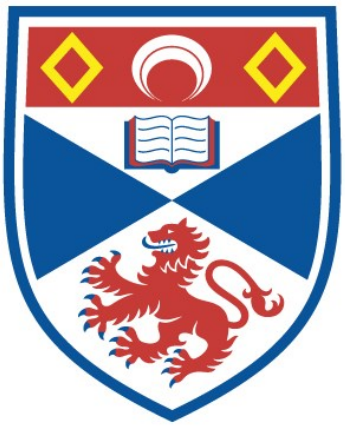
DETRITUS AND THE RITUALIZED THEATRE OF THE MODERN WEST

Joshua A. Edelman

A Thesis Submitted for the Degree of MPhil
at the
University of St Andrews



2004

Detritus

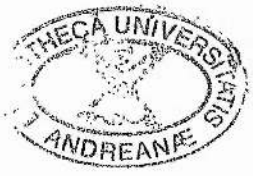
and the Ritualized Theatre of the Modern West

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of Master of Philosophy in Theology to the Faculty of Divinity, St Mary's College University of St Andrews, Scotland in September of 2004

by

Joshua A. Edelman
36a Bow Lane West
Dublin 8, Ireland
jae1@st-and.ac.uk

Supervisors: Trevor A Hart and Mario I Aguilar



Contents

Acknowledgements

In writing this dissertation, I benefited extensively from the expertise, advice and encouragement of my supervisors, Rev. Prof. Trevor A. Hart and Prof. Mario I. Aguilar, as well as from other staff and students at St Mary's College, particularly Prof. Christopher Seitz, Rev. Prof. Ian Bradley, Dr. Steven Guthrie, Janice Deary, Andrew Rawnsley, Catherine Lapinel, Katie Munnik and Ivan Khovacs. Many of the theatrical ideas I argue for here were field-tested during the 2003-2004 season of the Thirid From the Left Theatre Company, St Andrews. Everyone involved in the three plays that made up our season— *Everyman, Dybbuk,* and *Passion*—has contributed to my thinking about the relationship between theatre and ritual, whether they know it or not. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support of the Overseas Research Scholarship scheme of Universities UK and the University of St Andrews which have made this research possible.

Abstract

While theatrical performance is not an inherently religious act, the similarities between public, performed storytelling and religious ritual have been much noticed. Theologians talk about the Incarnation and the Christian life in performative terms, anthropologists have long used a theatrical metaphor to describe the workings of ritual, and modern theatricalists often use the language of ritual to explain theatrical potency. This dissertation surveys and critiques the ways these metaphors have been used in theology, anthropology, and theatrical studies, viewing theatre as an example of a meaningful cultural practice in the sense developed by Pierre Bourdieu and applied to ritual by Catherine Bell. It suggests problems in many common understandings of the ritual/theatrical overlap and proposes instead a particular strand of modern Western theatrical practice that has been subject to Bellian ritualization. This Ritualized Theatre of the Modern West is characterized above all by the presence of detritus: objects whose meaning and potency exceed the parameters established by their context and which are function and are recognized simultaneously as sacraments and as junk. This strand is explored with examples from the work of Samuel Beckett, Tony Kushner, and Glen Berger. In addition, this dissertation argues that the theatre provides a counterexample to Bell and Bourdieu's contention that a practice must necessarily misrecognize its actual effects. The Brechtian insistence that theatrical performance include an acknowledgement of its own conditions of production has led to the incorporation of a discourse about the theatre into theatrical practice itself. The Ritualized Theatre can thus provide a case study of what happens to a meaning-making practice when it ceases to misrecognize its own ends.

Declarations

I, Joshua A. Edelman, hereby certify that this thesis, which is approximately 40,000 words in length, has been written by me, that it is the record of work carried out by me and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for a higher degree.

Joshua A. Edelman — date 18/11/04

I was admitted as a research student in September 2002 and as a candidate for the degree of M.Phil. at the same time; the higher study for which ~~this~~ is a record was carried out in the University of St Andrews between 2002 and 2004.

Joshua A. Edelman — date 18/11/04

I hereby certify that the candidate has fulfilled the conditions of the Resolution and Regulations appropriate for the degree of M.Phil. in Theology in the University of St Andrews and that the candidate is qualified to submit this thesis in application for that degree.

Rev. Prof. Trevor A. Hart — date 10/12/04

Dr. Mario I. Aguilar — date 10/12/04

In submitting this thesis to the University of St Andrews I understand that I am giving permission for it to be made available for use in accordance with the regulations of the University Library for the time being in force, subject to any copyright vested in the work not being affected thereby. I also understand that the title and abstract will be published, and that a copy of the work ~~may~~ be made and supplied to any bona fide library or research worker.

Joshua A. Edelman — date 18/11/04

CHAPTER ONE

Defining the Field

Just Play

Much as it has tried to, theatre cannot remain a simple pastime. Every society has had true diversions, at least for an elite—gladiators, needlepoint, football—and while these activities had often lent their structure by analogy to larger reflection on the divine or universal or human, such reflection is not a part of the pastimes themselves. Baseball may be a grand metaphor for the American experience, but such a meaning is neither inherent in nor necessary for the practice of baseball-playing. Pastimes are practices, in the sense developed by Catherine Bell and Pierre Bourdieu. They are activities bound by traditions and cultural dispositions time-ossifed into the bodies of practitioners, which Bourdieu calls the *habitus*. They have self-asserted goals (winning the game, a needlework pattern) which have relatively little to do with the ends they objectively achieve (the channeling of excitement and competitive energy, the nurturing of a feminine sphere of activity). The nature of a pastime is that it durates pleasantly without any conscious imposition of meaning or nontrivial effect. Pastimes differ from one culture to another, and what is a pastime in one context might be much more elsewhere—consider the cosmic ball games of the Maya—but the basic human need for relaxation has ensured that all cultures have some practices that are inherently meaningless.

Storytelling cannot be one of them. Not, of course, that it's hard to find particular stories that are designed primarily to divert and amuse—just turn on a television—but storytelling, as a practice, is historically, and, I will argue, inherently inseparable from the construction of meaning. I am not arguing that the storytelling act *contains* meaning, the way a breadbox contains bread or a fable contains a moral; I am arguing, rather, that in telling a story, a storyteller is engaged in a practice that necessarily *works with* meaning, the way a breadknife works with bread or a sermon works with a lesson. One way of working with something is to push it aside, of course, but like the Romantic poets who eschewed any social relevance to their work, the act of denying meaning nevertheless does something to it. The language of ownership of signification— "this practice *has* this meaning" —is deeply misleading. Meanings statically contained—in a box, in a fable, in a text—are inhuman things. To have a meaning relevant for lived human lives, meanings must circulate: the box must be opened, the fable told, the text read. Of course, these acts of meaning-making can be intensely personal and private; many books are

designed to circulate their meaning not more than a few feet from the easy chair. But that is still circulation. A text with no reader, like a language with only one speaker, is semiotically impotent. My subject of analysis, therefore, is not the story as form or genre in a literary-critical sense but story*telling* in the practical sense.[1]

It may help to begin with an understanding of storytelling as one example of translation as described by George Steiner in his magisterial *After Babel.*[2] Steiner argues that interlingual translation is one species of a more general genus of language interpretation (the French *interprète*) one which takes place whenever a text is read, lines are spoken, a scene is enacted, or people try to talk to each other across dialectical lines of region, social class, profession, or gender. He ascribes a fourfold structure to the interpreter's "hermeneutic motion" first, an "initiative trust" that the text contains meaning; next, an aggressive act of extracting that meaning; then, an incorporation of that meaning into the interpreter's new medium (Steiner uses metaphors both of incarnation and infection), and lastly, a fuzzy move of balance-restoration that sets the source text back on the shelf and validates the interpretive product as a valid text of its own.[3] Steiner connects the last step strongly with the notions of the "fidelity" and "ethics" of translation,[4] and thus might be formed very differently for a text that demands interpretation, like a playscript or a musical score, where the result is not a text in the same sense as the source but a meaningful action of a different order which cannot and need not be compared in any direct way to the original. Still, the other three steps apply full well to a performance of a (written or oral) story. With this caveat, Steiner can provide us with a helpful model of the meaning-work of the storyteller's practice. As a form of interpretation, storytelling dis-covers, dis-members, and re-creates meaning; it does not simply channel it on in a different guise. There is a violence in this process. Steiner

---

1 In this essay, I will use the term "theatre" synonymously with the terms "public storytelling" and "narrative performance." This is not shorthand, but a conscious statement that what differentiates theatre from other species of the genus performance is its narrative content or, if you'd rather, its storytelling function. I acknowledge that many excellent scholars of theatre and performance have a very different understanding of what "theatre" is Eli Rozik, for instance, argues the defining element of the theatre is the "iconic-indexical" mode of signification by which actors portray characters. Storying, for him, is a separte medium in which such signification-work ('acting') is not present. See Eli Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual & Other Theories of Origin* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002), passim. I cannot properly defend my disagreement with Rozik's (entirely consistent and reasonable) viewpoint here. Instead, let me simply clarify that I am not arguing that plot is a more essential element of theatre than character; rather, I am arguing that the act of role-playing (based on a certain sign-relationship between actor and character) is secondary to and dependent on the act of story-telling (based on a certain communicative relationship between actor and audience). It also strikes me that a large amount of what generally passes for theatre (the late Spalding Gray's monologues, *The Laramie Project, As You Like It,* Anna Deveare Smith's work, the Oedipus trilogy) makes use of an actor-character relationship other than the one Rozik considers "theatrical acting," at least occasionally, and these plays do not seem to cease being theatre as a consequence.

2 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation,* second edition (OUP 1992), 27: In their use of 'speculative instruments,' critic, editor, actor, and reader are on common ground. Through their diversely accentuated and cognate needs, written language achieves a continuation of life .... The function of the actor is particularly graphic. Each time *Cymbeline* is staged, Posthumus's monologue becomes the object of manifold 'edition'" On the next page, he specifically describes an actor's performance as an "*interprète* of Racine."

3 Steiner, *After Babel,* 312-318. Steiner admits in his preface to the second edition (xvi) that this fourth part of the the hermeneutic process is the point at which his model is most in need of further development.

4 Steiner, *After Babel,* 318 (fidelity) and xvi (ethics).

is a believer in the unadulterated, timeless voice of classic texts if ever there was one, and yet, he goes to great lengths to defend *interprète* as authentic and even potentially true. He freely admits that exact equivalence is not humanly possible, but it remains basic to human culture as such that we can and do communicate others' meanings, and do so essentially accurately. The cultural Darwinian that he is, Steiner normally avoids all religious language, but in this case, he can find no other to express his point:

> Even if the exact motivations of the disaster at Babel remain obscure, it would be sacrilege to give to this act of God an irreparable finality, to mistake the deep pulse of ebb and flow which marks the relations of God to men even in, perhaps most especially in, the moment of punishment. As the fall may be said to include the coming of the Redeemer, so the scattering of tongues at Babel has in it, in a condition of urgent moral and practical potentiality, the return to linguistic unity, the movement towards and beyond Pentecost. Seen thus, translation is a teleological imperative.[5]

The implication is that the human capacity to correctly understand and interpret the meanings of others—translation—can remake what the calamity of Babel destroyed. Steiner is well aware of the inherently mystical implications of this view; he connects it quickly to the "long tradition of linguistic Kabbalism" (is there another kind?) and approvingly quotes Franz Rosenzweig: "every translation is a messianic act, which brings redemption nearer."[6] But, like all mystically grounded projects, there is a strong anthropocentric share to the project of messianic translation that may (and probably ought to) give pause to theologians looking to understand how theatrical practice can work with and contribute to theological meaning. The project sees human beings, through the power of their own minds, overcoming their limited natures and un-doing the work of God, thus dethroning him. Part of the potential theological relevance of theatrical *interprète* is that it can show that this is just not possible; embodied storytelling that tries to achieve a divine de-throning cannot help but show the frailty of the people doing the pulling down; in that, it provides fruitful grounds for theological reflection.[7] Steiner is sensitive to these concerns, admitting that "until the undoing of Babel, [translation] can only be partial," and quoting Walter Benjamin's claim that there may be texts which are translatable only by God.

This introduces an ambiguity into Steiner's work as to *who,* exactly, will undo Babel. The question revolves around the role of divine action in human life and, in parallel, the role of human action in the execution of divine sovereignty. Steiner, however, neither presumes nor develops a particular theology of the human-divine relationship that would clarify this point, instead borrowing those of the two (quite different) traditions in which his hermeneutical theory is set: esoteric Judaism and European Romanticism. The former, has, for centuries, wrestled with the limits human finitude imposes

---

5 Steiner, *After Babel,* 266.

6 Steiner, *After Babel,* 257.

7 Of course, the metaphor can be used poorly, as I believe Kevin Vanhoozer does (see below, p. 51).

on even the wisest and thus most powerful of men, but the latter has no such gumption. For the Romantic, the *ne plus ultra* of divinity is to be found in the depths of the individual mind in its perfect exercise of freedom. To the Romantic, if man can shake off all of his (not her) social, cultural, and psychological fetters and proclaim his utter individuality and absolute freedom, that cry will be heard by the whole world and Babel will be rebuilt. Apparently inbuilt limitations are to be overcome. Whether Steiner wholly subscribes to this point of view is unclear, but in that he thinks anything human can do the work of rebuilding Babel, it is translation and communication.

Romanticism is an important part of the theatrical history that will be described in chapter three, but for now, I want to address a serious challenge the Romantic notion of the theatrical form poses to my argument here that theatre as storytelling is an inherently meaningful and socially effective practice. There is a Romantic tendency to deny that any of the arts, including theatre, *do* anything; they exist for their own sake. The great American chronicler of the Romantic theatre is the director and critic Robert Brustein; his *Theatre of Revolt* remains the standard text on the movement. He opens with a scene that attempts to sum up the social function of both the older, classical theatre and the Romantic movement in which he is interested. Brustein's "pair of images" has influenced two generations of theatricalists, and is worth quoting in full:

> First, imagine an open temple of classical proportions, surrounded by rising tiers. Gathered on separate levels are artisans, citizens, nobility—divided into classes but forming a unified congregation of spectators. In front of the temple is an altar before which stands a high priest in hieratic robes. Beyond the temple is a city; beyond the city, the celestial spheres, moving steadily in their orbits. The priest conducts a ritual ceremony by miming a myth of heroism and violence. the congregation is startled by the growing frenzy of the action; the atmosphere grows taut and strained. the high priest concludes his service with a ritual sacrifice, and blood pours from the altar. The congregation screams as if they were the victim. Some spectators fall from their seats; the temple cracks; the city begins to crumble; the spheres start wildly from their course. At the point when total destruction seems imminent, the scene freezes. The spectators file out, their anxiety mingled with an ethereal calm.
>
> Now, imagine a perfectly level plain in a desolate land. In the foreground, an uneasy crowd of citizens huddle together on the ruins of an ancient temple. Beyond them, a broken altar, bristling with artifacts. Beyond that, empty space. An emaciated priest in disreputable garments stands before the ruined altar, level with the crowd, glancing into a distorting mirror. He cavorts grotesquely before it, inspecting his own image in several outlandish positions. The crowd murmurs ominously and partially disperses. The priest turns the mirror on those who remain to reflect them sitting stupidly on rubble. They gaze at their images for a moment, painfully transfixed; then horror-struck, they run away, hurling stones at the altar and angry imprecations at the priest. The priest, shaking with anger, futility, and irony, turns the mirror on the void. He is alone in the void.[8]

Brustein's point, of course, is the contrast between the first, older image (which he calls "the theatre of communion") and the new Revolt-ing theatre. The rest of the book explores the novelty of this Revolt. But perhaps Brustein's pair of images can show more than he intends; look at how much the two performers have in common! Both work in a (formerly) sacred space that battles decay. The theatricalist remains a priest, enacting a story of some kind for a congregation (audience, crowd) of whatever size which takes something potent away from the performance, even if only revulsion. He retains a vital social role through (or against) whom the public as (potential) audience derives some meaning. Why does the Revolting Priest not leave the temple for firmer ground? How does he retain his power to disgust? The priest is still *doing* something which the audience recognizes as meaningful and effective, if unpleasant. The street preacher may be safely ignored—though he preaches *at* us, she does not preach *to* us—but something in the disreputable priestly robes, the ruined but still identifiable temple, and that altar full of undefined "artifacts" gives the emaciated priest's actions meaning and potency.

Even if Brustein cannot explain it, he recognized the priestly function of theatre as a link from the Revolting theatre to its forebearers. Indeed, when one looks historically at the social functions ascribed to the public telling of stories both by the tellers themselves and their critics, they have have very often served some rather basic social and cultural functions. In what he calls the 'heroic' societies, such as Homeric Greece, medieval Iceland and Ireland, and Renaissance Europe, "the chief means of moral education is the telling of stories," writes Alisdair MacIntyre.[9] This is not the use of narrative *texts* (as opposed to, say, essays or debates) as pedagogical aids, but the *act* of storytelling as a pedagogical activity: "In sixth-century Athens, the formal recitation of the Homeric poems was established as a public ceremony."[10] This storytelling provides a "historical memory" of whatever accuracy for a society, and thus an authoritative framework within which public moral debates could be conducted long after the actions the stories described had passed. Similarly, medieval morality plays (and their modern incarnations in Brecht, Fo, and Eliot) are meant not just to instruct but to bind a community together around a common definitional narrative. The character typology of Noh drama has had deep implications on the Japanese concept of the individual for centuries. This is why theatre can be so dangerous to a social order. If it were merely a matter of entertainment, theatre would have no potential to be subversive. So Jeremy Collier deplores the theatre[11] not simply in the sense that modern cultural conservatives despise violent rap music or the Ayatollah objected to Salman Rushdie; not simply because it advocates impermissable views, but because of its cultural potency. Theatrical meaning is shaped publicly, and therefore it lures its audience into complicit participation. And because public storytelling

8 Robert Brustein, *The Theatre of Revolt* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962), 3-4.

9 Alisdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 121.

10 Ibid.

11 Jeremy Collier, *A Short View of the Immorality and Prophaneness of the English Stage,* critical edition edited by Benjamin Hellinger (New York: Garland, 1987). Originally published London, 1698.

is not a fair dialogue—unlike a debate, someone's job is to tell the story and someone else's job is to listen—theatre can be seen as the kind of practice through which certain people can establish contagious, public meanings that greatly effect social and cultural identity.[12]

MacIntyre's notion of 'classical' societies as opposed to modern ones, like Lyotard's concept of the modern dominance of scientific knowledge over its narrative cousin, may suggest that the social power of public storytelling is restricted to some antiquitated pre-modern era. That is not the case. Even now, as so many cultural forms grow cynical, ironic, and distanced, we still recognize theatre's priestly function. Electronic and broadcast media have of course changed the way that stories are told, but live storytelling retains an immediate social power that other media struggle to achieve. When the people of the Czech Republic got their first chance to chose a president after the fall of the Iron Curtain, they turned not to an athlete or a musician but to the playwright Vaclav Havel. Ian Bradley has documented the pastoral function served by popular theatre music in contemporary Britain, particularly that of Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber.[13] The collective singing of the Lloyd Webber anthem "You'll Never Walk Alone" has become a public assertion that cuts through the vaguely social to the explicitly political: the condemnation of sectarian football hooliganism. This example is particularly interesting because it is Lloyd Webber's: here is a theatre composer who has spent his career eschewing high culture and focused relentlessly on writing entertaining, heartwarming, and easily digestible music for the comercially-successful stage. If any modern theatre is a pastime, it is Lloyd Webber's. And yet *even here,* the theatrical medium is being used (or hijacked) for the negotiation of collective meaning. The only modern analogy would be to the Norwegian public's reception of Ibsen, a man who fled his homeland in search of creative freedom. Brustein praises him as the purest of Revolters for his utter disdain for all social and interpersonal institutions (state, community, party, even family): "Ibsen's revolt, in short, is so personal that it can find common cause with nothing else in existence."[14] Yet, the Norwegian public seized on his work as an icon of national identity and eventually buried him with the reverence due a pillar of the very national community he rejected.[15]

Neither Brustein nor anyone else would argue that all performances as such are priestly activities. The Theatre of Revolt is a subset of the larger theatrical industry, a part defined in opposition to the bulk of theatrical practice. Brustein shows a deep contempt for the playwrights of that bulk who, in his

12 Jean-François Lyotard argues that this is not the case. In his view of the "pragmatics of narrative knowledge," socially accepted narratives are so constructed as to legitimate first themselves and indirectly their tellers through their form. The story legitimates the role and not vice versa. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984), 23. But sociologically, this is not such an enormous difference. Even if they are ultimately just doing the work of the stories, narrators stand in a authoritative position *over those to whom they speak,* and that social authority, from whatever cultural source, is what Collier and others have found so dangerous.

13 Ian Bradley, *You've Got to Have a Dream: The Message of the Musical* (London: SCM Press, forthcoming).

14 Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt,* 39.

15 Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt,* 41.

mind, neglect the mandate of Revolt for more pedestrian concerns. His Anti-Revolter-in-Chief is Arthur Miller, who is frequently denigrated as a "democrat,"[16] one who bends down to the needs of public service instead of taking up the disreputable priestly mantle and risking the scorn of the crowd. In Brustein's view, the Revolting Theatre's priestly function marks it out as something other than theatrical practice as a whole. In Bell's terms, it is self-differentiated: it claims a formal uniqueness for itself that labels it as supermundane and permits it an authority that the rest of the practice lacks.

Though Brustein does not, we might consider the possibility that more overtly social playwrights like Miller are simply still performing the priestly function in Brustien's 'classical' sense, an effort that stands in both tension *and continuity with* the Revolting project. Aside from the difference of social setting (and there is an argument to be made that contemporary society looks more like the tiered temple than the flat plain), the main difference is one of narrative strategy. The classical priest "mim[es] a myth" while the Revolter holds up a "distorting mirror." These views of the priestly role have been debated in the Church at least since Luther: who is it that the priest serves? Is the leader of the congregation God's instrumentally effective mediator to humanity or a teacher who serves his pupils by showing them who they are? Contemporary practical theology has found the dialectic between these two roles a productive one, and there is little enthusiasm for having one wholly win out over the other. The Revolting Theatre argues that the teaching model supersedes the instrumental one; the Ritualized Theatre, in contrast, often shows the absurdity of the human ability to understand (and thus teach about) our condition and obliquely points back to an older concept of sacramental action.

Though movements like the Revolting and Ritualized theatres have a self-conscious novelty, there is nothing new about a self-differentiated strand of theatre serving a priestly function. In some cases—ancient Greece is the standard example—that strand dominated theatrical practice as a whole. In some cases—modern Broadway is the standard example—this strand is relegated to the periphery. But no practice of theatre has ever been wholly without it. The two new moves of the modern era, however, are, first, that with the development of critical and cultural theory, theatricalists are becoming more aware of this strand's position within the theatrical industry as a whole, and second, social scientists are beginning to take theatre seriously as a field in which anthropological work can and should be done.

The forefather of this latter movement was the anthropologist Victor Turner, whose studies of initiation rituals and pilgrimages offered a rigorous introduction of the concept of 'social drama' to the scholarly literature. In his essays collected in *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors,*[17] he uses an ethnographic analysis of performance to explain the ways cultures channel and contain the state-between-states of liminality during, for example, rites of adolescence. The theatre director and theorist Richard Schechner

16 See, for example, Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt,* 72, n.19.

17 Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975).

picked up on this theme and collaborated with Turner on the collection *Between Theatre and Anthropology*.Schechner's work since has tried to develop a cross-cultural anthropology of performance, analyzing performative practices such as the Ramlila of Ramnager and the Wahema of the Yaquis of Arizona as 'new texts' which can be read to understand the workings of a given culture: systems of power and authority, for example, and their justification, or moiety groupings and other forms of social organization.[18] Schechner begins to discuss how performance does not simply encode and exhibit the pre-existing reality of a society or culture, in the sense understood by Levi-Straussian structuralism, but can also allow for the expression of minority or even subversive views latent within but opposed to those of the dominant social structure. Ron Grimes's coining of the field of 'ritology,' or comparative ritual criticism, goes a step beyond Schechner's cross-cultural hermeneutics of performance and uses as anthropological data not just performances themselves but the processes by which they are rehearsed and created. The distinction between the artistic theatre of the industrialized West and 'ethnographic' performances more traditionally studied by anthropologists—*rites de passages,* carnivals, masques—has almost entirely vanished here; both can be studied with the same model and either can offer critical comments or suggestions to the other as an equal.

Max Harris comes closest to drawing a connection between theatre as such and theology proper. He finds a strong parallel to the Christian notion of Incarnation in the very medium of character-based performative storytelling in his neglected classic, *Theatre and Incarnation.*[19] "It is this that I propose," writes Harris: "that the idea of the Incarnation is through and through theatrical, and that the theatre, at its most joyous, occupies common ground with the Incarnation in its advocacy of what Karl Barth has called 'the good gift of [our] humanity'."[20] The insights he gathers into the ways the theatrical enactment of stories can be a tool to help understand God's work in the world are extraordinarily helpful. His stated goal, however, is to develop a 'theatrical hermeneutic' with which to more accurately read *Scripture*—the Bible-text, not the Incarnation-hosting-world-as-text. This aim shows itself in the way he treats theatre as a Scriptural analogue: a finished canon out there which must be discerned and explained (there are extracanonical books just as there unhelpful plays, like T.S. Eliot's *The Cocktail Party*). Theatre is an object of our perception and contemplation, rather than an action in which we participate. Grimes and Schechner both find it impossible to write their theatrical ethnography without extensive use of the first person. Harris sees no such need, as his work is essentially a hermeneutical study of a (remarkably broad) subset of Christian performance *texts*.[21] A theory of performative

18 See Richard Schechner, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

19 Max Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation* (London: Macmillian, 1990).

20 Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation,* x. The brackets come from the source.

21 I do not mean that Harris is studying performance *scripts*. The texts he analyzes are the fully-embodied performances themselves, or at least as best as he can reconstruct them across time and space. His texts includes image,

practice, in contrast, would look at the actions of performers as moves in a constant if slow Bakhtinian dialogue, each moment calculated to respond to past actions and lead to future ones.

This is criticism is a trifle unfair, as the textual/practical debate is not Harris's direct concern: he wrote his book because he saw the sacramental potential of public storytelling. This is, of course, my point. Despite their theoretical and formal differences, Grimes Schechner, Harris, Steiner, and even Brustein are all writing about essentially the same phenomenon, or at least widely overlapping ones: theatre's potential to *mean* and *accomplish* that which would be impossible within the accepted social order in the manner of the theological concept of sacramentality. An anthropological or theological reading of a culture's performance practices can contribute to an understanding of how this potential can be realized. Even if a full, transcultural understanding of this phenomenon were possible, it would go far beyond the scope of this essay. Here, my goal is to describe and explain one example of a performance practice behaving sacramentally: a strand of contemporary storytelling that I am calling the Ritualized Theatre of the Modern West.

Using anthropological concepts like Turner's liminality, or the Christian notion of sacrament, for the sake of theatre studies, though, foregrounds some major differences between the disciplines. Though theatricalists have often noticed a vague ritual-like tendency in their work, they have been hard-pressed to define it. Literary critics tend to see the theatre as just another genre of writing, and so the script is analyzed as if it were identical with the play, ignoring the very performative context that defines the theatrical form. The young scholarly discipline that attempts a study of all aspects of performance, called performance studies, has gained enormous ground in recent years but explanations, taxonomies, or methodologies in a rigorous social scientific sense remain elusive. Compared to, say, mythology, the medium of performance has proven very difficult to write about. It does not seem to obey systematic rules, certainly not rules that are consciously understood by its participants. In fact, simply drawing firm boundaries around the category of 'performance' seems to be more than the field can manage. When asked to describe what they do, theatricalists themselves tend to treat the question as primarily pedagogical and either defer larger questions to the irrelevant 'philosophers' (Stanislavsky) or attack them with wide-barreled and fuzzy Marxist or essentialist theories that even the theorist himself seems to ignore in practice (Brecht and David Mamet). Theatricalists seem to be much better at *doing* what they do than *explaining* why or how they do it.

This is, of course, exactly what Pierre Bourdieu calls a 'practical logic': not an exhaustive, systematic, or coherent set of rules that can account for any potential situation, but a small set of general principles and cardinal images that, alongside an embodied, *habitus*-based, and experience-taught sense of what is to be applied how and where, give the practitioner a fluency in working within a practice: the

setting, costume, gesture, casting, and even smell. But they remain texts: multisensory and layered ones, to be sure, but essentially information to be read by an observer. Schechner and Grimes analyze the *practice* of performance, which does not presume the objective viewpoint that Harris occupies.

so-called "feel for the game."[22] A practice defines itself strategically through its ongoing action, and as such, its definition is always subject to debate and revision.[23] Because neither objectivism nor subjectivism makes for an acceptable approach to the study of a practice, it is inherently difficult to write about (as is the case with performance). Per Bourdieu, doing so requires one to account for the deistortion caused either by treating the practice as an object for study or by treating it as an experience for reflection. Both views, in an important way, obscure the element of *contingency* that is so central to the practitioner. The anthropological study of gift exchange is Bourdieu's paradigmatic example of this practical contingency. The traditional ethnographic flowcharts and descriptions flatten out the temporal sequence to show a balanced and simultaneous equation of gifts moving in both directions that reflect and support familial relations, political authority, and the like. But this obscures the reality that the practitioner participating in a gift exchange does not know what will happen next. Each gift is suggested but not required by its predecessor; each element of the exchange could have happened otherwise or not at all. Practices cannot be separated from human decision-making in contingency and time. The practical logic of gift exchange "proceeds through [a] series of irreversible choices, made under pressure and often involving heavy stakes."[24] The participant experiences not a diagrammable order that can be comprehended as an a-temporal whole but webs of possibility, choice, causality, and uncertainty which he must manipulate in a way that will irreversibly affect those webs and his place within them. So the practice as a whole becomes less of a machine that runs and more of a playing field on which its participants can move. Though such a field is more resistant to academic analysis than a formal logical system, it is not beyond analysis: there remains a more-or-less reified field of play out there, and it can be pointed out and described.

Many anthropologists have used a dramatic analogy in a more-or-less vague way when talking about practice; in contrast, I am considering a form of public storytelling proper as an *example* of practice. I chose this case study not only because anthropological and theological theory can shed light onto theatre studies. The converse is also true. Both Bell and Bourdieu build into their theories of practice a notion of "misrecognition" (*méconnaisance*): the ends that a practice actually achieves must be other than those goals it articulates for itself. And more than that: because a practice embodies its own standards into its practitioners through the *habitus,* the practitioner is necessarily unable to see his practice's actual ends. Bell and Bourdieu agree that a practitioner cannot simultaneously *participate in* and *understand* his own practice.[25] This is a very hard conclusion to swallow, because it perpetuates the

22 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice,* translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992), 66.

23 Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice,* 86f.

24 Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice,* 101, my brackets.

25 Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice:* "But he [the practitioner] is no better places to perceive what really governs his practice and to bring it to the order of discourse, than the observer, who has the advantage over him of being able to see the action from the outside, as an object, and especially of being able to totalize the successive realizations of the

very distinction that Bell identifies as the primary flaw from which the circularity of scholarly efforts to put a definition to ritual flows: the contrapuntal opposition between thought and action and the subtle elevation of the former over the latter. This distinction, argues Jonathan Z. Smith, comes from the historical genesis of "the study of religion as, essentially, a Protestant exercise, a heritage that continues to haunt theorists of religion to the present day."[26] The Reformationist suspicion of the superstitious rites of "pagano-papism"[27] led first to the elevation of doctrine over liturgy, then the distinction between emic and etic, and finally the 'participant observer' incorporation of the emic into the etic. This is a colonialist mindset perpetuating itself, Bell argues. But the notion of misrecognition—only a person not steeped in the *habitus* leading to a practice can see what that practice actually does—continues the same mindset. I do not see how this is substantially less colonialist than the paradigms that Bell and Bourdieu are trying to get beyond.

But is such a notion of misrecognition really necessary to a coherent theory of practice, as Bell and Bourdieu contend? This is where the theatrical example may be instructive. In the modern West, the theatrical practice is very conscious of the social function that it serves (Brustein's Revolting priest knows that he is wearing clerical garb). Theatrical practitioners do *not* misrecognize theatrical practice. The Brechtian notion of the *Verfremdungseffekt,* perhaps the most central and hotly debated term in late-20th-century theatre discourse, entails a recognition and manipulation of the very ends practices are supposed to be unable to see. It is also not a matter of the same person wearing two hats in turn: now a practitioner, now a scholar. This should not be possible if the *habitus* is as embodied as Bourdieu says it is; if it is really constituitive of personal being, it could not be so casually removed. But more so, theatre studies sees itself as a practical science, even a pedagogy, and it is intent on *participating in* the process of theatrical creation, not just commenting on it from the outside. Theatrical practitioners are expected to be familiar with theatre theory and to use it to better their performances. The audience is expected to have some understanding of cultural theory (including theatre theory) as well. Few plays are made for a scholarly audience alone, but some rudimentary critical notions (that a person in authority who says something may not be telling the truth, for instance) are not confined to the performers. In fact modern discourse *about* theatre is often incorporated *into* plays themselves. Tom Stoppard's extremely popular work is perhaps the best known example of this, but it is to be found across the industry.[28]

---

habitus (without necessarily having the practical mastery that underlies these realizations or the adequate theory of this mastery). And there is every reason to think that as soon as he reflects on his practice, adopting a quasi-theoretical posture, the agent loses any chance of expressing the truth of his practice, and especially the truth of the practical relation to the practice. Academic interrogation inclines him to take up a point of view on his own practice that is no longer that of action, without being that of science .... Simply because he is asked questions, and questions himself, about the reasons and the *raison d'être* of his practice, he cannot communicate the essential point, which is that the very nature of practice excludes such questions."

26 Jonathan Z. Smith, *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987), 98.

27 Smith, *To Take Place,* 100, who cites the term as first used in English by John Corbet in 1667.

28 An example might help. At one point in Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead,* a propos of

If any practice would find a way to recognize, subvert, and subsume its own misrecognition, it would be one as self-consciously didactic and meaning-bound as the theatre of the modern West. I would not argue that this is an inherently unique or isolated case; on the contrary, I hope the theatrical example will help us better understand how practical misrecognition operates in general. Certainly this is an extreme example, but the differences between theatre and other practices are of degree and not kind. Because all practitioners are also thinking human beings, they cannot wholly separate their critical perspective from their practical activity. A truly embodied *habitus* at the core of practice necessarily implies that no two practices or discourses of which the same individual is a part can be completely distinct. We think, act, and believe all at the same time, and those of us who stay sane in the doing are able to find a way to keep the three reconciled, if not logically, than at least in practice.

