tragic hero: an individual who acts nobly in the face of a devastating fate. Bearing witness to the hero's rise and fall allows the audience to experience the best aspects of human nature and to cleanse itself of grief and sorrow. Tragedy elevates humanity by celebrating its potentiality and undefeatable struggle for purity.³⁵³

Ionesco's version of the tragic is far removed from the visions of Aristotle and Shakespeare, who are commonly regarded as iconic tragic dramatists. Called "a Tragic Farce" by Ionesco himself, *The Chairs* does not present the human condition as anything worthy of celebration. The would-be hero, the Old Man, has no name and no heroic nature. (Since we have no idea what his message is, we do not even know if it is worth presenting). His tragic flaw, were he to have one, would be his lack of confidence to speak for himself. Yet Ionesco does not present a chance for the Old Man to see the error in his ways or to make a sacrifice to appease his community: he embraces death as being more worthy than life, and there is no community to speak of in the eyes of the audience, for all his "guests" are invisible if they exist at all. The devastating impact of *The Chairs*

³⁵³ The definitive text on tragedy is Aristotle's *Poetics*. My preferred edition is *The Poetics of Aristotle*, with translation and commentary by Stephen Halliwell (University of North Carolina Press, 1987).

lies in the fact that, for all we know, the revelation of the Old Man's message to the masses would have changed nothing and mattered for nothing. His life and that of his wife were meaningless – we cannot even say their lives were wasted, for it is unclear that anyone's life could be useful for anything. In Ionesco, "tragedy" is no longer about endorsing humanism in a world outside of human control, but about resigning oneself to the fact that humanism is irrelevant and resistance is futile. Ionesco noted this explicitly in his *Paris Review* interview, observing that while classical tragedy dramatizes the contingencies of human experience and agency against the backdrop of a stable universe, what distinguishes his theater is that this is "not so with our characters": "They have no metaphysics, no order, no law. They are miserable and they don't know why. They are puppets, undone. In short, they represent modern man. Their situation is not tragic, since it has no relation to a higher order. Instead, it's ridiculous, laughable, and derisory."³⁵⁴

By 1956, it was clear that *The Bald Soprano*, and the plays that immediately followed – *The Lesson*, *The Chairs*, and *Jacques, or the Submission* – had deeply resonated with a large segment of the theatre community. Ironically, Ionesco's attempts to communicate to his audience the impossibility of human communication were well received. His exposure of the emptiness of bourgeois life was applauded by the bourgeoisie. And he received rave reviews from his well established peer, Jean Anouilh, and from culturally progressive critics, like Kenneth Tynan, who introduced Ionesco's work to the English.³⁵⁵

³⁵⁴ As quoted in Guppy, p. 13.

³⁵⁵ For a discussion of the plays' reception, see Gaensbauer. See also Tynan, *Curtains*. In it are positive reviews of a 1956 production of *The Bald Soprano* and *The New Tenant*, pp.149-50; a 1957 production of *Amédée*, pp.167-69; and a 1957 production of *The Chairs*, pp.177-78.

Indeed, it should not be surprising that Ionesco's vision of the world as a meaningless abyss resonated with his post-WWII European audiences – his theatre acted as a mirror through which the public could recognize themselves and their world. The public had seen the way language had been twisted by the Nazis and the Communists to rally people to their cause. And the de-humanization that had occurred over time left many people hollow. In this world, the day-to-day concerns of the petit bourgeoisie seemed not only petty but patently absurd. And the idea that humanism was a value that could be recovered and celebrated, that the dead could be seen as martyrs for humanity, and that the community – what community?! -- would somehow benefit from their sacrifice, was beyond ridiculous. Indeed, in this world, it was hard to even regard language as adequate to experience. Instead of serving as a means of individual lucidity or intersubjective understanding, for Ionesco language is ultimately a source of human confusion and misery.³⁵⁶

The London Controversy

Though his theatre struck a nerve with his audience and with his critics, there came a point at which the critics, at least, wanted more than a view into the abyss of the human experience. Eight years after the premiere of *The Bald Soprano*, a growing number of critics began to notice that, as astute as were Ionesco's criticisms of the absurdities of modern society and especially its totalitarian mutations, Ionesco appeared to be stuck in an endless loop of cynicism and despair. Perhaps this would have been acceptable had Ionesco offered critiques of particular issues or tangible situations, but all of his early plays took place almost completely outside the realm of time and space: that

³⁵⁶ For a discussion of Ionesco as both reflecting and contributing to the despondency of the world around him, see Grossvogel.

is to say, they existed in a world devoid of history and politics. The history of politics -- to the extent it even figures at all in these plays -- is presented by Ionesco as an endless cycle of domination and revolution, with no qualitative distinctions made between different types of societies: in Ionesco's world, the night is one in which all cows are black.

After the revival of *the Chairs* and *the Lesson* in 1958, Kenneth Tynan, an influential English critic who had been largely responsible for bringing Ionesco's work to England for production, experienced a dramatic change of heart about Ionesco's importance as an artist. His review of the plays, "Ionesco: Man of Destiny?" published in *The Observer*, set off a protracted debate with Ionesco that eventually involved a number of other commentators. "The London Controversy," as this exchange was later called, brought to a head the question of whether or not Ionesco's plays had any political meaning or redeeming social value, and made the differences between traditional theatre and the theatre of the absurd abundantly clear.³⁵⁷

In his review Tynan takes aim at Ionesco's favorable critical reception among theater critics and theater-goers oblivious to the real challenges of political life. He bemoans that "the ostriches of our theatrical intelligentsia"³⁵⁸ have chosen Ionesco as a "messiah," a leader of a new "cult" that rejects all theatre that contains an ounce of realism (including Brecht's) in favor of a world that rejects, not only realism, but reality itself. Tynan states that he has grown tired of Ionesco's "world of isolated robots, conversing in cartoon-strip balloons of dialogue that are sometimes hilarious, sometimes

³⁵⁷ The entirety of the London Controversy is reprinted in *Notes and Counter Notes*, pp. 87-108.

³⁵⁸ "The London Controversy," in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p. 87.

evocative, and quite often neither.”³⁵⁹ But it isn’t the fact that Ionesco has run out of tricks that is the problem for Tynan; his concern is that the audience, intent on embracing the latest theatrical fads, has chosen Ionesco as the herald of the new theatre. He says that Ionesco’s is a “valid personal vision,” but that “when it is held up for general emulation as the gateway to the theatre of the future,” the theatre of the future is in danger of becoming irrelevant.³⁶⁰ Ionesco “certainly offers an ‘escape from realism’: but an escape into what?” Ionesco offers no solutions, no alternatives, not even an abstract belief in resistance. For this reason, says Tynan, Ionesco’s theatre must be viewed as no more than “a diversion.”³⁶¹ To see it as anything more is to bury the theatre alive.

