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CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN DRAMA.

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1978

THE CREATION OF MYTH AND RITUAL IN  
CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN DRAMA

by

THOMAS JAMES CARABAS

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate  
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Abstract

THE CREATION OF MYTH AND RITUAL IN CONTEMPORARY  
EUROPEAN DRAMA

by

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In the last century dramatic theory and practice have been transformed by efforts to create new myths and rituals for contemporary audiences. The first chapter deals with this particular use of myth and ritual and traces its development in the theories of Yeats and Artaud as well as examining its debt to symbolism, dadaism and surrealism. Later chapters deal with myth and ritual as they are found in the works of Brecht, Genet and Ionesco.

In the plays discussed the gods of contemporary myth, personifications of man-made institutions, are locked in mortal combat with representative Everyman characters. These myths are a metaphysical revelation of man's instinctual impulses in conflict with the limitations imposed by society. At the same time they contain a vision of man whose humanity has been destroyed or so greatly diminished that

he too has become a monster in the service of the forces of oppression.

Brecht experimented with ritual elements beginning with his first plays; however, it is in 1928, when he becomes a Marxist, that his work acquires the metaphysical dimension essential to myth. From Marx Brecht learned to create representative characters whose experiences embody those of the masses. Marx describes man as having a dual personality-- the "natural" self which is suppressed by the "abstract" self, a product of the pressures of society. The Shen-Te/Shui-Ta combination in The Good Person of Setzuan is a clear-cut expression of this split. In some plays the split in the human personality is personified by two characters, such as Joan Dark and Pierpoint Mauler, Simone and Soupeau and Old Dogsborough and Arturo Ui. In Galileo, Mother Courage and Puntilla these characteristics are mixed. Regardless of how the elements of man's dual nature are apportioned, they are always clearly drawn and of mythical proportions.

Genet's basic myth recalls the myth of Narcissus in that his characters are transfixed in the contemplation of their social masks and functions. Regardless of rank or power, the individual is denied and forced, as though possessed, to act out a fate not his own. However, by giving the mask a reality independent of its human source, Genet demonstrates its absurdity and thereby liberates the self from its narcissistic spell. Deathwatch and The Maids,

Genet's first plays, and with the victory of the masks and death. The Balcony and The Blacks contain an incipient revolt against the masks which reaches its final stages in The Screens, where Saïd, his Mother and Leïla lead the way to liberation.

An examination of Ionesco's work demonstrates how he has gradually reworked his personal experiences into shamanic itineraries whose various elements are no longer personal but archetypal. The images of death and life, of flight, entrapment, obstacles and monsters are all part of the shamanic trance. Eros and Thanatos are the primal forces which struggle for control of the protagonists. Death usually wins except in Ionesco's latest play, Man with Bags, in which his protagonist achieves a victory for life.

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## Chapter 1

### The Theater of Myth: Its Characteristics and Development

The subject of this study is myth and ritual as they appear in the contemporary European drama--in particular, in the plays of Bertolt Brecht, Jean Genet and Eugène Ionesco. Since I am not concerned with the current use of classical myths, nor with their use in other periods, I shall in this chapter explain what mythical and ritual characteristics are shared by the works of the playwrights discussed. In this study I am using a particular definition of myth which is the product of dramatic theories, beginning with the symbolists, which find their expression in the works of the playwrights discussed. This chapter, by way of establishing a historical and critical background for the chapters to follow, examines the developments in the theory of drama which have led to the creation of myth and ritual in the contemporary theater.

Myth, as it is found in the plays of Brecht, Genet and Ionesco, makes visible and gives shape to the unavoidable conflicts between man and superhuman forces. The hero of myth suffers because of these superhuman forces, and he

struggles to defend life and humanity where they are challenged or denied. Victories are rare and, in the end, death is inevitable, but the struggle alone suffices to affirm the value of life and constitutes a victory for humanity.<sup>1</sup>

While the basic elements of myth are unchanging, the manner in which these are expressed on the contemporary stage is appropriate to the times in which we live. The plays of Ionesco, Brecht and Genet are a demonstration of the truth of Antonin Artaud's statement that myth has an existence independent of the ancient stories and works of art with which it has been associated. "On ne supprimera pas leur énergie. ...la culture sans espace ni temps et qui détient notre capacité nerveuse réparâtra avec une énergie accrue,"<sup>2</sup> The gods and heroes of classical myth have been reconstituted and find expression in terms of a more contemporary vision of the forces which govern our lives. Instead of anthropomorphic gods there are man-made forces-- economic, political, technological and social, among others which are felt, by the playwrights studied, to have grown to superhuman proportions; thus permitting them to escape human control and giving them the power to turn upon their makers. Fate is redefined in terms of socio-economic determinism. By giving their plays a metaphysical dimension, the playwrights discussed make these abstract institutions tangible.

Although there is no fixed theory into which the plays discussed fit, there are several characteristics of ritual and mythical drama which are common to them. 1) Myth must express the contemporary experience of man and not be an imitation or borrowing from the myths of another time or culture. 2) The mythical play has a metaphysical dimension which gives substance to forces and situations whose nature is otherwise abstract and insubstantial. 3) An objective of mythical drama is to present an image of human situation, not a realistic picture of a solitary individual in a particular social situation. 4) The mythical characters and situations, strange as they may appear, are drawn from either a) external sources: i.e. social, political, or economic or b) internal: i.e. usually external institutions whose control has been internalized by the individual. The resultant characters are often archetypal representations of the forces which govern the world. The actions of the characters are often ritual in the sense that they have an inevitability associated with them which predetermines the outcome of the situations. Finally, 5) there is the use of ritual techniques--also referred to as theatricalism--as a means of establishing the metaphysical dimension and of emphasizing the archetypal nature of the characters and situations found in the plays. In addition, the use of ritual is part of a concern with the totality of effect of the plays which touch both the intellect and the emotions.

In the course of this chapter I shall give examples of the use of myth and ritual in drama in order to illustrate and clarify the theories which inspired them.

Ionesco's early plays abound in characters whose mechanical behavior can be attributed to an external force-- such as language, material objects or political ideologies-- which has possessed their bodies and minds and has expelled whatever humanity resided there previously. The followers of Mother Pipe, for example, in Tueur sans gages ("The Killer"), are grotesquely inhuman because of their loss of critical ability and their mechanical reactions to their political leader's absurd philosophy. "Je vous promets de tout changer. Pour tout changer il ne faut rien changer. On change les noms, on ne change pas les choses."<sup>3</sup> The abdication of one's humanity, a disease called "rhinoceritis" by Ionesco, is treated in a similar if less vivid manner by Brecht and Genet. For example, Brecht's Galy Gay changes identities and personalities under external pressures as easily as Ionesco's characters adhere to political movements. In the above examples, the characters have no individuality and are not conscious of their condition. These characters exist only as a means of making manifest the presence and power of the alien forces which control their lives,

A second, more complex, kind of character can be found in the plays discussed. The major difference between the

two kinds of characters grows out of the awareness of his condition by the character and the suffering which results. Brecht and Genet, in particular, resort to a doubling of the personality which sets the authentically human aspect of the personality against the part which has escaped the control of the individual or has been altered as a response to external force.<sup>4</sup> A graphic use of doubling is found in the personality of the Good Woman of Setzuan whose quixotic nature requires its own Sancho in order to protect her and to make her desire to help others possible.

Whether the characters or the situations of the plays discussed are simple or complex, the source of their problems and suffering is the conflict between human aspirations and the limits imposed by the world and man's own creations. Whether the characters are bizarre in appearance and behavior, as are Ionesco's victims of rhinoceritis, or, whether they seem more real, as do Mother Courage and Galileo, the playwrights studied derive their myths and rituals from the world we live in. Thus the myths are structural elements of the plays without which the plays could not exist.

Although I may appear to be straying from the contemporary theater by turning briefly to recent studies of Racine by R. C. Knight, Lucien Goldmann and Roland Barthes, their relevance will quickly become clear because they are a practical demonstration of the potential fruitfulness of a

critical approach which considers myth as a structural element of a play. Read together these studies suggest that myth must be considered in terms of its own characteristics and that, in the guise of an old myth, one may determine the presence of a new one.