The Ritualized Theatre of the Modern West

There is something inherently wrong with using a piece of discourse like this essay to define a practice like the Ritualized Theatre. Self-definition is part of what the internal logic of a practice negotiates for itself. The boundary lines I draw here will necessarily be more illustrative than definitive and more a Wittgenstinean family relationship than a Platonic Formal one. The 'strand' of theatre I am discussing here is unified by its function more than its form; it consists of those storytelling acts which attempt to propose and shape meanings that are socially supermundane in modern Western culture. My argument is that these acts form a more-or-less coherent practical strategem than can be analyzed as such. I have found four formal trains that the the ritualized theatre tends to exhibit:

First, it is *performed.* Public storytelling necessarily involves a group of people co-inhabiting a space for some time and some of them telling a story to the rest of them. This is not to say that the audience is not involved in what is going on, but there is a fundamental asymmetry in the power structure of storytelling. This is something that can be missed by too narrow a focus on the performing arts collectives that grew out of the 1960s and 1970s, as when Ron Grimes performs ethnographic observation of the Actor's Lab of Toronto.[29] The rehearsal process may be wholly collaborative, but any act of public storytelling will eventually force a contrast between the story-givers and the story-receivers. This is the case even if, in another context, a story-receiver could become a story-giver, even for the same story. The act of telling a story is not wholly one-way, but it is firmly and irreducibly directional.

It is important to point out what this trait includes and what it does not. First, an 'ideolectical

nothing at all, Rosencranz looks out at the audience and shouts "Fire!" The joke only works if the audience has some critical distance from the play—that is, they are aware that they are in a theater—and they have at least a vague recollection of the famous definition of the limits of free speech by U.S. Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendel Holmes as "falsely shouting fire in a theatre" (*Schenck v. United States,* 3 March 1919).

29 See Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies,* revised edition (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1995), 15ff.

performance'—where a story is told by one person to him or herself only—is a contradiction in terms. A performance without an audience that is distinct from the performers cannot have a social meaning.[30] Second, this does *not* mean that the performers have a better knowledge of the story being told than the audience. A traditional Protestant worship service is a good example here. The fact that the minister tells the Gospel *to* the congregation does not mean that the congregation does not already know it. It does, however, place the congregation and the preacher in particular locations relative to each other: the act of telling the Gospel story moves *from* the minister *to* the congregation. In a parallel sense, one could say that in prayer, a story is moving from the worshipper to God (Who, of course, is not being told anything He doesn't already know). The storytelling practice asserts that its action is being undertaken by the performers for the sake of the audience. The parallel with gift exchange, then, seems more than apt; the performance, like the gift, bears the imprint of both giver and receiver, though differently. It serves as a kind of fulcrum, marking the end of the giver's activity, the beginning of the receiver's, and the continuity between them. This is dialogic in the Bakhtinian sense but without symmetry; the recipients of the dialogical performance cannot easily or quickly turn the tables and give back a performance of their own. Culturally, then, the performers stand is a position of authority reinforced by the very structure of the practice of performance.

The liturgical parallels are also unmistakable. Prayer and (non-missiological) Gospel preaching are also narrative acts with no real information-transfer effect, and their structure also encodes patterns of authority for particular ideas, texts, offices, and people. The Church's more authoratative liturgical traditions, whether based on formal ecclesiastic office, charismatic personal authority, or something else, encode a power structure more similar to high-Modernist or Romantic performances, like those favoured by Stanislavsky and Brustein, where the creative voice of the playwright and actors is the central element of the theatre. The Ritualized theatre, however, is quite conscious and critical of this structure of authority, though it cannot fully get rid of it without ceasing to be theatre. The way that the Ritualized theatre negotiates its systems of authority may offer a helpful model for liturgists who are similarly suspicious of centralized (human) authority in the context of worship.

Second, this strand of theatre's posture is *critical*. The theatre I want to consider here does not bear the burden of fundamental responsibility for psychological or social cohesion. It does *not* present the sort of knowledge on which one can build a social bond.[31] Perhaps there are forms of storytelling present in the world today that are definitive for social or personal identity. Perhaps the Ram-Lila of the Braj is, or was, such a performance, or some of the fiestas and public spectacles discussed by Max Harris in his latest work.[32] Perhaps for the Queen, the Coronation was a performance definitive for her identity.

30 Rather, if it does have a social meaning, it does not come from the actor of storytelling but from the exclusivity or social standing of the group or somesuch. It might be meaningful, but it cannot be meaningful as a performance.

31 See Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition,* sections 4 and 5.

But these are exceptions. In the modern West, we have grown suspicious of the narrative language game's authority and no longer rely on it for social or personal identity. "We no longer have recourse to the grand narratives—we can resort neither to the dialectic of Spirit nor even to the emancipation of humanity as a validation for postmodern scientific discourse," argues Lyotard.[33] Therefore, the theatre, like other meaning-making practices, has begun to make use of not the grand narrative but what Lyotard calls the "*petit récit*" or little narrative.[34] Little narratives are voluntary and secondary, not necessary or definitive. This is not to say that they hold no social function; rather, they function by nudging the pre-existing social order in some direction or another and not establishing it *ex nihilo*. They are political in the common sense of the word; they suggest that things could be other than they are.

Eschatologists understand this position and what it presumes. First, there needs to be an extant social framework which is an observable given *prior* to the story. (That framework need not be a static one, of course.) The classical-heroic examples lack this criterion as they engage in basic acts of world-structuring in themselves. Classical storytelling has what Brevard Childs would call a 'canon-consciousness;' that is, it understands itself as creating a fundamental and normative text for a particular society. Part of the ritualized theatre's social radicalism comes from its necessary *absence* of such a consciousness. Second, it must presume some kind of ideal world, even if this idealization is by no means sharp or exact. It need not be an eschatology in any sense that a theologian would recognize; the ideal aspired to may be only a fuller realization of a set of concepts and values already embodied in the *habitus*. Philosophically, notions like 'justice' and 'peace' are enough, even if dramaturgically, the storyteller normally needs to flesh them out in order to say something interesting about them. An example of storytelling which lacks this presumption might be Sophoclean tragedy. This is of course the subject of much debate among classicists, but in MacIntyre's view, the Oedipus cycle finds its tragedy in inherent contradictions that are an inescapable part of the human condition.[35] We can grow more or less conscious of our own self-destructive conflicts, but the tragedy's poignancy is that we cannot *do* anything about them. The third presumption is a consequence of the first two: that the observed world is different from the ideal world, and there is something we can do to push the former towards the latter, no matter how trivial or ineffective. This is the root of Brustein's Revolt, which he sees asserting itself at three levels: personal (the priest pointing the mirror at himself), social (at the crowd), and existential (at the void.) We are not who we could be, society is not what it could be, and the order of the universe is less than a good and just God would demand. The counterexample of this third assumption, though, is a

32 Max Harris, *Carnival and Other Christian Festivals: Folk theology and folk performance* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2003).

33 Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition,* 60.

34 Ibid.

35 MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* 142f.

certain sub-strand of the most existentially Revolting theatre. There is a disagreement within the Romantic project as to what the human response to the disparity between 'is' and 'could' should be. Some Romantics argue that if only we would face our situation, we might be able to do something about it. Ones sees this in overtly Marxist writing, for instance. But most Romantics have had a deep suspicion for Marxism's political eschatology.[36] Chekhov famously wrote, "All I wanted was to say honestly to people: 'Have a look at yourself and see how bad and dreary your lives are!'"[37] A few decades later, some would claim that even walking the human consciousness up to the futility of its situation was impossible; from this grew the Beckettian mantra "nothing to be done." At his most extreme, the Absurdist seemed to deny the whole possibility of constructive meaning-working until the *Übermensch* comes. The Ritualized Theatre can be quite hopeless, but if there is absolutely no possibility of movement from what is to what could be, this critical stance is no longer possible.

Third, this theatre is *ritualized.* Bell is the most articulate in showing how this ritualization is a strategic move of self-differentiation in order to claim an authority that other performances are denied. Like all practical definitions, exactly what this appeal consists of is for each practitioner to determine for herself within the context of the tradition. Often, it refers back to a known example of traditional religious ritual (Christian, Jewish, Buddhist, or even Amerindian), though the reference is more often to a stylized sort of movement and speech abstracted from a number of religious traditions. Bell lists invariance, traditionalism, formalism, rule-governance, and sacral symbolism as some typical characteristics of such performances.[38] The rejection of the normal-as-such is the exact opposite of the Stanislavskian insistence that theatre is more powerful when it is more beautiful and truer to life.[39] In the Ritualized Theatre, the attempt is rather to tell a story in a way *other* than the way we live (and often in a way far less attractive) in order to tap into a power to which normal action lacks access.

There are a number of ways this can take place. Perhaps the most famous is the Brechtian *Verfremdungseffekt,* normally translated 'alienation' but more literally the 'en-foreigning effect.' The details of the Brechtian project will be discussed in chapter three, but for now, some of his major techniques were 'artificial' or even caricaturish styles of acting (modeled on Asian theatre traditions like Beijing Opera and Kabuki or the Italian Commedia Dell' Arte), the use of music and placards, and a distancing of setting in time and space (a play about 19th-century China in 20th-s century Germany, for instance.) In general, though, ritualization demands not that individual actions be of a type that immediately points to their foreignness in the everyday world ('these pieces don't fit') so much as one

36 This is why, for example, Brustein tries so hard to play up Brecht's existential rebellion and his consequent discomfort with Marxism in a strong form (*Theatre of Revolt,* 232-240). If the Revolter must question all eschatology, it makes little sense to give Marxism a free pass.

37 Letter to Alexander Tikhonov, quoted in Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt,* 147.

38 See Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (OUP 1997), chapter 5.

39 Constantin Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares,* trans. from the Russian by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937), 14.

in which the actions joined as a narrative deploy a different practical logic than the one the audience is accustomed to in daily life ('this story doesn't make sense'). The Christian idea of a life 'not of this world' is exactly parallel, and the use of the act of worship within a church and a church community to explore the decidedly supermundane dynamics of that world is a project with a strong kinship to the Ritualized Theatre's. The relationship between the larger sacramental action of liturgy and the use of particular objects as more specific sacraments (the Host, for example) is another debate in which the theatrical example may have something to contribute.

Perhaps the most common ritualization technique, in theatrical practice as well as elsewhere, is the frame: a formal device which encloses and identifies the ritual action as such and keeps it separated from ordinary reality. Schechner talks about framing in the context of the Ram-Lila and elsewhere; he derives it from Victor Turner's analysis of how the antistructural core of rites of passage is surrounded by rites of separation and reaggregation so that its subversive character does not infect the social structure. As an anthropologist, Turner had very concrete notions of what this frame was. It manifested itself, for eample. in isolated huts to which initiands were confined or rules forbidding all communication between initiands and everyone else. But it can also be seen in the prologues and epilogues that frame most of Shakespeare's plays and even in many of the mainstream theatre's conventions: coming to a special place, buying a ticket, sitting down as a part of a crowd, reading the program, dimming the houselights, the interval, the curtain call, the post-show discussion. These all serve to mark out the performance as a unique kind of action, internally coherent and different from those taking place before and after it. The Stanislavskian form of theatre, however, tries to paper over this framing as much as possible in the manner of a *trompe-l'oeil* painting: the action is designed to create the illusion that, but for being in a frame, it could take place anywhere. A true ritualized theatre will have none of that; its formal dissimilarity from the real world is an irreducible part of how it does what it does, not merely a marker of separation.[40]

Fourth, the Ritualized Theatre is action, not recitation. Generations of critics have treated theatre as a literary genre alongside poetry, the novel, and the short story. And for a small number of playscripts, this is arguably the appropriate way to treat them: Ibsen's *Brand* and Byron's *Manfred* are the classic examples. But in general, we need to recognize the objective fact that public storytelling is an act before it is a piece of writing. A Shakespearian text does not become a play until it has the *interprète* of the actor applied to it. One *can* use a playscript as a literary text, just as one can use it as a doorstop,

40 A good example of this distinction comes from Tony Kushner's *A Bright Room Called Day*. The narrator, Zillah, delivers a series of political rants in which she compares Ronald Reagan (or, in British productions, Margaret Thatcher) to Hitler. Some political commentators were livid at the gross unfairness of the comparison, but importantly, these were critics who had read the script but not seen the play. In performance, the audience saw little inappropriate about the speeches; they spoke more to the logic of the narrative and Zillah's mind than they did to the logic of politics. But the same words in the context of a stump speech or an op-ed column would not, and ought not, have been tolerated. See Kushner's discussion of this in his introduction to *A Bright Room Called Day* (TCG 1994).

but that is not the use for which it was designed and for which it is best suited. This is part of the inherently embodied nature of performative practice. Words, in themselves, do not gain a performative meaning unless they are spoken to an audience in the context of a performed narrative. To take seriously the idea that in theatre, the storytelling act is more essential than the story being told is necessarily to question the still-current idea that "the playwright [is] the core artist in the theatre."[41] Most theatre does make use of words (but not all: dance theatre, for instance), but in that it does so, the speaking of words is a part of the action of performance and gets its meaning from that context.

We cannot, however, easily separate what a story does itself from what is added in its telling. There is no 'neutral' medium which can be used as a standard of comparison. Books, too, are media which color the way their stories are told. Whether or not stories can exist independently of their transmission is an open question; I do not want to argue either that the written word is somehow 'purer' or less encumbered by human agency than the oral one or vice versa. But there exist modes of performance where the intent is largely to convey and at most illustrate the words being spoken. The reading of an academic paper at a colloquium or the public reading of a royal proclamation are examples, if imperfect ones.[42] In such cases, ideally, the meaning of the act of reciting and the meaning of the words being spoken coincide. Characteristically, such recitations are either to no one in particular or to an arbitrary assembly treated as an amorphous 'general public.' Performative action is the opposite of this. Its meaning occurs between a particular audience and a particular group of performers, and though there is often a text of some kind used as an aid to meaning-making, that text is not a source with a meaning of its own to which the translation can be more or less faithful, in Steiner's sense. A playscript is not a text that permits the actor's *interprète* to be applied to it; it is a tool in the rehearsal process that aids the performers in creating the 'text' of central concern to the theatre: the performance itself.

Many theologians are staritng to come back to a more medieval idea of the importance of the embodied life of the Church as a necessary context to make sense of biblical interpretation, systematic theology, and certainly liturgics. The view of the Christian religion as a not-necessarily-embodied set of doctrines is starting to be seen as a not altogether helpful heritage of the Enlightenment. The relationship between theology and its necessary embodiment is part of what Harris was looking for in drawing a connection between Christianity and the stage.

These are four formal traits of the Ritualized Theatre of the modern West. Though descriptions of form are not wholly separable from those of content, a meaningful practice like theatre cannot be studied completely with only a structuralist method. There is a thematic thread here as well. It is more a

41 Graham Whybrow, Introduction to *The Methuen Book of Modern Drama* (London: Methuen, 2001), xi.

42 Both are set on a rostrum which is so structured as to grant at least a temporary authority to the words of the person inhabiting it. But in modern cynical academia and when the royal herald is not flanked by armed guards, that structurally-lent authority need not amount to much.

common motif than a common denominator; by itself, it is neither strictly necessary nor sufficient for inclusion in this category. Still, at the level of practical logic, I believe it should be a central organizing principle for those who would understand what this kind of theatre is doing and how.

That principle is the contrast between the great, good and beautiful Whole which is offstage and thus invisible and the flawed, pathetic, and weak scraps that Whole has thrown down to us, which are all we have onstage to see. Most all serious theatre is confronted with the question of what we as humans can do with this detritus. The Revolting Priest's answers is, essentially, nothing; he is, in Brustein's words, "alone in the void." The answer that distinguishes the Ritualized Theatre is one that theologians would call sacramental: that, despite their insignificance, these scraps can take us back to their Source. "Props are magical," say the directors; through these worthless physical objects, human beings can somehow find a connection to That which is worth seeking. The sacramental power of detritus is the tiny fulcrum that separates the Absurdists from the Ritualizers. In Absurdism proper, scraps are just that; at most, they can be powerless idols worshipped in vain. For the Ritualizers, detritus *can* be effective, though this is an acknowledged paradox: the scraps still remain scraps and neither they nor their uses transcend earthly limitations. No theatricalist shows how small the gap is between hopeless absurdism and hopeful ritualization than Beckett, for whom a carrot or a boot can make the difference between a meaningful human community and a solitary void.

But in truth, no ritualizing theatricalist can be very far from absurdism. The most incontrovertible fact about detritus is that it is rubbish. The Ritualizer has to start from the assumption that scraps do nothing; any sacramental potential they might have has to be shows against this observable given. The modern Ritualizer has a burden of proof that the medieval morality player never had but that the modern clergyman confronts daily: as she can no longer assume an accepted set of sacramental objects and words, each piece of detritus must be proved effective anew. Sometimes a reference back to a historically-acknowledged sacrament can be used as evidence, but in itself, this is not usually enough to establish an object as detritus. That case-proving is very difficult, particularly because there is no one on stage to do it except the very human beings whose only connection to authentic truth or authority is the very detritus being tested. So even the most sacramental of the ritualizing theatricalists will look like a doubting Thomas next to a medievalist or a Shakespeare.

Detritus are Brustein's 'artifacts': remnants passed down from another time or place where the relationship between object and meaning was an easier or more apparent one. Brustein's classical priest had no trouble identifying the ritual implements his work required. But an artifact is an object that has lost its context and whose significance must either be reconstructed in some way or go unrecognized. Because it is so physical, the act of public storytelling is particularly adept at establishing the contextual power of an object and then placing it in a foreign context where it must speak anew.

One can find theatrical examples of detritus as far back as Desdemona's handkerchief, but they only become a central theme in the modern era. Gáyev's speech to the old bookcase in Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* is an early near-example; the bookcase is, however, not so much a symbol of the old gentle life that is now dying (that's the orchard itself) as it is a mute witness to it:

> Dear old bookcase! Wonderful old bookcase! I rejoice in your existence. For a hundred years now you have borne the shining ideals of goodness and justice, a hundred years have not dimmed your silent summons to useful labor. To generations of our family *(almost in tears)* you have offered courage, a belief in a better future, you have instructed us in the ideals of goodness and social awareness...[43]

The absurdity of finding a such power and authority in a piece of furniture anticipates detritus, but the books case is still standing and not yet in danger of being sold when this speech is made. It has not yet been fully junked, even if it is a little pathetic. A real detritus would be if, say, the chopped-up cherry wood was made into a stool on which Lopákhin could rest his feet.

The Glass Menagerie's and *A Doll's House*'s eponymous props are also close but both are too easily recognized as beautiful and significant. Something which is unambiguously the object of reverence is simply a sacramental symbol, not a detritus. We can almost see the creation of the modern theatricalist's notion of detritus in Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler*.[44] When the prodigal poet Eijlert Løvborg brings his manuscript to read to Tesman the dowdy academician, it is the culmination of his life's work, the physical symbol both of his creative genius and his love for Hedda. We never learn what the manuscript actually says; it remains inaccessible yet potent. In a drunken haze, though, Løvborg loses it by the side of the road and Tesman brings it home. In the hands of a lesser man like Tesman, the manuscript becomes a detritus of genius. Tesman reveres it without knowing what it is—he dare not read it. Hedda cannot stomach this matter out of place. She opens it, reads a few pages, and throws it into the fire. In the end, after Løvborg has killed himself in despair over the loss, Tesman and Thea are only able to find strength enough to carry on by turning to a bag of Løvborg's discarded notes. The two resolve to devote their lives to the reconstruction of Løvborg's lost masterwork as the only fitting tribute to his memory. That bag of scraps becomes the model, consciously or otherwise, for many subsequent theatrical attempts to show humanity's relationship to greatness once that greatness has firmly and finally left the building. The twists and turns that model has gone through can tell us a good bit about modern notions of the sacramentality of the visible world. Practical theologians and others with an interest in ministry may find a study of this model helpful. Detritus takes on a role that religious ritual

43 Anton Chekhov, *The Cherry Orchard,* translated by Paul Schmidt (New York: HarperCollins, 1997), 342. The stage direction and ellipsis appear in the source.

44 In particular, this discussion comes out of the production on which I assisted, Henrik Ibsen, *Hedda Gabler,* directed by Ron Daniels, with Jenna Stern (Hedda) and Christopher McCann (Judge Brack), at the Dallas Theater Center, Dallas, Texas, September 2001; script published in anonymous translation (New York: Dover, 1990). James H. Clancy has also written about the importance of physical objects in *Hedda,* but my conclusions are quite different than his. James H. Clancy, "*Hedda Gabler:* Poetry in Action and in Object," from *Studies in Theatre and Drama, Essays in Honor of Hubert C. Heffner,* ed. Oscar G. Brockett (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 64-72.

has traditionally filled. Formal ritual still functions for some, of course, but the practice of ritualized theatre has adapted somewhat more quickly to the contemporary Western *habitus* than has the practice of ritual proper. An understanding of how and why that has happened will require an approach that takes the practice seriously both as theatre and as ritual.

The strand of theatrical practice I am trying to describe, then, can be characterized as active, ritualized performance that adopts a critical posture towards its cultural setting and tends to deal with the remnants of a past or distant glory that remain somehow visible and accessible to fallible modern man. The next chapter will look at the anthropological and sociological notion of ritual and its use of the theatrical metaphor with an aim to develop an understanding of the strategic move of ritualization that can apply to theatrical practice. In chapter three, I will discuss the development of this ritualized theatre out of the Western theatrical tradition and how it can be understood in that context. Finally, I will look at what some prime examples of the contemporary Ritualized Theatre have to say about modern sacramentality and the effects of incorporating a discourse *about* the theatre and its real social effects into the practice *of* meaningful theatre-making.

CHAPTER TWO

Ritual Looks to the Stage

The language of the theatre has, for decades, served anthropologists as a central metaphor in building explanations of ritual and religion observed in the ethnographic field. Certainly, the comparison is a fruitful one, but its genesis and dynamics are rarely subject to analysis themselves. Theatre is appealed to as a well-understood, even self-evident, mode of communication which can help to explicate the more difficult concept of 'ritual.' Rather than a rigorous attention to the properties that make ritual theatrical but not theatre, anthropologists using this comparison tend to stop at what Jonathan Z. Smith calls "magical" explanation, wryly turning a term classical anthropologists have used to explain ritual back on itself. Academics have just as much basis to claim that comparisons are analytically effective, Smith argues, as traditional "magicians" have to presume the efficacy of magic based on the principle that "like affects like."Anthropologists have usually seen magic as a field *for* cultural analysis and not a form *of* it; Smith simply asks that the same attention be paid to the academic magic of the language of comparison.[1]

In that spirit, the first half of this chapter will trace out the two major senses in which anthropologists have claimed that ritual is comparable to theatre. Though it will be clear enough which I believe to be an effective response to the other, the two double back on themselves historically and have been used concurrently throughout the twentieth century.

The task of tracing out the intellectual history of an anthropological comparison like this one must situate itself within a history of the anthropology of religion, one either borrowed or purpose-built. Thankfully, the first part of Catherine Bell's *Ritual* has done that work admirably, and this chapter rests comfortably within it. Because I am so indebted to Bell's history, it would be easy to assume my two senses of the theatrical metaphor—representation and action—can be liked to her three versions of the project of the study of religion—originism, structuralism/functionalism, and cultural symbolism. That would, however, be a misreading. Our projects are of different orders; though there is a good deal of overlap between Bell's originists and my representationalists, the parallel does not hold up much beyond that. The structuralists who belong together in Bell because they are engaged in kindred anthropological projects (Leví-Strauss and Turner, say) are distinguished here because they make contrasting appeals to the theatrical metaphor. My distinction is closer to the one Don Handelman draws between mirrors and

1 Smith, *To Take Place,* chapter 2: "In Comparison A Magic Dwells" (19-35).

models.[2] The act of representation is a mirror-holding (recall Brustein), though I would like to leave the question of to what the mirror is help up more open that Handelman's focus on statist bureaucracy implies. Modeling, in contrast, is only one species of the genus of effective action.

Ritual as Dramatic Representation

The first distinguishing feature of the category 'ritual' in popular usage and in much ethnographic literature is its apparent lack of mechanistic function. When an act is condemned as "merely a ritual," the accusation is that while it may carry significance for those who perform it, it does not achieve anything. This view can be seriously questioned, but it is central to one of the most common understandings of ritual: though it appears to be action, it is actually not. While other actions may accomplish actual ends (plowing a field, building a house) in addition to holding significance for those participating (or observing) it, ritual action only signifies. Coupled with the fixed, repetitive nature of ritual performance, it has been easy to see ritual primarily as a stable sociocultural signifier not unlike language. And like language's dangerous ability to lie which is a necessary part of its ability to speculate,[3] ritual can be *fictitious*: it can signify meanings that are either untrue or at least cannot be scientifically judged true or false. The unobservable which cannot be the referent of a scientific statement[4] can nevertheless be ritually presented. What links ritual to theatre in this view is its *status as a dramatic fiction*: both use the medium of human bodies speaking and moving in space to represent iconically something other than the performance itself. So a masked dancer who 'becomes' a god is like an actor playing a role; the importance comes in the use of the performative medium to represent that which would not otherwise be present (the role, the god). This is to treat ritual (and theatre) as a form of dramatic discourse; it is communication by means of enactment. Both performance forms are often, then, treated as if they were a different form of written texts. Just as literary critics can too hastily conflate a play with its script, anthropologists can treat recurrent ritual practice on the analogy of written transcriptions of oral texts.

On this basis, anthropologists and ethnographers have been documenting and analyzing ritual behaviour for centuries. Some pursued the ethological analogy to ritualization in animals—in courtship or fighting, for example—but more common was the notion that ritual performance was an uncritical, if incomplete, representation of a group's beliefs about cosmology, the world of the spirits, and

2 See Don Handelman, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events,* 2nd ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998), particularly the lengthy preface to the second edition. Handelman takes issue with the usefulness of Bell's concept of ritualization in trying to explain existent, as opposed to emergent, rituals. The debate is not strictly relevant to the present project, as theatre would not qualify for the solidified category of 'public events' which Handelman defines as his field, but as this is one of the best sustained critical responses to Bell's oft-cited, rarely-critiqued work, it merits a mention.

3 See Roy A. Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (CUP 1999), 11-13 et passim.

4 See Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition,* 24: In the scientific language game, "a referent is that which is susceptible to proof and can be used as evidence in a debate."

appropriate social organization. The details of the group's beliefs and mythology could be read in ritual's invariant repetition. Though some of these early scholars did use the language of theatre, it rarely signified more than a rough-and-ready analogy between the display of a static, fictional world on stage (Lear's England, say) and the ritual representation of a world (of the spirits or the dead or the time of myths) that transcended this one.

The study of religion proper, and not just the heathen beliefs and superstitious practices of tribal peoples, began with German linguist Max Müller (1823-1900). He argued that the essential and timeless core of a religion could be found in its scriptures. In the mid-19th century, studies of Indian languages were reaching critical mass, and the Vedas became accessible to European scholars in the original Sanskrit. Müller's magnum opus was a translation of the Rig-Veda into English, published at Oxford between 1849 and 1874. Such work was, for Müller, exactly what it would take to develop a genuinely social scientific study of the Hindu faith, and served as a model for the study of religion in general. Social anthropologists who sought to apply Müller's insights from the Vedas to their own fields, however, soon realized that it was difficult to maintain a textual focus when studying a society that lacked a writing system. Alternative 'texts' needed to be found if the core of religion was to be as stable as Müller had contended.

The main alternative came with Geraldus van der Leew and the phenomenological school, which claimed that observable phenomena such as artifacts, spoken words, and especially ritual performances were all potential cultural signifiers, and their traits—analyzability, discreteness, stability, independence from particular human consciousnesses and wills—could be worthy of the name 'objectivity.' The relatively passive, information-imbibing role of the phenomenological observer resembles that of the audience member at the theatre or cinema, and so such observers have long used theatrical terms like 'role,' 'performance,' and 'script' in their ethnographies of ritual. The analogy, however, is a poor one for the same reason that objectivity itself is so problematic.[5] Signifiers are not inherently objective and phenomena in themselves do not quite signify; signification can only take place within a mutually understood sign system. The phenomenological observer is unable to see her own temporal, spatial, or cultural location, and thus lacks a framework through which she can account for her own influence on the phenomena she observes. And so she cannot see that her very observation is influencing the performance she is describing. Richard Schechner has some fun attacking Indologist Frits Staal and ethnographer Robert Garner on this point. In 1975, they filmed and documented a performance of the Agnicayana, a twelve-day-long elaborate Vedic ritual in Kerala. They then released a 105-minute film of the ritual called *Altar of Fire* and a two-volume tome which purported to be "a definite account of the ceremonies"[6] without mentioning that the ethnographers had commissioned the performance,

5 It is also a poor analogy because it oversimplifies the role of the audience in theatrical practice. In truth, the analogy is more cinematic than theatrical.

directed and edited it, and shepherded it through a sea of local political controversy.[7]

Staal and Garner, like their fellow phenomenologists, take on the role of the naïve audience members who fail to understand that the play is being performed *for them,* and that their presences are not just a neutral catalyst for the *existence* of a performance but actually *affect* it in non-trivial and unpredictable ways. Theatre changes with its audience in ways large and small.[8] This view typically defines the phenomenon to be observed as the invariant 'text' of ritual, as opposed to particular, temporal performances of it. On the back of a longstanding interest in the primal and existential origins of ritual,[9] this view relates this invariant ur-ritual text to theatre of a 'classic' type, or even a 'mythic' one in the Eliadian sense. So every coming-of-age ritual has its Hamlet or Oedipus, and every rite of succession seems to echo Lear. Note that this is not actually an analogy to performance at all: the 'Lear' in mind here is not a temporally and spatially specific portrayal of the great old king but the idealized type of Lear, a character who has never been and could never be seen on any stage. The phenomenological analogy, then, is to the dramatic canon but not to theatre.

Structuralists like Claude Lévi-Strauss took great exception to the phenomenological focus on the merely observable, searching instead for the deeper structures that ground observable phenomena and of which they are more or less incomplete manifestations. This is still an attempt to find the non-performative truth that performances represent, but the relationship between the phenomena of performance and the meanings to be read out of them is now seen as formal or iconic and not indexical. Structuralism has the advantage of a means of acknowledging and understanding the symbolic thought behind performance by "analyz[ing it] as a language containing its own reason and *raison d'être,*" as Bourdieu describes Lévi-Strauss's work on Amerindian mythology.[10] Handelman would go farther, arguing that structuralism bears too close a resemblance to functionalism in wishing to tie an understanding of ritual to a locus within social structure. He claims that rituals should be understood as systems in their own right with a form of their own.[11] Semiotically, there is little difference here:

---

6 Quoted in Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 55.

7 For more on *Altar of Fire,* see Schechner, *Between,* 55-65.

8 Peter Brook, in his classic *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968) provides some helpful examples. He discusses how the 1966 RSC "group-happening-collaborative spectacle on the Vietnam war" entitled *US* "decided to refuse all invitations to tour. Every element in it had come into being just for the particular cross-section of London that sat in the Aldwych Theatre in 1966" (23). He also discusses a performance of *The Barber of Seville* in the bombed-out shell of the Hamburg Opera after WWII. The audience had to assemble uncomfortably on the stage itself—the seats had been destroyed—but there was a palpable "hunger . . . . nothing would stop them doing so" (44). Of course these are extreme cases, but most professional actors quickly become aware of the differences made by an audience in a different place, time of day, day of week, age bracket, or reason for being there. Worst of all are the dreaded "buy-outs," when a company will purchase all the tickets for a performance to distribute to its employees. Because the people present are not the people who chose to come, such performances are invariably as slow and painful as teeth-pulling as the actors beg the audience to care.

9 See Bell, *Ritual,* chapter one.

10 Bourdieu, *Logic of Practice,* 2.

11 Handelman, *Models and Mirrors,* xii: "One can easily close the door to the close study of public events *as*

Handelman's ritual is still a representing signifier, but his problematizing of the signified's relationship to the social order is insightful.

At its best, then, a wary structuralism can come closer to a true theatrical analogy through an examination of the strained relationship between deep structures and their performative embodiment. This work can shed some helpful light on the process and nature of performance. But too often, as Handelman notes, structuralists try to see performance as *a direct representation of,* rather than a reflection on, or even critique of, the deep structures of a society or culture. The model is a linguistic one straight from Sauserre, individual performances are words fitting directly into the syntactical structures of the culture. This leads to an ideal theatre just as atemporal and nonspatial as any reified phenomenological construction. It also has little to do with actual performance. If structuralism sees performance as a less-articulate language, the persistence of the economically inefficient practice of performance into the age of literacy should be at least an indication that the physical might signify not as a set of arbitrary signifiers, like language, but precisely *as itself.* Perhaps a tree used in a ritual is meaningful *because it is a tree* and not because it signifies a concept like 'life' or 'fertility' or 'knowledge' or somesuch. This is not to say that there are no doxic categories genuinely emic to a culture but rarely articulated, like 'raw' and 'cooked.' But structuralism has a hard time dealing with the value of the physical and observable in itself and not just as a pointer to conceptual abstractions. In Max Harris's terms, structuralism has a hard time being incarnational, and thus often distorts analogies to a medium as resolutely physical as the theatre.

Perhaps the culmination of this approach came with the so-called Cambridge School of social anthropology: Jane Harrison, Gilbert Murray, Francis Cornford, and their colleagues. This group was working from the 1920s through the 1950s under the legacy of Sir James Frazer's seminal 19th-century work *The Golden Bough,* which postulated not only a set of universals in the mythological systems of the world but also that these mythologies had become expressed in rituals which, if properly read, would reveal their universal proto-mythological source. The primitive religious impulse Frazer had identified, the Cambridge School claimed, was the source not only of all historic religious ritual but the performing arts as well; centrally, Harrison, Murray, and Cornford argued that Western theatre finds its origin in Greek tragedy, which in turn grew out of the expressive rituals of the cult of Dionysus, in particular, in the dirhythymb. Citing Aristotle as evidence, Murray set out the School's thesis in 1912:

> Tragedy is in origin a Ritual Dance, a *Sacer Ludus* …. the Dance in question is originally or centrally that of Dionysus, performed at his feast … as an "Eniautos Daimon," or vegetation god, like Adonis, Osiris, etc., who represents the cyclic death and rebirth of the earth and the world, i.e., for practical purposes, of the tribe's own lands and the tribe itself. It seems clear, further, that Comedy and Tragedy represent different stages in the life of this Year Spirit.[12]

public events by assuming that the answers to what ritual is about, and to what it does within itself, are necessarily located beyond the ritual events themselves, in the wide social order."

Like many all-embracing theories of the early twentieth century, particularly those which attempt a not-too-subtle elision between historical origin and timeless essence, the claims of the Cambridge School serve as prime examples of the grand narratives Lyotard claims strain postmodern credulity. And, indeed, the ritual origin of theatre has been thoroughly debunked, most recently and comprehensively by Eli Rozik in 2002.[13] Rozik is most convincing when he shows the difficulties in deriving the tragic form from any kind of documented Dionysian ritual. This is proof enough. I start to part company with Rozik when he seeks to make a clear distinction between the "neutral" medium of theatre, which could be used for any purpose, and the formal content of tragedy (or ritual or even drama), which could very well be expressed through any medium. By this logic, the Cambridge School made no effort to explain the origin of the theatrical medium but only the ritual or dramatic forms expressed through it. That is clearly not the case, and the media/content distinction between theatre and drama cannot be rigidly maintained, particularly not when drama's 'content' is not an example but a *form*. Media are not neutral, as Marshall McLuhan has made clear, and it is of more than trivial interest that the theatrical medium has been used for purposes of social ritual far more often than has, say, the medium of the novel.[14] The phenomenon of live performance before an audience can be meaningful in itself, and in that Rozik's model does not allow for this meaning, it has some of the same blind spots as the structuralist view of the meaningful potential of the manifestly physical.