Tynan articulates the crux of the issue exactly: Ionesco’s theatre both depicts and represents a complete retreat of theater from the public sphere. Ionesco was infuriated by the review, and regarded Tynan’s advocacy of a politically rooted theatre as a personal attack on him for not supporting a particular brand of left-wing politics -- the politics of Brecht. In his published response, entitled “The Playwright’s Role,” Ionesco defends himself against Tynan’s charge of “irrelevance,” insisting that it diminishes art to judge it according to considerations of political utility. To politicize the artist or his art, and to demand a certain kind of “relevance,” is both to vulgarize politics and to belittle art. A playwright’s role, according to Ionesco, is to write plays “in which he can offer only a testimony, not a didactic message – a personal, affective testimony of his anguish and the anguish of others or, which is rare, of his happiness – or he can express his feelings, comic or tragic, about life.”³⁶² Ionesco then goes on to criticize all those who demand

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.89.

³⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*

³⁶² *Ibid.*, p.90.

that art dramatize social problems and present messages of social uplift and political liberation. In doing so, he implicitly confirms Tynan's apolitical reading of his work. He writes, "I believe that what separates us all from one another is simply society itself, or, if you like, politics. This is what raises barriers between men, this is what creates misunderstanding."³⁶³ This is because "the authentic human condition is extra-social," and "it is the human condition that directs the social condition, not vice-versa."³⁶⁴

Ionesco does not here deny that art can have social or political effects, even sometimes beneficial ones. But he insists that art "testifies" to a deeper level of experience, one which is beyond politics, and which is perhaps indeed beyond true human communicability. The value of his plays, then, lies precisely in their refusal of the logic of politics, which is for Ionesco intrinsically a realm of misunderstanding and suffering, and its fidelity to the complexities of individual human experience in an absurd world beyond repair.

Just as Tynan crystallized the dangers of an Ionesco-inspired future beyond considerations of justice, here Ionesco concentrates his argument in its most basic form: art is beyond politics, and no good can come from a marriage between them, which can only be forced, to the detriment of both. Without realizing it, Ionesco's response completely confirmed Tynan's fears. At the same time, Ionesco's anti-politics—what he later called his "commit[ment] to anti-commitment"³⁶⁵ -- was in large part a consequence of a compelling if one-sided reading of the barbarism of 20th century politics. For the effort to combine art and politics in the 20th century had led to powerful propaganda

³⁶³ *Ibid.*, p.91.

³⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁶⁵ Ulmer, James. "An Interview with Eugene Ionesco." *The Harvard Crimson*. March 09, 1978. <<http://www.thecrimson.com/article/1978/3/9/an-interview-with-eugene-ionesco-pat/>>

machines on both the left and the right, which sought to mobilize art to do the dirty work of ideologues. This forced conscription of the artist reduced art to a tool of power. It also compelled the artist to enter a highly politicized world that promised liberation but delivered only pain, domination, and bitterness. It was thus far more comforting for Ionesco to believe that the social is “only one plane of reality,” “the most superficial,”³⁶⁶ and that the real truths of human nature are to be found elsewhere. In an earlier piece, Ionesco wrote, “I have always considered imaginative truth to be more profound, more loaded with significance, than everyday reality. Realism, socialist or not, never looks beyond reality. It narrows it down, diminishes it, falsifies it, and leaves out of account the obsessive truths that are most fundamental to us: love, death, and wonder.”³⁶⁷

But Tynan refused this retreat from politics in the name of a supposedly more profound “imaginative truth.” His next response to Ionesco, “Ionesco and the Phantom,” makes clear his position on the relationship between politics and theatre and expresses his exasperation at Ionesco’s “solipsism.”³⁶⁸ Tynan begins by stating what he considers to be obvious, but what he feels Ionesco has misunderstood: it is not “that I wanted drama to be forced to echo a particular political creed”; “all I want is for drama to realize that it is a *part* of politics, in the sense that every human activity, even buying a pack of cigarettes, has social and political repercussions.”³⁶⁹ Ionesco’s assumption that one can completely separate spheres of human activity and remove politics from daily life is one that Tynan rejects outright. Indeed, he is able to see quite clearly the end result if Ionesco’s vision of art is taken to its logical extreme:

³⁶⁶ “The London Controversy,” in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p.91.

³⁶⁷ “Experience of the Theatre,” written in 1958, published in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p.16.

³⁶⁸ “The London Controversy,” in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p.94.

³⁶⁹ *Ibid.*

The position toward which M. Ionesco is moving is that which regards art as if it were something different from and independent of everything else in the world; as if it not only did not but *should* not correspond to anything outside the mind of the artist. This position, as it happens, was reached some years ago by a French painter who declared that, since nothing in nature exactly resembled anything else, he proposed to burn all of his paintings which in any way resembled anything that already existed. The end of that line, of course, is action painting.³⁷⁰

Without any sort of social grounding, art becomes meaningless and uninspiring to anyone but the artist himself. Art for art's sake offers society nothing of interest or relevance and leads to its own demise.

Tynan perceives something else in Ionesco's words that concerns him: Ionesco maintains, both in his exchange with Tynan and elsewhere, that because art is separate from the social realm, the role of the critic should therefore be limited to judging whether the work of art is true to its own nature.³⁷¹ No opinion on the content should be offered, especially if it includes a critique about the way the play does or does not deal with social issues. The critic's job, he says, is to focus on the structure of the play to ensure it is constructed well, according to its own rules of construction. In this latest response to Ionesco, Tynan argues that the reason Ionesco "is so keen on this phantom notion of art as a world of its own" is because "he is merely seeking to exempt himself from any kind of value judgment."³⁷² By limiting criticism to a focus on construction, Ionesco has forced his audience to suffer from the same paralysis he criticizes in his plays. As Tynan argues, "Every play worth serious consideration is a statement . . . addressed in the first person singular to the first person plural; and the latter must retain the right of dissent."³⁷³ If the audience is no longer allowed involvement in the experience of the theatre by being

³⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

³⁷¹ See "Remarks on my Theatre and on the Remarks of Others," originally a lecture Ionesco gave in 1960, reprinted in *Notes and Counter Notes*, pp.59-82.

³⁷² "The London Controversy," in *Notes and Counter Notes*, p.95.

³⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.96.

able to respond to it, then why must there be an audience at all? Tynan retains his faith in a theatre that can do more than offer critique, and can offer new possibilities of political community as well. He regards Ionesco as the embodiment of a new type of threat to progressive politics: apathy, despondency, and demoralization without end.