Knight, in a detailed study of Racine's relation to classical Greece, proves that this relation is superficial. In contrast to Latin-oriented education offered by the Jesuits, the Jansenists with whom Racine studied emphasized the study of Classical Greek. As a result, Racine had a wide reading knowledge of the Greek classics in the original language. However, as Knight points out, the object of Jansenist education in Greek was the improvement of the student's French style and not to enter the minds and spirits of the authors under consideration. In concluding his study, Knight found himself in accord with H. C. Lancaster that Racine neither resurrected nor served Greece in his plays. "Il s'en est servi, sans grande délicatesse. Il a demandé à la Grece des noms, des anecdotes, des sujets, des meubles ... Bref un décor." The greatness of Racine's plays does not depend on the classical myths he used. Rather it is a result of how he transformed those myths to suit his needs and those of the audience.<sup>5</sup>

Goldmann, in Le dieu caché, endeavors to set Racine and his fellow Jansenist, Pascal, in the context of seventeenth-century French society. The assumption behind

Goldmann's work is that the author, in expressing himself, also gives expression to the lives of his contemporaries.<sup>6</sup> Goldmann's study, as well as that of Barthes, which I shall discuss next, illustrates the value of a complementary approach in which the critic analyzes the structure of a work and then interprets it in terms of the artist's vision of reality. The structure of a work of art, says Gérard Genette, is readily accessible to objective analysis: "comme un principe d'intelligibilité objective ... accessible, par voie d'analyse et de commutations, à une sorte d'esprit géométrique qui n'est pas la conscience." According to Georges Poulet, the vision of reality is less apprehensible to the critic except "dans la mesure où la pensée critique devient la pensée critiquée, ou elle réussit à re-sentir, à repenser, à re-imaginer celle-ci de l'intérieur."<sup>7</sup> As desirable as a combined approach may appear, it would not be feasible to attempt it in a study such as mine. Without ignoring or giving undue attention to the playwright's vision of reality, I shall concentrate on the structural importance of myth and ritual in the plays to be examined. Although I do not share his semiological approach, Barthes's analysis of Racine provides an interesting model for the study of myth in drama.

Roland Barthes turns our attention away from the external aspects of Racinean drama. Barthes's thesis is that the myth in Racine's plays is not the one which meets

the eye, rather it inhabits an old story which can only be analogical to its present use. "Si Racine choisit Tacite, c'est peut-être parce qu'il y a dans Tacite des fantômes déjà raciniens ...". Barthes says that Racine transforms whichever myth he appropriates into a new, recurring Racinean myth--the myth of failure (le mythe de l'échec): chaque fois que Racine s'empare d'un mythe pour le convertir en tragédie, c'est toujours en un sens pour le récuser, le paralyser, en faire une faiblesse définitivement close."<sup>8</sup>

Racine used mythological and historical characters to create a certain distance between the stage and the audience, in order to avoid too much familiarity between character and spectator, yet the underlying myth was always contemporary. "Les personnages tragiques doivent être regardés d'un autre oeil que nous ne regardons d'ordinaire les personnages que nous avons vus de si près ... ", as Racine says in his "préface" to Bajazet.<sup>9</sup> Racine's practice is also Brecht's even though the reasons for it differ. Both Ionesco and Genet place their own worlds on the stage but, transformed in such a way that they seem foreign. One must create a certain distance with the resort of a strange appearance to bring the play closer to the audience. Barthes claims that the classical myths and stories in Racine's theater play only an intermediate role between stage and spectator. They are the bearers of the myth--that is, they are charged with the myth which both Racine and the audience understand, at least unconsciously.

In Barthes's interpretation, the stories and myths used by Racine are seen and felt by the audience on two levels. The first is the literal story, the signe, which, taken out of its historical context, becomes both the signifier and the sign for an entirely new signification and myth. The classical façade in Racine becomes a means for rising to another level of understanding--the one goes beyond "immediate reality, i.e. that which is simply given." Thus classical myth, when it appears in Racine's plays, is no longer myth itself but the bearer of another myth. In this new shape the old myth still exists, but it is at the same time one with the new myth. Racine's Phèdre, the woman passionately in love, becomes one with the victim of Aphrodite in Euripides's play.<sup>10</sup>

The discussion of the nature of Racine's work demonstrates the ability of myth to communicate under a variety of guises. The structure of myth has a vitality which permits it to adapt to the unique attributes of the artist as well as those of his environment, "incorporating," as Lillian Feder says, "its changing approaches to reality, its assumptions about nature and man."<sup>11</sup> And, as Claude Lévi-Strauss concludes from his survey of related myths from many societies, there is no such thing as the true version of a myth. The only requirement which must be satisfied is that a myth be experienced as such. Otherwise, it can change and grow "until the intellectual impulse which produced it

is exhausted."<sup>12</sup> The unconscious mind arranges perceptions of the exterior world in accord with its previous experience thus a myth need only be partially or imperfectly expressed to be recognized.

Because myth depends on its structure for recognition, its ability to communicate itself, even in a partial state, can be illustrated with examples of ancient works of art which have come to us in a fragmentary form and still assert their unity and beauty. The Victory of Samothrace or the bits of Sappho's poetry which remain, for example, have this ability.<sup>13</sup> Lévi-Strauss's concept of myth, which is admittedly influenced by gestalt psychology, serves to explain why plays with incoherent dialogue and fragmentary, puppet-like characters are effective.<sup>14</sup> If one considers the tendency of human perception to give shape and unity to whatever it encounters and to fill in gaps with material from past experiences, then a play, such as La Cantatrice chauve ("The Bald Soprano"), may induce participation of an involuntary nature. Accustomed to using language as a benign human tool for imposing order and meaning on the universe, the spectator finds himself struggling unsuccessfully to impose meaning where it will not hold. While the characters of the play do not have a sense of the absurdity of their situation (nor do they seem to struggle against it or suffer because of it), it is the spectator who suffers because he is forced into a struggle with language transformed

into a superhuman monster which has turned against its maker. On this level, the play does become a tragedy of language as its maker had intended it to be.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to its ability to evolve, the abstract structure of myth can support multiple levels of meaning thereby meeting different conscious and unconscious needs simultaneously. This quality is transferred to the great work of art whose structure becomes the bearer of "an enormous number of converging patterns of significance." This, says Northrop Frye, permits us to entertain a concept which sees "literature, not only complicating itself in time, but as spread out in conceptual space from some unseen center."<sup>16</sup> The many interpretations of Sophocles's Oedipus the King which often contradict each other while remaining plausible are an illustration of the protean nature of myth. In addition, they serve as an additional warning that it is not enough to identify a myth as the Oedipus myth or the Phaedra myth to determine its significance. Plays should be considered from the viewpoint of the contribution of myth to their structure or, as Jean Rousset warns, "le critique cours le danger de les saisir du dehors."<sup>17</sup>

Barthes's discussion of Phèdre shows the independence of myth from the ancient tales with which it is associated as well as from objects and structures. This independence

is also evident from the fact that Racine borrowed mythological and historical subjects from various sources only to return to the same myth in each play. This is, in a sense, a verification of Artaud's statement that if the library of Alexandria, which, since Nietzsche, has become a symbol for the mummification of the emotional life of Western society, were to burn, the myths which inspired the works of art and literature contained within would emerge unharmed.<sup>18</sup>

Similarly, Ernst Cassirer points out that while myth itself "rises spiritually above the world of things" it is man who is bound by myth to them. Myth helps us outgrow old myths and thus promises escape from material bounds. However, by constantly renewing itself, it forges newer and stronger links between the human mind and matter. "What seemed to free the spirit from the fetters of things becomes a new fetter which is all the stronger since it is not a mere physical force but spiritually one."<sup>19</sup> The forms and objects upon which myth is projected lose the ability to support myth, as Barthes points out, by becoming objects of intellectual contemplation.<sup>20</sup> It is in protest against the tendency to mummify works of art, as though their meaning were eternally fixed, inherent in the idea of masterpieces that Artaud wrote "En finir avec les chef-d'oeuvres":