Besides phenomenology and structuralism, the third classic reading of ritual representation comes from Sigmund Freud. He views religion as an unresolved Oedipus complex at the social level, but what is interesting for my purposes is how he treats the analysis of ritual performance on the model of the psychiatric observation and evaluation of a patient.[15] The social neurosis that is religion can be seen, Freud argues, in the way in which we engaged in overdetermined, ritualized behaviour, even if that neurosis exist at an unconscious level of the mind. Though his conception of the content of religion was new at the time, it is striking how much this position resembles that of classical anthropology: observed ritual activity is neither actually activity nor is it actually about what it seems to be about (God, ethics, community, etc.); rather, it is a coded representation of inner obsessions and thoughts. The objective, clinical observer is in a privileged position to do the work of decoding, as the actor may not be consciously aware of or able to express the true state of her religion and her soul. This is a ritual-as-representation view and not a ritual-as-action one because psychiatric religion is a *complex:* it is not

12 Gilbert Murray, "Excursus on the Ritual Forms Preserved in Greek Tragedy," in Jane Ellen Harrison, *Themis,* (CUP 1912), quoted in Richrad Schechner, *Performance Theory* , third edition, (New York: Routledge, 2003), 2-3.

13 Rozik, *The Roots of Theatre.*

14 And it is of still more interest that, when novelistic media like Books of Hours are used for devotional purposes, they function very differently from the liturgical dramas with which they were contemporary. See Meg Twycross, "Books for the unlearned," in *Themes in Drama* 5 (CUP 1993).

15 See Sigmund Freud, *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo,* trans. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990).

properly functional. Ritual for Freud is not therapeutic; while it expresses the social neurosis of religion, it *does* nothing to or about it. Its fixity keeps it necessarily ineffective. He views therapy as fundamentally different from ritual in that it is creative and, therefore, able to provoke a genuinely new psychic experience: a catharsis. What is interesting, however, is that a good amount of the 'holy theatre' that claims a specific connection to ritual (Grotowski, Artaud, Brook, others) also sees itself as a aiming for this same cathartic effect in the psychotherapeutic sense. In explaining itself and its goals, this theatre uses Freudian terms willy-nilly. The actor becomes a kind of therapist for society, either inducing the audience's catharsis (Artaud), sharing in it (Brook), or demonstrating its possibility and means (Grotowski).[16] Here, the therapeutic end is achieved by ritual (or at least ritualized) means. Might this suggest a relationship between ritual and the *curing* of neuroses beyond and in contrast to Freud's link between ritual and the *presence* of them?

Ritual as Performative Action

The sociological theories of Emile Durkheim and the Cambridge anthropologists both trace their intellectual roots back to Frazer's religious originism. As such, both are cultural universalists and both see in ritual a fundamentally social origin. But the two have different understandings of the ritual act's relation to the larger society. For the Cambridge school, ritual (and thus theatre) was expressive: it is a representation of a social order, however oversimplified. For Durkheim, ritual is socially functional. If religion is society's worship of itself, then ritual is the means by which that worship impresses itself onto social individuals and established them as social creatures. Durkheimian ritual is not a documentation of invisible-but true cultural universals; it is, instead, a tool by which a society can inculcate its own authority into its members. Certainly, it can be mined for scholarly clues about social cohesion for the same reason that archeologists study arrowheads, but in itself, ritual *does* before it *means*.

Durkheim's description of the manner in which ritual functions has been much debated, but his contention that ritual should be viewed through its function and not its meaning has come to be accepted by the bulk of modern scholars of ritual. The most recent comprehensive transcultural treatise on ritual, Roy Rappaport's 1999 *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity,* sees ritual as "*the* basic social act,"[17] even granting it a nearly Durkheimian function: the public and binding acceptance by particular individuals and communities of unchanging, recurring norms embodied in fixed liturgical texts. Unlike the Frazerian individual or even the Lévi-Straussian mythmaker, the Rappaportian ritualist does not participate in a ritual because he already believes in its meaning; rather, he participates in order to publicly accept the promise that the ritual states. This is not so different from the Stanislavskian

16 See Philip Auslander, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997), 25-26.

17 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion,* 138 and elsewhere (with the italics in the source).

notion of the actor accepting the given circumstances of a character by means of the 'magic if' that defers truth claims and makes effective (social) action (on stage) possible.[18]

Durkheim, however, describes ritual action as directional in a way that later theorists do not accept, even if they accept ritual functionality. Sociologically, Durkheim saw ritual as a means by which the sacred—that is, the social—impresses itself upon the profane. Ritual action then requires the prior establishment of social authority, under the guise of the sacred, and the subsequent acquiescence of the profane individual. The social fact and catholicity of the sacred, then, necessitates that ritual must always move *from* the macro-social *to* the micro-individual. In the theatrical analogy, the script comes first and the performers must strictly follow it, making the performance more a recitation than an action. With a blurring of lines between the social and the individual (as, for example, with Bourdieu's *habitus*), or without a distinction between the sacred and the profane, or without a separation between ritual (sacred) and technological (mundane) effectiveness, such a model of ritual is hard to maintain. This was not a problem for Rudolph Otto, who saw the distinction between the numinous and the mundane as the defining element of religion. In Mircea Eliade's work, though, these distinctions begin to unravel as the sacred, originally defined in opposition to the profane, begins to expand to encompass it in a move reminiscent of Bell's description of how ritual action is first defined in contrast to, and then subsumes, belief. Eliade describes the profane increasingly negatively, eventually as chaos and "absolute nonbeing,"[19] and so the sacred becomes being-as-such and the distinction has been erased at a practical level—anything that *is* has some degree of sacredness, and so all that is left are sacredness and nothing. More recently and more ethnographically, Jack Goody has noted that such distinctions are simply not observed in anywhere near as many cultures as would be needed for a Durkheimian claim of universality, nor is there an ethnographically-observed universal basis for distinguishing between religious, magical, and technological effectiveness.[20] Without such a universal distinction, the Durkheimian model of ritual as theatrical recitation breaks down, and this is not the analogy to theatrical action most in use by anthropologists today.

The most important modern anthropologist to embrace the theatre as the essential metaphor for ritual action was Victor Turner. He built on the notion of *rite de passage* passed down to him from Malinowski and van Gennep and expanded it to a wider and more comprehensive understanding of the social matrices in which individuals and groups operate. In this, Turner and his large following shifted the object of social anthropology's study. Under Müller and Durkheim and to a certain degree among classical anthropologists like David Maybury-Lewis to this day, anthropology was explanatory ethnography: the object being studied was a reified sociocultural order with all its incoherences and

18 See Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares,* 51 et passim.

19 Mircea Eliade, trans. from the French by Willard Trask, *The Sacred and the Profane* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1959), 64.

20 Jack Goody, "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem," *British Journal of Sociology* 12 (1961): 151.

strangeness. Turner shifted the focus to the *movement of people within the system*—which was culturally determined, of course, but not static. Rites of passage are the prototypical example, but Turner generalized from this case into his concept of 'social drama,' the process a society goes through when confronted with a crisis that requires social adaptation—a drought, a death, a child growing too old to remain a child, a crime, an incursion, and so on. This process of transforming one social reality into another is dangerous because at its center lies a "betwixt and between" state-between-social-states Turner called 'liminality.' It characterizes those objects and persons which stand on the threshold of social categorization, such as the unburied corpse and the bride on her wedding night. Because the liminal has quite literally *no* stable place in society, it is dangerously anarchic and contagious and therefore needs to be hedged in by taboos and quarantine. But that same lack of social definition makes liminality the essential site of human freedom, creativity, and cultural progress. "In this gap between ordered worlds almost anything may happen," Turner writes.[21] Those cordoned off together in a liminal state, he noticed, often formed strong and rigorously egalitarian emotional bonds amongst themselves, which he called 'communitas.'

Though Turner characterizes liminality as exhibiting a *lack* of hierarchical social organization (and thus calls it "antistructural") at least one scholar has seen liminality as akin to the *reversal* of status studied by Bakhtin.[22] These are two different kinds of phenomena—Bakhtin is talking about calendrical or spatial inversion at the level of society, while Turner is talking about particular acts of social problem-solving. The Bakhtinian carnival bears more similarity to what Turner calls "normative communitas," the basic antistructural feeling that is subsumed under and justifies a hierarchical social order (as a feeling of fairness in an election legitimates a democratic government, for example). There is a need to periodically renew this feeling, even if no particular social crisis has developed, as society seems unable to function on structure alone. "Society seems to be a process rather than a thing—a dialectical process with successive stages of structure and communitas," Turner writes. "There would seem to be—if one can use such a controversial term—a human 'need' to participate in both modalities."[23] The division can be one of time (carnival vs. workday) or labour; specialists like shamans, prophets, and actors can hold a "statusless status, external to the secular social structure;"[24] they can then both be call called on in times of crisis and can also provide an ever-present-in-the-margin reminder of the antistructural potential that keeps structure in line. In that social and political institutions can carve out a space for such specialists (the court jester, the parish priest, the subsidized theatre company), we might see here a

21 Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors*, 13.

22 V.V. Ivanov, "The semiotic theory of carnival as the inversion of bipolar opposites," trans from the Russian by R. Reeder and J. Rostinsky, in *Carnival! Approaches to Semiotics 64* ed. Thomas a Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984).

23 Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine, 1969), 203.

24 Turner, *Ritual Process,* 116.

functionalist analog to Frazer's claim that ritual was the theatre's progenitor. Setting aside the question of historical origins, as Turner does, here is an anthropological argument to match the Revolting Theatre's contention, which the Ritualized Theatre shares, that the actor and the priest perform parallel functions, regardless of the different spaces carved out for them in society.

In his most recent work, Turner identifies the ritual process (or, in other contexts, a political or legal-judicial process) as the fulcrum of the social drama, that which moves a crisis towards reintegration.[25] Framed of by rites of separation and reaggregation, Turner sees the core of the ritual process, in turn, as a "ludic deconstruction and recombination of familiar cultural configurations."[26] The idea of the playful, or ludic, as central to cultural activity is borrowed largely from sociologist Johan Huizinga,[27] but the idea that this free play of cultural configurations could be *used,* and for the management of social crises at that, was Turner's innovation. This is what drew Richard Schechner to see the parallel between Turner's work and theatrical practice, particularly the politically-minded avant garde theatre of the 1960s. Both were interested in the ways that performance used its freedom to play with cultural patterns to create an image of that which was not just fanciful but actually *opposed* to social reality—that is, an image of anti-structure—yet in a way that was intentionally directed towards the better functioning of society. The parallels came not so much through their shared effort to 'read performance'—Durkheim shared that, as well—but with the mode of the performative relationship to social structure: what Turner labels the ludic or liminality and what Schechner, in the Sanskritophilic language of his time, calls *lila.*[28] The two collaborated extensively at the end of the elder's career, and Schechner co-edited Turner's posthumous *Festschrift.*[29]

Schechner has been perhaps the central *provocateur* of American performance studies since the 1970s, and though he stands unambiguously in the Turnerian legacy, it is not so easy to identify aspects of the Western theatre with Turnerian liminality as some might wish. The antistructural processes of the limen are still social processes, undertaken by the community as a whole and not by provocative subgroups acting on their own initiative. Turner specifically distinguished liminality from its corruption into individualistic, industrial, self-consciously creative contexts he calls 'liminoid.' Frankly, the term is never precisely defined. The closes Turner comes to a succinct definition is to call the liminoid the "successor of the liminal in complex large-scale societies, where individuality and optation in art have in theory supplanted collective and obligatory ritual performances."[30] Turner clearly sees the liminoid as

25 Or, if reintegration proves impossible, towards recognition of irreparable schism. See the diagram in Victor Turner, "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?" in *By Means of Performance,* ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (CUP 1990), 10.

26 Ibid.

27 See Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens,* trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1944).

28 Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology,* chapter 4: "Ramlila of Ramnager" and elsewhere.

29 *By Means of Performance,* ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (CUP 1990).

30 Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988), 29.

the bastard child of the liminal and the modern, but some crucial questions remain unanswered: for example, does the liminoid still fulfill the liminal function of social problem-solving? Particularly when anthropologists are finding examples that split the difference between liminal and *liminoid,*[31] it becomes hard to read 'liminoid' as anything other than 'liminal, but less so because of modernity.' Turner does in fact seem to see the pure, pre-industrial limen as the *Urquelle* from which all cultural activity springs, and modern theatre is but "one of the many inheritors of that great multifaceted system."[32] In an essay that sets out in its title to look for "universals of performance," the move from the liminal to the liminoid is necessarily one away from purity and clarity.

This kind of terminological difficulty is typical in trying to apply a Turnerian model as one moves farther from the Source. Schechner, for instance, tries to build a typology of modern performance as such, and the result is so huge and convoluted that it could not possibly be useful. (Indeed, he makes no effort to use it himself.)[33] His structural models of the process and composition of individual peformances are helpful for the actor, dramaturgically and pedagogically, but they remain attempts to describe the *structure* of the performance process.[34] But this ought not be possible; no such structural description should apply to a kind of theatre that can function as antistructure. The very usefulness and quality of Schechner's description is evidence that the thing he is describing has a hard time fitting into the category of the liminoid, never mind the liminal. I would argue that Schechner confuses the process of performance—training, rehearsal, warmup, cooldown, etc.—with the performance itself, and he has described the structure only of the former. This makes sense; the professional theatre is an industry like any other, and it has its bureaucracy and rules. But this only means that Schechner has offered no structural explanation of the antistructural core of performance—which is exactly my point.

The liminal would then seem to defy social description as such. And as long as the object of our description is a more-or-less unitary society, this will be the case. A different view, and one that might offer a better model for the Ritualized Theatre, comes from anthropologist Clifford Geertz. He moves the focus of study from the signification-systems of a cultural, whether structural, iconic, or procedural, to the signification-work accomplished by *individuals* within a cultural context. He sets his own view in opposition to the Turnerian use of the dramatic metaphor for social processes, instead embracing "the *symbolic action* approach" which stresses the affinity between the stage and rhetoric and persuasion.[35]

---

31 John Emigh, *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 192: "... the topeng pajeagan performed by I Nyoman at Tusan has attributes of both liminal and liminoid phenomena."

32 Turner, "Are there universals," 12.

33 Schechner, "Magnitudes of Performance," in *By Means of Performance* (CUP 1990), figure 2.1 (pp. 20-23), a two-page chart with two pages of footnotes.

34 See Schechner, *Performance Theory,* 82, for the original models; see Emigh, *Masked Performance,* 173, for some of the changes that the model undergoes when applied to a Balinese context.

This approach builds on Erving Goffman's theories of strategic self-presentation in everyday social interaction with a sizeable debt to John Austin's speech-act theory.[36] Geertz's famous Moroccan sheep theft anecdote illustrates the nature of the cultural inquiry he has in mind: a study of how people make use of the vocabulary provided by their cultures (creatively, ironically, multiply, or in hosts of other ways) to achieve particular ends. Faced with such a task, the ethnographer's method should be the "sorting out [of] the structures of signification"[37] through what he calls "thick description." Geertz borrows the term from Gilbert Ryle and builds on his example of "two boys rapidly contracting the eyelids of their right eyes. In one, this is an involuntary twitch; in the other a conspiratorial signal to a friend."[38] Phenomenologically, we cannot tell the difference; the two actions look identical. In fact, if one were rehearsing a parody of the other's wink, that too would look the same. Hence:

> But the point is that between what Ryle calls the "thin description" of what the rehearser (parodist, winker, twitcher ...) is doing ("rapidly contracting his eyelids") and the "thick description" of what he is doing ("practicing a burlesque of a friend faking a wink to deceive an innocent into thinking a conspiracy is in motion") lies the object of ethnography: a stratified hierarchy of meaningful structures in terms of which twitches, winks, fake-winks, parodies, rehearsals of parodies are produced, perceived, and interpreted, and without which they would not [...] in fact exist, no matter what anyone did or didn't do with his eyelids.[39]

Thick description, then, seeks to understand the function of each statement or action from the perspective of the actor at the moment of performance; not the word used or their objective denotation, but the meaning of the act of using them. It is a near-perfect anthropological analogue of the Stanislavskian concept of intention, stressing not the denotation of words and acts but the private, unarticulated reasons for them and granting actors supreme authority to interpret their own actions.[40] Geertz's view, then, stands opposed not only to phenomenology but to Durkheimian sociology and Lévi-Straussian structuralism, as it would to any theory that argued that actors do not or need not understand their own actions in order to do them. A Geertzian thick description cannot conclude that an actor's full and sincere explanation of her action could possibly be *wrong*, even if such explanations are almost never available.

Though Geertz sees culture, the object of the anthropologist's study, essentially as a web of signs

---

35 Clifford Geertz, "Blurred Genres," *American Scholar,* Spring 1980, 172. Also see Turner's response, "Are there universals," 15ff.

36 See Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1971), and John L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* (OUP 1962).

37 Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 9.

38 Geertz, *Interpretation,* 6.

39 Geertz, *Interpretation,* 7. The ellipsis is in the source; the bracketed ellipsis marks my abridgement.

40 It is only a near-perfect analogue because it also incorporates the Systematic notion of 'tactic.' A 'tactic' is the means by which a character seeks to achieve her intention. The line is a fuzzy one and sometimes the term 'tactic' is simply used to mean 'sub-intention,' but there is still a (thin) layer of mental process between stage action and intention for Stanislavsky that does not seem to intervene between ethnographically-observed performance and their appropriate thick description. This is a minor difference at best.

and symbols, his theory leaves plenty of space for sentences and actions that make use of that web for effective purposes, per Austin and Searle's speech-act theory. Just because Geertz sees the anthropologist's job primarily as understanding the meaning of the making of cultural statements, he does not deny that actions other than statement-making are culturally possible.

But what, then, has become of the category of ritual? It is not a term that Geertz uses often. His definition of religion is a functional one: it is a set of signs which have a certain effect on those who hold them by establishing a "uniquely realistic" emotional context in which life can be lived.[41] Religion itself is not subject thick description, as it is not an observable cultural *action* but a symbolic system which can undergird actions and motivate them for the actor. The Durkheimian definition of ritual as 'acts oriented toward sacred things' does not apply here, as it necessitates a division between sacred and profane spheres. The Geertzian claim that religion is uniquely realistic and pervasive means that virtually all actions will be at least indirectly religiously-oriented. If ritual is to be defined at all, then, it will require more than noting its direction of intent.

In the end, 'ritual' is the kind of scholarly category that Geertz sees as only occasionally useful in the process of thick description, and so he is content to leave it alone. But the idea of a performance deployed to achieve particular ends is central to Geertz's notion of cultural activity. This is an analogy from social action to performance but not to role-playing, as Geertz does not argue that these performance are grounded in, or symptomatic of, a multiplicity of roles or 'social selves' deployed in different settings, as Goffman contends.[42] For Geertz, these performances can be effective without the iconic or indexical construction of character, which, per Rozik, is the sina qua non of theatre. Still, Goffman, Turner, Austin, and Geertz are all developing a school of performance analysis that can be used in both the ritual and theatrical fields.

One scholar who has made a particular contribution to this school is Ron Grimes. Building on Geertz, Grimes sees ritual as a means by which social actors can affect novel, even revolutionary, cultural change. He is interested in the point where a discovered or created action is first recognized as effective and thus begins to solidify into ritual, a process he calls 'ritualization.' This process is nearly an aesthetic one; it can be done more or less effectively and gracefully, and is susceptible not just to ethnographic description but to criticism in the literary sense. Therefore, Geertz founded the discipline

41 Geertz, *Interpretation*,90: "A religion is (1) a system of signs and symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating concepts of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these concepts with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic." Note that Geertz, too, recapitulates the notion of misrecognition. Calling a system of signs and symbols a religion can only be an etic descriptor, because if these moods and motivations did in fact seem uniquely realistic to the practitioner, he would be unable to recognize them as (a) moods and motivations (b) that had been established (per 2) and then conceptualized and clothed with an aura of factuality (per 4). If Geertz's (5) is true, then the practitioner would simply see these moods and motivations *as real,* that is, simply as the way things actually are, and therefore not recognizable as anything called 'religion' apart from reality itself. Only the anthropologist can recognize a system as a religion; the native must misrecognize it as reality itself.

42 See Goffman, *Presentation of Self.*

of ritology, or ritual criticism, to investigate not just how ritualization *does* function but how it can *best* do so. Grimes focuses much of his work on ritualization in the politically-minded avant garde theatre of the 1960s, but his notion of ritualized efficacy is not limited to political problem-solving; his most recent book, *Deeply Into the Bone,* advises Westerners still hungry for spiritual nourishment but disillusioned with their received traditions how they might construct their own ritual for birth, coming of age, marriage and partnership, death, and even abortion and retirement. Grimesian ritualization seems to be the suggested response to any social or personal difficulty, from the cosmic to the international to the mundane. It is easy but not particularly helpful to turn up one's nose at Grimes's wide and fuzzy spirituality. But academically, the problem with such a broad notion of ritualization is not just that it seems to swallow up all human action as such into the notion of ritual and thus renders it meaningless. Rather, ritual is not supposed to be this easy. If we really could invent rituals willy-nilly that could effectively deal with every personal transition or social problem, well, we would, and we would not think much of the fact that we do so. That problems persist, and that the notion of ritual still holds our grudging respect, should show us that a meaningful notion of ritualization will have to be more particular than Grimes allows it.

Geertz can help us see a link between anthropological meaning-making and performance theory, but thick description in and of itself will not show us an intercultural notion of ritual specificity, and the largesse of the performative definition coming from Grimes will not change that. If social action in general can be seen as performative, and such performances cannot be readily divined by observers or participants between sacred and secular spheres, what is the sense in which ritual activity can be seen as distinctive from other action?

This is the context in which, I believe, the work of Catherine Bell is important. Her practice-based notion of ritualization as a strategic choice, discussed above, offers a way in which the emic difference between ritual doing and non-ritual doing can be appealed to without either reifying that category into a universal truth that trumps the performance itself or denying that anything is actually going on beneath the phenomenological surface. Placing ritualization within the Bourdieuian concepts of practice and *habitus* suggests a resolution to the dispute between Turner and Geertz over social drama versus personal action. If ritualization is an appeal to an emic authority embedded in a *habitus,* there is no conflict between free play and the rules and goals of the game. Ritualization is something the individual does to her practical actions, but it is conditioned by, conceived, and judged in terms of the culture's *habitus* which has impressed itself into the actor's mind and body. Because the logic of ritualization is a practical one, we do not need to presume, as Geertz seems to, that the actor had in her mind a full and correct image of the 'true meaning' of an action which it is our job to uncover. Actors with a 'feel for the game' may genuinely not understand their actions, but that in itself does nto make them any less

effective or meaningful.

The sub-form I am identifying as the Ritualized Theatre of the modern West, then, is that part of modern Western theatrical practice that is self-differentiated through ritualization.

It would be disingenuous to pretend that things were as simple as that, though. I argued above that theatre cannot be wholly a pastime. Theatre is no more a neutral practice which can be ritualized like any other than it is a neutral medium into which any content can be placed, per Rozik. Whether or not the Western theatre *did* originate in ritual—and Rozik's argument that it did not is convincing—an enormous number of its scholars and practitioners (not to mention Nietzsche and Aristotle) have found the ritual-theatre link compelling enough to *think* that it did, despite the near-total paucity of evidence. Public storytelling is about as good an example as one can find of a practice that seems ripe for ritualization. If there is a paradigmatic case for the ritualization of a practice, it is the theatre. The application of Bell's theory to the practice of theatre may tell us quite a bit about how it applies to practices in general; I suggested above that the central problem of 'misrecognition'—that is, of a practice's inability to see the true effects of its own actions—might be illuminated here. Few practices are as discursive as theatre or as aware of their own structure. If ever etic analysis has been incorporated into a practice, and if ever a practice required such analysis to complete itself, this is the case.

The theatrical problem of ritual-as-such

By now, it should be clear that I see Bell's view of ritual as a strategic self-differentiated practice as the most cogent and defensible position available. There are reasons internal to ritual to take that position, and I have tried to articulate some of them above. But the theatrical analogy also works the other way; theatrical practice lends weight to certain views of ritual over others. The arguments from theatre tend to be pragmatic; theatricalists gravitate towards those understandings of ritual which generate interest in the rehearsal room, however philosophically comprehensive or ethnographically defensible. The theatrical objection to most ritual theories is that they are unplayable. The Rappaportian definition of ritual, "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and utterances not entirely encoded by the performers,"[43] seems to apply to all pre-scripted theatre as such,[44] and therefore offers essentially

43 Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion,* 24.

44 Rappaport explicitly claims that this is not the case, but I find his denial unconvincing. He argues that the relationship between playwright and actor is not really one between encoder and performer. The playwright/actor difference is simply practical or instrumental, while the encoder/performer difference is ontological. "The invariance of drama in contrast [to ritual] is kept hidden beneath the illusion of novelty and spontaneity that gives virtual life to the dilemmas the drama represents" (Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion,* 42, my brackets). That is, the scriptedness of drama is an unfortunate technical necessity that theatrical practice attempts to cover up. One ought to question the relationship Rappaport seems to be presuming between actor and playwright here. When, at the beginning of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town,* the narrator character announces that "This play is called *Our Town;* it was written by Mr. Thornton Wilder," has the naming of the playwright suddenly made him ontologically separate from the actors? What about when he is only named in the program? And would Rappaport allow Shakespeare or Sophocles to be elided into the actors performing their words? It is hard indeed to argue that a modern performance of *Hamlet* or *Oedipus Rex*—culturally

no guidance as to how buy-your-ticket-and-watch-your-show theatre is different from ritual as 'basic social act.' Theatricalists tend to use 'ritual' as an adjective in order to add a particular color to their work, and this is often helpful and effective. Many ritual theorists, particularly those of the first half of the century, cannot help but see ritual as a *noun;* not a collection of nouns but one great Abstraction of which all ethnographically-observed proper nouns are more-or-less fitting manifestations. It is not reification as such which is a problem for the ritual using theatricalist but the extent to which a theory tries to reify *the notion of ritual itself* as a generic descriptor. As an anthropologist, I do not believe that the ethnographic record shows enough unity in the rituals of the world to enable theorists to construct this single Ur-ritual. But as a theatricalist, I do not think that, even if such a construction were possible, it could be specific enough to suggest anything of utility about individual performances, theatrical or ritual. The artistic movements towards abstraction in the plastic, visual, and literary arts have never quite taken hold in the theatre.[45] Performance is a culturally-specific practice, and in that it has a connection to ritual, it suggests that ritual, too, is particular to this culture or that and not a reified universal.

Theatre that tries to make use of a 'pure,' a-cultural ritual-as-such is doomed either to failure or to no longer being performance. Such efforts at pure universalism are what Peter Brook called the 'holy' theatre, the stage's effort to communicate "a reality deeper than the fullest form of everyday life."[46] Not just *a* reality, however; the universalized holy theatre aspires to a *single* spiritual reality independent of culture. Jacques Copeau, the holy theatre's progenitor, talked about the "religious mission" of the theatre: "to unite people of every rank, every class ... every nation."[47] Philip Auslander points out that this is not just a matter of achieving a very broad Turnerian communitas but a single and universal means of doing so: "An important corollary to theories of holy theatre is that the verbal and physical languages of the stage should be systems of signs understandable to all human beings, independent of their cultural affiliations."[48]

The first job of the holy theatricalist, then, must be to build such languages, in defiance of George Steiner's natural but lamented Babel. To date, most of the efforts to do so have used Jungian

known texts before any incident of performance—is in any meaningful sense entirely encoded by the performers. Are they therefore rituals? Rappaport offers no reason not to think so. His other argument for the ritual/theatrical distinction is even more suspect: that a theatrical audience is passive while a ritual congregation is active. "The defining characteristic of audience in contrast to performers on the one hand and congregation on the other is that they do not participate in the performance: they *watch* and *listen."* (Rappaport, *Ritual and Religion,* 39). This is simply not true. Certainly, theatrical spectators are relatively passive compared to performers, but I do not see, and Rappaport does not articulate, any principled reason why this relative passivity is not analogous to the role of a congregation compared to an officiating priest.

45 Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation,* 37: "The theatre would appear to exist, therefore, at a point of tension, blessed or handicapped, depending on your point of view, by two limitations: the impossibility of precision copying and the impossibility of pure abstraction."

46 Brook, *The Empty Space,* 40.

47 Jacques Copeau, *Notes sur le metier de comédien* (Paris: Michel Brient, 1955), 40, as quoted in Auslander, *From Acting,* 16.

48 Auslander, *From Acting,* 15.

notions of the collective unconscious to try to build the vocabulary of a trans-cultural performative text; the most comprehensive has been Eugenio Barba's International School for Theatre Anthropology in Denmark. Barba's magnum opus is a kinetic-to-emotional lexicon that is designed to bypass the cultural process of sign-production entirely and serve equally well as a performance manual to any human performer in the world. He summarizes his work:

> There exists a secret art of the performer. There exist recurring principles which demonstrate the life of actors and dancers in various cultures and epochs. These are not recipes but points of departure which make it possible for an individual's qualities to become scenic presence and to be manifest as personalized and efficient expression in the context of the individual's own history.[49]

Barba's performer moves directly from individual qualities to scenic expression, not outside of culture but despite it, making use of the universal language inherent in the body which must be discovered from an enormous intercultural process of exchange. (Though he has his differences, Grimes's ritology is a kindred project.) Barba's group has not, of yet, produced much actual theatre, and that which it has was largely a dry academic exercise in possibility.

What Auslander calls "therapeutic theatre," with a reference back to Freud, has done a good deal more. Instead of trans-cultural, this project is pre-cultural, trying to provoke the individual into an awareness deeper than and unmediated by cultural restraints. This theatre should touch us "like the plague," in the famous phrase of the therapeutic theatre's most-quoted proponent, Antonin Artaud: primally, physically, and far too quickly and bodily for thought or emotion to intervene. The Polish director Jerzy Grotowski's Theatre of Sources was another Artaudian effort to evoke an experience more primal than cultural constructs from building building blocks more basic than words—Auslander calls it 'catharsis,' in the psychological sense.

As theatricalists, though, both Artaud and Grotowski were spectacular failures. In 1970, Grotowski turned his back on performance, dismissing it as fundamentally unable to achieve the pre-culture Source his work sought, and moved instead to what has been variously called 'paratheatrical happenings,' 'experimental events,' and 'running around in the Polish woods.'[50] Had Grotowski not been an accomplished theatricalist beforehand, no reasonable observer would have seen his later work as more connected to the Western practice of theatre than to the new-age practice of ritual self-development as exemplified by Grimes (and mocked by Schechner). This is not theatre at all. Though Artaud's writings are much read to this day, he was spectacularly unsuccessful at actually mounting productions in his life. His most famous "play," *The Conquest of Mexico,* was not only never performed, no script for it was ever written. His Theatre of Cruelty never got off the ground. When Peter

---

49 Eugenio Barba and Nicola Savarese, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1991), 286.

50 For more on Grotowski and the move to paratheatre, see Grimes, *Beginnings,* chapter 10, and more extensively *The Grotowski Sourcebook,* ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford (London: Routledge, 1997).

Brook and Charles Marowitz undertook a Theatre of Cruelty season with Britain's National Theatre, it had not much more to do with Artaud than the inspiration and the name; the calmness and simplicity of their exercises, most of which never saw an audience, look nothing like the wild, sensuous proposals drafted by the Frenchman.[51] "Artaud applied is Artaud betrayed," Brook writes,[52] but how on earth are we supposed to understand or value Artaud's contribution to the practical, physical act of theatre if his work is, literally, inapplicable to theatrical practice?

Brook himself admits it: the holy theatre is unworkable as theatre because it shuns performance as a public act. "Grotowski plays for thirty spectators—as a deliberate choice," writes Brook. "He is convinced that the problems facing himself and the actor are so great that to consider a larger audience could only lead to a dilution of the work."[53] It becomes easy to see how such a view, once purified, would lead Grotowski away from performance (by some, for some) towards experimental action (by and for the same people). Such a notion of what 'theatre' should be has no space for the crass imprecision of an uninitiated audience and a grossly physical performance.

In contrast to such purity, the practice of theatre relishes the particular. It has, in Max Harris's phrase, "a licentious way with time and space."[54] It enjoys its own gloriously limited materiality and temporality. Rather than an assumption of ritual-as-such, theatre has found itself fruitfully engaged with *particular* ritual traditions. The practice of passion-playing in Europe represents a serious, sustained, and productive engagement with the ritual of the Mass. Particular traditions of ritual (and ritual theatre) in Bali, India, and Papua New Guinea have been influential for John Emigh, Richard Schechner, and a whole generation of their colleagues. Even if Heather McDonald's engagement with the ritual iconography of the American Southwest in *An Almost Holy Picture* is a bit inaccurate, it remains particular.[55] *Purimspielen* satirize and comment on the daily rituals of Orthodox Jewish life, not on ritual in general.[56]

The lack of universality is simply not a problem when ritual is appropriated for theatrical use. In fact, particularist engagements of this or that ritual tend to be more theatrically potent than universalist ones. Experiences and explanations of particular rituals, even inaccurate or crude ones, have often been used as productive sources for theatrical inspiration: Beckett (and hundreds of others) and the Mass, Schechner and the Ram-Lila, [57]Brecht and Noh and Kabuki.[58] When the Critical Art Ensemble wanted

51 Brook, *Empty Space,* 49ff.

52 Brook, *Empty Space,* 54.

53 Brook, *Empty Space,* 60.

54 Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation,* 19, quoting, in this instance, J. Barish, *The Anti-Theatrical Prejudice* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1981), 136.

55 Heather McDonald, *An Almost Holy Picture,* produced by Echo Theatre at the Bath House Cultural Center, Dallas, Texas, with Raphael Parry (Sam), directed by Rene Moreno. Script published in *American Theatre* 17:2 (Feb. 2000).

56 See Handelman, *Models and Mirrors.*

to build an interactive piece about the promises and hopes that contemporary genetics and biotechnology hold for humanity, they sought to comment on the history of cultural appeals to scientific authority that, in their view, culminated in eugenics. Where they turned is telling:

> If the secular rhetoric of the Enlightenment is off-limits, then what is left? One good place to turn is the utopian rhetoric of Christianity (and the Roman Catholic Church in particular) .... New universalism is the idea that if all DNA is part of every living creature and if it is all compatible, than the essential link between all living creatures has been discovered. DNA can replace the soul.[59]

And so, the Ensemble constructed a Catholic-like system of iconography, worship, and sacramentality (including a mock-Eucharist in which a complete set of human DNA has been spliced into the 'host') in their *Cult of the New Eve (CoNE)*. There is nothing particularly Christian—or Roman Catholic—in the genetic eschatology they are (ironically) putting forward. Had they been equally well-versed in it, they might have chosen a Buddhist or Hindu 'rhetoric' instead, and *CoNE* would have been different for it. But they could not have made *CoNE* a universal cult, or a cult-as-such. As the Ensemble's aim was "to contribute to the development of critical public discourse on what has so far been a hidden technorevolution,"[60]they had no interest in the purity of the holy theatre and instead sought a meaningful and effective interaction between performance and audience. For this, it was far more effective to use a particular ritual framework than a generic one. To say, performatively, "DNA can replace the soul," it is more important to have a full and nuanced understanding of what a 'soul' is than to have one which is either accurate or shared by all people. This makes the performance culturally specific, to a degree, but one side effect of modern Euroamerican hegemony and information technology is the apparent globalization of technological, urban, scientific, Western culture. (*CoNE* was performed in Karlsruhe, Tokyo, Graz, Barcelona, Rotterdam, Buffalo, Brussels, and online.[61])

The relative barrenness of the study of ritual-as-such, in contrast to the vibrancy and creative space offered by specific liturgics, is what draws me as a theatricalist to Bell's model of ritualization. When the Critical Art Ensemble offers a mock-Eucharist within a performance, they are taking the aesthetic practice of the theatre and ritualizing it by virtue of a single, known model. Because Bell's theory is not dependent on a universalist or essentialist definition of ritual as a noun, it can be applied to an open-ended set of creative human endeavors. Whether or not one sees religion or culture in general as an outcome of human creativity—I do—theatre and the performative arts certainly are, and Bell's is a model of ritualization that can apply to them.