A week after Tynan's second article on Ionesco appeared, *The Observer* published an article on the same topic by Orson Welles, who seconded Tynan's critique, chastising Ionesco for not realizing the social and political implications of his "anti-political" art: "It is not 'politics' which is the arch-enemy of art; it is neutrality – which robs us of the sense of tragedy. Neutrality is also a political position like any other; and its practical consequences have been meditated by many of M. Ionesco's fellow poets in the only effective ivory tower to be erected in our century – the concentration camp."³⁷⁴ Welles closes his critique by summing up the crux of Ionesco's political stance: "To denounce leadership as incompetent, and, having done so, then to insist that the 'direction' of world affairs be left strictly in these incompetent hands, is to acknowledge an extraordinary despair."³⁷⁵

The traditional role of the theatre critic makes sense only if it is assumed that the playwright is intending to create a specific type of experience for his audience: whether that experience be didactic, emotional, or cultural, it is meant to be shared by everyone. The critic's job is to judge both the relevance and the effectiveness of the produced experience. In rejecting the social role of theatre, Ionesco is also rejecting the assumption on which theatre criticism is based. His intention is to make his audience feel something, think something, but he claims that he has no desire to control the content of their

³⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.100.

³⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

understanding. He stands opposed to communal experiences of theatre both on principle – to attempt to exercise such control over others is to attempt to dominate them – and because he believes it impossible. In Ionesco's theatre, criticism based on the traditional understanding of the play as instruction, as catharsis, or as a socially relevant project has no place. The only criticism befitting Ionesco is one that assesses the plays "on their own terms": what exactly this means, even Ionesco cannot clearly explain. Not only had Ionesco apparently evacuated the theatre of social content, but in his responses to his critics, he came perilously close to insisting that all public conversation and debate about the theatre was at odds with the theater's "true" artistic character. Such a stance did not simply inoculate him from all possible criticism. It also represented the ultimate retreat of theatre from the world.³⁷⁶

Enter the Rhinoceros

At the same time that Ionesco responded very defensively to the criticisms generated by the London Controversy, it appears that his scuff with his critics did have some impact on his writing. In 1960, a year and a half after the battle in *The Observer*, Ionesco's full length play, *Rhinoceros*, premiered in Paris. One of Ionesco's chief interlocutors during the London Controversy, Orson Welles, indeed directed the London premiere a few months later. Theatrically, *Rhinoceros* signals the beginning of a new, more sophisticated period in Ionesco's work. By expanding the length and rooting the play in something specific outside of himself, Ionesco is able to communicate with his audience in a more effective way. Grounded in the context of totalitarianism, *Rhinoceros* is structured in a traditional three act style, with a clear beginning, middle, and end; at

³⁷⁶ For more on Ionesco's approach to criticism, see George E. Wellwarth, "Beyond Realism: Ionesco's Theory of the Drama," in *The Dream and the Play*, Moshe Lazar, ed. pp.33-48.

least one (and some could argue two or three) characters with unique personalities; and with arcs of change for the characters that are driven by an action-based plot that builds to a climax. The use of a familiar conventional structure allows the audience to feel the level of comfort necessary to make the fantastic element of the play work best: rooted in a familiar world, the rhinoceroses are sufficiently, but not overly, shocking. Ionesco is thus able to deliver his dramatic message without it becoming lost in a world of non sequiturs.

Yet, in spite of its sophistication as a work of drama, *Rhinoceros* remains an anti-political work. Though the play had an overtly political theme—the rise of fascism—with clear autobiographical resonance for Ionesco, the underlying message of *Rhinoceros* is the same as that of Ionesco’s earliest work: we are all alone, and any attempt to combat the isolation at the core of the human experience inevitably leads to tyranny. Social organization is equivalent to domination; and the only escape from the world of the rhinoceros -- i.e. from the beastly political world -- is death.

The play’s central character is named Berenger (the name of the protagonist in many of Ionesco’s plays, which critics have regarded as a symbolic reference for Ionesco himself).³⁷⁷ Berenger, an alcoholic, apathetic employee of a printing firm, bears witness to the literal transformation of many of the local townsfolk into rhinoceroses. One by one, the townspeople transform into beasts, including Berenger’s best friend, Jean, Berenger’s boss and coworkers, and finally, his love, Daisy. Berenger is left alone and confused; at first he is terrified of becoming a rhinoceros; then he is terrified he will not

³⁷⁷ See Moshe Lazar, “The Psychodramatic Stage: Ionesco and his Doubles,” in *The Dream and the Play*, pp.135-59.

become one; finally, in the last lines of the play, he accepts his fate as the last human being and vows to fight the rhinoceroses until his death.

The supporting characters in the piece are more developed than any of the characters from Ionesco's earlier work. Rather than interchangeable bourgeois bodies, these characters represent various sub-classifications of the universal bourgeois archetype that is the focus of most of Ionesco's work. The Logician represents the bourgeois philosopher, who, so focused on abstract principles and the practice of the syllogism, remains wholly uninterested in the implications of the rhinoceroses' presence, and thus oblivious to what is going on around him. He responds to the initial rhinoceros sighting by turning to The Old Man beside him and telling him, "I'm going to explain to you what a syllogism is."³⁷⁸ He steps in to the townspeople's debate about whether they witnessed one rhinoceros that ran through the square twice or two different rhinoceroses with a long, absurdly drawn out syllogism that merely elucidates the permutations and combinations of logical possibilities. When Berenger points out to the Logician that, "That seems clear enough, but it doesn't answer the question," he replies to Berenger, "[*with a knowledgeable smile*] Obviously, my dear sir, but now the question is correctly posed."³⁷⁹ The Logician commands the authority of the townspeople due to his education and position; yet the help he offers is no help at all, and only Berenger – immune to the proprieties of the cultured bourgeoisie around him -- is willing to tell him so.

The other characters of the play represent other bourgeois types. There is the Proprietor of the café where the sightings first take place, who ignores the action in the

³⁷⁸ Eugène Ionesco, *Rhinoceros*, in *Rhinoceros and Other Plays*, Derek Prouse, trans. (Grove Press, 1960), p.13.

³⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.37.

street in order to tell the Waitress that she will be charged for the glasses she has just broken. Upon learning that Mr. Boeuf, one of his employees, has just turned into a rhinoceros and is trying to come up the staircase, Mr. Papillon, the Head of the Department at the generic bourgeois office where Berenger works, responds with exasperation: “Well! That’s the last straw. This time he’s fired for good.”³⁸⁰ Dudard, the up-and-coming employee, responds to the situation by asking if Mr. Boeuf is insured, while Botard, the leftist cynic, lets Mrs. Boeuf know he will report the events to his union and then proceed to unmask the whole “conspiracy” or “treason” behind the rhinoceros-related events. Dutifully, Mrs. Boeuf joins her husband downstairs, unable to envision a life without him.

Here we have stereotypes of a bourgeois world: petty-bourgeois business owners fretting over every cent; philosophers well-versed in theory but incapable of coping with practice; mid-level managers obsessed with maintaining control over their staff; leftist intellectuals who predictably distrust authority; young, focused workers who work to get ahead; and dutiful wives, willing to sacrifice their own identities to care for their husbands.