Si la foule ne vient pas aux chef-d'oeuvres littéraires c'est que ces chef d'oeuvres sont littéraires, c'est-à-dire fixés; et fixés en des formes qui ne répondent plus aux besoins du temps.<sup>21</sup>

Our society lacks a unified religious and philosophical vision of life from which the artist can draw materials in order to communicate directly with his audience. Our rational, technological society has driven myth back to its sources in the unconscious mind where it must be discovered and expressed by the poet. In his essay on Victor Hugo, Baudelaire describes the artist as "un traducteur, un déchiffreur" who makes the hieroglyphic language understandable.<sup>22</sup> The theater expresses what cannot be expressed, writes Ionesco, and that is "son paradoxe et sa vérité."<sup>23</sup> We are accustomed to seeing our time as different from all others because our pluralistic society no longer provides a unifying, if not unified, vision of the world.<sup>24</sup> But, on the other hand, the Platonic dialogues do not show us a homogeneous society. Aeschylus, Aristophanes, Sophocles and Euripides approached their art in different manners and are not all reported to have been in perfect harmony with the attitudes of their Athenian audiences. Even if there had been perfect harmony of belief, it would have been an illusion. The antics of the Olympian gods and the struggles of the mythical first families of the Greek imagination are valid for us as they were for those who lived in ancient Greece, only insofar as the story itself continues to carry the truth with it. We may lack a contemporary mythological system to give the appearance of unity, but we still give importance to life and death, love and loss. Without a

universally accepted religion or ideology to give substance to these truths, one may suppose that the myths in which they would be embodied are invisible and waiting for the artist to give them substance.

It is the artist, as Otto Rank says, who gives shape to the unconscious ideas of an age. This is done arbitrarily. While there exists the overall ideology of an age--even if it is elusively abstract--its expression can advance little further than the ability of the contemporary artist to render it in a work of art. How can Francis Fergusson attribute to Sophocles and Shakespeare a "uniquely direct sense of life" while calling the works of Racine and Wagner "arbitrary inventions"?<sup>25</sup> Certainly there are the questions of ability and genius which differ in all of these dramatists. Their contact with reality is another matter. Goldman and Barthes demonstrate Racine's direct links to the realities of his time. What other reality could he have expressed? Sophocles's? Fergusson's? Reality is relative and not restricted to a single age or to a particular group of playwrights.

Aristotle's final criterion for a play's acceptability is that the audience feel it represents things the way they seem to be. "In our time," says Fergusson, "we are more at home with make-believe than we are with belief--or perhaps we have simply lost the sense of distinction."<sup>26</sup> In the theater, at least, the distinction is irrelevant. It is

the objective of the playwright, in any case, through make-believe, to make us believe by touching the unconscious mind through myth.

In the consideration of a theater of myth and ritual the artist and the creative process must be approached, contrary to the romantic tradition which regards the artist as the solitary genius, in terms of their relation to society. A good example of this kind of approach is found in Rank's Art and the Artist (1932). Although Rank does not concern himself with myth in this work, he does examine the social, political, economic and psychological conditions which determine the kind of art an artist will create. Rank shows how the interplay between the artist and society results in abstract or naturalistic art. The artist gives society shape and an image of itself by giving substance to its hitherto unexpressed reality. He literally raises society out of nothingness and, as a result of the process, acquires his own personality.

According to Rank, the manner, naturalistic or abstract, in which the artist expresses himself depends on the outcome of a struggle between the individual, society and nature. Whatever the result neither tendency ever gains a total or lasting victory. Instead, the give and take embodied in this "spiritual dualism" is the source of the artist's creativity.<sup>27</sup> Tracing the evolution of the art form from the primitive artist to the romantic, Rank gives as an example

the fecund conflict between the individual artist and the art forms given him by his generation.

The source of the conflict and of the various forms art takes, according to Rank, is the attempt of the artist to give concrete form to the idea of the soul. Since the soul cannot be examined empirically, its representation cannot be naturalistic, at least not initially. As one concept of the soul succeeds another, the meanings of naturalistic and abstract change as they are relative and dependent on their context. "Compared with the idea of the soul or its primitive predecessors, even the abstract form of art is concrete, just as on the other hand the most definite naturalism in art is abstract when compared with nature."<sup>28</sup> In other words, the artist has always been engaged in an effort to make the invisible concrete by giving it artistic form. Even realism and naturalism are no more than concretizations of the artist's idea of what constitutes reality. Rank's explanation that the concreteness and abstractness of art forms is a relative matter gives special significance to the argument of the contemporary dramatist that it is he who is truly presenting reality on the stage. Martin Esslin has proposed the idea that the content and style of contemporary drama is itself and outgrowth of naturalism. Having recognized the superficiality of presenting external reality, dramatists have turned their attention to man's inner reality.

The essence of the Naturalist's endeavor was an existential, value-free, scientific and experimental exploration of reality in its widest possible sense ... and that this approach logically led to the rejection of all ready-made formal conventions and implied the acceptance of organic form dictated by the nature of the subject matter--all else follows.<sup>29</sup>

What in the context of Esslin's statement seems to be a slight change in emphasis--one kind of psychological reality exchanged for another--has actually meant a revolution in drama and all the arts.

In studying turn-of-the-century art-forms, Rank finds that their evolution has taken a turn away from the increasing emphasis on the genius of the individual artist which reached its apogee in the romantic concept of the artist because of the "unattainability" of this ideology. It is not a movement back to the old collective means either for they too have failed. Rather he sees a new path opening up. "We have here to deal, not with a third type of art, nor indeed with a type of art or a style at all, but with spiritual needs that at one time are abstract, at another naturalistic, at a third individualistic." The emphasis is on a new kind of consciousness and humanity with a need for new art-forms and artists to satisfy them.<sup>30</sup> It is that new sensibility and the art-forms created to shape and satisfy it which I shall examine next.

Nietzsche's The Birth of Tragedy was revolutionary not in that it forced scholars to reconsider the ritual origin of Greek tragedy, but also because it served as a manifesto

for the regeneration of Western drama. By showing the close relation between myth and ritual, Nietzsche prepared the way for the triumphal reappearance of Dionysos on the stage; thus the modern audience attended, in a manner similar to that of the ancient Greeks, the coming of the tragic figure and would behold not "the awkwardly masked man but a figure born of their own rapt vision." Dionysos comes not to destroy Apollo, but to be his complement for only in concert can they bring into existence the "tragic myth" which is "Dionysiac wisdom made concrete through Apollonian artifice." Together they present a sublime vision of the absurdity of existence mitigated by the "comic spirit" which, through the medium of art, rescues man "from the tedium of absurdity." In this manner, man finds metaphysical consolation for his condition and is able to reorient himself and become liberated from the established values which no longer serve life. Man reacquires the ability of the ancient Greeks to contemplate their gods and thus, having seen them, challenge them. "We must remember that the profound Greek had an absolutely stable basis of metaphysical thought in his mystery cults and that he was free to discharge all his sceptical velleities on the Olympians."<sup>31</sup> It is the need to regain this metaphysical awareness which led Artaud to describe the theater of cruelty and the theater of the plague. The contemporary playwright has attempted to implement this theater of myth and ritual for which Nietzsche provided a philosophical basis and Artaud the practical means. The

artist was persuaded to give up his romantic introversion and return to his ancient place as priest and seer. As Gilles Deleuze, in his study of Nietzsche points out, we have learned that "Créer, c'est alléger, c'est décharger la vie, inventer de nouvelles possibilités de vie. Le créateur est législateur--danseur."<sup>32</sup>

Nietzsche's dramaturgy is contained in the poetry of his description of ancient Greek drama up to Euripides. He describes simultaneously the total spectacle which would come with the ritualization of drama and the rejection of realism and individual characters. "Music is capable of giving birth to myth" for it permits us to "understand the delight felt in the annihilation of the individual." Music, with its intimations of eternal life, beckons to drama to follow in its paths by creating for the eye "the turbulent flux of appearances!"<sup>33</sup> It remained, however, for others to seek and to create new theatrical modes of expression which would permit such a vision as Nietzsche's to become reality. Such preparations were underway at the end of the nineteenth century when the symbolist poets Stéphane Mallarmé and William Butler Yeats began to experiment with and develop the concepts which led to the artistic explosion represented by names and movements such as Alfred Jarry and Guillaume Apollinaire, Artaud, Dada and Surrealism.