---

57 See Schechner, *Future of Ritual,* chapter 5, and *Between Theatre and Anthropology,* chapter 4.

58 See, amongst other examples, Bertolt Brecht, "On Chinese Acting," translated by Eric Bently, from *The Brecht Sourcebook,* ed., Carol Marin and Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2000).

59 Critical Art Ensemble, "Performing a Cult," *TDR* 44:4 (Winter 2000), 169.

60 Critical Art Ensemble, "Performing," 173.

61 Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

The Stage Looks to Ritual

Anthropologists make use of the language of theatre so that they can better describe and explain their ethnographic reality of ritual. Theatre theorists have been able to offer many detailed, comprehensive, and contradictory understandings of theatre without much recourse to the language of ritual. Critics have been decrying the sorry state of the theatre for decades—Eric Bentley's dated screed is typical[1]—but few if any have looked to ritual, either anthropologically or theologically understood, as the solution. Instead, theatricalists' interest in ritual has come from a sustained engagement with the potencies of various particular ritual actions and modes of storytelling, and possibility of their adaptation or appropriation for theatrical use. That modern theatricalists would be discontent with the practice as they have received it and would feel the need to look for new potencies in the first place is a consequence of the defining debate of twentieth-century theatre: Stanislavskian modernism versus Brechtian and Artaudian post-modernism.

Character and Act: The Debate

Constantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938) remains the pre-eminent systematic pedagogue of the art of modern theatrical acting to this day. While his techniques are rarely used today without some refinement, no alternative systematic pedagogy of acting has yet been developed. His influence has always been greatest in his native Russia and the English-speaking world, despite the serious linguistic and legal problems surrounding the translation of his work. Through a series of exercises making use of the body's physical abilities, emotional potentials, memories, and the given circumstances of the script, Stanislavsky's System is a means by which an actor can use the rehearsal process to build a character for performance that is both as *true to life* and as *beautiful* as possible. Stanislavsky is explicit: "The fundamental aim of our art is the creation of this inner life of a human spirit, and its expression in an artistic form."[2] Though the System itself makes much use of circumstances given by the particular

1 Eric Bentley, *The Theatre of Commitment* (London: Metheuen, 1968).

2 Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares,* 14.

script, it is intended as a universal process: a Systematic actor ought to go through the same basic steps for any role she performs, and the goal of actor training is the development of a skill set and method which will be effective in *any* theatrical setting.

This is a modernist ideal. Nominally, referential truth and formal beauty are two criteria, but in the end, they are inseparable. Beauty without truth is condemned as 'mechanical' acting, while true but un-beautiful acting is simply not considered as a possibility. This is not to say that Stanislavsky does not focus a good part of his System on formal and physical considerations that seem to have little to do with the 'inner life of a human spirit'—breathing, walking, muscular tension, enunciation, and so on—but perfection of technique is never really celebrated for its own sake. Beauty of form is not so much an independent goal of the Stanislavskian system as a necessary corollary to truth-to-life that will enable it to be expressed onstage night after night.

If the actor's work is at the center of the theatrical enterprise and that work proceeds on Stanislavskian lines, then the concept of an atomic, discoverable character ('spirit') lies at the core of what the theatre is. Such a theatre is a Romantic project, privileging the plumbed depths of private souls while making little space for interpersonal or social interaction (between characters, between a character and his society, or between character and audience, for example). As a performative act, Stanislavskian theatre has the same expressed goal as all Romantic art: creating the possibility for the viewer to accept, valorize, and empathize with the artist's idiosyncratic articulation of his own inner soul. The Stanislavskian audience is more like a Romantic reader than a congregation; if it is not made up of only one person (the ideal), than it is made up of a set of discrete individuals (this one alone, and that one alone, and so on). Each individual watcher has an inner soul, as does the character portrayed, and the ultimate goal is the recognition of one soul by a kindred other. This the the goal of Brustein's Revolting Theatre, too (in that it has a goal), and that is why Brustein is ultimately a student of playwrights and not of plays; the scripts, like the playwrights' other writings, serve essentially as windows into the inner man with whom we are to identify and from whom we are to learn.

This view of how theatre should be made can be attacked on many fronts, and many have. Perhaps an 'inner human spirit' cannot be so summarized into a monolithic character with a single overarching superobjective. Perhaps human identity is determined at least as much by social context as interior soul; perhaps the body itself even has a role to play. Perhaps the audience does not, or ought not, respond as a single entity and consistently, but individually, even idiosyncratically, taking into account social and cultural realities that exist outside the theatre. Most any contemporary Western

theatricalist who stands in Stanislavsky's legacy (and that is most of them) is obliged to take at least some of these concerns into account.

For my purposes, though, the most important criticism has come from those who question the stated purpose of the Stanislavskian theatre: the disinternment and articulation of the inner truth of the individual soul. Instead of defining the performative act of theatre as *expressive,* and thus in relationship to the performer, a radical group offered that it should be defined as *effective,* and thus in relation to the audience. The exact effect the theatre is supposed to have is still debated, of course, but the two most passionate and influential descriptions of the effective theatre come from Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. The Stanislavskian theatre and its Revolting counterpart were supposed to have an effect, too, but derivatively: in them, the effective relationship is between the work and the artist (the playwright for Brustein, the actor for Stanislavsky); the spectators were permitted to join in that effect only through empathy with the characters as their artistic surrogates.

In contrast, a Brechtian or Artaudian theatre is designed to effect the audience directly. In Brecht, this approach's most systematic theorist, the goal is a materialist, Marxist one: theatrical performance can demonstrate social realities to which the audience is called on to respond emotionally and intellectually. To prevent that response from being confined to the fictional world of the play, Brecht asks his actors not to wholly embody the inner spirit of the characters they play, as Stanislavsky did, but to stand alongside and comment on them even as they are being embodied.[3] The effect for the audience is a straining and problematizing of the empathetic bond. No longer are the characters presented as full human beings who command our attention in the manner of the Face of Levinas or the Thou of Buber; they are admitted constructs, presented for our learning and our edification but in no sense necessary. We encounter them as foreign objects and not surrogate subjects; we can judge and evaluate them as readily as we can 'understand' them. Brecht called this the *Verfremdungseffekt:* literally the en-foreigning effect but usually translated into English as 'alienation,' in the political and not the existential sense. The avowed Brechtian Augusto Boal has argued that the theatrical use of empathy, rooted in the Aristotelian goal of catharsis in tragedy, is an inherently conservative force which cannot but reinforce the prevailing social structure.[4] Certainly, Brecht had no use for a theatre in which the

---

3 The specific language of the actor and character standing "side by side," each speaking at their own level of performative reality, comes from Schechner, *Performance Theory,* 127.

4 Augusto Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* trans. Charles A. and Mario-Odilia L. McBride (TCG 1985), 46: "Aristotle's coercive system of tragedy survives to this day, thanks to its great efficacy." This is not a conclusion I can support. Boal argues that the Aristotelian catharsis is meant to restore justice. This is fine as far as it goes, but he further argues that the Aristotelian conception of justice is necessarily a reflection of the prevalent social order—which in the case of ancient Greece, was an aristocratic, slave-owning one—and so catharsis cannot but reinforce the prevalent

audience was inclined to "lose itself in simply empathy, uncritically (and practically without any consequences) in the experience of the characters onstage."[5] Storytelling could be used as a part of the socialist project; it was a cultural tool, and it could be used to mould better revolutionary citizens.

Brustein sees Brecht as one of his Revolting crusaders, but in order for this attribution to work, Brustein needs to argue that Brecht's Marxism was less than genuine; at most, it was a stepping-stone eventually to be left behind for a more profound, existential revolt. Certainly, Brecht was too sensitive a playwright to have wholly subscribed to anti-intellectualist dogma. But in that anyone can be a true Marxist intellectual, Brecht seems to have been. Boal unreservedly describes Brecht's work as a "Marxist poetics."[6] Brustein's efforts to show that Brecht's soul was, deep down, closer to Nietzsche's than Marx's ("What Brecht really desires is the Buddhist Nirvana"[7]) are unconvincing, and more importantly, miss the point. Whatever Brecht believed in his heart of hearts is not at issue; we are concerned with his theatrical output and not his mind. His work does seem to be a creative and sincere attempt to use the theatre to raise the audience's consciousness of social injustice, whatever his private views. The ascetic pining for a remade humanity and a more perfect means of existence that one finds in, for example, late Ibsen is simply not present in Brecht's plays. His work remains grounded in this world and in society.

The writer who best fits the Brusteinian ideal of extending the Revolt beyond the merely Marxist is Antonin Artuad. The Artuadian ideal of a theatre of cruelty—not realized in his life or since—was a theatre that would afflict audience members "like the plague." It would not be beautiful; indeed, it would often be horrifying, shocking, or monstrously ugly. But that would be a necessary consequence of the horrible and ugly world in which we live. The problem is that we delude ourselves. The theatre of cruelty would bypass all our intellectual and emotional faculties and speak directly to our raw physicality in order to *wake us up:*

> I propose a theater where violent physical images pulverize and mesmerize the audience's

social order. Boal makes two critical errors here. First, he fails to consider that a political reality may not live up to its own professed ideals and that justice is defined by the later, not the former. Second, he fails to consider that the Aristotelian definition of catharsis and empathy might have outlived the Aristotelian conception of justice, and that it may now be entirely possible to use the former without the latter. Either of these might rehabilitate the tool of empathetic catharsis for the use of the socially-conscious theatricalist. That is not work that Boal wants to do, which is perfectly fine; it is not an obviously impossible tasks, however, as he seems to imply.

5 Bertolt Brecht, "Theatre for Learning," translated by Edith Anderson, in *The Brecht Sourcebook,* ed. Carol Martin and Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2000), 26.

6 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* 92.

7 Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt,* 240. He continues: "Though Brecht shares Nietzsche's assumption that Copernicus banished the gods from the heavens, he sings not of the *Übermensch* but the *Untermensch,* the man without possibilities. And his concentration on the more insuperable human limitations, the source of his quarrel with existence, leads him to attack not only the God of the Christians but the God of the Romantics as well" (240-241).

> sensibilities, caught in the drama as if in a vortex of higher forces. I do not believe that we have succeeded in reanimating the world we live in and I also do not believe it worth hanging on to. But I propose something to get us out of the slump, instead of continuing to moan about it, about the boredom, dullness, and stupidity of everything.[8]

That 'everything' includes culture in its largest sense, of course, and therefore if the theatre of cruelty is to work, it needs to do so not through culture but beneath it. And, under the influence of the Sartrean philosophical climate of his time, Artaud saw conceptions of personal identity as culturally constructed and thus part of 'the slump' from which we are to escape. The Stanislavskian form of theatre, which Artaud calls 'psychological,' is therefore an unacceptable accommodation of the boring, dull, and stupid language of cultural expression. In place of the Stanislavskian uncovering of the personal spirit, the Artaudian actor is "rigorously denied any individual initiative" but is still unabashedly creative.[9] Individuality is a cultural dead end; the 'higher forces' to be tapped are cosmic and therefore not particular. "We must create word, gesture, and expressive metaphysics in order to rescue theatre from its human, psychological prostration," Artaud writes.[10] This is a call for a pure grammar of physical action wholly removed from and destructive of the textual, the cultural, the psychological, and even the personal. Artaud would admit of no authority of a text written by some distant, tyrannical playwright; he himself would create the Nietzschean *Übermensch* through his purgative and antitextual theatre. His project has divested itself of all aesthetic standards and accepts as a criterion of judgment only the extent of its purification of the audience.

Because of that need for purity, the theatre of cruelty remains an inaccessible, distant vision. Perhaps because of that very distance, though, Artaud still haunts the contemporary theatre as a role model and yardstick. Eugenio Barba's theatrical anthropology, Grotowski's paratheatre, much modern performance art, and even Peter Brook appeal to him for inspiration. Artuad himself does not call his work religious, though he does describe his project as drawn to the "awful lyricism which exists in those Myths [his capital] to which the great mass of men have consented."[11] It is not hard to see an Eliadian crypto-religious appeal in his project and his following. Artaudians might call it cosmic or even post-human,[12] but that does not stop its function in theatrical discourse as a humanly-articulated ultimate.

Artaud offers a theology, then, even if that is not a word he would use. And his theology is not

---

8 Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double,* trans. Victor Corti (London: Calder & Boyars), 63.

9 Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double,* 79.

10 Artuad, *Theatre and Its Double,* 69.

11 Artaud, *Theatre and Its Double,* 65.

12 See Matthew Causey, "Posthuman Performance," *Crossings 1.2* (Sept. 2001), and the editor's introduction to the issue, Mads Haahr and Elizabeth Drew, "Human Identity in a Posthuman Age," online at http://crossings.tcd.ie/issues/1.2

just un-Biblical but as ascetic as they come. He writes "We are not free and the sky can still fall on our heads. And above all else, theatre is made to teach us this."[13] The sheer horror and universality of that confinement and dread are Artaud's main doctrines. The performative act of the theatre of cruelty offers us not a way out—for Artaud, as for Sartre, there is none—but the jolt we need to recognize our situation and a public, ineffective opportunity to lament it. Max Harris sees this world- and self-denying theology as the antithesis of Christian incarnationalism, which in sharp contrast is a divine embrace of not just the physicality of this world but the human condition as such. This is what led to Derrida's fascination with Artaud's work; he saw just how anti-theological it was. Artaud was not afraid to trace the force against which he was rebelling back to its Creator. And so, of necessity, "the Theatre of Cruelty expulses God from the stage," writes Derrida.[14] He explains:

> The stage is theological for as long as it is dominated by speech, by a will to speech, by the layout of a primary logos which does not belong to the theatrical site and governs it from a distance .... The Other, the Thief, the great Furtive Other, has a proper name: God .... The origin of a theatre such as must be restored, in the hand lifted against the abusive wielder of the logos, against the father, against the God of a stage subjugated to the power of speech and text.[15]

It is perhaps the sheer velocity of this anger at any God Who would dare to dictate any rules or words whatsoever for those below Him that makes Artaud the purest of Revolting theatricalists. It is also what encourages Harris to take more seriously than most Artaud's claim that he had become possessed by demons when he lost his sanity at the end of his life.[16] From a Christian perspective, it is not too much to say that Artaud made an idol of his own creativity. Nevertheless, that idol has been a powerful and inspirational model for theatricalists for the better part of a century.

This, then, is the form of the debate. Is the theatre a mirror, a vehicle through which the inner truths of the human soul can be discovered by the actor and gracefully exhibited for the spectator? Is it a megaphone, a means of address through which the audience can be confronted with, learn about, wrestle with, and perhaps even come to embrace certain ideas and emotional truths?[17] Or is it a drug, an

---

13 Artuad, *Theatre and Its Double,* 60.

14 Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* trans. A. Bass (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1978), 235, as quoted in Max Harris, *The Dialogical Theatre: Dramatizations of the Conquest of Mexico and the Question of the Other* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993), 58.

15 Derrida, *Writing and Difference,* 235, 180, and 239, respectively, as quoted in Harris, *Dialogical Theatre,* 58.

16 See Harris, *Theatre and Incarnation,* chapter 7.

17 The more common image for the Brechtian theatre is, of course, the hammer that shapes reality. I prefer the image of the megaphone, however, because it more closely resembles the actual process that Brechtian theatre seeks to induce. The act of performance itself is not revolutionary and cannot materially fix the world. What it can do is provoke intellectual and emotional reactions in those to whom it is displayed that will egg them on towards a more specific and effective form of social action. The hammer model seems to assume that performing a play is in and of itself effective,

awful potent force which takes hold of an audience, wrests them out of their complacency whether they will or not and forces them to experience the raw truth of human existence? These three options are not mutually exclusive; they intrude into each other as in, for example, the Revolting Theatre, which makes use of Brecht's work and admired Artaud's ends, but tries to make Stanislavskian mirror-holders out of them.

The notion of ritual does not appear much in the debate at this point. Though Brecht was even less comfortable with religious language than Artaud, there are certain understandings of ritual-as-teaching (Protestant ones, for example) that could fairly be applied to Brechtian performance. The difficulty is that Brechtian theatre takes pains to show that it is a human construction engaged in a social dialectic, not a necessary outworking of revelation. In Turner's terms, this makes Brecht liminoid, not liminal. The call for a ritualized theatre is not yet much of a voice in this debate, although Artaud did appropriate a good deal of ritual language and many have seen a connection between his goals and certain non-Western performative practices that have often been called ritual.[18] Instead, ritualization was one of the many responses that came into the theatre after the dust of the Brechtian-Stanislavskian debate had begun to settle.

Responses

Given Brecht, given Stanislavsky, given Artaud, and given the continuing need or desire to engage in public storytelling anyway, what is a modern theatricalist to do? One can pick one's horse and ride it; there are overt Stanislavskians and Brechtians out there who try to emulate the master *comme il faut.* One can twist and turn to show that the dilemma is not really there; Brustein's Brecht as not really a Marxist, for instance. But most people in the theatre find themselves stuck somewhere between the three. Few can deny any longer the propagandistic potential of public storytelling, intended or not, for good or ill. Everyone wants to believe that Artaudian purgation is possible. But we also cannot get away from the centrality of the character to the theatrical process and the essential role that empathy plays in drawing people to the theatre. We want theatre to be effective, but we cannot (and don't want to) rid ourselves of the Romantic idea that the theatre is one of the places we can best learn who we *are.* Ritualization, I contend, is the most promising response to this paradox, but it is not the only one. I want to look,

regardless of how it is received. Brecht, however, was centrally concerned with the audience. His theatre was a performed dialogue that led to action, not action itself. The audience maintains a crucial role. In Boal's terms, then, theatre is not itself a revolutionary action but a rehearsal for one (Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* 155).

18 Max Harris, visiting the central Mexican town of Huejotzingo's famous, massive annual carnival in 1989 (2500 participants, 10,000 to 15,000 spectators), wrote that "only in Huejotzingo have I seen theatre that came so close to that of which Artaud dreamt" (Harris, *Dialogical Theatre,* 115).

briefly, at four others: purification, abandonment, simplification, and absurdism.

Purification is the most Artaudian of paths. Scorning the difficulties of creating a whole new form of expression, utterly universal and unsullied by the sins of culture, a pure theatr epushes forward towards an utterly new mode of action. This can be seen in a number of places: the early Grotowskian Theatre of Sources, Peter Brook's Artaudian experimentation, and the aggressively antisocial theatre of Jean Genet, for example.[19] The process of such theatres is one of reduction, a stripping away of the self mediated by culture, tradition, awareness of the audience to find the the pure, pre-social, pre-cultural person underneath, the person that strict postmodernism argues does not exist.[20] Peter Brook explored this approach in his own work with the Royal Shakespeare Company:

> We set an actor in front of us, asked him to imagine a dramatic situation that did not involve any physical movement, then we all tried to understand what state he was in. Of course, this was impossible, which was the point of the exercise. The next stage was to discover what was the very least he needed before understanding could be reached: was it a sound, a movement, a rhythm — and were these interchangeable — or had each its special strengths and limitations?[21]

Such an exercise is not a performance, of course, but certain performances tend toward it. Any building from these discoveries is suspect: why was this choice made, and not the other? And is not personal choice itself to be overcome? In contemporary classical music, there is a parallel here to the work of British composes John Tavener, who seems to equate the spiritual with the ultimate in simplicity.[22] This tradition is what Brook calls the "Holy Theatre," but it comes with a paradox. Even as such artists reach the heights of pure human expression, people stop listening. "Almost as a condition," Brook writes, Holy performers create "theatres for an *élite* ... Grotowski plays for thirty spectators — as a deliberate choice. He is convinced that the problems facing himself and the actor are so great that to consider a larger audience could only lead to a dilution of the work."[23] Brustein anticipates this in his image of the Revolting priest: in the end, his audience flees and his is "alone in the void."

Brustein does not seem to care, but at its extreme, the purifying project pulls the ground out from under the very practice of performance. Like the novelist who rages against the existential

---

19 See Brustein, *Theatre of Revolt,* chapter 9: "Antonin Artaud and Jean Genet: The Theatre of Cruelty."

20 See Auslander, *From Acting,* 90, 91-92: "The performing body is always doubly encoded — it is defined by the codes of a particular performance, but has always already been inscribed, in its material aspect, by social discourses .... The problem is not that modernist performance theorists, especially Grotowski, fail to acknowledge that the body is encoded by social discourses, but rather that they suggest that these codes are only an overlay on the body, that there is an essential body that can short-circut social discourses."

21 Brook, *Empty Space,* 49-50.

22 For a good analysis of this project and its limitations, see Jeremy Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (CUP 2000), chapter. 5.

23 Brook, *Empty Space,* 60.

compromise of submitting to the ink industry only to find herself penless, the constantly reductive tendency of the pure Revolting theatre must eventually turn against its own means of production. An actor without an audience cannot act; without someone watching, performance is not possible and will not be funded. Without the artificial safety net of massive subsidization and institutionalized cultural authority, one cannot simply purge the theatre again and again, always assuming that there will be a medium to fall back on. This is the one step Brustien's Revolter never takes: he does not turn the mirror on *itself,* nor does he question his right to hold and use it. Refusing these moves—insisting that the Romantic, Revolting theatre is important simply because it *declares itself so!*—is simply disingenuous. Artaud, for example, rallied against the tyrannical dictatorship of the playwright over the theatre only to establish a tyranny of his own.[24] If one is going to question the cultural construction or reality itself, one must make the question self-reflexive; the theatre is at least as much of a cultural construction as the universe is. When the Revolter rails against all constructions of authority and meaning, why on earth *should* anyone accept his authority to say anything? And so no one does, and Brustein's priest is alone and utterly irrelevant.

Some have used the notion of ritual as a way out of this dilemma, but it is a poor use of the term. In theories of ritual, some theatricalists have seen a model of effective action that does not depend for its authority on communication or a person for whom the action is performed. The act itself *does,* even if performed in isolation, according to this view.[25] Most ritual scholars would not subscribe to such a definition, insisting instead that ritual is effective precisely in the promises (Rappaport), social realities (Turner), or means and motivations (Geertz) that it establishes between people, or, at the least, is a strategy in a practice of social exchange and is thus functionless without a society (Bell). But this argument can be put more simply. The pure theatre cannot be a ritual because it is reductive. Because rituals are plural—there is not a single Ur-ritual of which all ritual performances are more-or-less effective manifestations—the decision to deploy this and not that ritual is a reference to the worldly context in which a ritual action is set. In that rituals are things human beings do with each other, this is a social and cultural and cultural context. A pure theatre is not ritual, therefore, because it will not allow itself this contextual space. In fact, this is exactly the problem confronted by Vladimir and Estragon in *Waiting for Godot;* they find their attempts to do something to get what they want (to make the time

24 Harris, *Dialogical Theatre,* 59: "Having wrested control from the playwright, Artaud is determined to retain it .... He is, in other words, like so many revolutionaries, interested in stripping tyrants of their power not to share it but to vest it in himself."

25 In truth, such notions of 'ritual' are more often borrowed from popular accounts of magic, Voudon, and the occult than any anthropologically or theologically defensible study.

pass) without reference to the world around them doomed to failure. The more their actions are tailored to their located, embodied situation, the more effective they become.[26]

In fairness, many of the most thoughtful followers of Artaud have foreseen how too pure a theatre will negate itself. And so, many of them have chosen the second response, which I call 'abandonment.' If the practice of theatre itself is part of the problem, then away with it. These are the artists who have left the theatre behind, though they often still use its language. The most famous example is Jerzy Grotowski's paratheatrical events, discussed briefly in the last chapter. Though his work is not a performance an any meaningful sense and has no narrative content, it does make use of certain techniques of physical action, intention, relationship, and emotion traditionally used in the art of theatrical acting.[27] Grotowski's goal was always a very Nietzschean one: the creation of a new kind of human identity. He has unmoored the concept of character-building from its theatrical context; the character no longer exists in the service of an act of storytelling and no longer has the distance of an iconic relationship to the person performing it.[28] This kind of work may be fascinating, but it is neither performance nor theatre. It does, however, look very much like the kind of activity Kevin Vanhoozer has in mind when he tries to draw an analogy between 'theatre' and evangelical Biblical theology.[29] He explains his analogy with reference to the Stanislavskian System even though he has no interest in performance as such; instead, he uses the Stanislavskian process of character-building to help explain the Christian process of sanctification.[30] Using the techniques of acting on human identity outside of a fictional or performative context is exactly the nature of the Grotowskian project, though he emphasizes immediate experience far more and mental reconstruction far less than the Russian master.

The other great Abandoner is the Brazilian Augusto Boal, founder of the Arena Theatre of São Paulo and developer of what he calls the "poetics of the oppressed."[31] His initial concern mirrors Brecht's—empathy coerces political acquiescence under the name of catharsis—but his solution is far more radical than the demonstrative acting style of the *Verfremdungseffekt.* His goal is a theatre that erases the distinction between audience and performer: all are to become SpectActors. His project is set

---

26 See below, p. 70 and following.

27 For a personal experience of Grotowskian work, see Grimes, *Beginnings,* chapter 11. For a more scholarly history, see chapter 10.

28 The first half of this sentence disqualifies Grotowskian paratheatre from the theatrical category by my own definition; the second half does so by Rozik's.

29 See Kevin Vanhoozer, "The Voice and the Actor," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method,* ed. J.G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

30 For a critique of Vanhoozer's use of the theatrical metaphor, see my essay "Can An Act Be True?" in Trevor Hart, ed. *Faithful Performances?* (London: Ashgate, forthcoming).

31 See, in particular, Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed.*

in the context of a literacy campaign and the premise is thus that just as fluency in written or spoken language can enable people to understand and effect their social world, theatrical enactment can be a tool through which people can experiment and discover how to build a more just society. The fictive nature of performance separates it from actual social action, but that does not make it any less empowering. The spectator "thinks and acts for himself" without "delegating" that power through empathy to a character or a professional performer. "Perhaps the theatre is not revolutionary in itself," writes Boal, "but have no doubts, it is a rehearsal of revolution!"[32]

One of Boal's less overtly political examples is an exercise he organized in a *barrio* of Lima. A woman had just discovered love letters her husband had been saving from another woman. How should she respond? The group enacted the scene several times and tried out different endings suggested by its members. Running away, locking the man out of the house, and simply crying a lot to make him feel guilty were all tried and rejected. The solution "accepted unanimously by the entire audience, men and women," was to "let him come in, get a really big stick, and hit him with all your might — give him a good beating. After you've beat him enough for him to feel repentant, put the stick away, serve him his dinner with affection, and forgive him."[33] It is important to point out, *contra* Boal that a unanimously accepted solution is not necessarily an effective, ethical, or wise one. But that aside, this is no longer theatrical performance. Grotowski used theatrical techniques to explore the self outside of the theatre; Boal is doing something similar to explore social relationships in the real world. Boal takes different techniques from the theatre than Grotowski, but he has a similar relationship to the practice itself: it can be mined for useful technology, but must in the end be abandoned as corrupt.

The third way out, simplification, is by far the most popular. Frustrated with the endless academic debates over the notion of character and its relationship to the actor and audience, this approach declares such questions off-limits. Empathy and alienation are not the point; the deep human discoveries of Stanislavskian acting are irrelevant; analyzing the iconicity or indexicality of the character's relationship to the actor is just making trouble. Critics might call this anti-intellectualism, but in anthropological terms, this approach is phenomenological. It takes as an objective given that the practice of theatre consists of stories performed by actors for an audience. The practical pedagogical question, then, is not how can an actor perform a character in a way more beautiful and true to life, per Stanislavsky, but what needs to be done to tell the story more clearly and effectively. There is no need to rigorously define clarity or effectiveness, either, as they will be instantly recognized in the rehearsal room. The call to

32 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* 155.

33 Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* 134.

make the storytelling process as simple as possible has been raised most vociferously by playwright and moviemaker David Mamet.[34] His is not an academic and it is not too difficult to find inconsistencies in his argument; he rails against Stanislavsky, for example, but unintentionally borrows from his later writings.[35] He dismisses the importance of an actor's construction of the inner emotional life of a character but uses the concept of intention with gusto, and so on. But this is to be expected. His proposal is not a theory of the theatre, though one could develop one from it, but an anti-method, a manifesto against certain unhelpful excesses he sees in the contemporary theatre: an undue emphasis on the actor's inner feelings over the audience's experience, primarily, but also a more general tendency to aestheticize the technical and design aspects of theatre over the storyline of which actorly overinteriority is just one manifestation. In contrast, Mamet advocates a theatre guided by the plot-building considerations long known to novelists, journalists, and (increasingly) moviemakers.

Under Mamet's inspiration, contemporary theatricalists and moviemakers have done gripping, compelling work. Mamet's plays and movies are very popular and quite good; though typically American, they have been enthusiastically embraced by audiences across the world. Many directors have found in Mamet's approach a way to do reliable, quality work with the constraints of time, money, and resources that are a reality of the industry. Nevertheless, Mamet's view of theatre has its drawbacks. First, it unabashedly privileges the dramatic text over the theatrical performance, placing the playwright at the core of a practice for which she is often not even present. The actors and directors are seen as the author's hands and eyes and ought, in theory, to be subject to the complete control of her creative mind. This leads to the second problem: a strict emphasis on play as story alone, as Mamet wants, widens to impassible the gulf between the audience and the performers. There is no space for audience participation or even interaction in the Mametian model. Unlike the Revolting Theatre, the audience is not ignored here; in fact, its tastes and aesthetic opinions are extremely important, just as the popular novelist takes pains to ensure that the reader will turn the page. But the Mametian theatre dismisses Brechtian notions of effectiveness even as it dismisses the Stanislavskian inner soul. Of course the theatre *does* something to the audience, but we are not to think about exactly what that is. Instead, we should think only about "telling a story." That story is often deeply moving, but it is not in principle different than a story told in any other medium—a novel, a poem, or (centrally) a film. It is hard to find space in this model for theatricality: the awareness an audience has that it *is* an audience, watching a play.

34 See, in particular, David Mamet, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York: Pantheon, 1997).

35 See Bella Merlin, "Mamet's Heresy and Common Sense: What's True and False in 'True and False,'" *NTQ* 16:3 (Aug. 2000), 249-254.

Because it relies on this kind of theatricality, the *Verfremdungseffekt* has not translated particular well to other media—television, books, music, oratory. The simplified theatre translates far better; few modern playwrights have been as successful as Mamet in making the transition to Hollywood screenwriting.

And yet, there is something a little paradoxical about too bold a Mametian theatre, and not just because of the huge social, political, and ontological issues it dismisses as unworthy of attention. If the point is just to tell a story, there are easier ways. Why bother with such an expensive, messy medium as the theatre? If the drama really is more important than the performance, why not just save time and read the script? That simplified theatricalists remain *theatricalists,* despite all the difficulties, is powerful evidence that, at the very least, they still recognize some kind of potential latent in the theatrical form that other narrative media lack. The strict Mametian, though, refuses on principle even to speculate about what that potential might be. So the simplification approach is a kind of enforced mysticism, asserting the practical reality of a power while denying that it can be fully understood through discourse. I have suggested elsewhere that this might be a useful theatrical model for practicing Christians who seek to take the authority of Scripture and the infinitude of God seriously.[36] As a practical response to the Stanislavskian-Brechtian debate, though, the intellectual silence advocated by this model may be reasonable, but it does little to advance our discourse.

The fourth and most radical of the responses is absurdism. If the Stanislavskians posit an inner human soul which can properly speak and the Brechtians posit a real social good which can be achieved, this response can accept neither. There is then no basis on which the theatre—or anything else—can say anything true or meaningful. All is "chat," in Ionesco's language.[37] The action of chat mimics speech but lacks meaningful content and effectual force; it is an amusing time-waster and no more. This response is the hollow flipside of purification, The cultural detritus that the purifiers seek to peel away is all there is, say the Absurdists; that famed inner human spirit is either absent or inhuman. The Absurdist theatre proper attempts to display the workings of chatting, hollow humanity so that we can recognize them for what they are. Ionesco is the foremost exemplar of this school, offering, for example, an image of a town transformed into an inarticulate herd of rhinoceri, a statement as much about the political implications of chat as the cultural ones. But there is a cheerier side to this response, too: the vapid Broadway musical which makes no claims to be doing anything other than trotting out clichéd character and plot tropes whose very attraction is that they are already known to the audience. No one goes to see *42nd Street* or the revival of *Thoroughly Modern Millie* (or Gilbert & Sullivan, for that matter) expecting

36 See Edelman, "Can an Act be True?"

37 Quoted in Boal, *Theatre of the Oppressed,* 78.

a mirror, a megaphone, or a medicine. The goal instead is beautiful twaddle: absolutely nothing done in a charming manner. Like the art of dinner-party conversation, it is chat at its purest and most graceful. Ionesco may attract a different audience from the self-consciously cotton-candy blockbuster, but the difference is only that Ionesco critiques or at least laments the chat, while Broadway revels in it.

This response, though, is a model of theatre as pastime, and as I argued above, that view is inherently unstable. It is hard to sustain a practice of chatter that does not at least occasionally drift into meaning. Even if it first appears accidentally, the human need to resist chaos and meaninglessness leads us to encourage meaning-making practices when we can. And so the absurd, vapid musical becomes *Les Miserables* or *Jesus Christ Superstar*. Even if they are maudlin and pedestrian, such shows stand as an attempt to reintroduce the mirror and megaphone functions into a form of theatre that had doubted that such things were possible.

The Embarrassing Theatre

This long-running debate over the nature and meaning of the performative has made theatre-makers very self-conscious about their work. It is seen as either irresponsible or naïve to participate in the practice of theatre without simultaneously engaging in a discourse *about* the theatre. This is an appropriate and inevitable response to the Brechtian challenge, but it is not always the most comfortable position for theatricalists to be in. There have always been radical theatrical reformers who want to do with the primary aim of pushing the medium itself forward, and God willing, there always will be. But the bulk of theatrical practice wants to be, ought to be, and *is* about more than just itself. Certainly, most today accept that the theatrical medium is not a pure given and that their work will need to establish its own form and tone, at least to some extent. But the vast majority of theatricalists want to be practitioners first and discoursers second. A practice requires, in Bourdieu's terms, a somewhat-common *habitus* on which to build. If a *habitus* is not held in common by a community, that community will have a hard time sharing a practice. How much more so, then, when a practitioner is forced to call into question the authority or justice of their own *habitus!* Then, the possibility of doing (or meaning) things socio-culturally *through* the practice, as if it were a medium, becomes all the more difficult. The cultural arteries that are our performative practices have become constricted; they grow thicker and thicker and begin to overwhelm the blood flowing through them. The more discursively problematic the practice of theatre becomes, the more difficult it is to *use* the practice of theatre to achieve particular ends, through ritualization or not. Of course, there is no turning back the clock; not that we are aware of the

problematics of theatrical practice, we cannot and ought not feign ignorance or innocence. But this just means that a (practical) solution to the problem is all the more urgent.