Even the more complex characters of Daisy and Jean are representatives of a type of bourgeois personality, though admittedly with a bit more depth than the others. Jean is a young intellectual with respect for culture and rationality, who is drawn to Nietzschean philosophy and the culture of the trenches. He experiences his gradual transformation into a rhinoceros as positive: the physical changes it brings, such as jutting veins and hard skin, are welcomed by Jean as signs of “virility.”³⁸¹ The elements of Jean that were more

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.51.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p.62.

subtly presented in the café scene – his intellectual haughtiness, his emotional coldness, his physical strength, and his sense of moral superiority – become more pronounced during his transformation, until he emerges, fully transformed, as a Nietzschean superman.

As for Dudard, he re-appears in Act 3, representing the good bourgeois liberal. A moral relativist, who reminds Berenger to “Judge not lest ye be judged,”³⁸² Dudard is one of the last to succumb to rhinocerotitis. In the last act, he tries to calm Berenger by telling him that rhinocerotitis is a virus which, like all viruses, is sure to pass. And, even if it does not, they all might benefit from rhinocerotitis with time. What is clear is that there is nothing that Berenger can or even should do about it:

DUDARD: You leave the authorities to act as they think best! I’m not sure if morally you have the right to butt in. In any case, I still think it’s not all that serious. I consider it silly to get worked up because a few people decide to change their skins. They just didn’t feel happy in the ones they had. They’re free to do as they like.

BERENGER: We must attack the evil at the roots.

DUDARD: The evil! That’s just a phrase! Who knows what is evil and what is good? It’s just a question of personal preference.³⁸³

Ultimately, Dudard decides to join the rhinoceroses on principle, feeling it is his duty to stand by his people. The majority vote has clearly decided the issue.

Daisy is the representative of the bourgeois conception of love: she and Berenger come together in the last Act as the only man and woman left. They begin by proclaiming their eternal love to one another, promising to take care of each other no matter what happens. Yet over the course of their conversation they gradually realize that love is not enough to save them from catastrophe. They begin to argue like an old married couple, and their declarations of love become fewer and less sincere. Berenger

³⁸² *Ibid.*, p.78.

³⁸³ *Ibid.*, p.80.

becomes aware of this during the conversation: “In the space of a few minutes we’ve gone through twenty-five years of married life.”³⁸⁴

Indeed, bourgeois love is no match for the pull of the rhinoceros. Daisy begins to see the rhinoceroses as beautiful, and wishes she were like them: “[the rhinos] are the real people. They look happy. They’re content to be what they are. They don’t look insane. They look very natural. They were right to do what they did.”³⁸⁵ Now seeing her isolated life with Berenger as unlivable, Daisy joins the rhinoceroses, abandoning the weakness of human love for the strength of the animal community. Berenger is left alone.

The play ends with Berenger’s monologue – a rambling reflection on his situation that shifts its focus from protecting Daisy to hoping to communicate with the rhinoceroses to his demoralization. It culminates in a long moment in which Berenger tries to imitate the rhinoceros in hopes of becoming one. Yet, try as he might, he cannot transform. In the final moments of the play, Berenger regains his certitude:

Now I’ll never become a rhinoceros, never, never! I’ve gone past changing. I want to, I really do, but I can’t, I just can’t. I can’t stand the sight of me. I’m too ashamed! [*He turns his back on the mirror.*] I’m so ugly! People who try to hang on to their individuality always come to a bad end! [*He suddenly snaps out of it.*] Oh well, too bad! I’ll take on the whole of them! I’ll put up a fight against the lot of them, the whole lot of them! I’m the last man left, and I’m staying that way until the end. I’m not capitulating!³⁸⁶

Whether this can be considered a happy ending is open to interpretation. What is clear is that fighting rhinocerotitis is a solitary endeavor, and that no member of the bourgeoisie has a chance against it. The Logician, the liberal, the leftist, the lover, and the business owner all become the same monster in the end. It is indeed a night where all

³⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p.104.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.103.

³⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.107.

cows are black, where there is no qualitative difference between political groups, and where all forms of resistance fail. Only the loner, the individualist, the outcast of bourgeois society remains – and as a loner, he must live, and “fight,” alone. Ionesco said that Berenger “represents the modern man. He is a victim of totalitarianism— of both kinds of totalitarianism, of the right and of the left.”³⁸⁷ A *victim*. Yes, a victim with no weapons with which to fight the rhinoceros who will eventually break down his door.

If politics can be defined broadly to include any collective action in the public sphere, or to take an even broader definition from Harold Lasswell, “who gets what, when, and how,”³⁸⁸ then Berenger can be said to be a truly anti-political figure. In the dramatic world of *Rhinoceros*, politics is fundamentally anti-humanist. All collectivities end as totalitarian systems, and intervention into the world of power and resources – even by those with the best of intentions – is a move towards domination over individuals.

Ionesco expressed his deep alienation from all politics in his reflections on *Rhinoceros*:

When *Rhinoceros* was produced in Germany, it had fifty curtain calls. The next day the papers wrote, Ionesco shows us how we became Nazis. But in Moscow, they wanted me to rewrite it and make sure that it dealt with Nazism and not with their kind of totalitarianism. In Buenos Aires, the military government thought it was an attack on Perónism. And in England they accused me of being a petit bourgeois. Even in the new *Encyclopaedia Britannica* they call me a reactionary. You see, when it comes to misunderstanding, I have had my full share. Yet I have never been to the right, nor have I been a communist, because I have experienced, personally, both forms of totalitarianism.”³⁸⁹

³⁸⁷ Quoted in Guppy, p.16.

³⁸⁸ Harold D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, How* (Whittlesey House, 1936).

³⁸⁹ Quoted in Guppy, pp.16-17.

His experience promoting his play reinforced his belief that political systems are all the same, that ideologies differ in name only, and that politics is ridiculous at best and incredibly dangerous at worst.

Like all of his plays, *Rhinoceros* received mixed criticism from the press. Some critics hailed it as a riveting testimony to the horrors of fascism – a play with a political message – (exactly what they had been waiting for!); others viewed it as insultingly ridiculous nonsense. For his part, Ionesco made it clear that, although the play was inspired by his personal experience of the rise of Romanian fascism and particularly the inability of his intellectual companions to resist the fascist temptation, *Rhinoceros* was not a statement limited to fascism or communism or any particular ideology. On the contrary, it was meant to reveal a universal aspect of human experience: that all politics is a trap. Ionesco wrote in 1940 that “I know that every sort of justice is unjust and that every sort of authority is arbitrary”³⁹⁰ and that “all systems are false.”³⁹¹ Now, in 1960, his views remained the same: all ideologies create rhinoceroses; everyone is vulnerable; and the petit-bourgeois in particular are to blame for the spread of rhinocertitis. The problem is intractable because progress is an illusion. Political revolutions do nothing but return society to an alternative, but equally horrible, experience of domination:

To me, revolution is the restoration of an archetypal social or political structure: it is authoritarian, even tyrannical and hierarchical; a re-establishment in an apparently different form of the forces of government; the rehabilitation of a ruling power and disciplinary spirit that had weakened because the worn-out slogans of the preceding elite was no longer able to maintain them.³⁹²

³⁹⁰ Ionesco, *Present Past/Past Present*, p.17.