Inspired by the operas of Richard Wagner and by the ballet, Mallarmé dreamt of a new, symbolist theater which

would use all of the arts at its disposal. The unhappy state of Parisian theater in the late nineteenth century permitted Mallarmé to witness his ideal only in "le seul théâtre de notre esprit, prototype du reste." Mallarmé's ideal prefigures what has become reality in the contemporary theater. His attack on the over-ornate realism and the histrionics which prevailed in his time--summarized in the following words: "Remplacez Vaudeville par Mystère"--soon became the goal of new playwrights.<sup>34</sup> Mystery, the "evocation of the absolute, embracing the destiny of all humanity,"<sup>35</sup> and not voyeuristic slices of life should be the objective of the playwright. Realistic plays are about other people whom one watches merely out of curiosity and without the possibility of finding in the performance a reflection of one's reality. Drama should be about the spectator--"il n'est point d'autre sujet, sachez bien: l'antagonisme du rêve chez l'homme avec les fatalités à son existence départies par le malheur."<sup>36</sup> The creation of a symbolist theater in Mallarmé's time would have required a complete reconsideration of the nature of drama.

It is a recurring idea with Mallarmé that the action of a play should be emblematic. He expresses this idea both directly and indirectly. For example, he envies the ability of dance to transform the dancer into "une métaphore résumant un des aspects élémentaires de notre forme, glaive, coupe, fleur." In the ballet Mallarmé finds a divine vision

worthy of replacing the "monstre ... qui parada au lieu divin." The symbolist poet anticipates Artaud's concept of a concrete language when he reads in the dancer's movements "une écriture corporelle ce qu'il faudrait de paragraphes ... pour exprimer ... poëme dégagé de tout appareil du scribe." In the works of Wagner, Mallarmé recognized the possibility of uniting the symbolic elements of drama into a total poetic unity.<sup>37</sup>

In place of richly upholstered and cluttered stage sets, Mallarmé expressed the preference for a restraint and perfection which "ne gene ni masque l'avenir." Very little would suffice if it were appropriate. He wished the theater could be redeemed as it was for a single moment in a performance of Hamlet, by "l'exorcisme d'un geste." Mallarmé cleared the stage of its clutter so that it could be refurbished with the concept of a symbolist theater as its governing ideal. Mallarmé seemed, at times, to doubt the ability of the theater to escape the tyranny of the word. Despite his suggestions for a symbolist theater, Mallarmé was ambivalent about the play which he also considered as a work of literature. As literature a play could be performed in the theater of the mind where its poetry could be expressed in its fullest, most emblematic manner. And, if one keeps in mind the kind of art for which Mallarmé expressed a preference--ballet, the operas of Wagner, Hamlet--it might not be too presumptuous to assume that he would not

have recognized the influence of his ideas in their first manifestation under guise of Alfred Jarry's Ubu Roi.<sup>38</sup>

First performed in 1896, Jarry's play was a scandal. The pear-shaped Ubu is emblematic to be sure, but of all the worst instincts of man--cowardice, treachery, avarice, lust, homicide. The treatment of the characters is definitely symbolic. They are puppets in human bodies dressed in the costumes of a masquerade for children. The armies of Poland and Russia are each represented by one toy soldier and their battles are strictly make-believe. The value of the play was recognized by Mallarmé who praised its author. Yeats, too, applauded with Jarry's partisans, although his reaction was not without a sense of wonder as to what Ubu Roi meant for the future of the arts, "After Stéphane Mallarmé, after Paul Verlaine, after Gustav Moreau, after Puvis de Chavannes, after our own verse, after all our subtle color and nervous rhythm, after the faint tints of Conder, what more is possible? After us, the Savage God."<sup>39</sup> Perhaps Yeats served a different god, but his plays grow out of dramatic principles not unlike those which inspired Jarry's work.

Yeats's early, turn-of-the-century work in theater is a combination, according to Richard Ellmann, of literary activity and Irish patriotism. More concretely his activities were directed toward the establishment of an Irish mystical order and an Irish theater. The order was to provide a basis for literary work. The object of the plays and the

theater was to serve as a focus for the spiritual values of the Irish nation and its revolution.<sup>40</sup>

His first plays, The Countess Cathleen (1889-1890) and The Land of Heart's Desire (1894), were, from Yeats's point of view, mystery or miracle plays "by which he meant plays not necessarily Christian but manifesting in one way or another the existence of an invisible world."<sup>40</sup> That invisible world would, if Yeats's hopes could have been realized, have become a source of strength for the Irish national movement submerging personal interests in deference to a common ethnic bond.<sup>42</sup>

The invisible world of the Irishman was not accessible to logic or empirical demonstration, rather it had to be reached by an act of faith through mystical union with a collective will. In "Ireland and the Arts" (1904) Yeats maintained that the artist's duty was not to entertain "a few people who have grown up in a leisured class and make this understanding their business." The artist must become a missionary to the entire nation and use his art to free those who are shackled by mundane concerns.<sup>43</sup> The artist's materials are not possessions of the church, but the living tales of Cuchulain, Emer and Conchubar--tales of life and death, great battles which included spirits and mortals, great loves and equally great deprivations. What the artist takes from the people is to be returned in a form enhanced by art.

The new mythology would bring with it the freedom to indulge in the physical joys of life with the knowing and willing concurrence of the mind. It would be a new weapon which would cut through the pettiness and narrowmindedness of poverty and servitude. "We were to forge in Ireland," Yeats says in "Poetry and Tradition" (1910), "a new sword on our old traditional anvil for that great battle that must in the end re-establish the old confident, joyous world."<sup>44</sup>

Yeats did not achieve the anticipated and hoped for mystical union of the audience. As Ellmann says, Yeats's theory with its "half-religious intentions" was not enough for an audience which "needed more substantial fare." Yeats's early attempts at a theater of myth failed to meet the needs of the audience and was thus unsuccessful both as myth and as theater.<sup>45</sup>

In 1916, putting behind the desire to move an entire nation and turning his back to the masses, Yeats claimed to have "invented a form of drama, distinguished, indirect, and symbolic, having no need of mob or Press to pay its way-- an aristocratic form."<sup>46</sup> Through his acquaintance with the Japanese Noh theater, Yeats had recently become aware of a theatrical form which would transform his approach to myth and theater. Although Yeats had long known the ritual connotations of dance, the potential for dance in his plays became clear to him on seeing the Japanese dancer, Mr. Ito. In a small, simple hall, with neither decoration nor special

stage lighting, the mere movements of Mr. Ito's body were a revelation. He seemed "to recede from us into some more powerful life. Because that separation was achieved by human means alone, he receded but to inhabit as it were the deeps of the mind." Yeats discovered that the strength of the emotion is stronger because the gesture is vague and does not address the conscious intellect, but it goes directly to the unconscious where its truth is immediately perceived. "We only believe in those thoughts which have been conceived not in the brain but in the whole body." For Yeats the use of dance is part of the ritual of the theater.

It is moreover, a ritual of transcendence, for the movements of dance, stylized and perfect, usually symbolize superhuman skill and knowledge. The dancer achieves control over nature; the silent moving figure transcends the language in which he is described.<sup>49</sup>

In the Noh theater Yeats found a well-defined medium which could give shape and direction to his still incomplete theory of theater.

Yeats's understanding of the Noh theater was augmented and informed by Ezra Pound, who was completing translations of Noh plays and theory left unfinished by Ernest Fenollosa. From Pound he learned that the Noh theater's plots are founded on myths expressed in a combination of dance, gesture, chanting and minimal scenic effects. Whereas the naturalist drama which dominated the European stage of the late nineteenth century is highly mimetic of surface reality in its techniques. Noh theater exists at the opposite pole--it is

anti-mimetic. In terms of Northrop Frye's concept of a literary spectrum whose extreme poles are occupied, on one side by the realistic surface of naturalism and on the other by the abstract form of myth, Noh theater is a theater of myth.<sup>48</sup> Pound rightly felt the Noh theater would "delight" Yeats because it is "a symbolic stage, a drama of masks." Furthermore, it is not crude in its effects like the Western stage; it is a theater of "fineness and subtlety" proved by time.