Though the theatre of his time looks stilted to us now, Stanislavsky had it easier. His theories of the nature of theatrical practice, the actor's role, and the relationship of audience to performer generated little controversy. The basic notions of 'character' and 'performance' he used were widely present in the *habitus* of his time, and there was little difficulty in building on them. Notice how easy it was for Stanislavsky to assume that the actors' and director's emotional engagement with a play would match the audience's: "Forget about the public. Think about yourself. If you are interested, the public will follow you."[38] Stanislavsky's discourse about the theatre was a good, clean match for the *habitus* that undergirded theatrical practice at his time. That is adamantly no longer the case.

It was Brecht and Artaud who shifted the discourse in a way more maladjusted to the prevalent *habitus*. Why, then, did they not feel the straightjacketing that afflicts modern theatricalists? As for Brecht, he had in his Marxism a new social consciousness—a kind of artificial *habitus,* essentially—that he could substitute for the old, discredited one, and on the basis of which he could build up his theatrical practice. He assumed a Marxist audience just as Stanislavsky assumed a modernist one, the *Everyman* dramatist assumed an English Christian one, and so on. To this day, theatergoers with a distaste for Marxist thought often find Brecht's work patronizing, didactic, and dull. Artaud, in contrast, *did* feel the effects of that straightjacketing—recall how little actual performance he completed in his lifetime—but in that he was able to work, he had his own form of ideology (a suspicion of all culture, the horridness of the world, the need to recognize that fact, if not transcend it) that served as a kind of jury-rigged pseudo-*habitus* from which to engage in theatrical practice.

The contemporary theatricalist's bind is that, though neither she nor her audience are naïve enough to fully re-embrace a theatre that displays the truth and beauty of the inner man, she cannot uncritically accept Brecht's Marxism or Artaud's nihilism or any other alternative ideological pseudo-*habtus* either. There many be things that she wants to say and do theatrically that lend themselves to a character-and-empathy-based theatre, and there may be goals that only a *Verfremdungseffekt* can achieve, but neither kind of theatrical practice commands the wholehearted *habitus*-bred loyalty from a modern audience that their originators expected. So any modernist play done today must be, to some extent, a mimicry of a modernist play, and the same for a Brechtian one.

If asked to explain this situation, Bourdieu and Bell might see a loss of the misrecognition of

38 Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares,* 120.

actual effects that is essential for a practice's proper functioning. Bourdieu and Bell assert that the actual effect of a practice *is* different than the goals it claims for itself. They do not address, however, what would happen if that suddenly ceased to be the case, as it would if the practitioners were confronted with a thorough ethnographic description of their own practice. (Etic observers are, in the logic of practice, in a privileged position over emic practitioners to recognize the effective ends of a practice.) Once the veil of misrecognition is gone, practitioners could deny it, as the Simplifiers did with theatre, they could opt for an ever-deepening irony, as the Absurdists did, or they could give up the practice entirely like the Abandoners. But if the practice is to be maintained, what is to be done?

The situation strongly resembles a resurgent interest over the last few decades, particularly in Britain, in the morality and mystery plays of the middle ages. The difficulties of performing such pieces for a modern, secular audience are manifold. Our English, our performance spaces, our social context, and our gender roles have all changed, not to mention theology. Paula Neuss, in reviewing a large number of these performances, notes a more basic problem: many productions put an unusual premium on historical reconstruction and suffered an academic dryness as a result. "Directors are clearly nervous of tampering with the text in a way that would hardly worry them if it were Shakespeare," she writes.[39] She speculates this strange hesitation comes from the fact that directors "find the subject of God embarrassing" to present to a modern audience:

> An audience cannot be forced to 'see a universal image', not even when it is spelled out for them in the programme .... The feeling that most of his audience does not believe in God (or at least will not be prepared to admit it if they do) is perhaps the cause of the embarrassment (or worse still, coyness) that mystery plays sometimes bring in directors of modern productions. "How is God to be put across?", they ask themselves ... God usually comes down to ground level and addresses the audience (or even Adam and Eve) in the manner of a modern clergyman speaking to those who do not share his faith: in jovial tones, tinged with embarrassment, yet showing a clear awareness of his superiority.[40]

Is that it? Are we embarrassed by sincere God-talk stripped of its pastoral or academic qualifications? I think so. This image of God, one who sees himself as superior to his creation but self-consciously ashamed of that superiority, has more to do with our own embarrassment than any theological truth. The embarrassment is made up of two incompatible impulses. We want, first, to acknowledge some kind of truth resident in God-language. Some of us might actually believe, but even for the nonbelievers, there is a deep interest in religious practice as cultural phenomena, as something that some people do, and others could, find meaningful. But secondly, we are aware how preposterous it is to try to actually *create*

39 Paula Neuss, "God and Embarrassment," in *Studies in Drama* 5 (CUP 1983), 252.

40 Neuss, "God and Embarrassment," 252.

authentic religious practice or discourse: to ask an actor to play God, for instance, or to write lines to come out of God's mouth, or to decide what a real Divine Being would look like and how It would act around Its creations. To do so would be to equate our own creative activity with the Divine Creativity, and Brechtian thought has made us all too aware of how far from 'natural' our creativity is. So we talk about God hesitatingly, sheepishly, or indirectly, all too aware of the danger of hubris or just sounding like an idiot, but we *do talk.*

I disagree with Neuss's diagnosis that the problem is directors who find the subject of God embarrassing. A self-professedly religious director will not have an easier time doing 'a play about God' to a general audience, and perhaps not even to a religious one. That which makes theatrical God-assertion embarrassing is not faith or the lack of it, but our desire to speak of Real Things and our inability to do so. Religious people can be, and often are, embarrassed about God-talk, too: just look at Neuss's own model of the 'modern clergyman.'[41] The embarrassment is a constituent part of modern theatrical attempts at communicating Real Things, and faith, in itself, does not affect that. Brecht shows us that there can never be a strict and complete separation between an actor and the character she plays. Performers are always and invariably implicated themselves in their performances. Embarrassment comes when a performance requires an actor to presume an authority for which she feels unqualified. Most seasoned actors are more than happy to presume all sorts of authority—they do not embarrass easily—but the presumption of an authority that transcends human finitude as fallibility *as such* will usually still trigger embarrassment. An utterly unqualified statement of absolute truth—the kind that only God can make—would be embarrassing for most any modern to say. Even the most ardent Christian would feel self-conscious if asked to embody in themselves the very Voice of God.

But might this embarrassment be useful? The Rev. Billy, a character of performance artist Bill Talen and my nominee for the Ritualized analogue of the Revolting priest, suggest so. The Reverend is a New York street preacher and activist who preaches against consumerism through the church of Stop Shopping, often through Boalian-style unannounced interventions in coffee shops and chain stores around New York. He talks about the "bright, unclaimed space [that] opens up" when a person "lift[s her] hand from the product and back[s] away from it,"[42] or, more dramatically, "the landscape of

41 In fact, one could argue that the only person who would have *no* embarrassment about presenting God on stage would be a devout atheist. Showing a Wizard-of-Oz-style God—impressive on the outside, hollow underneath—might upset people, but there is nothing particularly *embarrassing* about it. The atheist is not embarrassed for her atheism. Perhaps embarrassment comes in direct proportion to the speaker's (however unarticulated) belief that there is actually Something there which she is unable to present properly.

42 Bill Talen [as the Rev. Billy] "God-sightings and Post-Commercial Complexity," n.d., 1, available online at http://revbilly.com. A revised (and abridged) version of this essay appears as chapter 4, "Not Buying," in Bill Talen,

previously erased memories which opens before us like some forgotten Edenic utopia when we stop buying tchochkes."[43] But in working with the people he calls "our parishioners" and a more conventional performer would call "the audience," he discovered that even the most successful of them did not, often, drastically change their shopping patterns, much less actually cease shopping entirely. In what sense, then, were they successful? Well, for some,

> the utopian future that advertising promises with each purchase became a bit of a joke. (When the seduction fails, it becomes silly very quickly. The tall rich white woman in the car bats her eyelashes, we say no, and she suddenly looks like Rodney Dangerfield.) Many of these not-buyers never consumed much anyway but now cultivate a new independence from the things they feel they are forced to buy .... others seemed to come alive politically, smiling as they strode with us into Starbucks and Disney Stores and Wal-Marts, interrupting the flow of sweatshop items with inspired foolishness. They found the embarrassing moment that is revelatory. They ascended to the state of Sanctified Oddness.[44]

What is this joke? This embarrassment? For the first group, the humor of advertising's ludicrous promises becomes a means to distance themselves from the act of purchasing, even while they are performing it. The second group, however, was in a situation very much like the modern director of mystery plays. The message they had to express—here, one about the moral costs of capitalist exploitation—was both profoundly important and ridiculously beyond any socially legitimate authority they could assume. And so it was embarrassing to, for example, storm into the Disney Store and declare that Mickey Mouse is the Antichrist. But that embarrassment, Rev. Billy argues, is *revelatory*. The transgression of the reasonable, defensible, and even the respectable ("Oddness") is a way of opening up to the possibility of receiving and expressing that which cannot be understood or articulated through a social framework. Jill Lane, in her analysis of the Reverend's work, calls Billy's subversive actions in commercial space a "poetics of useful embarrassment."[45] It is a poetics that makes use of the body's relative immobility to interrupt the flow of capital or information in the spaces of its greatest vulnerability. But those spaces are meticulously designed to control the flow of bodies in a particular way; to use the body in those spaces to problematize them requires a performer to use his body in a decidedly *uncomfortable* and *inappropriate* way. The Reverend elaborates:

> Going into a really sophisticated retail church like Starbucks or Disney is still a harrowing experience. But when you feel excruciatingly inappropriate [...] and you feel the executives in Orlando or Seattle staring at you through the surveillance cameras, well ... Embarrassment is [...] the signal that we have found their power.[46]

What Should I Do If Reverend Billy Is In My Store? (New York: New Press, 2003).

43 Bill Talen [as the Rev. Billy]. "We Believe," sermon, n.d., online at http://revbilly.com in MP3 format.

44 Talen, "God-sightings," 3. Also in Talen, *What Should I Do,* 82, but with the two passages in reverse order.

45 Jill Lane, "Reverend Billy: Preaching, Protest, and Postindustiral Flânerie," *TDR* 46:1 (Spring 2002), 61.

Not just *their* power, but the performer's, too; this kind of embarrassment signals that the performer has tapped into an authority that decorum insists that *they must not have*. The performance has literally 'touched a nerve'—it has discovered a weakness in a prevailing cultural system and has pointed it out and poked away at it in contravention of the behavioral norms embedded in the *habitus* from which both the system and the performer operate. Of course, this could be said of sheer lunatics and vandals, too; what distinguishes Rev. Billy's Starbucks invasion is that there is a sense, however paradoxical or ironized, that *he is right*. The authority he 'claims' as a minister to point out the evils of Starbucks is both *prohibited* and *validated* by different parts of the American *habitus*. American culture condemns greed, homogenization, and inauthenticity even as it values commercial power and efficiency. This contradiction need not be noticed until someone disobeys the rules of decorum that divine one practice from another. Through that embarrassing confrontation, Rev. Billy's theatre does its work.

The only real difference between Rev. Billy's embarrassment and that of the directors whose work Neuss reviewed is that the latter try to hide from it while the former embraces it. That modern productions of morality plays are embarrassing is seen by Neuss (rightly) as a flaw. That a Starbucks Cell Phone Opera is embarrassing is by design and a sign of its effectiveness. This, I propose, is an appropriate model to respond to the loss of misrecognition in the practice of theatre.

The Embarrassing Theatre acknowledges, without attempting to resolve, the basic paradox of a practice that attempts to do the work of a discourse. Because of this acknowledgement, the performance necessarily breaks down as a coherent whole. For Bill Talen, "Reverend Billy" is more than a character but less than an alias. This is no secret. He expects his audiences both to be aware of that information and to know that it is not 'supposed' to be operative at the manifest level of the performance. Richard Schechner's model of the constituent texts that make up a performance is helpful here. The model is made of four concentric circles, labeled, from the inside out, drama, script, theatre, and performance. "Drama is what the writer writes; the script is the interior map of a particular production, the theatre is the specific set of gestures performed by the performers in any given performance; the performance is the whole event, including audience and performers."[47] Outside of these stand the spheres of everyday life and the cosmos. In Schechner's model, these appear as concentric circles; each out layer is focused on and geared to the one inside it and, in John's Emight's application of the model to Indonesian

46 *Freedom's Got Us Surrounded,* performed by Bill Talen at the Salon Theatre, New York, 26 March 2000, unpublished text quoted in Lane, *Reverend Billy,* 71. The elipsis is in the source; bracketed ellipses are mine.

47 Schechner, *Performance Theory,* 71. A few pages later, Schechner proposes an 'avant-garde' model that places the circles in dialectical tension rather than concentrically (in discussing his production of *Tooth* with The Performance Group, 77), but even this is not what is going on with the Ritualized Theatre, where the circles are actually incompatible.

topeng performance, the audience's experience of the performance proceeds as a diameter, moving from the outer levels to the center and back out again.[48] In the theatre of embarrassment, however, the levels remain stubbornly at odds with one another. The image of a Jummy Swaggart-esque preacher railing against Mickey Mouse is incongruous; the audience is aware of the clash between the drama the preacher is performing (anticonsumerist activism) and its theatrical presentation (a holy-roller sermon). The experience of sitting in a coffee shop and having a staged performance erupt around you without warning is similarly incongruous; the point is not to define the appropriate context in which a script can be presented, but to set a drama in an ontological and physical space which does *not* accommodate it, in order to challenge common understandings about the sorts of behavior patters ('theatres,' in Schechner's model) appropriate to each place. Discourses and practices come together and do *not* fit; that incompatibility is the Ritualized Theatre's essential starting point.

Unlike the environmental or community-based theatre movements of the 1970s and their modern incarnations, this is not about appropriating old spaces (warehouses, garages, airplane hangars, steel mills) and transforming them into theatres.[49] The Starbucks does not cease to be a Starbucks after Reverend Billy's performance. Neither of the space's two uses—commercial and theatrical—is subsumed under the other, as in the environmental theatre, nor are the two shows as symbiotic, as in much liturgical drama proper. Rather, the two are shown to be, and remain, at odds.

That incompatibility is embarrassing, but is it also a powerfully honest description of the post-modern theatricalist who still wishes to use the theatre as a meaningful practice. There is a fundamental incompatibility between the grossly physical medium of the theatre and the transtemporal and transphysical truths that the theatre has tried to convey since Euripides and that MacIntyre points out as a necessary function of a certain sort of theatre. There is a fundamental incompatibility between the inarticulateness of performance as a practice and the performative act as a discursive and effective instance of meaning-working. A doctrine of divine inspiration might, in theory, short-circuit this problem, but such a doctrine is, first, hard to reconcile with the sheer variety of theatrical practice; second, not a doctrine accepted by the community of theatre practitioners (including audiences) and this not a part of the *habitus* on which the practice of theatre is based; and third, irreconcilable with the awareness that a performance must be a conscious construction, an awareness that is Brecht's great legacy to the theatre. Faith, in itself, cannot stop meaningful theatre from being embarrassing.

48 See Emigh, *Masked Performance*, 188f.

49 See Sara Brady, "Welded to the Ladle: *Steelbound* and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre," *TDR* 44:3 (Fall 2000), 51-74 for a good discussion of how a formally innovative, Lecoq-inspired, community-based performance piece may, for that very reason, be deeply conservative.

From this comes the notion of detritus. The junked sacrament is a physical manifestation of that embarrassment; it is an object which signifies a truth which cannot be contained within the place or practice in which it operates, and therefore is taken to signify absolutely nothing. A detritus must simultaneously be the most important object in the universe and junk. If the detritus was not garbage, then the attachment to it would not be embarrassing (and thus effective, per Rev. Billy). If the detritus was not also supremely important, the attachment to it would simply be psychotic.

In its most developed form, detritus is generally a physical object—a prop—because in this form, it can most easily maintain its identity as it moves from context to context within the performative medium. But in the practice's history, the Ritualized Theatre has also used spoken language in order to indicate both that which cannot be indicated and the ridiculousness of trying. The most famous example is probably Lucky's 'think' in the first act of *Waiting for Godot.* In a play that constantly hovers around existential issues, this is the only overt statement in the play of a philosophy of existence. It can be mined for actual philosophical claims applicable to the real world in the way that Camus's *L'Etranger* can be. But the most obvious fact about Lucky's speech is that it is utter nonsense. Though Didi and Gogo, like the audience, have sought an explanation of their situation from the beginning, when Lucky offers them one, their pummeling him to make him shut up wins the audience's approval.

Detritus, whether object or language, does not being together two spheres of meaning into a classical unity. It does not mediate at all. Nor does it set up a dialectic that can be used as an intellectual tool. It stands as an unresolved contradiction, an embarrassing inconsistency that will not go away. It is ontological dirt. The contention that the theatre can still *say something* is itself dirty, per Mary Douglas's notion of dirt as "matter out of place."[50] What the Ritualized Theatre does is to hold up that dirt as a sacrament, rather than sweeping it under the ontological (or physical) rug. This is an example of a move of strategic self-differentiation that Bell called ritualization, and it applies to theatrical practice as well as it does many others.

Because practices are better described than explained, the next chapter will look at three major playwrights who can stand, I argue, as pillars of the ritualized theatre: Samuel Beckett, Tony Kushner, and Glen Berger. I hope to show how this method can provide theatricalists interested in meaningful, effective theatre a way forward. Also, though the theatre is far from a typical practice, I hope this example might shed some light on the ways in which practices can acknowledge and make use of the loss of their own misrecognition.

---

50 Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger,* passim.

CHAPTER FOUR

Some Examples: Beckett, Kushner, Berger

What, then, *is* the Ritualized Theatre of the modern West? Much of this essay has thus far defined it in negative terms: *neti, neti, neti,* not this, not this, not this. As I wish to claim that ritualization is a valid positive stratagem for the modern theatre to apply, I need to show that it can be feasibly done. And so what I most need are actual examples of the theatre I am describing. But because the theatre since Brecht has been a discursive practice, conscious of and critical about its own means and methods of production, some theoretical explanation may also be genuinely, if secondarily, helpful. The goal of this chapter is then, first, to present some major examples of ritualization in the modern theatre and second, to trace out how understandings of ritualization and detritus have changed as the practice has developed.

To these ends, this chapter will present and discuss three paragons of the Ritualized Theatre: the Irishman Samuel Beckett and the Americans Tony Kushner and Glen Berger. In keeping with academic convention, I am using the playwrights' names as markers for the spheres of practice and discourse directly influenced by their words (as talk of the *Übermensch* is called 'Nietzschean' and the privatization of British public service is called 'Thatcherite'). This convenient shorthand is something of a misnomer. My examples are not the scripts that these men have written but performances based on those scripts. Whenever possible, then, I cite productions that I have personally witnessed; when that is not possible, the object of my analysis is the (potential) sphere of performative action these scripts open up, which ought to be distinguished from the scripts themselves. There are, of course, many other theatrical artists whose work could be analyzed here. A fuller version of this chapter would discuss the work of Adrienne Kennedy, the Wooster Group, Dario Fo, Susan Lori-Parks, Charles Mee, Octavio Solis, and others. The three playwrights I have chosen, however, do present a coherent history of theatrical ritualization's development in some of its most influential forms.

Samuel Beckett

The field of Beckettian analysis is so variegated and well-trod that it is now nearly impossible to say

anything definitive about what Beckett's plays unambiguously *mean*. This is probably a good thing. Still, there are some statements than can be made with some confidence about the effect of a Beckettian performance on an audience. Just as Beckett has often been seen to prefigure the deconstructionist philosophy and literary criticism of the current era, I think it is fair to see Beckett as the progenitor of the Ritualized Theatre.

Beckett's relationship with metaphysics can help us understand his parallel relationship with ritual. Despite his overt unwillingness to comment on his writing, Beckett's work has been a major generative force in modern philosophy and literary criticism. Many critics have noted that his plays cry out for interpretation, even imposing upon the audience the job of searching for or making sense of the event that is actually happening in performance. What a Beckett play is *about* is a critical construction, not a given, and the audience member who wants to understand the play will be forced into the critical role. Wolfgang Iser sees this as a property of the way Beckett simultaneously uses and dislocates theatrical conventions (foreground and background, plot, character, and so on) for comic effect. He calls these techniques "minus functions" as they are used to draw the audience's attention to that which is *not* present. For example, Beckett plays with and attacks the audience's assumed preconception of dramatic action by focusing the plot of *Waiting for Godot* on the non-action of 'waiting.' The spectator, writes Iser, is "left with an array of empty spaces into which his mobilized interpretative faculties are relentlessly drawn and which are manipulated by them [the voids] in a specific manner."[1]

On the one hand, there is nothing surprising about this. Beckett's work is certainly more formally innovative than other playwrights of his stature and era: Ibsen, O'Neill, Williams, and Chekhov, for example. This is perhaps what keeps Brustein from appealing to Beckett as a theatrical Revolter; it is hard to identify the establishment, the rebel, and the act of revolt in Beckett's plays simply because it is hard to identify *anything* in them. Beckett pushes live storytelling to the bare limit of its capacity in a way that has not grown much less unconventional in the half-century since it was first seen. This formal novelty ought to provoke us to watch differently, just as Joyce's formal experimentation in *Ulysses* forced his readership into a new understanding of the practice of novel-reading. But on the other hand, Iser's contention that Beckett's work catalyzes our *interpretative faculties* (and not our emotional ones, say) is in need of explanation. Joyce, famously, made a point of putting enough in his novels to "keep the professors busy for centuries arguing over what [he] meant." Beckett, in contrast, scorned the critical project, claiming that his plays neither required nor invited explanation. He wrote to director

1 Wolfgang Iser, "Counter-sensical Comedy and Audience Response in Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot,'" *Gestos* 4 (1987), 21-32, reprinted in Steven Connor, *New Casebooks* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 56.

Alan Schneider:

> [I] have no elucidations to offer of mysteries that are all of their [the critics'] own making. My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else. If people want to have headaches among the overtones, let them. And provide their own aspirin.[2]

This attitude suffuses all of Beckett's writing, not just his letters. In the Beckettian stage universe, the idea that well-thought-out words can make sense of people, society, the world, or most anything else is resolutely mocked. In *Endgame,* Clov first laughs at his master, Hamm, in response to his fearful question, "We're not beginning to ... to ... mean something?"[3] Beckett often pairs one character who talks endlessly but says very little (Pozzo in *Godot,* Winnie in *Happy Days*) with another who is wholly or largely mute and says about as much (Lucky in *Godot,* Willie in *Happy Days*). Some of his short plays contain no dialogue at all.[4] But the best known and most telling example of a Beckettian character trying to talk his way to an understanding of the world is Lucky's "think" in *Godot*'s act one. Pozzo tries to repays his hosts for their civility by showing off Lucky's talents. He asks Vladimir and Estragon, "What do you prefer? Shall we have him dance, or sing, or recite, or think, or—"(26).[5] "I'd rather he'd dance, it'd be more fun," answers Estragon. "Not necessarily," replies Pozzo (26). 'Thinking' is a diversion like any other; it is for 'fun.' But when Lucky launches into a long, incomprehensible speech that sounds like the history of theology put through a meat grinder—that is, when Lucky tries and fails to make his words *mean* something—he is wrestled to the ground by the other three (28-29).[6] Pozzo, Lucky's master, grabs his thinking hat (without which Lucky is mute) and tramples it to the ground, declaring, "There's an end to his thinking!" (30) Pozzo is a petty tyrant, but in performance, the audience sympathizes with him here; Lucky's barked-out diatribe was only disturbing the quiet order of the play and doing no one any good. We, too, are happy to see it over.

If *this* is what the interpretative faculty produces, why on earth should Beckett prod his audiences

---

2 Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment,* ed Ruby Cohen (London: 1983), 109, quoted in Steven Connor, Introduction, *New Casebooks: Waiting for Godot and Endgame* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 1.

3 Samuel Beckett, *Endgame* (London: Faber, 1952), 27. The ellipsis is Beckett's.

4 *Breath,* most famously, but also the *Play Without Words* series.

5 Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove, 1954), and the production at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, Jan. 2003, directed by Walter Asmus, with Johnny Murphy (Estragon), Barry McGovern (Vladimir), Conor Lovett (Lucky), and Alan Stanford (Pozzo), designed by Louis de Brocquy, lighting by Rupert Murray. Citations to the script will appear in parentheses by page number. Note that each numbered page in the Grove edition refers to two pages which would in most books be numbered separately.

6 The speech begins, "Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extention who from the heights of divine apathia divine apasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell..." In performance, the speech is barely comprehensible, thought that it contains vaguely theological themes is apparent.

into interpretation? There is, apparently, no choice. Simply sleeping through the day thoughtlessly is not permitted; in *Happy Days,* whenever Winnie closes her eyes, a harsh bell immediately wakes her up. Questions need to be asked and answered proffered, no matter how ineffective or ludicrous they may be. "If all of Beckett's characters are ruined philosophers of a kind," writes Steven Connor, "they continue to live their ruination philosophically, that is to say, restlessly asking *why* things should be this way."[7] This is the effect provoked in the audience, too: they are forced to become the very critics that Beckett despises, trying to make sense of performances that eschew sense. In *Waiting for Godot,* for example, if the audience wants to make Didi and Gogo's wait in any sense comprehensible, they need to at least address the critical question of Godot's identity. (What other play not only never shows its title character but leaves the audience questioning the very nature of his existence?) But this is no easy task. James L. Calderwood argues, first, that "all attempts to establish Godot's identity encounter Beckett's insistence that if he had known he would have said — which of course may or may not be true."[8] Certainly, the play itself offers no precise clues. After an act or so of failed effort to identify or recognize an actual Godot, the audience may being to abandon the quest for identity and start to look for Godot simply as the antidote to the endless waiting they are seeing, and thus as an "outcome," any outcome. "Let Godot come in whatever form he likes — God, Pozzo, or The Great Carrot — as long as he puts an end to waiting."[9] By the middle of act two, however, the audience has realized that Godot is not coming, even if the characters have not. At this point, "Godot disappears even as the possibility of an identifiable outcome." Calderwood knows all this. He traces out the process of Godot's critical de-identification and then, in the next paragraph, writes:

> Still, since we can count no man happy until he has speculated about the meaning of 'Godot,' let me offer my own exercise in divination ... [10]

His 'divination' is a bizarre reading of the word 'Godot' backwards with a double d as 'tod-dog,' or 'death-dog' or (backwards again) 'god-death' or all three together. He makes no effort to defend the reading or even argue it convincingly. It is utter absurdity, which is exactly the point. If we *must* explain Godot even though we *cannot,* dead German tail-first dogs are as good as anything. Finding the true Godot is not what lets us count a man happy; the act of speculating is enough in itself.[11]

---

7 Connor, Introduction, 3.

8 James L. Calderwood, "Ways of Waiting in 'Waiting for Godot,'" *Modern Drama* 29 (1985), 363-375, reprinted in Steven Connor, *New Casebooks* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 36.

9 Calderwood, "Ways of Waiting," 37.

10 Ibid.

11 Because I too wish to be counted happy, let me offer my own speculation. "Godot" is not a divine figure wholly external to the two men but the realization and personification of their relationship to each other, and thus to the

And this does, in fact, work: in performance, *Godot* is a hopeful, even inspiring play.[12] This should not be overstated: *Godot's* mood is far from optimistic, but unlike much Existentialist and Absurdist work, it decisively rejects hopelessness. Long after the audience has abandoned its attempts to identify Godot, Vladimir is thinking about what he will say tomorrow about today when he sees Estragon dozing:

> He'll know nothing. He'll tell me about the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot ....
> *(He looks again at Estragon.)* At me too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying,
> He is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on. (58).[13]

Perhaps that 'someone' is Godot; perhaps not. As audience members, that is no longer our question. The simple acknowledgement that Vladimir *sees* his friend and that he, in turn, *is seen* by another is a great comfort. And that the watchers can know what the watched need and can provide it—a carrot, some sleep—makes us feel that some tiny act of understanding has been paradoxically achieved. "We'll hang ourselves tomorrow," says Vladimir at the very end, "unless Godot comes" (60).Even if he still knows nothing about who Godot is, there is a confidence in that assertion of him, of the future, and of a plan connecting the two that assumes him despite. The ability to make that kind of assertion is the reason why Vladimir (or the audience) would need to know who Godot is, anyway; even if Godot remains an unknown, our identification of him has worked. The interpretative questions provoked by the play have not been answered, but they have been satisfied anyway.

The paradoxical relationship between question and answer in Beckett's work parallels its use of ritual quite neatly. Just as the plays show (in the characters) and provoke (in the audience) the failure of philosophical questioning, they display and enact failed attempts at ritualized action. There is a victory in asking unanswerable questions just as there is an effectiveness in the act of performing an ineffective ritual. Ritualization *cannot* be effective, as its stated means and goal are too large to fit into a rigorously minimal Beckettian universe. Yet it *does* appear to work. Louis Overbrook explains that though Beckett's work is basically comic, rituals emptied of their meaning and reduced to farce

> is not what we see in these plays. On the other hand, neither do we see that ritual in itself is capable of transforming reality .... By allowing us to see ritual as a means of evading the

world. The Messiah will come when we no longer need him, say the kabbalists; Gogo and Didi can make Godot themselves. What other explanation can there be for those two strange nicknames, which have nothing to do with their actual names and can combine into something very like Go-dot? (The final 't' would have been less of a problem when the play premiered in Paris, in French, where the last letter of *En Attandant Godot* would not have been pronounced anyway. This is, of course, no more defensible than the dead dogs but hopefully just as effective.

12 Of course this is a subjective judgment, but based on my reading of the script and the production at the Gate Theatre, Dublin in 2003 directed by Beckett's former assistant, Walter Asmus, it strikes me that a production which did not show some final hope for Didi and Gogo would be a misreading of the script. In Dublin, I think the sense of hope was palpable and shared by the whole of the audience.

13 Glen Berger will bring nearly this exact speech back to life in the person of the Taxidermist. See below, p. 96.

> reality of the void, as a means of seeking meaning in the void, Beckett's work seems to expose the futility of such goals in tension with the desire to reach them. Because of this ability to express the tension, ritual enacted in art may be the "remains" which say, to me at least, another has come before.[14]

Of course, Overbrook's 'remains' have much in common with my concept of detritus. I concur in her analysis of ritual's function, but she inadequately defines ritual in this (quite brief) essay.[15] She sees ritual as most any habitual action, taking a cue (apparently) from the Freudian equation of ritual and compulsive behavior. Her main ritual image is the mobius strip, the repetitive, continuous shape whose inside becomes its outside. And most of her examples of ritualized habit are in fact patterns of language: Clov's refrain of "I'll leave you" in *Endgame,* the "we're waiting for Godot" and "adieu" sequences in *Godot,* and so on. The repetition of language is a common property of ritual, but no theorist would consider it a sufficient one. My problems with it are twofold. First, linguistic repetition in itself is not theatrical. Like a novelistic or musical *leitmotif,* repetition may only be meaningful within the fictional world the play depicts and not itself a performed action that therefore concerns the audience. It may be recitive and not active. This is the case with the word 'gray' in *Endgame;* repeated endlessly, largely by Clov, its use is more to describe the world in which *Endgame* is set than to mark something that Clov is doing again and again; it has a consistent reference but not a consistent function. Repetition, in itself, does not make something a speech-act, which ritual language must be. Second, many literary critics who make use of the term ritual do not show how ritual action or language self-consciously differentiates itself from its non-ritual relatives. This happens particularly easily when the term 'ritual' is conflated with 'habit,' as in Claudia Clausius,[16] Stephen Watt,[17] and Martha Fehsenfeld, whose comments on *Happy Days* are typical: "So grounded, Winnie can only go through the motions of living out her days, and these inevitably become ritualized vestiges of what was—of all that is left."[18] But this is just a reassertion of the problematic dialectic Bell first critiqued in *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice.*[19] Ritual,

14 Louis More Overbrook, "Getting On: Ritual as Façon in Beckett's Plays," in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1987), 26.

15 Overbrook, "Getting On." The essay is only seven pages long, but there is no look at the anthropological theory of ritual at all.

16 Claudia Clausius, "Bad Habits While Waiting for Godot: The Demythification of Ritual," in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Press, 1987),

17 Stephen Watt, "Beckett by Way of Baudrillard: Toward a Political Reading of Samuel Beckett's Drama," in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Press, 1987). The utopian universe of meaningful and natural possibility in Beckettian drama, which Watt calls the "green world ... forms a mythic space which opposes ritual and the social structure which endorses it" (105-106). For this opposition between myth (freedom, nature, possibility) and ritual (the enforcement of social structure), Watt turns to what strikes me as a misreading of Turner and van Gennep's understanding of the function if *rite de passage* in social structure. Certainly, a rite of passage functions within the sociocultural sphere, but so does everything else in Turner and van Gennep's anthropology. The link that Watt wants to draw between his concept of 'myth' and Turner's *communitas* is simply not supported. Communitas, like everything else that can be the object of the anthropologist's study, exists in society and culture, not outside of it in the "green world."

first defined as action in opposition to myth as signifying text, then becomes the bridge when action action takes on the functions both of itself (habit) and of text (signification). It is difficult to find any action which *cannot* be searched for the signification somehow invested in it; it is harder still to find such insignificant actions in the meaning-working practice of storytelling, and it is well-nigh impossible to find *anything* insignificant in such a master of the minimal sign as Beckett. Ritual actions, onstage or off, need to be distinguished from their non-ritual kin in terms of their strategy, not their capacity to mean.

What might a fuller picture of Beckettian ritual look like? A Durkheimian or Rappaportian definition will not work here. Beckett never provides anything like a society to which allegiance can be inscribed in ritual participants or which can set the terms of the promises which social actors accept. Nor do most Beckettian plays seem to be plotted clearly enough to be a depiction of a van Gennepian *rite de passage*. Susan Maughlin does attempt an analysis of *Endgame* based on Turnerian liminality; though a valiant effort, her essay shows how difficult it is to map Turner's social drama onto Beckett's work.[20] The social drama as Turner describes it requires the liminal phase to be framed by a stable society which can undergo crisis and survive it. First, there is no society as such in *Endgame*; though unclear, the play lends itself to a post-apocalyptic reading (the outside world is called 'gray,' 'zero,' and 'corpsed'). Second, though Maughlin is right to point out the antistructural nature of the play, it is not framed by anything that could be regarded as structure.[21] At best, a theatrical performance of *Endgame* is itself a liminoid event, breaking away the social and linguistic structures with which we normally understand our world. And as theatrical practice as a whole is liminoid, that does not make it particularly unique.

The difficulty is that many critics looking to find ritual in Beckett have looked for the theatrical depiction of characters engaged in ritual action, which can then be judged by the audience as more or (usually) less effective. The characters *do* ritual and the audience *sees* it (fail). But that is simply not to

---

18 Martha Fesenfeld, "From the Perspective of an Actress/Critic: Ritual Batters in Beckett's *Happy Days,*" in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Press, 1987), 50.