³⁹¹ *Ibid.*, p.45.

³⁹² *Ibid.*, p.239.

Like old wine in new bottles, political ideologies may appear new and even progressive; yet they will always be nothing more than new iterations of an eternal quest for domination.

Faced with such bleak political prospects, the rare individual who refuses to succumb to the herd is assured only of isolation and uncertainty. Ionesco portrays the transformation of human beings into mindless beasts in a frightening and dramatic way. We bear witness with Berenger to the transformation of his best friend, Jean who, before our eyes, relinquishes the pieces of himself that bind him to his fellow men – his empathy, his respect, and finally, his body and mind. In the end, we are left with Berenger, alone and isolated, with little hope of survival and no hope of companionship.

Indeed, after the London Controversy, politics did emerge as a theme in Ionesco's drama. But not in the way his critics had hoped for. Instead of defending any particular political position or ideology, Ionesco consistently and relentlessly indicated that all political views and ideologies are inherently misguided and lead inevitably to human suffering. Instead of a renewed belief in progress, Ionesco expressed an ever-stronger belief in the impossibility of progress and the permanence of the cycle of defeat.

Ionesco went on to write two more full-length plays of similar caliber: *Exit the King* and *Macbett*. *Exit the King* is about a king who must confront his immanent death, and *Macbett* is a re-envisioning of Shakespeare's tale in a post-tragic, post-modern world. Ionesco's gloss on the latter play neatly sums up his view of politics:

My *Macbett* is not a victim of fate, but of politics. I agree with Jan Kott, the Polish author of *Shakespeare, Our Contemporary*, who gives the following explanation: A bad king is on the throne, a noble prince kills him to free the country of tyranny, but ipso facto he becomes a criminal and has to be killed in turn by someone else—and on it goes. The same thing has happened in recent history: the French Revolution liberated people from the power of the aristocrats.

But the bourgeoisie that took over represented the exploitation of man by man and had to be destroyed—as in the Russian Revolution, which then degenerated into totalitarianism, Stalinism, and genocide. The more you make revolutions, the worse it gets. Man is driven by evil instincts that are often stronger than moral laws.³⁹³

These plays present the most politically engaged and compelling versions of Ionesco's critique of modernity. Yet in their overdrawn depictions of dictatorship, and in their cynicism about aspirations for freedom or justice, even these plays are deeply anti-political, and the worlds they dramatize contain little solidarity and offer no grounds for political hope.³⁹⁴

The rest of Ionesco's later plays suffer from the same problems that plagued his writings in the early years: these plays lack structure, and the characters are parodies of human beings, who lack psychological depth, exist in a social void, and are unable to understand one another.

Ionesco's belief in the impossibility of beneficial social or political change is reflected in his work in a most basic way: his drama does not and cannot evolve beyond the narrow parameters in which it was originally constructed. In the same way that the world that he dramatizes is stuck in an eternal recurrence that wavers between banality and barbarism, his own dramatic creations suffer a similar fate, as the characters, themes, and images begin to reappear again and again in his work. To find new material, there is nowhere for Ionesco to go but further inside himself. Hence, over time, the content of his plays becomes increasingly self-referential and autobiographical. *The Man with the Luggage* contains many scenes pulled either from Ionesco's dreams or his personal experiences with his family. His last play, *Journeys among the Dead*, is Ionesco's life

³⁹³ Quoted in Guppy, pp.14-15.

³⁹⁴ On the limits of Ionesco's politics of critique see Emmanuel Jacquot, "Ionesco's Political Itinerary." *The Dream and the Play*, Moshe Lazar, ed. pp.63-80.

written as theatre. Not only are these last plays entirely self-centered, but they lack any sort of structure. In them, Ionesco's surrogate relives specific moments again and again, each time forgetting he has done so in the past. The plays end without any semblance of resolution, and the experience of watching them is akin to watching someone's dreams on a screen while they sleep.

It would be difficult to make the argument that these last plays represent "art for art's sake" and should be valued on those grounds alone. These plays no longer feel like art, but like psychodramas: psychotherapeutic interventions designed to purge a patient of negative feelings by having him direct the action of individuals acting out moments of his personal life traumas. In psychodrama, one actor plays the patient, and the patient sets the scene – the goal is to recreate the traumatic event in order to alter the ending; through the experience of psychodrama, the patient can take control over negative memories and purge himself of negative emotions.³⁹⁵ Indeed, *The Man with the Luggage* and *Journeys Among the Dead* contain the most difficult moments of Ionesco's life as revealed in his *Journals* and *Memoir*: Ionesco witnessing the attempted suicide of his mother; Ionesco abandoning her to live with his father; Ionesco confronting his wicked stepmother; Ionesco returning to his mother; Ionesco being given to his wife by his mother, who subsequently dies; Ionesco attempting to flee Romania and being detained; etc, etc.

Indeed, Ionesco here takes his dramatic vision to its logical extreme. What we are left with is exactly what Kenneth Tynan feared: we are left with nothing but the pure subjective experience of the playwright himself. The turn away from the public sphere has thus produced a theatre of pure solipsism, a theatre so inverted that the playwright has nothing to write about except his own dreams and memories. Not only is this theatre

³⁹⁵ For more on Ionesco's plays as psychodramas, see Lazar.

irrelevant to politics, it is now irrelevant to anyone who is not Ionesco himself. Ionesco said in 1959 that “I can easily imagine drama without a public.”³⁹⁶ By the end of his life, this imagined vision had been realized.

Conclusion: The Implosion of the Political

The history of Western political thought is a history of the development of ever-more increasingly complex sets of categories through which we can understand and explain our world. From Plato to Marx, philosophers have sought to construct frameworks and to build systems that would both explain and guide human thought and action towards the fulfillment of human potentiality. With the death of the belief in progress came the death of closed systems of thought and the reworking of various frameworks to ground them in something other than an inevitably bright future. Unfortunately, the unraveling of philosophical categories and qualitative distinctions had grave repercussions for Western civilization. Fascism and Soviet Communism were based on streamlined, Manichean understandings of the world which justified the murder of millions and the annihilation of the past. In the post-war West, such direct threats to human survival were minimal. But the so-called “open societies” of the West were no less damaged by the instrumentalization of reason most vividly analyzed in Horkheimer and Adorno’s famous *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Without sophisticated sets of categories on which to base their political views and to ground their conversations, individuals in the public sphere began to communicate at cross-purposes, using the same words to signify different things, and making arguments that lacked clarity even in the speaker’s own mind.

³⁹⁶ Ionesco, “A Talk about the Avant-Garde,” reprinted in *Notes and Counter Notes*, pp.39-52. Quote is from p.43.