It is a stage where every subsidiary art is bent precisely upon holding the faintest shade of a difference; where the poet may even be silent while the gestures consecrated by four centuries of usage show meaning.<sup>49</sup>

With the Noh play as his model, Yeats could finally create the kind of play he "had wanted to create in the nineties but for which he had then lacked method." At the Hawk's Well (1917) and The Cat and the Moon (1917) are the first products of this new capacity to finally create a theater of myth and ritual. A theater which unexpectedly has universal appeal.<sup>50</sup> Eric Bentley disagrees with Yeats's idea that one can or should create a private theater: "Write on this assumption, and you will not get an audience of supermen--merely one of snobs, bluestockings, and bohemians." Bentley asserts, moreover, that Yeats inadvertently created what he had not intended. "Yeats's anti-popular works contain more vitally 'popular' elements than the plays he intended for a national theater." Yeats failed first in his attempt to create a popular theater based on myth and then

an unpopular theater for cultivated sensibilities. The latter, which Bentley terms "inferior to nothing in modern English drama," acquires its effect by making direct contact with the unconscious and establishing its verity there. It is not a popular theater in the sense that it moves its audience as a mystery play would--in the sense of responding to a commonly accepted and deeply felt belief--but in finding its way to needs only vaguely felt and understood.<sup>52</sup>

Whereas Yeats, daunted by the failure of his plays to fire the masses, had narrowed the scope of his objectives in the theater to satisfy a select few, the revolution in the arts, so long awaited and prepared for in France, finally exploded amidst the spiritual and physical wreckage of World War I. The Dadaists, led by Tristan Tzara, embarked on a nihilist campaign to capsize all artistic standards, traditions and, had they possessed the means, all of French society. By 1924, having run their anarchic course, the Dadaists put an end to their movement by drowning an effigy in the Seine. The old Dadaists were now reborn as Surrealists. The term "Surrealism" was coined by Apollinaire in 1916 to describe his play, Les Mamelles de Tirésias ("The Breasts of Tiresias"). Half seriously, half in fun, Apollinaire claimed to be bringing to the stages: "des esthétiques nouvelles et frappantes qui accentuent le caractère scénique des personnages et augmentent la pompe de la mise en scène, sans modifier toutefois le pathétique

ou le comique des situations ..." The author used the purported subject of his play--the need to repopulate France because of its war losses--as a pretext for a zany, anarchical preview of the total spectacle:

Marient souvent sans lien apparent comme dans la vie  
 Les sons les gestes les couleurs les cris les bruits  
 La musique la danse l'acrobatie la poésie la peinture  
 Les chœurs les actions et les décors multiples.<sup>53</sup>

As did its predecessor by Apollinaire's friend, Jarry, Les Mamelles de Tirésias caused an uproar and was soon followed by a series of Dadaist and Surrealist imitations. But it would be Artaud, working from a Surrealist background, who would finally give poetic unity to the idea of a new drama and explore it in all of its ramifications.

Artaud's short-lived participation in the surrealist movement exercised a lasting formative influence on his theories of drama. The importance of the dream, the idea of the Double, Artaud's insistence on the alchemical properties of the theater which are capable of healing the split between man's inner and outer self--these are all concepts which the surrealists helped him develop. The dissolution, by means of the artistic vision, of the barriers between man's dreams and reality would fuse them in a "surreality" which would make man whole again--"c'est à l'homme total, et non à l'homme social, soumis aux lois et déformé par les religions et les préceptes, qu'il s'adressera."<sup>54</sup> The surrealists, led by André Breton, were inspired by Freud (a compliment which he did not return), except that they found

his method too limited. Despite their efforts to convince him, Freud did not accept their argument that the dream transformed into a work of art is proof that the artist has adjusted "to two planes of reality, no longer visualized as contradictory."<sup>55</sup>

Rebuffed by Freud, the surrealists turned to Friedrich Hegel and Karl Marx whose works provided reinforcement for their basic position. The Hegelian dialectical theory--thesis, antithesis, synthesis--could also be used to describe their artistic objectives. Breton, Paul Eluard, Louis Aragon and other surrealists joined the Communist Party as a sign of their commitment. Artaud, on the other hand, parted ways with the surrealists at this point, not because he no longer believed in their artistic concepts, but because he found surrealism incompatible with communism. He continued to see himself as a surrealist--the only true one--even after his break with the movement, because, as Esslin says, he "could not reconcile constriction with freedom."<sup>56</sup>

Following a solitary path which better suited his tortured self, Artaud turned his efforts to the creation of a theater of myth and ritual. Unlike Yeats who tried to graft together various myths and legends to create his own mythology, Artaud felt it was necessary to prune away useless deadwood to permit myth to exist in its essential form. Once vital literary myths had been obscured and suffocated by centuries of scholarly accretions which had robbed them

of the ability to move the heart. Myth had become an object of intellectual contemplation contrary to its non-rational nature.

The theater of myth and its audience, as Artaud saw them, are constantly changing. The form of a myth changes or the myth dies. The audience also changes. A myth which is necessary to it at one time has no meaning at another. The healthy essential relationship between the myth and the spectator, as Artaud describes it, is one which attacks and destroys the masks and lies which separate us from a true knowledge of ourselves and the meaning of life.

... l'action du théâtre comme celle de la peste, est bienfaisante, car poussant les hommes à se voir tels qu'ils sont, elle fait tomber le masque, elle découvre le mensonge, la veulerie, la bassesse, la tartuferie; elle secoue l'inertie asphyxiante de la matière qui gagne jusqu'aux données les plus claires des sens; et révélant à des collectivités leur puissance sombre, leur force cachée, elle les invite à prendre en face du destin une attitude héroïque et supérieure qu'elles n'auraient jamais eue sans cela.<sup>57</sup>

In one essay, Artaud calls this form of theater a "theater of alchemy" which burns away dross and leaves pure spiritual gold. It is a "theater of the plague" which, like the death-dealing plague after its harvest, leaves a clear-eyed humanity brutally aware of the meaning of life.

The first duty of the playwright is to do away with the stifling idea of the classics. Each play must be considered in terms of its vitality and not its history or its creator. Artaud's idea of the playwright imposes responsibilities beyond merely writing plays. He must also direct

the play. Thus if he undertakes to present a play by Shakespeare or Sophocles he must be prepared to recreate and rescue it from a formalistic tradition which fixes itself on plays like a death mask making them "fixés en des formes que ne répondent plus aux besoins du temps." If performances of Sophocles's Oedipus fail to move the masses it is not the fault of the play, but the way in which it is performed. The selection of themes and plays must be made on the basis of their vitality. Next, the production of the play must be directed towards making those elements evident. Oedipus is one example.

Dans Oedipe Roi il y a le thème de l'Inceste et cette idée que la nature se moque de la morale; et qu'il y a quelque part des forces errantes auxquelles nous ferions bien de prendre garde; qu'on les appelle destin ces forces, ou autrement.

Whether one begins with an old play or creates a new one, Artaud, like Yeats, felt audiences need mystery--"La foule aujourd'hui comme autrefois est avide de mystère."<sup>58</sup> Artaud felt mystery should have an inescapable attraction for the members of the audience, because it is about them and intimately concerns their lives.