19 Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (OUP 1992).

20 Susan Maughlin, "Liminality: An Approach to Artistic Progress in *Endgame,*" in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Press, 1987).

21 The only possible frame would be the audience's pre- and post-theatrical experience. But if that were the case, one might expect some kind of rites of separation and reaggregation at the beginning and end of the play. They are not present. (Maughtlin does not pursue this line of thought, instead analyzing just the drama, not the theatre.) To make *Endgame* fit Turner's model, Maughlin has to it as an allegory of the process of playwrighting itself: "In her view, Ham is author and Clov is character"(Maughlin, "Liminality," 86). With that assumption, we do have a relationship that can undergo a liminoid transition: like Turner's Ndembu initiands, Clov must gain his independence from his 'parent,' Hamm. Even if one accepts this view—and though it is plausible, it is far from given in the text—*Endgame* does not depict anything that is recognizable as a Turnerian social drama. One relationship does not a society make.

be found. That is the distinction between 'native' performers and 'objective' observers that Bell and Bourdieu recognize as a distortion. Beckett is a ritualizing dramatist because he realized that any ritual on stage need to be ironically and strategically handled at *every* level. So in performing a ritual, Beckettian characters understand that it cannot work, and in watching a ritual failure, Beckettian audiences understand the potency that led it to be done in the first place and participate sympathetically with the ritual doing. Ritual is never just presented fully formed and ready for public consumption. It is instead simultaneously done and referred to and understood and mocked by both the audience and characters. There is then no ritual present in Beckett's drama. Instead, there are instances of the problematized sign 'ritual' which encompasses both actual ritual action and its necessary failure.

Examples will make this clearer. Didi and Gogo "do the tree" in act two of *Godot*. It is the last in a series of things they 'do' in the act's main waiting sequence to pass the time before the re-entrance of Pozzo and Lucky. ("How time flies when one has fun!" says Vladimir (49), with irony inversely proportional to the 'do's effectiveness as fun-having.) The potential for a 'do,' however phrased ('fun,' effective action, meaning, etc.) is not obviously present and needs to be discovered. The sequence in which they make this effort begins with Didi's declaration that "this is awful" and they need to "star[t] all over again" (41). Their first attempt strictly limits itself to the mental world of their two minds (Estragon: "Let's contradict each other .... Let's ask each other questions" (41)). This quickly fails as they realize they need to talk *about* something and the only things they can find in their own minds are in memory, which fails all too readily. Didi is upset at Gogo for not remembering "any fact, any circumstance" of the previous day, but in Gogo's mind all particular details have merged together and lost their specificity, becoming uninteresting. "I'm not a historian, he says, and later, "there's no lack of void" (42). This problem of having nothing to talk about is eventually solved by the introduction of an ouside force in the form of a physical object with the ability to signify: Lucky's discarded "thinking hat" from act one. The hat is preceded by two other partial, less effective solutions: something physical but still confined to the two-person universe (Gogo's wound) and an external object that holds no significance (the misrecognized boots). Only the hat has all the elements of a classic detritus, as it expands the sphere of consideration, first, from Didi and Gogo to a larger word, second, from mental constructs (language, memory) to the physical, and third, from the arbitrary to the signifying. With the hat, new possibilities for effective action open up. "Now our troubles are over, " says Didi (46).

The 'do's after the hat have been discovered are different than those before. They are largely imitations or character-playing in the more common theatrical sense. They all refer outwards, at first just

a few inches (to the hat), then to each other (insulting, forgiving) and then farther and farther ("God have pity on me!").[22] Even these speech acts are ironized; the context makes clear that these 'do's are set within a play frame and are therefore not 'real' insults, acts of graciousness, or prayers, but still, they are the most effective actions we have yet seen.

In the context of this semi-intended and semi-effective action, Did and Gogo "do the tree." They mimic the one object which has been present on stage for the whole of the play. It is the play's only set piece, and if anything signifies the actual universe beyond the five characters, this is it. When Didi and Gogo 'do the tree,' then, they are performing a classical kind of ritual action: attempting, through their performance, to align their embodied selves with the heart of 'uniquely realistic' universe. Though the specific image of the tree as *axis mundi* is very Eliadian, the more general notion of using ritual to embody primary religious sources in ritual "for the balance," as Didi puts it, has been observed across the world by a wide variety of ethnographers and theorists.

Were Beckett depicting a full and effective ritual, Didi and Gogo would succeed in embodying the tree and would thus be renewed as it is (a few leaves have appeared on its branches in this act). But the tree is not actually a symbol of the world; it is just a prop and a cheap one at that, [23] and such fallible people as Didi and Gogo could never achieve any kind of 'balance,' anyway. They "stagger about" as a proper tree would not. As he staggers, Gogo asks Didi about their success: "Do you think God sees me?" "Close your eyes," Didi advises, but this is even more of a failure; Gogo "staggers worse" (49). This is embarrassing to Gogo, and frustrated, he turns to direct address: "God have pity on me!" he shouts to the sky, fists clenched. But the scene is interrupted at this point by the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky; we never do learn how effective the tree-'do' was or get a straight answer to Gogo's question. This ambiguity is exactly what we should expect. Without a detritus, effective time-passing is impossible. With one, we will find ourselves embarrassed at our human awkwardness, but nevertheless, a paradoxical possibility for effectiveness opens up.

---

22 After an extended, wordless, and quite funny bit of passing hats around, Didi suggests that they "play at Pozzo and Lucky" (47), and so they act out that relationship. It works, but not too well, as Didi has to order Gogo to order him around. A real reference to the outside world—to physical space itself—comes next, as Gogo think he sees someone coming. They run around and off the stage, even surveying the auditorium before declaring "Not a soul in sight." Like the roleplaying, this physicality is not particularly effective—they never do find the person coming or figure out if it is Godot—but is it unquestionably a better 'do': more 'fun,' a better way to pass the time. After more spatial play, they play at gentility, insults ("Critic!"), and forgiveness in tern. These 'do's have started to gain effectiveness, both because of their external cultural reference, (to behavior norms) and because they are speech-acts, not representations. To speak an insult at other person is to insult them; to speak politely to someone is to be polite to them.

23 In the Gate production, the tree, designed by Irish sculptor Louis le Brocquy. was a two-dimensional cardboard-cutout-looking icon of a tree with three utterly bare and straight boughs. In act two, three oversized green cardboard leaves were added. The quiet, tall simplicity of the tree hovered over the whole production as a kind of mute standard.

Another example can be seen in *Happy Days* in Winnie's use of her bag. Like the now-bare tree that was once full of life, Winnie's bag is a memento of her relationship with Willie, who for all she knows is "dead, like the others... The bag too is there, Willie, as good as ever, the one that you gave me that day to go to market."[24] Winnie's goal is to make every day into "another heavenly day" (her first words) despite an utterly bleak (potentially post-apocalyptic) landscape and being buried in a mound of earth up to her stomach (act one) or neck (act two). She does this by means of making use of objects pulled out of the bag—toiletries, mostly, like a comb, lipstick, toothpaste, a mirror, and so on, but also a music box, a parasol, a hat, and a revolver (the one object which is not used), all of which she arranges systematically around her on the mound. Particularly in the first act, her speech is often interrupted and far less coherent than the rigid spectacle of her toilette. Her ability to perform this worshipful and systematic act of grooming as thanks for the "marvelous gift" of life[25] is dependent on the objects from the bag. A bit into act one, for example, Winnie has a crisis when she cannot recall if she had brushed her hair before putting on her hat. In fear, she searches her bag. When she finds the brush in it, she knows that she is out of sequence. There is nothing to be done, however, because as her hat is on she "cannot take it off now."[26] The objects, then, define and control both what has been done and what can be done, more so than Winnie does herself.

Control, though, is not really the issue. Even if it deprives her of agency, the bag can justify Winnie's life; the tradeoff is certainly worth it. Through its sacramental power, it can turn her days into happy days. But like all sacred objects, the sheer scope of its power compared to Winnie's own is both comforting and scary. In perhaps her most honest speech in the play, Winnie considers it:

> The bag. *(Back front.)* Could I enumerate its contents? *(Pause.)* No. *(Pause.)* Could I, if some kind person were to come along and ask, What all have you got in that big black bag, Winnie? give an exhaustive answer? *(Pause.)* No. *(Pause.)* The depths in particular, who knows what treasures. *(Pause.)* What comforts. *(Turns to look at bag.)* Yes, there is the bag. *(Back front.)* But something tells me, do not overdo the bag, Winnie, make use of it of course, let it help you ... along, when stuck, by all means, but cast your mind forward, something tells me, cast your mind forward, Winnie, to the time when words must fail—*(she closes eyes, pause, opens eyes)*—and do not overdo the bag.[27]

The bag contains all the treasures and comforts of the world. It certainly contains all Winnie could need to make all her days happy. Why, then, must it not be overdone?

This, I would argue, is embarrassment internalized to shame. Even if the bag contains all

24 Samuel Beckett, *Happy Days,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963). 38.

25 Beckett, *Happy Days,* 11.

26 Beckett, *Happy Days,* 11-12.

27 Beckett, *Happy Days,* 25.

possibilities, Winnie does not. There is an embarrassing disconnect between what the bag enables her to do—anything—and what Winnie actually can do, which is quite circumscribed and bound up with notions of feminine propriety. Each time she uses the bag for comfort, she is relying on her ability to *use* the bag to provide that comfort; the more it is deployed, the more fallible that ability is shown to be. We see this ability shrink as the play progresses: she begins to rummage, the objects on the mound build up confusingly, she forgets to brush her hair, she drops her parasol, and so on, and by act two, she can do nothing but look at the bag and talk about it, as her arms are buried. Eventually, a time will come "when words must fail," she knows, and then there will be no way in which can make use of or even evoke the bag and will need to comfort herself through her own power. Just as Didi and Gogo were embarrassed by their stagger in trying to do the tree, Winnie is embarrassed by her fumbling and forgetful way with the bag. Their responses to the embarrassment are different,[28] but frustration and shame are both perfectly reasonable responses to the real, local presence of a powerful detritus that cannot be used without revealing the ridiculous limitations of the person using it.

Tony Kushner

Beckett was the first major playwright to use detritus as a central element in his theatre. His use was foundational but not definitive; later playwrights have developed the means of theatrical ritualization and the concept of detritus in novel ways. For example, Beckett's characters have little difficulty in recognizing a detritus or knowing how the character ought to go about responding to it. The tension (and thus the interest) comes from the inability to do what ought to be done. As the ritualized theatre developed, however, that certainty began to be questioned and objects of detritus began to be used differently. That development can be seen in the work of American playwright Tony Kushner, particularly in his *chef d'ouevre, Angels in America,*[29] and his more recent *Homebody/Kabul.*[30]

---

28 A good bit of the difference is gendered, I think, but gender is always a complicated question in Beckett. For more, see in particular Shari Benstock, "The Transformational Grammar of Gender in Beckett's Drama," in Linda Ben-Zvi, ed., *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press), 172-186.

29 Script: Tony Kushner, *Angels in America* (TCG 1995). I have not seen a full production of this play, so my references here are to the script only. *Angels* is a play in two parts, titled *Millenium Approaches* and *Perestroika,* respectively. As each takes nearly three hours to perform, they are normally produced separately or in repertory. *(Millenium* premiered at the Eureka Theatre in May of 1991, while *Perestroika* premiered at the Mark Taper Forum in November of 1992.) They are, I think, more akin to a two-movement symphony than a novel and its sequel. The title *Angels in America* refers to both, and as there are many different editions available of both parts, I will cite from the script parenthetically by part (*M* or *P*), act, scene, and page in the TCG edition. I will use Kushner's italics, capitalization, and punctuation and use the customary notation for stage direction, 's.d.'

30 Tony Kushner, *Honebody/Kabul* (TCG 2002). Though I have not seen a production of this play, I have discussed it with several people who either played in or saw the production at the Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago, in the summer of 2003. When discussing this play, I will cite this script parenthetically by page number, again using all of Kushner's punctuation and emphasis, including ellipses, unless adding my own material in brackets.

Kushner sees himself (and has been seen by most critics) as more of a Brechtian than a Beckettian.[31] This *epiches Theater* heritage is reflected in Kushner's relentless pursuit of social and political issues in (and around) his drama. his plays are forums for debating ideas, both through rhetorical disputations between the characters[32] and through the demonstration of objective situations in a more traditional Brechtian manner.[33] Kushner laments "the emotional life being privileged over the intellectual life in the business of making plays, and the two being regarded, incorrectly, as separable."[34] The intellectual work of social and cultural criticism is, to him, part and parcel of what theatrical practice does. He is no Revolter aiming for an escape from society or existence as such, but a genuine social and even political fighter, encouraging readers of a *New York Times* interview of June 4, 2004, for instance, to work to defeat George W. Bush.[35] He has also inherited something of Brecht's Marxist materialism; he sees Individualism (with a capital I) as the insidious cultural counterpart of economic capitalism, and a political way of life that has become deeply embedded in the American cultural psyche. Objects in Kushner's plays tend to be resources to be possessed, traded, deployed, and managed in the economic sense. Such resources are defined wholly by the socioeconomic system that gives them value. Baudrillard has argued that it is inappropriate to elevate the use value of economic goods over their trade value.[36] Detritus, in contrast, necessarily has no trade value; that is why it is seen as junk. Kushner's characters, permeated by late-capitalist Individualism, do not know what to do with detritus except to treat it as an economic good, which is to mistake it. They do not know how to use it in a ritualized manner as Beckett's characters did. This is the situation held up for public condemnation by Kushner the good Brechtian *epiches* dramatist.

But when both *Newsweek* and *Variety* referred to *Angels* as "epic" in their reviews, the Brechtian definition is probably not what they had in mind.[37] Kushner's theatre is epic in a sense much closer to

31 See Lasse Kekki, "Beyond Abject Bodies: Reading Queerly Tony Kushner's *Angels in America,*" paper presented to the Post-Dramatic Texts working group of the International Federation for Theatre Research, St Petersburg, May 2004: "The most important influence for Kushner is Bertolt Brecht and his *episches Theater.*"

32 Louis's accusations of gay-bashing against Joe {*P* Iv.viii.241f) are true with out regards to dramatic context, and is meant to be taken as such.

33 Reagan "flackman" Martin (*M* II.vi.69; the description is from the *dramatis personae*, 10) performs his evil with as much of a *Verfremdungseffekt* as Brecht's Fleischkönig Herr Mauler from *Die Heilige Johanna Der Schlachthöfe [St Joan of the Stockyards].*

34 Tony Kushner, "With a Little Help From My Friends," afterword to *Angels in America* (TCG 1995), 287. This essay is dated November 15, 1993.

35 Tony Kushner, Interview, *The New York Times,* 4 June 2004. Also see the scene from his "Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy" published in *The Nation,* 24 March 2003, which shows Laura Bush reading Dostoyevsky in heaven to three Iraqi children killed in the U.S.-led bombing. The parallel between the First Lady and *The Brothers Karamazov's* Grand Inquisitor is handled with more subtlety than you might expect. (Another scene from this still-unfinished play, a fictional conversation between Tony Kushner and Laura Bush, was published in the *New York Times* of 5 September 2004.)

36 See Watt, "Beckett by Way of Baudrillard," 102f.

Alisdair MacIntyre's descriptions of storytelling in "heroic" societies.[38] Most of Kushner's work, but particularly *Angels,* has a breadth of scope extremely rare in the modern American theatre. This is a play that includes not just a vaguely divine figure (like *Our Town*'s stage manager or *Carosel*'s Star Keeper) but an utterly unambiguous flying angel with "magnificent steel -gray wings." To write a play so unambiguously *about* American society as a whole without even the veil of allegory is bold and rare. Kushner has the chutzpah to propose an alternative mythology of the modern American condition. This unfashionable social boldness may come from Kushner's sympathetic reading of Marx,[39] but that reading is not presented on stage. Nor does the epic scope come from the spectacular display of the class struggle of *Les Miserables* or even Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle.* Instead, Kushner's scope in *Angels* comes from very traditional religious—often, specifically Jewish—imagery. Beyond the angels, God is presented as a flaming Aleph on a book (*M* III.ii.105, *P* V.ix.274) and His Name is obscured by a thunderclap (*P* V.ix.274, *P* V.iv.265, and others). Such classical religion is utterly incomprehensible and impossible to talk about to Kushner's overedutcated Individualists in a way socialism, for instance, is not.[40] When Prior tries to explain that he has been visited by a real-live angel, he is believed neither by the secular Belize (*P* I.iv.153) nor by the devout Mormon Harper (*P* V.i.250: "Yes but I thought it was more a ... metaphorical ..."). They play opens with a comically old-fashioned rabbi presiding at the funeral of a first-generation immigrant Jewish woman. Her faith was of a simpler time, he implies, and though she has given it to them, it cannot be properly taken on by her too-far-Americanized grandchildren ("Eric? This is a Jewish name?" *M* I.i.16).

It is this incompatibility that makes Kushner an heir of Beckett as well as Brecht. It is also how he extends the Brechtian theatre of social demonstration and commend to a kind of theatre that can make a *cultural* (and as such religious) critique. To do so, it needs to engage with the culture it is criticizing. And so, as radical and important a play as it is, *Angels* is formally very conservative. It is a character-based situation drama realistically depicting scenes of love, power, guilt and betrayal in a way of which Stanislavsky would no doubt approve. In fact, it could even be called a genre piece: in 1980s and 1990s New York, "AIDS plays" were not just those pieces which dealt with the epidemic but those which did so in a style particular to the genre: a kind of hope-and-humor-infused medical realism.[41] Such plays

37 These reviews of *Angels* from the popular and industry press are quoted in the TCG edition of *Angels,* i-ii.

38 MacIntyre, *After Virtue,* passim.

39 See Kushner, "With a Little Help."

40 In fact, they spend a good deal of stage time on lengthy, meandering, and rather annoying political debates *(M* III.ii, *P* IV.viii, *P* Epilogue, for example).

41 In fact, the first published excerpt from the play appeared in the collection *The Way We Live Now: American*

spend much of their time in beds and at bedsides and involve true, pained speech between lovers, family, and friends. In its core and on its surface, *Angels* is an AIDS play: we watch Prior's diagnosis and struggle with the disease through his eyes and those of his friends Louis and Belize.[42] This is not just an aesthetic choice on Kushner's part: because such psychological realism is the dominant form of storytelling in contemporary Western culture, it is part of what needs to be critiqued. The realist narrative mode has becomes the way we understand our personal and cultural selves. When Kushner's characters' lives are depicted that way, too, we instinctively understand and sympathize.

So when Kushner cracks that realist mode open like an egg, it is not just an aesthetic convention which is opening up; it is our day-to-day sense of ourselves and our culture, too. Because this generic, realistic grounding goes so deep, the overtly religious elements—that which in Beckett or a medieval play would be readily ritualized—are utterly incompatible and are thus much harder for the characters or audience to deal with. They are thus detritus in the strictest sense.

In *Millennium Approaches,* the most central religious element is, of course, the Angel herself. We hear voices throughout *Millennium* calling to Prior to "prepare the way" for her (*M* III.i.93, for example). Such preparations are, of course, impossible; when the Angel finally does appear (*M* III.vi.124), she is literally incomprehensible to him. She has cracked open his roof (and his world) like an egg, and he can only fall back on the kind of consumptionist petty awe that Rev. Billy decries as Disneyfication:

> *(There is a great blaze of triumphal music, heralding. The light turns an extraordinary hard, cold, pale blue, then a rich, brilliant, warm golden color, then a hot, bilious green, then finally a spectacular royal purple.*[43] *Then silence.)*
>
> PRIOR: *(An awestruck whisper):* God almighty ...
>
> Very Steven Spielberg. (*M* III.vii.124)

In a way, this is progress,: at least Prior is accepting what he is seeing *as presentation,* if not as truth. The preparations for the descent which punctuate *Millennium* were not so acknowledged; they were all dismissed as symptoms of illness. Seeing angels was shown as 'disorderly' in the psychological sense, not unlike the way homosexuality itself was classified as a psychological disorder until 1973.[44] As the

---

plays & the AIDS crisis, ed. M. Elizabeth Osborn (TCG 1990), alongside plays from such American stage luminaries as Terrence McNally ("Andre's Mother") Lanford Wilson ("A Poster of the Cosmos"), Paula Vogel ("The Baltimore Waltz"), and Harvey Fierstein ("Safe Sex").

42 The related realist genre of the coming-out play is also presented through the plot around Roy Cohen, Joe, and Harper. The two are not, of course, separable; it is AIDS that pushes Roy out of the closet, if only posthumously.

43 The four colors, I think, represent the Angel's presence in her four emanations: Fluor (pale blue), Lumen (gold), Phosphor (green), and Candle (royal purple). Or, perhaps, it is just designed to look impressive.

44 Homosexuality was listed as a psychiatric disorder (specifically, a "sexual deviation") in the first and second (1968) editions of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manuel of Mental Disorders (DSM I and DSM II), the American

play progresses, these hallucinations intrude more and more into the play's realistic world, and the audience begins to see them as having a truth of their own which deserves recognition. The parallel to gays' social acceptance is hard to miss.

Kushner is not using the socially misfitting (illness, gays, angels crashing through roofs) to serve as a Turnerian liminal transition from one social state to another. The society he is critiquing is not some kind of childhood, fine for a while but to be outgrown; it is simply *wrong*. It misrecognizes what is actually going on in a culture, and this can lead to injustice. Rather, he is asking us to throw off our cultural misrecognition and to *remain* in liminality permanently. He has no illusions that this will be easy; his word for a person in such a state is generally "refugee." It is not at all comfortable to be "eternally a person out of doors," but that is the modern condition whether we wish to admit it or not: "Dispossession by attrition is the permanent condition that the wretched modern world endures."[45] Kushner is far from a Revolter and his goal is not an existential but a political one: that we live in peace and friendship within that dispossession. Though the presence of transcendent scraps may help us become aware of this task, they cannot help us achieve it, even if we could make perfect use of them. This leads to the radical response to detritus Kushner proposes: its rejection. This detrital path, from hallucination to recognition to rejection, will be clearer when traced out through the course of the play.

Angels' first potential detritus is clearly a medical hallucination. Harper, a depressive Mormon Valium addict, finds Brooklyn scary, especially when away from her husband, Joe. She sees the world losing its divine protection (which she equates with the ozone layer, a "spherical net" of "guardian angels"), so she conjures up a travel agent named Mr. Lies to take her away. (*M* I.iii.23). No one but Harper ever sees the aptly-named Mr. Lies, and he brings nothing that outlasts his visit. Harper's next hallucination seems just as clear; is it even introduced in the script as a "dream scene" (*M* I.vii.41 s.d.). But the audience sees a referent beyond Valium in this one; Prior appears in her dream though the two have never met. This is also the first appearance of the Angel, here just a feather falling from heaven and "an incredibly beautiful voice" proclaiming, "Prepare the way!" (*M* I.vii.4). On hearing it, Prior doubles over in pain. There is already a connection between illness and prophetic vision, but it is not yet clear.

Psychiatric Association's official diagnostic guide to psychiatric illness. The designation was replaced with "sexual orientation disturbance" in December of 1973. The 1976-1978 edition (DSM III) used the diagnosis of "ego-dystonic homosexuality," a category eliminated form the revised version of the DSM (called DSM III-R) published in 1987.

45 Tony Kushner, "An Undoing World," lyrics from the title song to the play *It's an Undoing World, or Why Should It Be Easy When It Can Be Hard?* The play, which remains a work-in-progress, has been read in New York several times in 2004, but the song was recorded by The Klezmatics on their 1997 album, *Possessed.* (That album also contains the Klezmatics' original score for Kushner's adaptation of the Yiddish drama classic *Dybbuk.*)

The next angelic appearance comes at the end of act two (*M* II.v.68). Prior hears the Angel's voice while in a hospital bed, alone with his illness. This time, they converse. In the next scene, Harper calls on Mr. Lies to take her away after her husband has confessed to being gay. "Absolutamento," says Mr. Lies, and they vanish (*M* II.ix.86). The third act opens with a different kind of hallucination. The ill Prior wakes to find in his room two of his long-dead ancestors, Prior 1 and Prior 2. They have "been sent to declare [H]er fabulous incipience," they say, but instead of making majestic Angelic pronouncements, they chat and joke with Prior as his 'live' friends do (*M* III.i.93)[46] In performance, this scene seems to fit both in the sequence of sickness/hallucination episodes that began with Mr. Lies and the realistic character-scenes that have dominated the play to this point. The audience is starting to see the boundary between the everyday and the transcendent (detritus, here medicalized as delusion) break down. The concept of immanence—the upward-pointing potential of mundane existence—was not really present in Beckett. It is being introduced here. Humanity itself, in its social relationships and in the body, becomes a potential Angelic detritus. This is not as optimistic as it may sound, as unlike Godot, this Angel of sickness is not the one for whom Prior is waiting. There is no sense, not even an ironic one, in which a Kushnerian detritus is salvific. Its incomprehensibility is so great that the Angel can be called nothing but Other: not necessary good or helpful, only present. Eventually, a relationship will develop between the Angel and humanity (via Prior), but it is not until much later and it is nothing like the covenantal bond one might expect from Kushner's Judaic model.

From here, the detritus beings to take over; no scene in the final act of *Millennium* is free from hallucination. The metaphor of detritus as illness becomes all the stronger as Prior's physical condition and Harper's mental one deteriorate.[47] Hallucinations are becoming roped into the realistic world even as that world becomes more fantastical. "Even hallucinations have rules," says Mr. Lies, explaining that no, Harper can't have an Eskimo in her Antarctic. But when one then appears, even those rules seem to be breaking down (*M* III.iii.108). The next scene appears realistic, but one of its two characters is a street woman who screams senselessly. "In the new century I think we will all be insane," she says (*M* III.iv. 111). *Millennium*'s last major scene seems to cling to Stanislavskian character-realism just as its main

46 The chat is not perfectly smooth, of course; there are some misunderstandings and linguistic hiccups across the centuries (the cleverest of which is over the word 'gay,' *M* III.i.92). But it is far more casual communication than Prior ever has with an Angel.

47 During a medical exam, Prior hears his nurse speak to him in Hebrew (as do we); she notices nothing. A moment later, the flaming-Aleph book appears; it is seen only by Prior, who is "agog" (*M* III.ii.105 s.d.). We will later learn that this flaming Aleph is a representation of God, but at this point, it is just an utterly incongruous piece of religious imagery that does not even physically fit into its surrounding environment (it comes up through a trap in the floor). In the next scene, Mr. Lies as taken harper to Antarctica. This is a dream sequence like before, but now even Harper connects it back to her mental illness in the real world. "Wow. I must've really snapped the tether, huh?" she asks Mr. Lies. "Apparently, he answers (*M* III.iii.107).

character, Roy Cohen, clings desperately to the delusion that he is healthy and in control. In truth, though, Roy is dying of AIDS and the Angelic forces have been released too far to be contained.[48] The brief pentultimate scene finds Prior in his sickbed again with the prior Priors and "the sound of wings" (*M* III.vi.120). At the very end, Joe admits his homosexuality and the Angel bursts through Prior's ceiling in her descent. The Millennium has burst open; the sacred, incomprehensible logic of the Angel has not taken over Prior's life.

In a more fanciful, less Brechtian work, such a Millenium would serve as a narrative pivot. There are plenty of literary and rhetorical examples of this kind of world-transforming event: the opening of the heavens at the end of Philip Pullman's *Northern Lights* which ushers in a new world for the next novel in the trilogy, or even the American politicians' overused exuse that "everything is different after September 11th." But Kushner does not do that; even as the Angelic (that is, the ill) seeps its way into the everyday social world, it remains distinct from humanity. Kushner shows a human logic and an angelic one at battle in the social world. Beckett's characters try (unsuccessfully) to conform themselves to the detritus they find; Kushner's try to resist its inhuman pull.

After a short introduction by "the World's Oldest Living Bolshevik," (*P* I.i.147), *Perestroika* begins where *Millennium* left off with the Angel above Prior's bed and Harper with Mr. Lies in the Antarctic. But the fun has gone: Harper complains that she is "FREEZING!" (*P* I.ii.150) and has been forced to chew down a pine tree with her teeth for firewood. When Mr. Lies accuses her of "overreach[ing and tearing] a big old hole in the sky"by her blatant disregard for the rules separating fantasies from real life, she pleads guilty. There are no pine trees in the Antarctic, she knows; she must have chewed the one she has from the Botanical Gardens in Brooklyn's Prospect Park. "What a lousy vacation," she declares (*P* I.ii.151). She has tried to make the hallucination work for her own needs and she has found it will not comply. The world of angels may exist and even be accessible to humans with the help of prophetic vision, but its ways are incompatible with and perhaps even hostile to healthy human social living.

Harper and Prior have been linked in their dreams before, and it seems fair for the audience to take Mr. Lies's warning to Harper as one intended for Prior, too. He wakes up to find the ceiling undamaged and no sign of the Angel's presence except his nocturnal ejaculation. In fact, except for a

48 The scene appears at first to be a realistic, psychologically intense confrontation between Roy and his protegé, Joe. Eventually, though, Joe leaves and the front is removed; Roy collapses in pain and the ghost of Ethel Rosenberg, the purported communist he had executed during the Red Scare, come by to watch him suffer. Though she does not, strictly speaking, exist, she calls the ambulance for him. "History is about to crack wide open," she tells Roy. "Millennium approaches" (*M* III.v.118).

flashback, there are no more hallucinations or Angelic appearances until act five.[49] As illness, the detritus has internalized itself into Prior as it never did into Didi or Gogo. Prior and his AIDS are the detritus now. He accepts the title "prophet" that the Angel had given him (*M* V.vii.125, *P* II.ii.170), and for the rest of the play wears his "prophet clothes" (*P* III.vi.221 s.d.): a long black cloak with matching hood and scarf that Kushner describes as "disconcerting, menacing, and vaguely redolent of the Biblical ... fundamentally corvine, ragged, and eerie" (*P* II.i.167 s.d.). The effect of the internalization and personalization of detritus, now very tightly linked to illness, is neither comforting nor helpful. Roy Cohen was always a cruel man, but now his illness has made him joyless as well. Prior's lover Louis leaves him, scared of Prior's illness and what it will do to them both. Joe abandons Harper to begin a relationship with Louis that makes Joe nervous, Louis guilty, and Harper psychotic. Though he is a prophet, Prior can do nothing to stop these crises. The Angel offers no help. What is the *point* of Prior's prophetic sight if his life—and the society of which he is a part—only grows sicker, more lonely, and more pained because of it?

In that there is an answer, it comes from the only real discussion between Heaven and Earth in the play, the flashback to Prior's meeting with the Angel (*P* II.ii). The Angel's explanation of heavenly bureaucracy is too detailed to be fully comprehensible to an audience. It is enough to note that, as the Angel describes it, the universe is generated through creative sexual coupling between the angels and God, in the incarnate for of his "Glyph," the Flaming Aleph, as masculine *primo genitor*.[50] The angels, however, as omnisexual and as such are only hugely powerful functionaries; they carry out divine commands and have knowledge of the future but cannot be creative in the way that sexually-differentiated humans can.[51] This human creativity is attractive to God, Who abandoned the heavens for Earth in 1906, causing the Great Earthquake in both the earthly and (more so) heavenly San Francisco. The continuing absence of God from heaven is dangerous for the Angels, as without Him, their world will solidify and crack. To forestall this apocalypse, the Angelic Host wants to mute human creativity into stillness and thus return God to Heaven. "You have driven Him away!" cries the Angel. "You must stop moving!" (*P* II.ii.178). Prior translates: "You want me dead" (*P* II.ii.179).

To this end, the Angel has sent certain "Sacred Implements" to the Prophet which he receives on behalf of "all Earth:" a pair of glasses with "peep-stones" for lenses and a Book with steel pages (*P*

49 The only exception is Ethel Rosenberg's visit to the dying Roy, which, I will argue below, is over a very different type than the hallucinatory or the angelic.

50 "The Aleph Glyph! Deus Erectus! Pater Omnipotens!" (*P* II.ii.175).

51 When the Angels want to listen to earthly events, for example, they need to use a manmade radio, as they cannot invent machines themselves (*P* V.v.260).

II.ii.173).[52] The Book as locus of revelation is of course a very traditional image in all three Abrahamic faiths, but this Book is a physical symbol of the stillness and death the Angel demands of Prior, and, therefore, a manifestation of Prior's AIDS. His body has become a "vessel of the BOOK now," says the Angel: "On you in your blood we have written STASIS! The END!" (*P* II.ii.180).

There are perhaps some mystics who look for death (written in blood, not spirit) as the telos of life, and Prior's gloss of the Angel's message as "be still, toil no more" does sound peaceful, particularly to an audience which has watched Prior's physical, violent struggle with AIDS for the past few hours. But the human instinct to survive is too basic. Prior admits that this might be "just the animal. I don't know if it's not braver to die. But I recognize the habit. The addiction to being alive" (*P* V.v.267). Given that, what choice does he have? And so Prior ascends to Heaven to give the Angels back their Book:

> I... I want to return this [....] It just ... It just ... We can't stop. We're not rocks—progress, migration, motion is ... modernity. It's *animate,* it's what living things do. We desire. Even if all we desire is stillness, it's still desire *for.* Even if we go faster than we should. We can't *wait.* (*P* V.iv.264-265)

This is not so much a stance as an observation. People live and move and progress; there is nothing prophetic in saying that human nature is incompatible with the Book of Stasis. But Prior continues in a much more overtly prophetic voice:

> And wait for what? God... *(Thunderclap.)*
> God... *(Thunderclap.)*
> He isn't coming back.
> And even if He did...
> If He ever did come back, if he ever *dared* to show His face, or His Glyph or whatever in the Garden again... if after all this destruction, if after all the terrible days of this terrible century He returned to see ... how much suffering His abandonment had created, if all He has to offer is death, you should *sue* the bastard. That's my only contribution to all this Theology. Sue the bastard for walking out. How dare He. (*P* V.iv.265)

The Angel responds, "Thus spake the Prophet," inscribing Prior's rejection into the authoritative record.[53] Prior does not cease to be a prophet when he turns against God. Like an anti-Job, Prior issues an arrogant if just challenge against the Divine Throne that he expects to be heard. And Kushner implies that it is: at the end of *Perestroika,* the hellbound Roy Cohen agrees to take the Flaming Aleph's case:

52 There has been a miscommunication, and Prior does not actually *have* the Implements; they are buried under his kitchen. He refuses to dig (the security deposit!), so the Angel rips up the floor for him. The "ancient leather suitcase, very dusty" that Prior finds in the rubble is about as prototypical a detritus as one will find (*P* II.ii.172 s.d.).

53 This is an echo of the Angel's response to Prior's objection to digging up his kitchen (*P* II.ii.172). At that point, the Angel said: "And Lo, the Prophet was led by his mighty dreams to the hiding place of the Sacred Implements, and .... Revision in the text: The Angel did help him to unearth them, for he was weak of body though not of will."

"Paternity suit? Abandonment? .... You ain't got a case here, you're guilty as hell, no question, you have nothing to plead but don't worry, darling, I will make something up" (*P* V.ix.274).