The post-war theatre was far from immune to this epidemic of confusion in language and thought. Indeed, it is an illustration of the consequences of such philosophical regression. And Ionesco's experience is once again exemplary. His dismissal of history as a cyclical narrative of domination and rebellion was a rejection not only of the chronology of events, but of the categories developed over the centuries which helped make sense of the world. Without access to these categories, Ionesco found himself re-inventing the wheel at every turn. He took part in recycled debates that had taken place hundreds of years earlier. For example, in the London Controversy, Ionesco argued that art is an autonomous sphere of expression that should be judged on its own terms, and not according to political or scientific criteria. In the most obtuse and unselfconscious way possible, Ionesco recreated Kant's delineation of the third realm of art and imagination as separate from the realms of philosophical and practical reason. His interlocutors misinterpreted him as making an argument that art exists entirely apart from society, and proceeded to tear that argument to smithereens. They were making a Marxist argument (a post-Kantian argument) that if art denounces politics completely, then both art and politics suffer. It is no wonder that, coming at the conversation from two separate, yet related, frameworks of understanding, Ionesco and his interlocutors should have such a difficult time communicating with one another. The most unfortunate aspect of the London Controversy is that no one had the clarity of mind required to identify the fundamental issues – i.e. the confusion of categories – that underlay the dispute.

Throughout his work, Ionesco makes use of terms and concepts that he understands in his own idiosyncratic way, apart from the definitions and socially-

constructed meanings that his well-educated critics and audience members hold. This leads to miscommunication on his part, and to great misunderstandings on the part of his audience. These mishaps should be separated in our minds from the intended personalization of interpretation that Ionesco hopes to inspire. Indeed, Ionesco was baffled and angered that his plays could be misunderstood so badly. For example, almost all of his plays center on the lives of the petit-bourgeoisie. From his first play, *The Bald Soprano*, to his masterpiece *Rhinoceros*, the petit-bourgeois are consistently held up for ridicule, parodied, and/or depicted as de-humanized objects in a dark world. Ionesco's focus on the petit-bourgeois led many critics to interpret him as offering a political commentary rooted in a Marxist framework. Yet he vehemently rejected such interpretations, angered that his critics would force a political element into his work. He repeatedly lashed out at his critics for overstepping their bounds; yet it was not until 1960 that he revealed to his public in a lecture that his understanding of the petite-bourgeois differed so radically from that of Marx:

the petite bourgeoisie I had in mind was not a class belonging to any particular society, for the petit bourgeois was for me *a type of being that exists in all societies*, whether they be called revolutionary or reactionary; for me the petit bourgeois is just 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.³⁹⁷

Whereas for Marx the petit-bourgeois is a historically specific (and transitional) class belonging to the distinctive capitalist mode of production found only in the modern era, for Ionesco it is a universal archetype of the unthinking and manipulated man who pervades all human societies and defines the human condition. Yet his critics can hardly be condemned for interpreting his plays in a political light given his use of a category that

³⁹⁷ From "Remarks on my Theatre and on the Remarks of Others," in *Notes and Counternotes*, p.66, my emphasis.

is socially understood to belong to the capitalist mode of production as outlined by Marx, a category with strong political valence in the world that Ionesco inhabits. It is one thing for Ionesco the individual artist to insist upon an artistic “right” to define his terms. But it is another to insist on the “right” to be understood in the way he wishes himself to be understood. For in his art as well as in his commentary on this art, he is addressing an audience of people who are not himself and who cannot read his mind. In other words, were he not acting in the public realm, Ionesco’s reconfigured universe of meaning would cause no confusion, as there would be no attempt at communication. But the fact that, in the public sphere, he retained the names of categories but altered their content to fit his personal inner-world was highly problematic.

The confusion surrounding his work is understandable given the fact that Ionesco was an admitted man of contradiction. In *Exit the King*, death is the only important aspect of life; in *Amédée*, the possibility of transcending death is present, if only fleeting; in other plays, like *Double Act* and *Hunger and Thirst*, death is forever postponed, however much it may be wished for. Ionesco does not present a coherent vision of the world to his audience because he himself does not understand the world in a coherent way. His rejection of systematic thought and the categories of history led him to understand the world in an ever-changing, inherently personal way based on the life of his inner-world. It was this lack of cohesion and rootedness in anything external to itself that forced Ionesco’s drama into the corner of isolation and solipsism. And it is this same conceptual confusion that is reflected in his audience’s confused appreciation of his work. On this score one can do no better than to conclude by quoting Ionesco himself, from his 1984 interview in *The Paris Review*: “The theater chose me. As I said, I started

with poetry, and I also wrote criticism and dialogue. But I realized that I was most successful at dialogue. Perhaps I abandoned criticism because I am full of contradictions, and when you write an essay you are not supposed to contradict yourself. But in the theater, by inventing various characters, you can. My characters are contradictory not only in their language, but in their behavior as well.”³⁹⁸

³⁹⁸ Quoted in Guppy, p. 12.

The Inversion of the Public and the Private

This dissertation has offered a glimpse of the eclipse of political theatre in the 20th century: the process by which theatre gradually lost its role in the public sphere as a tool of political education, engagement, and inspiration and became a capitalist industry of the private sphere, existing mainly for purposes of entertainment.

I have not attempted to write an exhaustive or systematic account of the theatre's decline. I have not analyzed a large sample of playwrights from across the nations of Europe, nor have I imposed an externally created set of categories and questions onto each playwright's work in order to gain an objective view of the process of decline. This work is not meant to provide definitive answers to the questions it poses; it cannot be used to "prove" any theory; and it is, above all, not a work of science.

This is a work of cultural history, meant to offer insight and foster understanding rather than to explain events. I chose to focus on a small number of cases in order to enrich the quality and expand the depth of each inquiry. I allowed the categories and the tensions to emerge organically from each case, with the result that, although common themes run throughout the dissertation, the chapters vary in length and emphasis. For example, while the cultural movements that shaped Shaw and especially Brecht receive attention, in the cases of Sartre and Ionesco I chose to focus on other aspects of their experience which loomed larger for them as individuals and members of their respective movements. In this work, I privileged the individual experiences of the playwrights over scientific principles of inquiry, for in this case – in the study of art and the political power of the artistic experience for performer and audience alike – the scientific method of analysis seemed to go against the essence of inspiration and revelation inherent in art. I

have sought to be as true as possible to both the historical contexts of each playwright and their authentic experiences as unique individuals.

Each playwright's experience contains material worthy of study by political theorists interested in the relationship between politics and art. Shaw's experience highlights the introduction of the culture industry into the world of theatre production, and the way in which even such a renowned public intellectual was pressured to accept the increasingly widespread view that his role as a playwright was to entertain rather than to make political statements. Brecht's experience as a leftist émigré, forced to flee a Germany in which his radical project had been destroyed by the rise of Hitler, and struggling to create a revolutionary theatre under the pressure of a dogmatic state-run culture machine, emphasized the grip that totalitarianism had, not only upon the bodies of its subjects, but upon their imaginations as well. Sartre's ability to utilize the theatre during war time and Occupation to engage the French citizenry and sustain a spirit of revolt was a brief moment of testimony to the importance of theatre as a public space; yet his decision to abandon the theatre to pursue his political aims through other means speaks to the limitations of the theatre as a political tool in the post-WWII world. Finally, Ionesco's career, from his rise to fame to his ephemeral moments of political critique to his devolution into his own inner-psyche, speaks to the new role of theatre in the post-war West.