As in Yeats's experience, contact with Oriental drama in 1931--the Balinese Theater in this case--gave Artaud a concrete example of what had been, up to now, partially experimented with or left in the realm of theory. Indeed, Artaud's impressions of the Balinese Theater seem to be a paraphrase of what Mallarmé suggested in his description of an ideal drama. "Et les correspondances les plus impérieuses

fusent perpétuellement de la vue à l'ouïe, de l'intellect à la sensibilité, du geste d'un personnage à l'évocation des mouvements d'une plante à travers le cri d'un instrument." Artaud witnessed the "côté révélateur de la matière" which brings the spectator face to face with the mysteries of existence by endowing them with "l'identité métaphysique du concret et de l'abstrait." The Balinese Theater, for Artaud, was the theater of the mind come to life. It was "une idée physique et non verbale, où le théâtre est contenu dans les limites de tout ce qui peut passer sur une scène, indépendamment du texte écrit..."<sup>59</sup>

Artaud was impressed by the totality of effect--the unity of music, gesture, color, costume and myth. "La merveille est qu'une sensation de richesse, de fantaisie, de généreuse prodigalité se dégage de la spectacle réglé avec une minutie et une conscience affolantes."<sup>60</sup> The importance of the physical spectacle convinced Artaud that it is not enough to be a playwright. The new form of theater needs a new kind of creator--"une sorte d'ordonnateur magique, un maître de cérémonies sacrées."<sup>61</sup> The sense of "metteur en scene" acquires a wider significance for Artaud. He is not merely the interpreter of what is basically a literary work. Rather it is his task to breathe life into art by returning it to its former primitive religious power. "C'est le rendre à sa destination primitive, c'est le replacer dans son aspect religieux et métaphysique, c'est le reconcilier avec

l'univers."<sup>62</sup> Artaud's wish was to touch the spectator in every possible manner, with every sense involved. The final effect would be an overwhelming sensation of truth. The spectator would be carried away by a "tourbillon de forces superieures" by violent physical images.<sup>63</sup>

Characteristic of myth, as Artaud saw it, is its expression of the evil which underlies all human nature. All action has its source in evil: "le bien est voulu, il est le résultat d'un acte, le mal est permanent."<sup>64</sup> Myth is an expression of evil in action and, by extension, of those willed acts of good. The goal of theater should be to bring the evidence of this evil to the attention of the conscious mind. The conscious mind seeks to ignore its innate evil and its self-ignorance makes it all the more susceptible to evil. The only valid subject matter for theater is that which tears away the false mask of civilization and reveals us as we are despite our resistance to the truth.

Myth, for Artaud, is reflected in our dreams and in living legends. A legend lives and becomes myth because it is a true expression of the thoughts and feelings of those who turn to it. It presents the spectator with:

...des précipités véridiques de rêves, où son goût du crime, ses obsessions érotiques, sa sauvagerie, ses chimères, son sens utopique de la vie et des choses, son cannibalisme même, se debondent, sur un plan non pas supposé et illusoire, mais interieur.<sup>65</sup>

In the history of the Cenci family--previously treated in

play form by Percy Bysshe Shelley and in a short narrative by Stendhal--Artaud found sufficient evil to mirror the contemporary soul. The story of the Cenci is permeated with evil--murder, incest, revenge, avarice, parricide, torture and executions--the perfect subject for a modern mystery play.

Despite Artaud's efforts to make sure every detail was as he wished it, Les Cenci failed as a play. Artaud had recorded his own "concrete" music from especially selected church bells to be sure of its effect. Everything, from the lighting to the movement of the curtains, was under his control. "JE NE VEUX PAS que dans un spectacle monté par moi il y ait même un clin d'oeil qui ne m'appartienne." The audience was to participate as one being. "Quel bonheur pour moi si j'arrive à faire participer le spectateur à la tragédie des Cenci avec son âme et ses nerfs."<sup>66</sup> Everything was under Artaud's control except, unfortunately for him, the audience. Perhaps Artaud had too many detractors in the audience or, in 1935, he was simply too far advanced. His objectives required more than the powers of a mere genius to be realized, as Ionesco says, "son défaut c'est de ne pas avoir été non seulement ni poète ni dramaturge mais ni un dieu ni un démon: simple acteur et metteur in scène, ou plutôt régisseur."<sup>67</sup>

One of Artaud's mistakes was to assume that myth and ritual are the same thing as religion. It was inevitable

that Artaud's expectations be disappointed because the use of myth in the dramatic performance does not constitute a religious event. This misunderstanding led Artaud to expect a religious response where it was not appropriate. For its part, the audience was deceived because it had come to The Cenci with different, more traditional, expectations from the theater experience. Artaud, however, was correct in sensing the power of myth and ritual to communicate with the emotions although the strength and nature of their effect was misjudged by him.<sup>68</sup>

Artaud's failure notwithstanding, his contribution to theater has grown steadily since the late forties and can be seen in the works of many playwrights including Ionesco, Samuel Beckett and Genet.<sup>69</sup> Artaud explored the same area as Yeats. They both sought to give the spectacle a greater importance in relation to the written text. Both worked against the theater of naturalism in their enthusiasm for a theater of myth. While their expectations of quasi-religious happenings makes them appear rather unscientific, the result of their efforts must be seen not for what they failed to accomplish, but for what they contributed to the transformation of the contemporary drama.

Together, Brecht and Artaud can be considered as the two most important influences on contemporary drama theory. Being contemporaries, they both shared similar formative influences. Brecht's early years as a playwright, immediately

following World War I, were influenced, although not controlled, by expressionism, a German relative of Dadaism, and later by surrealism. More violent than their French counterparts, the expressionists actually did revolt and temporarily established a Soviet Republic in Munich at the end of the war. Their attempt to take political control failed, however, and the expressionists were obliged to continue their revolution through art.

Expressionist works went on, expressing belief in the 'New Man,' spreading a message of love and brotherhood, and of a more intense Dionysian existence: there was in them an incompatible combination of Marxist ideals for society and Nietzschean ideals for individuals, total integration and total self-realization. They were also, and this is where Brecht withdrew his sympathy, ludicrously melodramatic.<sup>70</sup>

Brecht credited expressionism with enriching the "theater's means of expression," but he rejected it because it failed to shed "light on the world as an object of human activity."<sup>71</sup> Brecht made selective use of expressionist and surrealist means because they coincided with his idea of what true realism is. His models of realism were writers such as Cervantes, Swift, Grimmelshausen, Dickens, Voltaire and Hasek. Most of Brecht's models do not occupy themselves with surface realism, but rather in the distortion of reality until its underlying truth becomes inescapably evident. Common to most of them, and to Brecht as well, is a taste of humor, exaggeration and satire. Brecht's models reflect reality in a "concave mirror" which can "exaggerate and emphasize." The realism of a work, Brecht argued, cannot

be judged by its form, but its content--"the means must be asked what the end is."<sup>72</sup> Brecht was speaking of a realism which occupies itself with man's total reality. Although he might not have approved of using the word "metaphysical" to describe the additional level of reality which he brought to the stage, Brecht experimented with a form of drama not unlike that of Artaud. Of course it is not difficult to find similarities in the background of playwrights who are contemporaries. Nonetheless, even taking into account Brecht's political differences with Artaud or Ionesco, and despite Brecht's insistence that he was creating an epic drama for thinking people, they present their visions of reality in terms of myth and ritual.

I shall not attempt a definitive explanation of what Brecht meant by epic theater because, despite his numerous essays referring to the epic theater, the concept itself was always in flux and was implemented idfferently according to the exigencies of individual plays. There is a great deal of confusion about Brecht's ends as well as his means. The confusion is compounded if one sees Brecht's plays, reads his theoretical work and then consults his critics. Much of the difficulty hinges on the meaning of epic theater and the Verfremdungseffekt ("A-effect"). Epic theater, in its widest possible sense, is directed at the working classes to which it proposes to offer an entertaining and didactic vision of the world. The A-effect, involves the limitation

of the audience's emotional involvement to permit it to reflect rationally about a play's meaning. As John Willett's anthology of writings by Brecht on the theater demonstrates, there is no consistent or fully elaborated theory which guided the creation of the plays. In contrast to the powerful aesthetic whole of his plays, the theoretical writings of Brecht are fragmented, inconsistent and tendentious. Willett's chronological arrangement of Brecht's essays on the theater also reveals that he was capable of changing his mind and adapting to circumstances. At first, Brecht seems to have been against all forms of emotion. Later, he limited himself to trying to exclude empathy alone. In the end, only the critics remained to insist that emotion be banned. John Fuegi points out that Brecht, after over a decade of attempting to make spectators not empathize with Galileo, finally gave in to the inevitable. Before his death in 1956, Brecht began the production of Galileo which the Berliner Ensemble presented in Paris. Critics accused the Ensemble "of having 'dramatized' what was supposed to be an 'epic' play and of having given it a 'tragic focus.'" The critics misplaced their ire, says Fuegi, because they did not know that Brecht himself was responsible, otherwise "they would not have directed their wrath at the helpless fire brigade, but against the man who set the fire."<sup>73</sup> While Brecht's plays, particularly the later ones, do not fit comfortably in the epic framework, they are heavily influenced by it.