How can we make sense of humans passing judgment on divine artifacts? How do you explain the rejection of grace? At one level, this is rank disobedience and a shirking of the prophetic mantle, and so Prior compares himself to Jonah (*P* IV.vi.236). On the other hand, a refusal to accept the dictates of heaven is one of the hallmarks of the Jewish prophetic tradition. Prior is explicit in citing Jacob as a mode when he wrestles down the Angel to force her to take back the Book (*P* V.i.251). In a short scene on the streets of heaven after the Book's return (which tends to be cut),[54] Louis's grandmother, Sarah, gives Prior a message ostensibly for her grandson, but the audience would be forgiven for confusing messenger and recipient. Sarah speaks in Yiddish and the Rabbi who buried her translates:

> SARAH: Tell him: az er darf ringen mit zain Libm Nomen. Yah?!
> RABBI: You should struggle with the Almighty.
> SARAH: Azoi toot a Yid.
> RABBI: It's the Jewish way. (*P* V.vi.269)

Sarah has the generational authority to say such things. As a child of the previous century and the old world, she can articulate a "Jewish way" with a definitiveness impossible for a postmodern American. To struggle with 'His Holy Name' is the noble life; the act of articulating that truth is Sarah's posthumous, authoritative gift to her grandson.

As such, the message is not a negative statement but a positive artifact of a now-lost wisdom. God is to be positively struggled *with,* not negatively fought *against.* The message looks and behaves like a life-affirming detritus to counteract the life-denying angelic one. The difference is its source; there is no mistaking the Angel for a pseudo-person, while Sarah's message comes from a human source extended pasts its ordinary parameters of death and language. And though it is far less obvious than the Angelic appearances, these human artifacts have germinated from the seed planted in the very first scene of *Millennium,* the funeral of the very same Sarah. I want to maintain the distinction between these artifacts and true detritus not just because of their (expanded) human source but also because they are not physical objects. When the Angelic erupts into the mundane, it leaves things behind (Flaming Alephs, books, broken roofs). Human artifacts, in contrast, exist only in language and gesture; they are necessarily embodied. They take the form of blessings, from standpoint of the Jewish tradition that permeates all of Kushner's work. Biblically, blessings (and curses, their counterpart) are a uniquely

54 Kushner admits that he has never seen a production with it (*P,* playwright's notes, 143). There are good reasons for this directoral decision—the scene doesn't fit, introduces two new characters and an impossible setting, and is extraneous in a very long play—but it's still a pity.

powerful means of both divine *and* human action. They are both a gift of divine grace *and* a currency of human exchange. Parents bless children; soldiers curse their enemies.[55] Sarah's message to her grandson is such a blessing, as is Roy Cohen's deathbed blessing of his protegé Joe in an overt echo of Isacc's deathbed blessing of Jacob.[56] Roy lays his hands on Joe's head, and for a moment, one of the most loud-mouthed characters in modern history or drama is silent.[57] The most spectacular blessing, though, comes in Ethel's final appearance. Quietly, she recites with Louis the *Kaddish*, the Jewish prayer for the dead, over the body of Roy Cohen, her mortal enemy. Louis refuses at first, but Belize pleads with him in a speech as Brechtian as anything in the play:

> BELIZE: He was a terrible person. He died a hard death. So maybe ... A queen can forgive her vanquished foe. It isn't easy, it doesn't count if it's easy, it's the hardest thing. Forgiveness. Which is maybe where love and justice finally meat. Peace, at last. Isn't that what the Kaddish asks for?
>
> LOUIS: Oh it's Hebrew who knows what it's asking? (*P* V.iii.256)[58]

Louis relents, and though he forgets the words, he repeats Ethel's prompting. They both end the prayer with "You sonofabitch," but it remains a prayer (*P* V.iii.257).

Such blessings are the best means humans have of betting beyond the linguistic and temporal barriers between people. As such, they are strategic moves in Bell's sense, making use of a differentiated appeal to a higher authority (God, the concept of 'blessing,' the standardization of the text) in order to achieve certain ends (forgiving Roy, helping and loving Louis or Joe). Their power and utility is linked to just how difficult and rare authentic acts of blessing and forgiveness are. But also per Bourdieu, they are not conscious manipulations of social reality. Louis does not know the words of the *Kaddish,* and he certainly doesn't know what they mean, but he can effectively deploy them anyway.

The contrast between human blessing and Angelic detritus is all the more clear from the central placement Kushner gives in *Perestroika* to his peculiar definition of the Hebrew term *brocha,* blessing, one he borrows from Harold Bloom: "More life."[59] That blessing, "more life," is what Prior demands in heaven: "But still. Still. Bless me anyway. I want more life. I can't help myself. I do" (*P* V.v.266). It is also the blessing he as Prophet gives directly to the audience in the very last moment of the play:

---

55 Jews even include God in their family of blessing when they bless the Divine Name—and not vice versa—in the second line of the *Shema,* the most central of Jewish prayers (Deuteronomy 6:4). Of course, there are many Biblical examples of god blessing His people; it does work both ways.

56 Roy: "A *Brokhe* [blessing, in Yiddish]. You don't even have to trick it out of me, like what's-his-name in the Bible." Joe: "Jacob." Roy: "That's the one" (*P* Iv.i.214-215, my brackets).

57 "They both close their eyes and enjoy it for a moment," writes Kushner (*P* IV.i.214 s.d.).

58 Kushner adds a footnote to this line, his only one in the entire script: "Author's note: I know, I know, it's not Hebrew, it's Aramaic, but for the sake of the joke ..."

59 Playwright's Notes to *Perestroika,* 144.

"And I bless you: *More Life*. The Great Work Begins" (*P* Epilogue.280). Compared to the Stasis and death offered by the Angels, Prior's blessing is alive, hopeful, and politically progressive.

Though the angelic/blessing contrast is Kushner's way of exploring the differences between cosmic and human detritus, the latter is not fully developed in *Angels;* it is mostly defined in opposition to its angelic counterpart and lacks the grand physical theatrical *presentation* of its opposite. In his more recent work, however, Kushner has focused more particularly on the artifacts left by blessing. In particular, his 2002 play about travel, cultural encounter, the desire for otherness, and Afghanistan, *Homebody/Kabul,* merits a discussion.[60]

Formally, *Homebody/Kabul* is a very odd play. Its first act consists of only two scenes: a 45-minute monologue by a Londoner called only the Homebody who obsesses over Kabul, the city's history, and the sufferings of its inhabitants, and a very brief scene where we learn that she has traveled to Kabul and gone missing. In the following two acts, her family tries to figure out why she disappeared and what has happened to her. The opening monologue has generally been recognized as the play's finest achievement; it was the kernel from which the play sprung, and it is the section that has changed the least as the play has been reworked.[61] There are also difficulties of translation *within* the script; the monologue is in English (if a neurotically verbose one), while the rest of the play makes use of a full eight languages.[62]

The Homebody's interest in Afghanistan is focused through a pair man-made objects that embody the relationship between Kabul and the West. The first is an "outdated" guidebook for British tourists, and the second is is a set of hats she bought at a shop in London from an Afghan man missing three fingers. Both these objects carry knowledge about and love for Kabul, but they also carry human weaknesses and bloodlust.[63] Because of this combination, they are precious, useful, and to be treated with respect. The Homebody explains her "moth like[—]impassioned, fluttery, doomed" attraction to cultural castoffs:

---

60 Two other recent Kushner works that could also be profitably explored but for which I lack the space are his musical of growing up in segregated Louisiana in the 1950s, *Caroline, or Change,* and his adaptation of S. Ansky's Yiddish drama classic *Dybbuk.*

61 Ben Brantley, in reviewing the Brooklyn Academy of Music's May 2004 production of the revised *Homebody/Kabul* in the *New York Times,* whote: "Mr. Kushner and Ms. [Linda] Emond [the actress] have made the Homebody such a rich and reqarding charcter that she is a nearly impossible act to follow. But if it's still true that nothing else in "Homebody/Kabul" comes closes to achieving the perfection of that opening monologue, the gap has narrowed." ("Afghanistan Still Stirs A Housewife," *New York Times,* 13 May 2004.)

62 Besides English, Kushner uses Dari, Pashtun, Arabic, Russian, French, German, and Esperanto. His acknowledgements (vii-x) recognize the help he received in working in each of these languages (except Esperanto).

63 Both objects are blood-spattered: the generation-old travel guide cannot but refer to past Western misconceptions about Afghanistan and the hats must refer back to their maker and the mutilated man who sold them.

> I invariably seek out not The Source but all that was dropped on the wayside on the way to The Source, outdated guidebooks—this was published in 1965, and it is now 1998, so this book is a vestige superannuated by some ... thirty-three years, long enough for Christ to have been born and die on the cross—old magazines, hysterical political treatises written by an advocate of some long-since defeated or abandoned or transmuted cause; and I find these irrelevant and irresistible, ghostly, dreamy, the knowing what *was* known before the more that has since become known overwhelms ... as we are, many of use, overwhelmed, and succumbing to luxury. (9-10)

This is the historian's detritus. In the Homebody's view, because the present state of knowledge is overwhelming to the point of incomprehension and thus is no knowledge at all, it is necessary to reach back to the knowledges of the past. And not the successful ones, either, as they point back to the present tumult, but those which have failed. Only knowledge that has been rejected and has therefore *ended* can be a complete historical object in itself and thus not overwhelm, and only through the study of such objects can we cone to some kind of (logically or emotionally) true conclusions and thus make progress in comprehending the world now.[64] Like the blessings in *Angels,* such objects come not from the Wholly Other or Mythic Time but from the all-too-human past, just 33 years ago. The language of ghosts and dreams in the quote above alludes back to the distinction in *Angels* between the ghostly and the dream-defined—Ethel, Prior to Harper—and the Angelic. Both are technically transcendent, but ghosts and dreams are extended versions of human consciousness while Angels are not.

As a human detritus, the guidebook serves as an artifact in the strong sense. It is a physical record of human cultural achievement at a particular place and time. It reified and makes permanent its maker's successes and failures (intellectual, cultural, moral, and even physical—the book itself may be falling apart). By this standard, the guidebook is much harder to judge than either of the detrituses present in *Angels.* It is a manifestation of love and understanding, but it is inevitably flawed. However, the relationship between the detritus and its maker (the author) is clearer than that between it and its user (the Homebody). We hold an author responsible for her words, but should there also be a sense in which we hold a reader responsible what what she chooses to read, particularly if, as in the Homebody's case, that reading is erratic, obsessive, and leads to ideas and decisions of enormous import?

In Beckett, the objects of detritus were "always already there," to borrow a phrase of Foucault's, and in that they were judged, it was on their utility. Kushner accepts that view of angelic detritus, but asks that his preferred human detritus be defined differently, as the yearning-towards-perfection-yet-necessarily-flawed goal that connects one person to another across time, space, and language. The

64 There is another dimension to this, too. "The Present is *always* an awful place to be," argues the Homebody. (11). We are implicated in the present, the "scene of our crime" (11), while the past belonged to others and thus can be covered with an undeserved nostalgia.

dynamics of this latter relationship is clearer with the Homebody's other, more revered detritus for which her responsibility is much more clear: the hats she has purchased from

> a dusty shop crowded with artifacts, relics, remnants, little ... doodahs of a culture once aswarm with spirit matter, radiated with potent magic the disenchanted dull detritus of which has washed up upon our culpable shores, its magic now shriveled into the safe container of *aesthetic,* which is to say, *consumer* appeal. You know. Third World junk. [....] That which was once Afghan, which we, having waved our credit cards in its general direction, have turned into junk. (17)

In case her postcolonial self-condemnation for buying and thus junking the hats was not clear enough, she continues:

> Looking at the hat we imagine not bygone days of magic belief but the suffering behind the craft, this century has taught us to direct our imagination however fleetingly toward the hidden suffering: evil consequences of evil action taken long ago, conjoining with relatively recent wickedness and wickedness perpetuated now, in August 1998, now now now even as I speak and speak and speak .... (17)

The hats have not just been junked by the commercial process, then; they are reminders of Third World suffering and the social evils of a colonialist system that continues in the present. By buying the hats, then, she is both sullying the "potent magic" of the hats and contributing to an ongoing human evil.

And yet she does so. "This one is particularly nice," she says (18). It is a part of her "moth-like" draw, always towards the light even if inevitably deadly. What is that draw? There is something in it of the "morbid fascination" she takes with the sheer horror of Afghan suffering, as when she fantasizes as to the story behind the clerk's three missing fingers: "A clean line, you see, not an accident, a measured surgical cut," she thinks as he swipes her credit card (21). There is also the lure of the foreign and exotic to someone who is, after all, a Homebody. And also, there is her wholly un-neurotic curiosity and zest for living. "Oh I love the world!" she declares with embarrassing honesty. "I love love love love the world!" (12)[65] More particularly and simply, she has a genuine love for Kabul, the place from which the hats have come.[66]

There is, however, a much more basic and profound reason. The Homebody buys the hats for a party she is throwing. "My parties are never good parties," she confesses (14), and as the monologue progresses we learn that this is no trivial fault. The main outcome of her internalized guilt and fear of motion, what she calls standing "safe in her kitchen, on her culpable shore, suffering uselessly watching

---

65 That this is sincere and neither ironic nor neurotic is clear from context. To wit, her next line: "Having said so much, may I assume most of you will have dismissed me as a simpleton?" The embarrassment, as in Beckett and Rev. Billy, shows the potential for an excess of truth.

66 She ends her monologue by quoting from memory the 17th-century Persian poet Sa'ib-I-Tabrizi: "I sing to the gardens of Kabul; Even Paradise is jealous of their greenery" (30).

others perishing in the sea" (27-28), is a distancing coldness that separates her from the rest over her beloved world. She rarely speaks to her husband or daughter (13); she takes powerful antidepressants. I do not know of any other protagonist in a multi-character play who exchanges not a single line of dialogue with anyone else for the entire show. She repeatedly observes the reaction others have to her "dry[ness]" as she puts it (28), at one point telling the audience she would expect it of them, too, should they meet her on the street: "Avoid! Her!" (25 and 28).

She lacks the ability to form human bonds of community. To create them at what would otherwise be a painful party, she makes use of the hats as detritus. "I had no hope that this would be a good party," she has said (14), but miraculously, though the hats are useless as hats, they do their job:

> The hats at the part are a brilliant success. My guests adore them. They are hard to keep on the head, made for smaller people than the people we are and so they slip off, which generates amusement, and the guests exchange them while dancing, kaleidoscopic and self-effacing and I think perhaps to our surprise in some small way meltingly intimate, someone else'e hat atop your hear, making your scalp stiffen at the imagined strangeness. (28)

It is as much for their present use as for their bloody past that the Homebody treats the hats with such reverence. This is the prototypical function of human detritus: to establish human community and communitas not through the *absence* of social divides (as in Turnerian antistructure) but *across* them. The Homebody has erected walls between herself and the whole of the world. The hats enable her to overcome them, both in her imagined Pashtun conversation with the maimed hat merchant (21-26) and in her impossibly good party. The hats are the physical detritus towards which the blessings in *Angels* were pointing.

Homebody/Kabul contains one other example worth a mention of a detritus embodying human experiences and hopes with full moral ambiguity. Pricilla, the Homebody's daughter, receives a packet of Esperanto poetry from her guide, Khwaja, with instructions to return it to a fellow Esperantist in London (65f). In the context of her desperate search for her mother, this seems to Pricilla an insulting non-sequitor. But Khwaja is insistent and may know something useful, so she relents. The image of poetry as crystallization of suffering is quite conventional; even the metaphor of a sheath of poems physicalizing the human experience of a city finds precedents in medieval travel writing and the Psalms. Here, though, the poems are connected far more concretely to Khwaja's experience in Kabul, and, particularly, his long stay in Pole-I-Chakri Prison for socialist tendencies during which he learned Esperanto (literally, "hope") from his elderly cellmate, now executed. "I love its modern hyperrational ungainliness. To me it sounds not univerally at home, rather homeless, stateless, a global refugee

patois," he tells Pricilla (67). And so out of the experience of injustice, a detritus emerges that embodies the naïve hope for global understanding, cooperation, and justice.

Or does it? When Pricilla is leaving Afghanistan, she is detained by a Taliban official, Mullah Aftar Ali Durranni, because she was seen with Khwaja, who has by now been executed for crimes against the state (135). The Mullah demands these poems that no one can understand, as he claims they contain coded military instructions for the Northern Alliance, the Taliban's enemy. He threatens to have Pricilla shot if the poems are not turned over. Such espionage, too, is a detritus of injustice, but one with quite a different moral weight. Because Kushner writes with a more delicate hand than Brechtian polemicists like Dario Fo,[67] we never do find out if the Esperanto texts were poems or military code. Either way, Pricilla did indeed transport it to London and she is now complicit, though neither she nor we can say in what. Kushner's final "Periplum" takes place back in London. The Homebody has traded roles with an Afghan woman named Mahala, who now tends her British garden while the Homebody is either dear or living as a wife/homebody in Kabul. With this small coda, Kushner suggests the scope of the new life that this family has built out of the detritus of Kabul, but like the "Great Work" promised at the end of *Angels,* this is a future hope that is suggested and indicated without actually being shown.

Glen Berger

Can this detritus-built world, the world of refugees, be fleshed out and developed as a livable present and not just a hoped-for future? This is, I think, the question to which the ritualized theatre ought to turn its attention. Nothing like a definitive statement can yet be made about the shape such a world will take, but to suggest some possibilities, I want to present the work of the playwright who, I think makes the most productive and challenging use of the ritualizing possibilities of the contemporary theatre. His one piece to see a major New York production was *Underneath the Lintel* in 2001,[68] His *Great Men of Science, Nos. 21 and 22* premiered at Chicago's Lookingglass Theater in the winter of 2004,[69] and his *O Lovely*

67 For an example of Fo's lack of tact, see his ending to *An Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (adapted for the English stage by Gavin Richards from a translation by Gillian Hanna, London: Metheuen, 1980), 74, where the logic of the play insists that four essentially hapless policemen be blown up and the otion that we shoudl have sympathy for these poor souls about to die is specifically rejected.

68 Glen Berger, *Underneath the Lintel, or, The Mystery of the Abandoned Trousers: An Impressive Presentation of Lovely Evidences* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing , 2003). I am working from galley proofs of this script, rather than its published form. I will cite from this edition parenthetically by page number. Apparently, the play was also published in 2003 by Stage and Screen in New York.

69 Glen Berger, *Great Men of Science, Nos. 21 & 22,* Lookingglass Theater, Chicago, Feb. 2004, directed by Tracy Letts, with Joey Slotnick (de Vaucanson) and David Pasquesi (Spallanzani). Though I have read and studied an early draft of the script, it remains unpublished, and I do not have a copy of it. I cannot, therefore, cite by page. Apparently, an early version of this play was presented (with the subtitle "Our Great Labors," in ironic echo of Kushner) at the Empty Space Theatre in Seattle in June of 2001.

Glowworm, or Scenes of Great Beauty, though read at Madison Repertory Theatre's 2003 new play festival, has yet to be produced.[70]

Berger's work explores a larger life-cycle of detritus. In Beckett, detritus was pre-existent; the bag gained its power in the indeterminate past and the tree was forever. In Kushner, even when detrital objects were artifacts of a past civilization or civility, they are received as already mysterious. The guidebook and hats are present as the curtain rises; they have been handed down by a past that is more-or-less fuzzily connected to our present but with a decidedly different perspective than the one shared b the contemporary audience and characters. In contrast, Berger's work shows the creation *of* detritus as part and parcel of creation *out of* detritus. Beckett and Kushner deal with human responses to a transcendent given; Berger harnesses the spirit of the great detectives of literature to make that very givenness deliciously problematic.

Great Men of Science, Nos. 21 and 22 shows this process quite clearly. They play tells the more-or-less true story of two men. The first is the 18th-century French inventor, Jacques de Vaucanson (Great Man #21), whose quest is to affirm the world's "underlying order expressing exquisite wisdom and design" and thus the existence of God by building a mechanical duck which eats, flaps its wings, and excretes just like a real duck. Should he succeed in his task, he would win not only fame, fortune, and the respect of theologians everywhere but also the hand of his beloved Chatelet from his hated rival Voltaire. This task is presented unironically as the supreme intellectual endeavor of which man is capable, and the play is remarkable for sustaining the audience's respect and admiration for this man whose life and vocation are so patently absurd.[71] De Vaucanson is clear that the duck itself is the manifestation of all his labors, intellectual, emotional, and physical. We are seeing a life of effort coalesce itself into a detrital duck, a fact made all the clearer when we learn the duck's eventual fate in act two: it will gather dust for some years in a Russian cabinet of curiosities before being destroyed in an accidental fire.

The forces of de Vaucanson's story seem large and social; the stage is populated by the French

70 Glen Berger, *O Lovely Glowworm, or Scenes of Great Beauty,* reading at the Madison Repertory Theatre, Sept. 2003, directed by Tracy Letts, and the working script (unpublished) from that reading, dated 5 September 2003, which I will cite parenthetically by page number. (I served as assistant director for this reading and participated in rehearsals.) All italics, underlining, and punctuation will be quoted from the script verbatim, but they should not be taken too seriously. As this was an actor's working script and not a published version, punctuation and emphasis are designed to be tools more for the actor's performance on very little rehearsal than for the reader's comprehension. I have no doubt that they will be cleaned up and minimized before the script is published.

71 In addition to the seemingly 'normal' obstacles of insomnia, lack of funds, unwillingness to eat, and social stigmatization, de Vaucanson suffers from severe gallstones which make urination difficult and has a tendency to forget and misplace essential products of his work (detritus). For example, he leaves his "ratios," the product of months of labor and essential for the construction of the duck, in his wig after a late-night visit to Chatelet's and spends days scouring the sides of highways for where they might have wound up.

public at large, the settings range across Paris and beyond, and, in the Chicago production, the variety and excitement of the act's visual world gave the aura of an epic story on a mythic scale. This grandeur highlighted, but did not cancel out, just how odd de Vaucanson's project really was. The second act, in contrast, is confined to the tiny, dark basement flat of Italian biologist Lazarro Spallanzani (Great Man #22) in post-revolutionary France. Spallanzani's task is every bit as noble and absurd as the duck: in order to find the invisible origin of life, he is collecting and analyzing frog semen. He has the frogs—each named after a great scientist of the past—but in order to collect his samples, he needs to build each one a tight-fitting pair of taffeta pants to act as a kind of froggie condom. His job is not helped by his ill health, his constant fights with the landlady and the gendarmes who have been persecuting scientists like him since the Revolution. After too many fights, he has to ask his landlady (never named) to make the pants, as his skills are not up to the task. The pants, then, become the detritus of the combative but affectionate relationship between Spallanzani and his landlady. Even his ignoble end at the hands of the Revolution (which the landlady pronounces in an unexplained moment of foresight) does not diminish the accomplishment the useless little taffeta pants represent: here, for some time, against all social convention, two people came together to discover the meaning of life. Of course they failed, but that does not diminish the power or the meaning of the act or the detritus that resulted from it.

The play, then, shows the creation of detritus far more than its use. But in performance, there are certain devices at play which push the audience to take up a relationship to the Great Men that is far more Brechtian than Stanislavskian; it demands an active, thoughtful response. The title, the historical setting (complete with all the trappings of a costume drama), the sung odes to wisdom which begin and end the show, the unexplained prophecy, and of course the utter absurdity of these projects which goes completely unmentioned by the play itself, all highlight to the audience the debt they owe as technologically-dependent moderns to crazies like the Great Men. These two seem arbitrarily chosen (why 21 and 22?), and so the respect that Spallanzani and de Vaucanson have earned from the audience is transferred to all the other great men of science in the world, and the detritus of their lives' work: modern science and technology. Most anything that is the product of human endeavor will, after enough time, look, sound, and act like a mechanical duck. Berger's play both suggests and asks us to acknowledge, then, the scientific sacralization of the man-made world.

While *Great Men*'s point is clear enough, the mechanism is a little fuzzier. That, of course, is the source of the comedy: the relationship between the universe's exquisite design and a mechanical duck is

tenuous, to put it mildly. This is hardly a criticism, but in Berger's earlier work, *Underneath the Lintel,* the (necessary) human is placed elsewhere and so the relationship between a transcendent truth or goal worth pursuing and the detritus it leaves behind can be more fully explored.

Underneath the Lintel is presented as a monologue in the form of a lecture given by the Librarian (the only character) for the interested public (the audience). The Librarian is a well-read, awkward, and rather antisocial Dutch man with a penchant for order. Though his professional life is of little consequence—he checks in books that have been returned through the overnight slot and issues fines when need be—he fancies himself as grand a scholar and investigator of the human condition as the Great Men. His subject, however, is one particular person. His interest is piqued by a dog-eared travel guide slipped through the overnight slot 118 years overdue. "Appalling," he decrees. "Well, he wasn't going to get away with it, not a chance" (3). But when he checks the records to find the culprit, he learns that the book has been checked out to an "A." with no address but a post office box in Dingtao, China. That might have been it had the Librarian not also discovered a laundry ticket left in the travel guide as a bookmark that was issued in London in 1913, seventy-three years before the play is set but a good forty after the book was checked out from Holland. He asks the library to pay for his investigative trip to London; the request is turned down, but he uses vacation time and collects the trousers which are, amazingly, still sitting there.

The trousers themselves are the most impressive of the Librarian's "eveydences," each tagged and numbered and set before us for our examination like a lawyer making his case or a waiting presenting a fine meal. It is not the last, however: in the trouser pocket is a used tram ticket from Bonn stamped in 1912. In Germany, he finds a report of a disruption on the tram from March 1912, which he patronizingly translates for us:

> A man with a beard and a curious hat and smelling truly foul, boarded the tram at Potsdamer Platz with a mangy dog. Although there were plenty of seats, he *refused to sit,* and instead paced up and down the aisle with his dog distracting the other passengers and myself. A dirty Jew, I threw him off at Wittlesbach. (7)

He finds a record of the dog's entry into Britain (again signed 'A.'), which refers him to the estate bookkeeper of the Lord of Derby from 1754; those books mention a similarly smelly man with a strange hat who refuses to sit or identify himself who was employed as an earthstopper. Eventually he even travels to China to check that post-office box; it contained nothing but a love letter from 1906, in Yiddish, from a woman named Esther Gelder of Zabludov, Poland. that mentions that he had left his jacket behind. Tracking down Mrs. Gelfer (now deceased) to Australia, he examines "the ephemera of

[her] life" (23), finding in it the most convincing detritus of the man he seeks:

> A raggedy old jacket, and on that jacket, a faded yellow star, yes, like the type Jews were forced to wear in Augsburg *in the fifteenth century*, yes, and in the jacket—a coin. An old coin. A Roman coin, from the time of Tiberius. Issued? 37 A.D. Eveydence? #16, underlined, circled, exclamation points and arrows pointing to it! (24)

By this point, he has deduced the identity of his search's target: the legendary Wandering Jew. (The tip-off was the British dog's name: not Sabrina but Zebrina, the genus name of the houseplant *Zebrina Pedula,* commonly known as the Wandering Jew.)[72] As the Librarian explains it, the man who would become the Wandering Jew was a first-century Jerusalem cobbler named Ahashuerus ('A.'). Carrying his cross up to Golgotha, Jesus stopped underneath this cobbler's lintel to rest.[73] He was inclined to just to let him, but the Roman guards were "telling the cobbler to cease in this aiding and abetting or he'd have to answer for it himself with *a cross of his own!"* (14). So Ahashuerus told Jesus to leave. Calmly, Jesus got up, turned to the cobbler, and said, "I will go ... but you, you will tarry til I come again" (14). And so Ahashuerus was condemned to roam the earth until the Second Coming. In addition, Ahashuerus discovered two unique stipulations about his curse. First, he could never rest. "That means never sleep. Never lie down. Never sit down. Never kneel. Could he lean? A little. But just a little" (15). Second, and to the Librarian even more horrible, is that "the Jew can *never identify himself.* He is never allowed to confirm his own existence to his fellow man. He can be nothing more than a myth, whether he's a myth or not" (16). His very existence has become a malevolent divine detritus, not unlike the way Prior's life was consumed by the angelic, inhuman message of AIDS. And yet, there seems to be slightly more going on. For a myth, Ahashuerus is leaving quite a visible trail. As the Librarian puts it, "although the Wandering Jew was just a myth, I was in possession ... of that myth's ... *pants*" (16).

Prior rejected his calling, but in that rejection, there was something of the fantastic personal agency that only really exists in fiction. In the Librarian's world, injustices and sufferings are inflicted on people all the time, and they are rarely able to do anything about it. Broody van Brummelen at the reference desk tortures the Librarian and complains about the space his lunch takes up in the refrigerator; the Librarian can do nothing in response. Similarly, it is "physically impossible" for

72 There was another clue, too, that Berger plants in the script but the Librarian never notices. The very act of taking a Jewish lover named Esther—and allowing a record of that relationship to remain in the form of a love letter—is a clue to the Wandering Jew's name. In the biblical book of Esther, the Persian king who gets rid of his old queen Vashti when she refuses to dance for him and replaces her with the Jewish beauty Esther is named Ahashverush, normally Latinized into Ahashuerus. This would not be the first time that the Book of Esther was mines for resonances with the modern world. During the Clinton impeachment scandal, the Israeli press had a field day comparing young Jewish ruler-seducers in ancient Persia and contemporary America.

73 "The lintel. The top of the doorframe," the Librarian explains. "Not lentil" (14).

Ahashuerus to sit or to tell someone who he is (15). There is no rejecting of God's curse; it is simply beyond human power.[74] But what, then, is there to do? The Librarian speculates:

> If I were in such a predicament, in which a superior had foisted an unreasonable condition upon me, well there's two ways you can go, either (A) accept your new condition grovelingly, or (B) find a way around it. I've always been more of the option (A) sort of man. If you can call that a man. But what if you've —[75] option (A) for a thousand years now and you're getting a little weary of it? [....] Trousers, claim tickets, incident reports—what if these things weren't as incidental, as accidental, or casual and trivial as they *seemed.* Just hypothetically speaking, if *you* were the hypothetical Wandering Jew, wouldn't *you* drop little clues, from time to time, nothing overt mind you, nothing to catch His notice, but just little things ... like ... oh, I don't know ... conveniently leaving your *pants,* for instance. Or taking out a discrete post office box in China. (17)

Unlike Kushnerian blessing, which is contrasted to but independent of its divinely-ordained counterpart, Ahashuerus's assertion of his identity is a human *response* to oppression inflicted by "a superior." It is as if Prior, instead of blessing the audience with life, had destroyed the Book of Stasis. At one level, this is more good old-fashioned God-wrestling, Ahashuerus finding "a way around" God's curse and thereby asserting the human power to oppose the Divine one. Of course, it is not so simple. First, there is an element of anti-Christian polemic here that makes one hesitate just a bit to equate Christ's curse with God's actual plan for Ahashuerus.[76] If the curse had the full omnipotence of divine authority, of course, it would be impossible for any human being to 'get around' it. Second, the Jacob-wrestling-with-the-angel model has space for only two antagonists; there is no one watching. The Wandering Jew's quest seems to be not just to *articulate* his existence but to *communicate* it to someone else. He does not just want to exist; he wants to be *found.* So there is an interpersonal dimension introduced. Ahashuerus and the Librarian need each other to give their lives validity and relevance. The Librarian claims his goal is "to prove one life [Ahashuerus's] and justify another [his own] ... with scraps" (28), but by this point, the audience knows better. The Librarian is not standing on some Archemedian height proving one thing and justifying another; the two lives are bound together in the same communicative project that requires, justifies, and proves them both.

As the play progresses, this communication of meaning across time and space creates a deep

---

74 *Underneath the Lintel* presumes the sort of orthodox Christian incarnationalism in which it is entirely fair to call Jesus's curse on Ahashuerus "God's curse." This may be theologically curious, but dramaturgically, it makes sense. If Berger wants to talk about the relationship between God and humanity, he needs some kind of incarnationalism as a given to allow God to enter into the story for a nonbeliever like the Librarian. And Jesus is the most culturally accepted incarnation out there. Why not use him?

75 In the proof from which I am working the word 'practiced' here is scratched out but its replacement is illegible.

76 The Wandering Jew wears the yellow hat and star demanded by the medieval Church, his lover Esther flees from a pogrom, the Bonn conductor calls him a "Dirty Jew," and so on.

bond between the Librarian and Ahashuerus. The two never meet, but the audience watches the Librarian beginning to act more and more like the Wanderer he describes. At the beginning, we saw a quiet, organized, rather dull man who had never left Holland. By the end, he has walked out on his job (his only locus of social interaction), roamed the ends of the earth, become haggard and filthy,[77] and been stricken from the library's files by his boss: "It will be as if you were never here at all" (26). This connection takes over the play's final section: the Librarian, now a little loony, is showing us slides from everywhere and anywhere that he says might be the Wanderer's handiwork; they all show the phrase "I WAS HERE," unsigned, carved or scrawled on some building. When he is fired, he carves the same three words inside his old desk. The final detritus is an anonymous recording made and left unclaimed by a visitor to the 1939 World's Fair in Queens, New York. On it, an old man's voice sings, "We're here because we're here because we're here because we're here..." (29). The Librarian joins in, and we notice the two voices' similarity.[78] Has the Librarian become the Wandering Jew? He could not tell us, of course, but his presentation of evidence after evidence, some completely irrelevant, and his desperate need for our approval and validation look very much like Ahashuerus's need to make himself known. Though the audience is necessarily placed in a Brechtian position of assessing and judging the evidences the Librarian puts forward, it is a monologue, and as such our natural inclination is to identify with the human being telling the story. If the Librarian sees himself in the Wanderer, then, we are then pushed to see ourselves in him, too. Berger is proposing the Wandering Jew as a model for how *all* of us moderns locate ourselves with respect to artifacts of the human past, the world around us now, our duties to the future, and "our superiors:" governments, science, culture, and even God. The similarity to Kushner's notion of the refugee as the quintessential contemporary is easy to see.

There are at least two questions *Underneath the Lintel* raises in fleshing out the action of human-detritus-building action from *Great Men.* First, unlike in *Great Men,* the detritus is not completely human. The whole reason the Wandering Jew wanders, and the reason that he is worth seeking, is his unique relationship to Christ. Even if he failed to recognize Christ's divinity, it is that divine authority that dictated the terms of his pilgrimage and to which he responds. This makes for a strong force to propel against, but Berger has stacked the deck a bit by choosing the Wandering Jew as his symbol of humanity. Is it just *this* story that demands that the detritus of our lives which defined who we are be a strategic move to outwit the decrees of God or fate? Or is that necessarily always the case? Put another

77 When the Librarian finally returns to his job, he is confronted with "a few gaping stares from the library patrons and some rather unkind remarks about the hum wafting off [his] unwashed self" (26).

78 In a stage direction, the recorded voice is described as "scratchy and eerie [...] perhaps slightly reminiscent of The Librarian" and when the Librarian joins in, "his eyes ligh[t] up as a much-desired realization sinks in" (29).

way, can detritus-built human relationships like that between Ahashuerus and the Librarian ever stay wholly within the human sphere, or must all human detritus necessarily point heavenward, just as Martin Buber suggested that every speaking of an 'I-Thou' points to the "eternal Thou"?[79] The play presumes an answer rather than arguing or showing it. Second, just how far can human ritualization go? The Librarian's quest for the Wandering Jew takes over his life, but it does not wholly consume it. Two of the script's sketchier points are the Librarian's scattered references back to the lost love of his life, Rosa van der Werff, and his nemesis at the library, Brody. To an audience attempting to get to know this strange man, these references suggest the naggingly unconvincing yet unrefuted implication that this whole Jew-kick is just a midlife effort to make up for some youthful cold feet and stand up to a professional bully. Such a motivation would trivialize the Librarian's whole enterprise, even if it would make it more heartwarming. But what if these two were decidedly *not* the problem the Librarian was trying to solve with these Eveydences? What if he was forced to subsist emotionally on detritus alone; could he do it? Just how much could they do? Can a whole life be created around the detritus of a single human existence? A whole world? Or are there limits beyond which either the mundane (Rosa and Brody) or the cosmic (God) must necessarily retake control?