Alone, each case presents one aspect of the decline of political theatre and the experience of that decline from the point of view of the playwright under discussion. Taken together, the four main chapters of this dissertation offer a chronological treatment of the way the function of theatre has changed over the course of the last century. When

Shaw began his career, he believed in the power of theatre as a tool of civic education and enlightenment, and his plays and theater criticism were of a piece with a broader project of intellectual critique and social reform. By the time Ionesco's last play premiered, the public debates about the political responsibility of contemporary theatre had virtually ceased, and the Romanian-French writer forced into permanent exile by first fascism and then Communism had become an entertainment celebrity.

In my introduction, I asked how it was possible for the public at large, and for the political science profession in particular, to simply assume that the realms of politics and art are and ought to be completely separate. I pointed out that Western civilization has, until very recently, understood these two aspects of social life to be interrelated. The media of art have been used to educate, to provoke, to engage, to enlighten, and to unify; at the same time, artists have offered their personal reflections, critiques, and interpretations of their social and political situations, re-imagining both the possible and the impossible, the utopian and the dystopian, and producing new visions of a more humanistic politics. I have attempted to elucidate the ways in which the realities of the 20th century made it nearly impossible for three of the most politically committed artists to impact their world, with the hope that this may help us understand why the realms of politics and art currently seem so very far apart. Try as they might, these playwrights could not break through the boundaries that came to separate the political aspects of their art from their public. These boundaries – the culture industry, totalitarian control over the public sphere, dogmatic ideologues with the powers of censorship, and the mass public's growing desire to escape from politics into the safety of their private worlds – grew stronger over the course of time. As the boundaries between political art and the

public sphere became naturalized, it became difficult to conceive of theatre as serving any serious political function. Once the totalitarian regimes fell, the culture industry was able to exert control over the arts in a new way – state censorship was replaced by the process of capitalist reification and the logic of mass production. The totality of capitalism transformed art into a set of mass produced and increasingly pre-fabricated commodities, relegated to the private sphere of individual and mass consumption.

The chapters of this dissertation testify to the fact that we are living in a new era, where “political theatre” signifies something drastically different from what it did a century ago -- indeed, as a virtual oxymoron, it signifies almost *nothing*. This makes it all the more important that the tales of my four playwrights be told. For while today “political theatre” refers almost exclusively to theatre with political content, the phrase used to imply so much more – political in content, form, purpose, consequences, and experience. If we can include the stories of these playwrights as part of our cultural history, if we can understand our own time as exceptional, and if we can reflect upon the process by which our understanding of the relationship between politics and theatre has changed, and if we can remember the political work that theatre used to accomplish, then we will perhaps keep alive the possibility that it can occur again. The tales of these playwrights may yet inspire individuals in future generations to re-envision what the theatre is capable of, and provide them the impetus to produce a new type of political theatre appropriate to their time and place.

Indeed, while my narrative of decline is a fairly dark one, it is important to emphasize that the history of 20th century theater also evinces more hopeful glimpses of something brighter. For the efforts of my subjects were not entirely in vain. Perhaps the

clearest example of this is the inspiration that absurdist theatre, and Ionesco in particular, provided to Eastern European dissidents during the Cold War. This was particularly the case for Vaclav Havel, the playwright and writer and leader of the Charter 77 movement who ultimately led the Czechoslovakian independence movement in 1989 and was elected the first post-Communist President of Czechoslovakia. Havel's plays, first produced in the early 1960s, were based on the absurdity of the Eastern bloc bureaucracy and the semantic incompetence of language in the Soviet controlled states. Ionesco's critique of the universal bourgeois class was reflected in Havel's derisive commentaries on the Czech apparatchiks. As the Czech novelist Milan Kundera—himself one of those profoundly influenced by both existentialism and absurdism—wrote in a retrospective on Havel:

No foreign writer had for us at that time [the 1960s] such a liberating sense as Ionesco. We were suffocating under art conceived as educational, moral, or political. . . . One cannot conceive of Havel without the example of Ionesco, yet he is not an epigone. His plays are an original and irreplaceable development within what is called "the theater of the absurd." Moreover, they were understood as such by everyone at the time.³⁹⁹

Yet whereas Ionesco received negative reviews from those on the left who disliked his politics, and at the same time was regarded a brilliant and entertaining parodist by a wider audience, Havel's transgressions had a more profoundly political impact. His plays, as well as those of other playwrights associated with the Theatre at the Balustrade in Prague, helped to spread the rebellious spirit that eventually led to the Prague Spring of 1968. After the Soviets squelched the insurrection, Havel was forbidden by the state from having his plays produced. In the Soviet-controlled Eastern bloc, where the divide between public and private life had not yet been cemented, theatre maintained its power

³⁹⁹ Robert Skloot, "Vaclav Havel: The Once and Future Playwright." *Kenyon Review*, 15 (2), Spring 1993, p. 225.

as a political tool in the public sphere. Havel's plays were widely read and sometimes even performed underground in defiance of Communist authorities. As a playwright, Havel became a major public figure in the movement of "anti-political politics" that eventually produced the Velvet Revolution.

Even now, in the post-Cold War era, the embers of political theatre have not been wholly extinguished. For while theatre may have been stripped of its overtly political role in Western society, it has not been wholly deprived of its audience. In capitalist terms, there are still niche markets for certain types of theatrical products, and this fact allows some forms of political theatre to continue. Even under these difficult terms, many Western playwrights have managed to succeed in having their politically provocative work produced for a relatively wide public. Tony Kushner, Paula Vogel, Mart Crowley, Carol Churchill and Suzan-Lori Parks are playwrights who have taken on identity politics issues such as gay rights, AIDS politics, racism, and gender. Tom Stoppard, Edward Albee, and Peter Weiss are playwrights who have focused on presenting a more general and more philosophical politics, concerned with basic questions as to what makes us human, what our limitations are, and what we can and should strive for as a society. Though all of these playwrights operate in the now fully-privatized theatre, their plays do perform some political work, mainly in terms of civic education, and intellectual stimulation. Of course, audience members are self-selecting and must pay for the privilege of such an education. Even still, it is not a night where all cows are black and all expressions of theatre are of the same value. There is a qualitative difference between the cultural value gained from watching a performance of

Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* and the Broadway musical, *Seussical*. As long as this remains the case, the political potentialities of theatre remain alive.⁴⁰⁰

Yet if I am correct in thinking that there is a causal link between liberal capitalist hegemony and the removal of art from the public sphere, then more needs to be done to protect the theatre. If it is the case that civil society and political society are completely severed spheres in liberal democracy, as Marx argued in "On the Jewish Question," then is there any way for art to regain its place in the public sphere? Is it possible for a private industry, which is what theatre has now exclusively become, to have any measurable influence upon political – i.e. public – life? If not, then theatre is reliant upon the market and the donations of philanthropists for its survival. If and when the niche market for intelligent theatre dries up, it may vanish as a medium. If theatre dies, will our memory of its political power die with it?