The content of the plays was meant to be transmitted by means of the grab-bag of theatrical effects and techniques which Brecht attributed to the epic theater. Many of these elements were intended to create the A-effect. Instead of inhibiting emotion, they encouraged it. At the same time, they contributed to some of the most moving drama of this century. An elementary reason for the frustration of Brecht's desires is that, regardless of their intended purpose, these techniques are ritualistic and inescapably engage the spectator on an emotional level. They are a fitting complement to the mythical content of the plays. Doubtless Brecht was aware of the ritual nature of his plays. What he apparently chose to ignore about ritual is that, despite wishful thinking to the contrary, it addresses itself to the emotions and not the intellect.

The objective of the various techniques associated with the A-effect and epic theater was to make the obvious perceptible: "to free the socially-conditioned phenomena from that stamp of familiarity which protects them from our grasp." In reworking reality to give it unity and coherence, Brecht was not concerned with "incorrectness or considerable improbability" as long as the incorrectness has a "certain consistency" and the improbability was of "a constant kind." The kind of reorganization of reality proposed by Brecht in combination with the theatrical effects employed has many clear correspondences with the establishment of realistic and

metaphysical levels in myth. Brecht was closest to his time and subject when his plays seemed to be the most alien.

"A representation that alienates us is one which allows us to recognize its subject but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar." Myth, too, is unconcerned with surface strangeness, contradictions or incompleteness. It is essential only that it be perceived as a unity.<sup>74</sup>

Epic theater, in order to arrive at the underlying meaning of social situations "traces out all their inconsistencies." In a manner similar to the movement from realistic imitation to ritual abstraction, Brecht distorts reality through the use of masks, gesture and choreography with the objective of arriving at the essential. "Stylization should not remove the natural element but should heighten it." The differences between men disappear in a combination of elements which share common characteristics. This is a form of realism whose definition Brecht borrows from Engels: "the 'reproduction of typical people under typical conditions.'"<sup>75</sup> Shen-Te is an archetypal expression of the Marxist theory of human alienation. MacHeath insists on being a "typical" bourgeois. He is captured twice by the police because he insists on frequenting his lady-friends at the brothel according to habit. When, in preparation for going into hiding, MacHeath bids farewell to his new bride, Polly, he spurns emotion and insists on telling her how to run the "business." He reminds her that payday is every

Thursday and ends his goodbye with "otherwise carry on the same as before: get up at seven, wash, take one bath a day, and so forth."<sup>76</sup> Mother Courage insists on the fact that she is like all people, although in her youth she had illusions of being different. Brecht's characters are oppressed by the world they live in and are obliged to wear masks to survive. Brecht takes the social mask which in most of us is so internalized that it seems natural and turns it into a visible mask through the use of ritual techniques.

In part, Brecht's use of ritual effects was intended to emphasize the typicalness of a character and lessen the possibility of too much individual personality. The doubling of personality, previously mentioned, is one of the most effective techniques for making the character abstract. Another technique which detracts from the character's realism is having the actor refer to the character he is playing in the third person or reading his lines instead of reciting them from memory. Having the action stop while the characters sing a song about their condition or while they move the stage props around also contributes to their being perceived as part of a whole rather than as individuals. However, in order to describe how characters are treated in Brecht's plays, one runs the risk of giving the impression that, in performance, the actors are supposed to project a haphazard air of amateurishness. On the contrary, Brecht

used these techniques with an eye for the overall effect of the play. Brecht used the A-effects judiciously, in a ritual manner, to alter the psychic distance of the audience. A dramatic scene with traditional acting might be succeeded by a lyrical interlude of song or by the interjection of the third person, but they were not indiscriminately mixed. While movement from one level to another was supposed to reinforce the ability of the spectator to think, it was also supposed to give pleasure. The latter requirement was given priority by Brecht whose production of his own plays emphasized their ritual unity and thereby their ability to please the heart as well as the mind.<sup>77</sup>

There is no question about pleasure in Brecht's plays--they are filled with music drawn from popular sources, songs, storytellers and striking visual activity. "Moritat," the song of Mac the Knife, whose score was composed by Kurt Weill, is one of the most famous songs of this century. Regardless of one's class or political affiliation, it is difficult not to be swayed emotionally by Brecht's use of music. Brecht used music for ritual purposes in addition to the pleasure they gave. His songs serve to tie together different scenes. Their lyrics are often a poetic expression of the literal meaning of a play as is exemplified by the "Song of Solomon." By placing the didactic weight upon the lyrics of the song, Brecht prevented his plays from becoming educational bores, although he never managed to do away with empathy.

Possibly, by 1954, Brecht was no longer as opposed to emotion as he had been in the thirties. Certainly his initial expectations that he could devise a way to impede emotional involvement were ill-founded. There is evidence in his own writings that he simply refused to consider the possibility that his goals were impracticable. Only the continuing failure to make the audience think instead of feel finally wore down Brecht's faith in his theories. Although he and his colleagues had experimented with various techniques for impeding empathy and other emotions from the beginning of his dramatic career, the certitude that the A-effect is practicable came from his experience with oriental drama in the person of Mei Lan-Fang. Brecht's reaction appears curious when compared to that of other dramatists. Whereas Yeats, upon seeing Mr. Ito, discerned a form of art which bypassed the intellect directly appealing to the emotions and Artaud, seeing the Balinese Theater, discovered a way to bring myth and ritual to the Western stage; Brecht though he had found a way to keep the spectator from identifying with the stage performance.

"The subconscious is not at all responsive to guidance" says Brecht in "Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting," an essay written in 1936 after he had seen Mei Lan-Fang perform in Moscow.<sup>78</sup> The Chinese theater seemed to be a way to short-circuit the natural empathy of the spectator and make contact with his mind which presumably is more "responsive

to guidance." Speaking of the Chinese actor, he says: "Acceptance or rejection of their actions and utterances was meant to take place on a conscious plane, instead of, as hitherto, in the audience's subconscious." The conscious nature of Chinese acting--in other words, the situation in which the actor shows clearly an awareness of repeating somebody else's action as opposed to the realist stage where the actor and audience are, as closely as possible, involved in a real experience--supposedly causes the audience and actor to be observers of an act which they can judge on its various merits without, at the same time, being participants in the emotion shown.

As Brecht admits in the above-mentioned essay, he only imagined the "A-effect" among Chinese spectators. He assumed that the effect of Oriental theater on himself and other Europeans with techniques so unlike what they were accustomed to was equal or greater on the Chinese. There is no indication Brecht considered the possibility that the Chinese might not be "alienated" by their art. On the contrary, it appears that Brecht was so intent on finding ways to reduce, or completely do away with, empathy that he saw what he was looking for, not what was actually there. Chinese theater, in practice, communicates on the level of ritual and myth and, as a result, does not satisfy Brecht's criteria for alienation. "The Chinese actor would be unthinkable without ritual and myth," says Oscar Budel, in

his discussion of aesthetic distance in the contemporary theater.<sup>79</sup> Brecht refused to seriously consider the possibility that audiences might respond to "A-effect" techniques emotionally because the techniques themselves inhibit transferral to an intellectual level.