A step towards an answer is to be found, I think, in Berger's latest play, still unproduced. The narrator of *O Lovely Glowworm* is revealed to us in the very first scene as "a tattered, taxidermically stuffed goat, mounted on casters, with expressive brows and a movable jaw," singing in the "earnest voice of an old man" an Irish tenor's sentimental croon of 1919 (3 s.d.). From the beginning, then, we know more about him than he does himself. His opening monologue sets out the problem:

> I don't understand any of this. I was once dead, I 'm sure of it. Now I'm living. Again! If you can call it living. I can't see a thing. No. Can't hear neither. Smell? No. How about taste? Can I taste? No. Feel though. That I can do. Feel. And what is it that I feel? If I had to put a word to it? "Barstarding and bastarding torture" that's what. Oh yes, ever-blooming and really horrible. Like a thousand million slivers of glass running in and our of me. But I can't do it justice. *(naive and bewildered)* It hurts...and it won't stop, and it's getting worse. In fact, I think it's precisely this ever-increasing pain that has revived me again to life. Baah. I'm full of theories. It's fact I'm short of. What the source of this pain is, for instance. That, I don't know. Where I am, that too I don't know. What I am, I don't know. Do I know anything? No. Only that there is pain, and therefore, Life. *(pause)* And I don't find it very interesting. But. There is something I find very interesting. *(confiding)* I cannot

79 Martin Buber, *I and Thou [Ich und Du]*, trans. R.G. Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958), 99: "Every particular *Thou* is a glimpse through to the eternal *Thou;* by means of every particular *Thou* the primary word addresses the eternal *Thou.* Through this mediation of the *Thou* of all beings fulfilment, and non-fulfulment, of relations comes to them: the inborn *Thou* is realized in each relation and consummated in none. It is consummated only in the direct relation with the *Thou* that by its nature cannot become *It.*"

> see or hear the world beyond my eyes and ears, no, but I've constructed, with great effort, an inner world , and it's lovely! And I can see it, and I can hear it. I can't taste it, and that's a blow, but I can see it, and I can I hear it. And I turn to this inner world again and again for soothing and solace. And here it is— (3-4)

And so, with a flourish of music, the Goat launches into his first "Scene of Great Beauty" (4): an apparently dead but only sleeping First World War soldier whom the Goat names Marveaux being pelted, in turn, by rain, snow, sleet, leaves, bird droppings, "excrement flung by monkeys," and "a little more rain" (4). These scenes are his mental playground, his emotional lab experiments, and his moral role models. When he envies Marveaux for his rest, the Goat gives him a "stabbing pain in the head" just like he experiences himself to see what happens when he wakes us. The characters are independent of their creator, to a degree, but when he disapproves of their action or suffers too much himself, he punishes them with pain, maiming, or (usually temporary) death. He maintains control over setting, weather, time, and most everything else like an erratic onstage director-tyrant.[80] His goal in the Scenes is to discover his *own* true and beautiful identity and place in the world, not to follow any kind of narrative logic or to do justice to the characters and scenes he uses as tools.

Part of that identification, of course, is watching the Goat struggle to understand something we already know: who he is. The Goat himself is only given as clear a view at the very end, when the God-figure of the Taxidermist explains that he was stuffed after death. But why, the Goat wants to know, is he alive again, and why all this pain? The Taxidermist manipulates the Goat's mouth and speaks for both his creation (in quotation marks) and himself:

> "Oh goodie. You mentioned preservation chemicals. What sir is their purpose?"
> Well the short answer is this—lice. Lice and maggots. They'll lay an egg in an untreated pelt and a thousand are born. And a thousand more. And soon there's a lousy and maggoty million infesting your corpus and breeding and just imagine being the unwilling host to those fellows wriggling and running rife through your skin, uncaring, and unceasing, the wurbling, scattering, scurrying, torturing creatures they are. A living hell 'twoud be. A pain so horrible I bet you ten to one it could bring you all the way back from the dead.
> "And tell me this—do the chemicals always work?"
> For a while. Perhaps. Not forever, no. No, all things, all creatures bright and beautiful, and creatures great and small, they all end in maggots and in lice. But fear not, my little carcass of a friend...you'll be in the incinerator long before then.
> "But what if I'm not incinerated, what then? If I'm preserved long enough to be infested, and no one notices, what then?"
> What then?

80 Near the play's end when Marveaux faces a firing squad, the Goat places Macmann, a character from a completely different Scene of Great Beauty, next to him for no apparent reason at all. The characters themselves are aware of their creator's caprice: "Are you here as well for desertion of ranks?" asks Marveaux. "To tell you the truth, I have no idea what I'm doing here," answers Macmann (68).

> "Would I return to a sort of life?...and be forced to concoct scenes of great beauty to distract from my pain?"
> You might at that.
> "And what then?"
> Well...you might concoct a scene even like this one. Even with me. Putting on a gramophone record like this... and stroking your hide like this...and kissing your head...on the occiput...the pointy bit...like this...and telling you not to worry...not to worry...your end will come...and you are loved... (99-100, all ellipses in source)

"Concoct" is a strange word. Like the narrator of Beckett's *The Unnameable,* the Got is an imaginative consciousness with no awareness of its body. Even such a Goat, however, cannot concoct these scenes *ex nihilo* or out of his consciousness itself. (Recall what happened when Didi and Gogo tried to have fund with their minds alone.) Like all human concoctions, these scenes need a source from which to work. Berger explains in his setting direction on the play's title page:

> Being blind, dead, alone, and insensate for an unknown number of years, the Goat has no idea where is is or what year it might be. However, as the Goat spent nearly all of his more-robust life tethered to a post near a rubbish heap by a cottage outside Dublin between 1910 and 1924, his memories and the inspirations for his "scenes of great beauty" should be confined to that period. (2)

This is what makes *O Lovely Glowworm* such a central example of the ritualized theatre: the play's entire universe is built out of the memories of a trash dump. The set itself is built out of scraps, string, paper, and bits of old advertisements.[81] There are scrap paper comets (25), a sun "ineptly made" (37), and so on. Characters frequently extol the virtues of Swan's Soap, not as an aside but like any other piece of philosophical vocabulary.[82] A Mermaid/Siren appears (from the soap label) named Philomel reading the February 1917 issue of *Electrical World,* also from the dump. Newspaper headlines and photographs from WW I provide both the starting images of scenes and specific lines of dialogue. Nor is this junk-building restricted to the level of the Goat's construction of his Scenes of Beauty. In act two, Marveaux is married to Philomel (now with legs). He asks her for a token of her love: "a lock of hair...a perfumed handkerchief...." She offers something rather different:

> A used tram ticket. *(he clutches it to his breast, near tears)* More precious still. For this pitiable scrap of paper has not bravely taken on a responsibility unmatched by any tram ticket in the history of tram tickets—to bear silent testament to our love...God bless this scrap... (61)

---

81 Berger's description of the set at the beginning reads: "The set should rely heavily on scraps of paper and bits of string, which, in the Goat's mind's eye, become the most fantastic of landscapes—shimmering lakes, cityscapes, battlegrounds, etc. The set may also contain enlarged swatches of words, images from product packaging, and photographs, all suggesting contents of a rubbish heap in Ireland circa 1908-1923" (3 s.d.).

82 On starting an affair: Kathleen: "If only we were pure." Halliwell: "Only two things are pure. The unicorn, and Swan's Soap" (89).

At some level, the Goat is well aware that he is building a world out of scraps, just as he is aware that the is actually a dead stuffed goat. The dialogue he gives his characters occasionally lets down its guard and allows the un-beautiful truth to come out. When Marveaux is suffering for love of Philolem, for example, he says, "Even a dead, stuffed goat, revived again to a sort of life by a pain unspeakable, cannot begin to imagine my torment" (24). A dead, stuffed goat is pathetic and ugly, the two things the Goat cannot bear to be. Likewise, the world of high drama, love, bloodshed, and true beauty and meaning he depicts would be made ridiculous if revealed to be nothing but scraps. One of the Goat's most charming self-referential characters is a sunny but simple boy named Macmann who lives with his dying mother and skips school to work on inventions that he hopes will save the family from poverty.[83] His mother is convinced that no good will come from such a lazy, worthless boy's efforts:

> MOTHER: Now look here my addled one, what materials to you have after all? What can come of it? A few scraps of paper, a piece of string...
> *(stirring beautiful music has begun to be heard on the gramophone as he climbs a chair)*
> MACMANN: And what wonders have been accomplished with less! Mother, all it takes it faith...the Faith to see what isn't readily apparent...I haven't much, I know, but I needn't much—look at Edison—a tin can, a sewing needle, a piece of rubber—the phonograph! I will create nothing less than a world, with bits of string and small scraps of paper! (10)

Well, can he? And can the Goat create not just a world, but a world with "great beauty" in it? There are plenty of moments that seem utterly hopeless (particularly the war scenes), but in the end, the answer is apparently yes. Macmann eventually discovers the principle of nature he needs ('water always finds its own level') in order to make his great invention (a toilet that can flush effectively even when the cistern is only half full). The goat finally discovers himself to be, in Marveaux's words, "a creature personifying nobility and purity, and dignity and innocence and sincerity, wisdom and strength, and vulnerability. In short...Supreme Beauty" (107). The Goat has become a unicorn; or, rather, he is the same goat he always has been but now with a horn attached to the middle of his forehead.

This, though, would leave us as an audience just about where we were at the end of *Great Men,* admiring the characters' ridiculous nobility. We relate to the Goat more like we relate to the Librarian than to de Vaucanson and Spallanzani. Like the Librarian, the Goat narrates his own story from inside his own head, and in its attempt to follow and make sense of the play, the audience has little choice but to set itself in the same place. The Great Men's story, in contrast, was framed in a way that asked us to look *up* to them as models; it had a much stronger *Verfremdungseffekt.* Because we have identified with the Goat, it would feel like a failure if his plight ended with nothing but a comfortable delusion—if he

83 Incidentally, he also collects the Ogden-cigarette-packet cards the Goat found in the trash heap called "Great Men of Science" (15)—a detritus of a detritus!

actually considered himself a unicorn—just as we would feel if we were not at least a little convinced that the subject of the Librarian's inquiry actually existed. That the life and world we can build out of detritus is necessarily a delusional one is hardly a selling point; if the point of ritualization is to enable people to make particular strategic moves that would otherwise be impossible, the side effect of permanent delusion makes that choice much less attractive.[84] This is the problem of misrecognition again; if a ritualizing practitioner is *aware* that his ritualizing is deluded about the world and his own action in it, that ritualizing ought to be discredited. Once the Goat knows that he is just a goat, he should stop trying to find his beauty, get rid of the horn, and just enjoy trash as trash.

Of course, that doesn't happen. Macmann may speak of his invention in terms over-grand enough to make the audience laugh, but they all have one at home. The reliably flushing toilet has undoubtedly done more good for humanity than any mechanical duck. The Goat, likewise, is aware of the reality of his situation, even if he would rather think about more beautiful things. This awareness slips out bit by bit throughout the play, and, in the very last speech, he admits what we have known (and known that he has known) for some time. The stage direction labels this the "sincerest of confessions":

> I have something to say. I am not a tramcar conductor. No. Nor an ailing mother. No. Or thoroughbred. Or glowworm. Or taxidermist. Or heroic dog. Or father and channel swimmer. Or passimeter booking equipment supervisor. And I am a goat. You see. We all find our own level. In the end. Bah. And yet, everything endured, despite of it, doesn't it. Or rather, because of it. Yes...we can stay just where we are, at our very own level...and endure...
> *(resigned to it—)*
> I'll endure.....
> *(now perhaps seeing a positive—if not a beautiful—side to it—)*
> I will. I will.....I will.....Endure...
> *(Beautiful music swells as it is revealed that the Goat is part of a remarkably lovely crèche scene. Then lights out, and up on music—preferably "Paper Moon" as sung by Cliff Edwards.)* (109-110)

Certainly the ending is ambiguous and dependent on the actor for its meaning, but if the penultimate stage direction is to be observed, the audience is led to see the Goat's Scenes of Great Beauty as a successful means by which the Goat has understood and accepted his life and himself *as he is,* despite the pain. His scrap-built self-justification worked in the end. And even if he is not beautiful himself, his discovery of his authentic existence locates him as a part of a larger, "remarkably lovely" system that is itself beautiful, meaningful, and important—the crèche. In finding his own level, that level is lifted up.

---

84 It is important to remember that Berger's work does not at all shy away from labeling ritualizing choices as delusional. In contrast, consider Priandello's *Henry IV,* where a modern man who chooses to live as a medieval king is not only *not* mocked but shown to be making a legitimate choice for his identity that is only incidentally more unusual than those which the rest of us make.

Importantly, the crèche is beyond the Goat's horizon of sight; though we see him as part of this larger context, he does not. Yet he *accepts* his location and his level even without a conscious awareness that their elevation as a part of a larger beauty. Seeing is unnecessary; that enduring an authentic life is a part of a higher, more beautiful larger order can be taken on faith. The effectiveness of the Goat's scenic ritual, then, is not dependent on any kind of transcendent vision and also does not require him to delude himself about who he is or what he is doing. If there is a more helpful suggestion for effective Bellian ritualization which does not require either prophetic vision or blinders to misrecognition, from the theatre or elsewhere, I have not seen it.

Conclusions

Public storytelling in the modern West is not a religion, and on the whole, it has no pretensions to become one. But because it is a practice which works with the making of meaning, it has the ability to take on many of the functions traditionally ascribed to ritual. Sociologically, many modern Westerners who no longer identify with organized religion have looked to public storytelling for ritual-like sustenance. And structurally, the practice of theatre is a particularly potent one for doing so, as its performative nature makes it particularly fluent in speaking about, providing a model for, and effecting the embodied human subject who addresses and is addressed by it. This is particularly true of for the theatre of the Euroamerican West, which has grown up under a Christian cultural umbrella, whatever its stance towards faith and the Church. As Max Harris has shown, the theatrical medium is adept at serving particularly Christian functions: relating the individual to a larger social sphere (the Church) and cosmic (i.e., divine) plan, setting a temporally finite human life in a larger or eternal context, and balancing the tension between the world's beauty (incarnationalism) and suffering (sin).

Harris is making an argument about the theatrical medium as such, and therefore, I think he somewhat overstates his case. Yes, theatre can be deployed for ritual ends, but it can also be used for attention-diverting, money-making, or time-killing. The examples that Harris uses, rather than being representative of theatrical practice as a whole, are sites of self-differentiation within it more or less congruent to Catherine Bell's concept of ritualization. The ritualized theatre marks itself out from the rest of the theatrical industry by incorporating elements which are too beautiful, meaningful, or true to fit into the narratively-established universe depicted by the play. When they appear, then, the appear as detritus, sacramental objects treated as or turned into junk. The question of how people (both actors as characters and their audiences) can or should relate to this detritus is the question of how postmoderns can relate to and understand the invisible larger wholes of which they are a part.

This is both genuinely theatrical work—it attempts to use public storytelling to show the audience a new and consequential fiction—and ritual action—the Rappaportian "primary social act" of relating people together into communities. To understand how the ritualized theatre of the modern West

does what is it does, therefore, it is necessary to approach it from the perspectives both of religious and ritual studies trying to make sense of a performed narrative phenomena, and of the aesthetic, sociological, and political debates about the role of theatre in relationship to its creators and audience. The anthropological debate over the use and the appropriateness of the theatrical metaphor for the study of ritual can shed light on the human "need" for ritualization, in Turner's terms, its social form and function, and its political implications in a way that theatre critics like Brustein often miss when considering the theatre as a creative art form and not as a social practice. The post-Brechtian debate in theatre studies, in contrast, has done much to make clear the political and social implications of how the theatre can be *used* for this end or that. Together, the anthropology of ritual and post-Brechtian dramatic theory can teach a theatricalist how to ritualize. With this background, the ritualizing theatrical has a vocabulary to talk about both the social practices and roles he has been given and the particular moral and political implications of their work within them.

There is one particular contribution that the ritualized theatre can make to the theory of ritual practice, and of Bourdieuian practice in general. The concept of misrecognition (*néconnaisance*), which both Bell and Bourdieu see as a necessary element of practice theory, makes the very colonialist move the two set out to avoid, claiming that a practitioner must misrecognize his own ends and only an observer can see them clearly. The Brechtian move in theatre was, at base, an attempt to recognize, judge, and make use of the actual sociopolitical effects of the practice of public storytelling. While is is perfectly fair to argue that Brecht's Marxism was just as much a misrecognition as Stanislavsky's modernism, post-Brechtians like the ritualizers are striking examples of practitioners who both *recognize* the actual social effect of their practice as well as anyone can and *participate* in it anyway. The post-Brechtian theatre is a *knowing* theatre, and nowhere is this knowledge more apparent than when it attempts to portray or appeal to the unportrayable or do the impossible through ritualization. Of course this leads to paradox, but many practices, including theatre, do not find that to be a hinderance. The ritualized theatre will, I hope be seen as a provocatively *non*-misrecognizing practice: a practice that both knows what it does and does what it does through the same activity of the same persons at the same time.

What does such a non-misrecognized practice look like, and what might more traditional ritual practitioners (like pastors) learn from it? The examples of the last chapter were not enough to make firm and definitive conclusions, but some observations are in order as to what happens to practice that loses its misrecognition but ritualizes anyway.

First, some level of mystery or paradox is necessary. This cannot just be a matter of a special, secret knowledge reserved for a particular group. Both knowledge and paradox must be democratized. Both performers and spectators need to have equally full knowledge of what is going on, but that knowledge must not be so complete that all processes and techniques of the practice can be fully explained. Even with full knowledge, a non-misrecognizing practice like the Ritualized Theatre must have a place for mystery, whether called intuition, revelation, luck, or a 'feel for the game.' Some part of the process of the practice must be inexplicable. If the choice of means, the relation of means to ends, and the ends themselves are all perfectly understood and explicable in themselves and their relationship to each other, there is nothing of a practice left. A non-misrecognizing practice must try to aim for inexplicable ends, use inexplicable means, or use means with no explicable connection to the ends sought.

It must *try* to do so; it need not succeed. In fact, the lack of misrecognition usually comes when the discourse around a practice points out that the ends a practice claims to achieve are in fact not achieved, and other ends are instead. But one strategic effect of ritualization seems to be that the failure to achieve the impossible might, in some way, be a means of achieving it anyway. Prior could not heal his AIDS, but he blesses us with more life; Didi and Gogo cannot find Godot, but in seeking him they may have vacated the need for him; the Great Men are far from great, but in the sheer force of their failed passion is a kind of greatness. There seem to be certain limits on our ability to tap into truly transcendent methods or ends imposed simply by our human finitude. The Ritualized Theatre suggests that there is no necessary incompatibility between recognizing and submitting to these limits and the benefit to be gained by the effort to transcend them. In fact, that very combination is the most honest and effective mode of ritualized practice available. Calling this irony or paradox is perhaps a bit overdone; the theatrical case suggests instead that it be called ludic or playful. When play does the impossible, it is doing what is supposed to without any breakdown of reality. Success is superfluous in play.

What is absolutely necessary, though, are human relationships. Even if extended past normal limits of space, time, and language or solidified into the detritus of science, history, or technology, human beings seem only able to undertake a practice (ritualized or otherwise) in consort with other human beings. The ritualized theatre suggests the human relationship as the essential catalyst and site of all practices of consequence. Alone, Didi and Gogo are as utterly immobilized as the Librarian without the Wanderer. No human activity can be done alone, not even sane survival.

This human context, then, is both essential to all practice and its unsurmountable limitation. Any ritualization, in the theatre or elsewhere, must work within that context. This does not mean that the human becomes the ultimate standard by which all practice must be judged, in the Nietzchean sense of 'health,' but it does mean that no practice, including ritual and theatre, can begin by assuming any perspective but that of a human relationship if it is to be effective or meaningful. *From* that perspective, almost anything can be done, and the particular remit of ritual is to move beyond human limitations in an act of reaching out. But without misrecognition, one cannot start beyond and move back to the human. We have to acknowledge our own location, our own limitations, and our own knowledges if we want want our practices to be built on something other than misrecognized delusion. We cannot know more than we do, but we cannot know less, either.

Given all that, the outward-pointing move of ritualization is not easy, but is is also far from impossible. I would argue that the methods by which the Ritualized Theatre builds a meaningful and effective act out of detritus while recognizing and acknowledging human limitations and knowledge can provide a helpful model for contemporary practical theologians who would like to find a semiotically defensible and performatively effective concept of sacramentality that can be useful in worship or pastoral contexts. The exact shape of such a sacramentality exceeds the bounds of this work, but if the Ritualized Theatre is any guide, it will be one that acknowledges the origins of detritus, the complicated relationship it has with imperfect humans, its potentials both to communicate real, transhuman information and to create human community, and its real social effects. Such a sacramentality will take its worshippers seriously as thinking, social and embodied people in cultural contexts who yet have the ability and perhaps the need to experience mystery and aim for goals beyond their everyday selves.

Bibliography

Abbreviations:
TDR: The Drama Review (formerly *Tulane Drama Review)*
NTQ: New Theatre Quarterly
CUP: Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
OUP: New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press
TCG: New York: Theatre Communications Group

Adler, Thomas P., "'The mystery of things': the varieties of religious experience in modern American drama," in *Studies in Drama 5* (CUP 1983).

Adorno, Theodor W., "Towards an understanding of *Endgame,"* in Bell Gale Chevigny, ed., *Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J., Prentice-Hall, 1969).

Artaud, Antonin, *The Theatre and Its Double,* trans. Victor Corti (London: Calder & Boyars, 1970).

Auslander, Philip, *From Acting to Performance: Essays in Modernism and Postmodernism* (London: Routledge, 1997).

Austin, John L., *How to Do Things With Words* (OUP 1962).

Bakhtin, Mikhail, *The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev, Voloshinov,* ed. Pam Morris (London: Arnold, 1994).

Barba, Eugenio and Savarese, Nicola, *A Dictionary of Theatre Anthropology* (London: Routledge, 1991).

Beckett, Samuel, *Endgame* (London: Faber, 1952).

——, *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Embers* (London: Faber and Faber, 1959).

——, *Happy Days,* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

——, *Waiting for Godot* (New York: Grove, 1954), and the production at the Gate Theatre, Dublin, Jan. 2003, directed by Walter Asmus, with Johnny Murphy (Estragon), Barry McGovern (Vladimir), Conor Lovett (Lucky), and Alan Stanford (Pozzo), designed by Louis de Brocquy, lighting by Rupert Murray.

Begbie, Jeremy, *Theology, Music and Time* (CUP 2000).

Bell, Catherine, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (OUP 1992).

——*Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions* (OUP 1997).

Bentley, Ben, "Afghanistan Still Stirs A Housewife," review of *Homebody/Kabul* at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, *New York Times,* 13 May 2004.

Bentley, Eric, "Are Stanislavsky and Brecht commensurable?" *TDR* 9 (1964) 69-76.

——, *The Theatre of Commitment* (London: Metheuen, 1968).

Benstock, Shari, "The Transformational Grammar of Gender in Beckett's Drama," in Linda Ben-Zvi, ed., *Women in Beckett: Performance and Critical Perspectives* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press), 172-186.

Berger, Glen, *Underneath the Lintel, or, The Mystery of the Abandoned Trousers: An Impressive Presentation of Lovely Evidences* (New York: Broadway Play Publishing , 2003).

——, *O Lovely Glowworm, or Scenes of Great Beauty,* reading at the Madison Repertory Theatre, Sept. 2003, directed by Tracy Letts, and the working script (unpublished) from that reading, dated 5 September 2003.

——, *Great Men of Science, Nos. 21 & 22,* Lookingglass Theater, Chicago, Feb. 2004, directed by Tracy Letts, with Joey Slotnick (de Vaucanson) and David Pasquesi (Spallanzani). The script remains unpublished.

Boal, Augusto, *Theatre of the Oppressed* (TCG 1985).

Bourdieu, Pierre, *The Logic of Practice,* translated by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1992)

Brady, Sara, "Welded to the Ladle: *Steelbound* and Non-Radicality in Community-Based Theatre," *TDR* 44:3 (Fall 2000), 51-74

Bradley, Ian, *You've Got to Have a Dream: The Message of the Musical* (London: SCM Press, forthcoming).

Brecht, Bertolt, "Theatre for Learning," translated by Edith Anderson, and "On Chinese Acting," translated by Eric Bentley, both from *The Brecht Sourcebook,* ed. Carol Martin and Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2000).

Brook, Peter, *The Empty Space* (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968).

Brustein, Robert, *The Theatre of Revolt: Studies in Modern Drama from Ibsen to Genet* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1962).

Buber, Martin, *I and Thou [Ich und Du],* trans. R.G. Smith (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1958)

Calderwood, James L., "Ways of Waiting in 'Waiting for Godot,'" *Modern Drama* 29 (1985), 363-375, reprinted in Steven Connor, *New Casebooks* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 36.

Causey, Matthew, "Posthuman Performance," *Crossings 1.2* (Sept. 2001), and the editor's introduction to the issue, Mads Haahr and Elizabeth Drew, "Human Identity in a Posthuman Age," online at http://crossings.tcd.ie/issues/1.2

Chekhov, Anton, *The Cherry Orchard,* translated by Paul Schmidt (New York: HarperCollins, 1997).

Clancy, James H., "*Hedda Gabler:* Poetry in Action and in Object," from *Studies in Theatre and Drama, Essays in Honor of Hubert C. Heffner,* ed. Oscar G. Brockett (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 64-72.

Clausius, Claudia, "Bad Habits While Waiting for Godot: The Demythification of Ritual," in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Press, 1987),

Collier, Jeremy, *A Short View of the Immorality and Prophaneness of the English Stage,* critical edition edited by Benjamin Hellinger (New York: Garland, 1987). Originally published London, 1698.

Connor, Steven , Introduction, *New Casebooks: Waiting for Godot and Endgame* (London: Macmillan, 1992).

Coupeau, Jacques, *Notes sure le métier de comédien* (Paris: Michel Brient, 1955), as quoted in Auslander, *From Acting to Performance* (q.v.).

Critical Arts Ensemble, "Performing a Cult," *TDR* 44:4 (Winter 2000), 167-173.

Douglas, Mary, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge, 1969).

Eco, Umberto, "The frames of comic 'freedom,'"in *Carnival! Approaches to Semiotics 64* ed. Thomas A. Sebock (Berlin: Mouton, 1984).

Edelman, Josh, "Can An Act Be True?" in Trevor Hart, ed. *Faithful Performances?* (London: Ashgate, forthcoming).

Ehrmann, Jacques, "Homo Ludens Revisited," *Yale French Studies* 41 (1968): 31-57.

Eliade, Mircea, *The Sacred and the Profane,* trans. Willard Trask, (San Diego: Harcourt Brace & Co., 1959).

Emigh, John, *Masked Performance: The Play of Self and Other in Ritual and Theatre* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1996).

Fesenfeld, Martha, "From the Perspective of an Actress/Critic: Ritual Batters in Beckett's *Happy Days,"* in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Press, 1987),

Fo, Dario, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist,* adapted for the English stage by Gavin Richards from a translation by Gillian Hanna (London: Metheuen, 1980).

Freud, Sigmund, *The Origins of Religion: Totem and Taboo,* trans. Albert Dickson (London: Penguin, 1990).

Friedrich, Rainer, "Drama and Ritual," in *Studies in Drama 5* (CUP 1983).

——, "The Deconstructed Self in Artaud and Brecht: negation of Subject and Antitotalitarianism," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 26:3 (1990), 282-297.

——, "Brecht and Postmodernism," *Philosophy and Literature* 23 (1999): 44-64.

Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973).

——, "Blurred Genres,"*American Scholar,* Spring 1980, 165-179.

Goffman, Erving, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (London: Penguin, 1971), and

Goody, Jack, "Religion and Ritual: The Definitional Problem," *British Journal of Sociology* 12 (1961).

Grimes, Ronald L., *Beginnings in Ritual Studies,* revised edition (Columbia: Univ. of South Carolina Press, 1995).

——, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 2000).

Grotowsky, Jerzy, *The Grotowski Sourcebook,* ed. Richard Schechner and Lisa Wolford (London: Routledge, 1997).

Handelman, Don, *Models and Mirrors: Towards an Anthropology of Public Events,* 2nd ed. (New York: Berghahn Books, 1998)

Harris, Max, *Theatre and Incarnation* (London: Macmillian, 1990).

——, *The Dialogical Theatre: Dramatizations of the Conquest of Mexico and the Question of the Other* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993).

——, *Carnival and Other Christian Festivals: Folk theology and folk performance* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 2003).

Huizinga, Johan, *Homo Ludens,* trans. R.F.C. Hull (London: Routledge, 1944).

Ibsen, Henrik, *Hedda Gabler,* directed by Ron Daniels, with Jenna Stern (Hedda) and Christopher McCann (Judge Brack), at the Dallas Theater Center, Dallas, Texas, September 2001; script published in anonymous translation (New York: Dover, 1990).

Iser, Wolfgang, "Counter-sensical Comedy and Audience Response in Beckett's 'Waiting for Godot,'" *Gestos* 4 (1987), 21-32, reprinted in Steven Connor, *New Casebooks* (London: Macmillan, 1992), 56.

Ivanov, V.V., "The semiotic theory of carnival as the inversion of bipolar opposites," trans from the Russian by R. Reeder and J. Rostinsky, in *Carnival! Approaches to Semiotics 64* ed. Thomas a Sebeok (Berlin: Mouton Publishers, 1984).

Katyal, Anjum, "Sacred Ritual into Professional Performance," *TDR* 45:1 (Spring 2001), 96-117.

Kekki, Lasse, "Beyond Abject Bodies: Reading Queerly Tony Kushner's *Angels in America,*" paper presented to the Post-Dramatic Texts working group of the International Federation for Theatre Research, St Petersburg, May 2004.

Kushner, Tony, *A Bright Room Called Day* (TCG 1994).

——, *Angels In America, Part One: Millennium Approaches and Part Two: Perestroika* (TCG 1995).

——, "An Undoing World," lyrics from the title song to the play *It's an Undoing World, or Why Should It Be Easy When It Can Be Hard?* (work in progress).

——, "With a Little Help From My Friends," afterword to *Angels in America* (TCG 1995),

——, *Homebody/Kabul* (TCG 2002).

——, "Only We Who Guard The Mystery Shall Be Unhappy," script in progress, excerpts published in *The Nation,* 24 March 2003 and *The New York Times,* 5 September 2004.

——, Interview, *The New York Times,* 4 June 2004.

Lane, Jill, "Reverend Billy: Preaching, Protest, and Postindustiral Flânerie," *TDR* 46:1 (Spring 2002).

Lyotard, Jean-François, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,* trans Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984

Kennedy, Andrew K., "Action and Theatricality in 'Waiting for Godot,'"excerpted from *Samuel Bekcett* (CUP 1989), 24-31 and 42-46 in Steven Connor, *New Casebooks* (q.v.).

MacDonald, Heather, *An Almost Holy Picture,* produced by Echo Theatre at the Bath House Cultural Center, Dallas, Texas, with Raphael Parry (Sam), directed by Rene Moreno. Script published in *American Theatre* 17:2 (Feb. 2000).

MacIntyre, Alisdair, *After Virtue,* second edition (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984).

Mamet, David, *True and False: Heresy and Common Sense for the Actor* (New York: Pantheon, 1997).

Marowitz, Charles, *Propsero's Staff: Acing and Directing in the Contemporary Theatre* (Bloomington: Indianan University Press, 1986).

Maughlin, Susan, "Liminality: An Approach to Artistic Progress in *Endgame,*" in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Press, 1987).

McDermott, Dana Sue, "Ritual and Reification: the Passion plays at Oberammergau and Eureka Springs, Arkansas," in *Studies in Drama* 5 (CUP 1983).

Merlin, Bella, "Mamet's Heresy and Common Sense: What's True and False in 'True and False,'" *NTQ* 16:3 (Aug. 2000), 249-254.

Nealon, Jeffrey, "Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern: Language Games, Play and 'Waiting for Godot,' *Modern Drama* 31 (1988), 520-528, reprinted in Steven Connor, *New Casebooks* (q.v).

Neuss, Paula, "God and Embarrassment," in *Studies in Drama* 5 (CUP 1983), 252.

Osborn, M. Elizabeth, ed., *The Way We Live Now: American plays & the AIDS crisis* (TCG 1990),

Overbrook, Louis More, "Getting On: Ritual as Façon in Beckett's Plays," in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Presses, 1987).

Rappaport, Roy A., *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (CUP 1999).

Rozik, Eli, *The Roots of Theatre: Rethinking Ritual & Other Theories of Origin* (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 2002).

Schechner, Richard, *Between Theatre and Anthropology* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

——, "Magnitudes of Performance," in *By Means of Performance* (CUP 1990).

——, *The Future of Ritual: Writings on Culture and Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

——, *Performance Theory,* third edition (New York: Routledge, 2003). earlier editions published by Routledge in 1977 and 1988.

—— and Willa Appel, ed., *By Means of Performance* (CUP 1990).

Smith, Jonathan Z., *To Take Place: Toward Theory in Ritual* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1987).

Stanislavsky, Constantin, *An Actor Prepares,* trans. from the Russian by Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1937), 14.

Steiner, George, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation,* second edition (OUP 1992).

Talen, Bill, *What Should I Do if Reverend Billy Is in My Store?* (New York: New Press, 2003).

——, "We Believe," sermon, n.d., online at http://revbilly.com in MP3 format.

——, "God-sightings and Post-Commercial Complexity," n,d., available online at http://revbilly.com.

——, *Freedom's Got Us Surrounded,* performed at the Salon Theatre, New York, 26 March 2000, unpublished text quoted in Lane, *Reverend Billy* (q.v.).

Turner, Victor, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (New York: Aldine, 1969).

——, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975).

——, *From Ritual to Theater: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

——, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1988).

—— "Are there universals of performance in myth, ritual, and drama?" in *By Means of Performance,* ed. Richard Schechner and Willa Appel (CUP 1990).

Twycross, Meg, "Books for the unlearned," in *Themes in Drama* 5 (CUP 1993).

van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge, 1909).

Vanhoozer, Kevin, "The Voice and the Actor," in *Evangelical Futures: A Conversation on Theological Method,* ed. J.G. Stackhouse (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000).

Watt, Stephen, "Beckett by Way of Baudrillard: Toward a Political Reading of Samuel Beckett's Drama," in *Myth and Ritual in the Plays of Samuel Beckett,* ed. Katherine H. Burkman (London: Associated Univ. Press, 1987).

Weber, Carl, "Gestus and the American Performance Tradition, from *The Brecht Sourcebook,* ed. Carol Martin and Henry Bial (London: Routledge, 2000).

Whybrow, Graham, Introduction to *The Methuen Book of Modern Drama* (London: Methuen, 2001), xi.