As persuasive as economic explanations for the decline of the theatre – and of the quality of culture generally -- are, they do not and cannot account fully for the phenomenon. It seems to be the combination of capitalism and liberal democracy that is responsible for the death of high culture. With capitalism alone, a public sphere can operate; political art can flourish (usually underground); and culture can provide a safe haven for dissidents. Perhaps the most important recent discussion of this is Jurgen Habermas' *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas makes clear that the emergence of bourgeois liberalism always involves a flourishing public culture

⁴⁰⁰ Roberto Schwartz offers an interesting discussion of the continuing relevance of Brecht, particularly in Schwartz's native Brazil, in "Brecht's Relevance: Highs and Lows." *New Left Review* 57 (May-June 2009), pp. 85-104.

that includes art, literature, as well as more directly political forms of communication.⁴⁰¹

By the same token, democracies without capitalism can also support the flourishing of robust cultures in which art can have a vital place within the public sphere. Ancient Athens is perhaps the best example of this: viewing the world ecologically, Athens was not based on the separation of society into spheres of private versus public. All life outside the home was public life, and art, religion, education, and other aspects of culture were all interconnected. Athenian culture has produced some of the most well-known and most admired works of art in the history of human civilization, and indeed the flourishing of culture during the pinnacle of ancient Athenian democracy is often regarded as exemplary.⁴⁰²

It may be the case that a truly successful culture industry could not exist without a liberal democratic foundation. Because almost all areas of life are protected from state interference in a liberal democracy, almost all areas of life are vulnerable to the process of commodification on which the culture industry is based. It would make sense, then, that liberal democracies would provide the best possible conditions for the commodification of culture. In all other cases the state patrols the public sphere for

⁴⁰¹ See Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (MIT Press, 1981). Habermas documents the flourishing of the public sphere throughout continental Europe in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Suharto's Indonesia is another example of this pattern of cultural development: under an authoritarian, capitalist regime, the *dalang* – master puppeteers and the most renowned performers in society – provided political commentary and social cues that kept the public informed, encouraged them to resist, and reminded them that Sundanese culture would long outlast Suharto's reign. Proof of their political importance is found in the fact that over the course of his reign, Suharto rounded up hundreds of *dalang* and their fellow artists and had them murdered for political treason. He understood their positions of power as cultural leaders and acted in a manner that prevented them from inciting revolution, which he considered to be a vital threat. For a general discussion of the Indonesia case, see Michael R.J. Vatikiotis, *Indonesian Politics under Suharto: The Rise and Fall of the New Order*, 3rd Edition (Routledge, 1998). On the importance of art and literature as a source of dissidence amidst liberal transitions in Eastern Europe see Jeffrey C. Isaac, *Democracy in Dark Times* (Cornell, 1998) and Barbara Falk, *The Dilemmas of Dissidence in East Central Europe* (Central European University Press, 2003).

⁴⁰² See Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Volume 1: *Archaic Greece: The Mind of Athens* (Oxford University Press, 1986).

threats to its power. Even in a capitalist non-democratic state the government would exercise control over public dissent, and this might include preventing the commodification of certain cultural texts to the detriment of the capitalist. This may help to explain the remarkable political influence Vaclav Havel's absurdist theatre had in Soviet-ruled Czechoslovakia that Ionesco's Parisian theatre lacked. In Havel's case, the expression of criticism in any form was a public statement, with potentially large ramifications. But in a capitalist democracy, the market rules, and any meaningful public sphere is eclipsed by the privatism of social life. Hence, at most, Ionesco's work could serve a critical function that could be eventually coopted by the culture industry and rendered innocuous.⁴⁰³

There seems to be an elective affinity, then, between liberal capitalist democracy – a state in which dissent as voiced through culture poses no threat to the state's power – and the culture industry, which seeks to commodify every aspect of culture. This elective affinity helps explain how, over the course of only a century, the culture industry was able to transform our understanding of what culture is, the value it has, and what it is – or is not – capable of accomplishing in the contemporary United States. As a society, the ways we acquire and distribute knowledge are controlled by the culture industry; since history is not of interest to the lowest common denominator or to those with the most disposable income, it is a niche market, available only upon request and at a price. The culture industry, based on planned obsolescence and rapid turnover, both reflects and reinforces our desire to live “in the now,” to focus on the new and improved, with no concern for or understanding of what came before. In a society without deep knowledge

⁴⁰³ Perhaps the most important critique of this can be found in John Dewey's *The Public and Its Problems* (Swallow Press, 1927), whose penultimate chapter is entitled, “The Eclipse of the Public.”

of or an appreciation of history, it is understandable that the current understanding of culture as existing completely separately from politics should be pervasive.⁴⁰⁴ It requires effort and imagination to conceive of a world where this would be otherwise, even if it was so less than 100 years ago, and even if our “now” is the great historical exception. Because it was never part of our experience as a society – it was never “now” – it may as well have never been. Due to the strong hold of the culture industry on our imaginations, the vast majority of our society might never be able to imagine a world in which culture truly matters.

This is where the true value of my dissertation lies. It has been my purpose to highlight the historical nature of our current understanding of “the political” and of the relationship between politics and theatre. Given the totality of the capitalist system, there may come a point at which even the value of theatre as a critical check on the status quo is placed in jeopardy; if and when that time comes, we need to remember that we are living in an exceptional time, that the history of human societies understood both theatre and politics in a different way, and that the theatre can be a public space in which social and political critique can flourish, as with Shaw and Ionesco; individuals can revolutionize the way they understand themselves and their world, as with Brecht; and people can engage their political situation with new awareness, as with Sartre. By keeping their stories alive, by connecting ourselves to our cultural legacy, we can stay connected to the utopian visions that have inspired the creation of political theatre, and that will continue to inspire future generations to better themselves and their world.

⁴⁰⁴ See Kenneth C. Davis, *Don't Know Much About History* (Harper Collins, 2004) and James L. Lowen, *Lies My Teacher Told Me: Everything Your American History Text Book Got Wrong* (Touchstone, 2007).

My hope is that this dissertation leads to more questions than answers; that it inspires further inquiry into the political potential of theatre, and art more generally; and that the cases presented here gain more attention from political theorists than they have had previously. There is still much ground to explore in terms of the relationship between dramatic art and political action: my hope is that the power of drama to stimulate the political imagination be remembered, if not revered.

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