The A-effect is supposed to keep the audience from becoming so emotionally involved in a play that it is unable to consider its social significance rationally. It is important, however, to remember that Brecht was not wholly opposed to the emotional involvement of the audience; he wanted only to limit emotional reactions to those points which he considered appropriate. Likewise, he was against the total detachment of the didactic theater as his criticisms of Erwin Piscator in his lecture "On Experimental Theatre" prove. The gist of Brecht's argument against Piscator was that the theater must combine learning with pleasure unless it wanted to address itself solely to those in agreement with the playwright's views. Pleasure necessarily meant using traditional dramatic elements in conjunction with the new in order to alternate between reason and the emotions. (Brecht did write some purely didactic plays such as Der Jasager ["The Yea-Sayers"] and Die Massnahme ["The Measures Taken"], but these came from an earlier formative period preceding the above-mentioned lecture which was delivered in 1939, the time of his greatest plays.) Thus he sought and experimented with techniques which would

cause the psychic distance of the audience to vary between the two poles of realistic and didactic theater.<sup>80</sup>

In his own examples of what constitutes the "A-effect" Brecht never presents a completely successful dampening of the emotions. For example, in 1929, Helene Weigel played Jocasta in a deliberate, unemotional manner in order to emphasize Sophocles's words and not Jocasta's emotions. But, Brecht complains, the spectators were "plunged in self-identification with the protagonist's feelings, virtually the whole audience failed to take part in the moral decisions of which the plot is made up." Even the audience reaction to Mei Lang-Fang's performance did not conform to Brecht's desires. "One or two people behaved as if they were present at the death of a real girl. Possibly their attitude would have been all right for a European production, but for a Chinese it was unspeakably ridiculous."<sup>81</sup> Throughout much of his dramatic career, Brecht tried unsuccessfully to circumvent an entirely natural reaction which the abstract, puppet-like action of the Chinese acting provokes so intensely.

An example of Brecht's ritual use of gesture can be seen in a film clip of a Berliner Ensemble production of Mother Courage with Helene Weigel playing the lead role. The clip is contained in Werner Hecht's film, "Helen Weigel: Portrait of a Great Actress," and Weigel herself explains how the scene was created. Weigel, playing Mother Courage,

nervously wipes dry a knife while waiting to hear the report of the rifles of Swiss Cheese's firing squad. Upon hearing the volley, she throws her head back and opens her mouth wide for several seconds in a silent scream. The idea for this gesture of pain and affliction came from a photograph in Brecht's collection entitled "After the Bombing." The picture shows two screaming Chinese women squatting among the rubble of Singapore. Weigel's imitation of the scream captured and intensified what already existed in her model. For all its mute stylization, the scream seemed doubly loud and moving.<sup>82</sup>

The contemporary theater, seeking to exercise those mythical and ritual techniques which playwrights such as Artaud and Yeats pioneered in reintroducing to the Western stage, has been the scene of much experimentation. There have been efforts to alter the relation between stage and audience by redesigning the theater space, by placing actors among the spectators and even by inviting or imposing the participation of the latter. These experiments are revealing in their successes and despite failures of the enormous possibilities of the theater and of the present capacity of the spectator to absorb such radical changes which challenge, often quite aggressively, the passive spectator.

The creation of a new theater which in its combination of ritual and myth goes beyond the bounds of the traditional Western theater has been a goal of many twentieth-century

playwrights and theater groups. The involvement of the entire audience is the ideal goal although the project has its dangers. Contemporary man is capable of following and participating in ritual as his primitive ancestors did. The problem is that the capability has remained unexercised in most of us, whereas in traditional societies it is an integral part of life. Until people learn to participate in drama of ritual and myth, there will continue to be spectators who cannot fully savor such a performance or who are repelled by it. One should not forget that Artaud and Yeats, who were among the first to sense the possibilities for ritual in their plays, failed because their audiences resisted involvement or could not follow. The popularity of ritualistic plays since World War II suggests that audiences are changing. Contemporary audiences seem either more passive or better oriented for the ritual experience.

It is certain that we have never left our primitive selves behind--we have in this century, through technology, refined our barbarism enormously--despite the occasionally bright and glittering paints of culture and civilization with which we adorn ourselves to convince the conscious mind and delude the unconscious mind into believing we have changed. We still live partially, at least, in Vico's first stage of civilization ready to create new myths.<sup>83</sup> We carry the potential for myth within us. If our imaginations are capable we can draw on our potential and create myth. If we lack the talent then we can find myth in the creations of

others. As we do lack an "effective general mythology," we must turn to the artist to create for us ad hoc myth which can deal with a single experience or a series of experiences. Without accepting it as canon, our adherence will be gained because of the truth we feel it to bear.

In their plays, Ionesco, Genet and Brecht have attempted to present a vision of reality which accounts for its physical phenomena and for its metaphysical truths. All of the elements of the dramatic performance, including the actor and language, have been subordinated to the creation of a complex ritual. The role of the actor and of language have been transformed. Contemporary drama is not a showcase for the histrionic abilities of the actor. It is more important to accept equal billing with inanimate objects and to renounce one's individuality, than to be a star. In a similar manner, language has lost its primacy as the mode through which the play communicates its meaning. For those accustomed to treating drama as a form of literature this change has been anathema, but the theater of myth and ritual is sufficient compensation. Language is often little more than a vocal accompaniment to the action. The de-emphasis of the importance of the actor and of language has been accompanied by the partial or total elimination of plot, story, motive, theme, suspense and personality. Instead, events simply occur--they are accidental or fated, and have no causal connections.

In terms of the traditional theatrical performance, the actor's presence is incidental. However, the presence of the human participant has a necessity of its own. The performer is the living spirit which inhabits the play and is the catalyst for its otherwise inert mechanisms. The actor represents the spectator in the drama and involves him in its performance. At the same time, because the actor in the ritual performance surrenders his individual identity and becomes, in a manner of speaking, an object--a highly sophisticated stage prop--which is manipulated by the playwright for the sake of the total effect, he, too, becomes an abstract being. Having eschewed full humanity, the actor nonetheless retains human qualities. In this way, the familiar is combined with the unfamiliar, a situation in which the psychical distance between the spectator and the stage is simultaneously increased and decreased and participation is provoked on all levels, rational and emotional.<sup>84</sup>

The modification of many of the techniques and presumptions of theater has brought about a new kind of relationship between the spectator and the performance. It is in the nature of the contemporary drama to mitigate against the traditional distance between stage and audience. Because of the constant movement between the real and the false, it is difficult to follow a contemporary play in a disinterested manner as though one were observing empirical data or a work of art. The apparent lack of connection between

events, the confusion of the language and the irrational behavior of the characters discourages attempts at intellectual comprehension and appreciation. The easiest path for the spectator is to abandon the safety and neutrality of distance and become involved emotionally in the play.

Robert Benedetti explains this new form of audience participation on the basis of psychological distance. He describes the theater as the locus of a "dynamic gestalt" consisting of the contact between two environments: the stage and the audience. Naturalistic theater attempts to remove any barrier between the two. The differences are emphasized by the didactic theater. The contemporary theater which alternates between the two environments has "the effect of calling attention to the performing situation per se." The manipulation of the audience entails engaging both the spectator's objective and subjective participation in the presentation. The response of the audience is "a combination of realizing and forgetting that what we are watching is a performance." The effectiveness of this kind of presentation comes, paradoxically, because it does best what it seems not to do. It seems to avoid the real world which naturalism and realism claim as their domain. Nevertheless, it presents a "primary direct demonstration of the dynamic gestalt of that world."<sup>85</sup>

The plays to be discussed, with their seemingly antithetical elements, have quite naturally fused together the

tragic and the comic. It is difficult to banish laughter even from the most tragic moments because they are often intertwined with comic elements. To be experienced as serious and ennobling tragedy depends on a sense of cosmic order such as that of the ancient Greeks. Today, however, the sense of absurdity of the human condition often leads the spectator to find comic elements even in the presentation of man's most sublime hopes and aspirations. It is a contradictory kind of laughter born of man's dual nature, as Baudelaire noted in his essay on laughter. It is "à la fois signe d'une grandeur infinie et d'une misère infinie, misère infinie relativement à l'Être absolu dont il possède la conception, grandeur infinie relativement aux animaux."<sup>86</sup>

Just as man is both comic and tragic at the same time, there is no compartmentalization of the two in the contemporary theater. We are expected to experience them together.<sup>87</sup> When Genet's Blacks act out the worst fears contained in the white stereotype of them--the rape and murder of a white woman--they dress Diouf, the Uncle Tom, as a woman and turn the scene into farce. Even as Mother Courage loses her three children, the audience finds itself constantly laughing. And, as Ionesco consistently demonstrates, the most tragically sublime moment of a play can be its most comic. In Tueur sans gages ("The Killer"), Bérenger's futile attempts to beg, bully, ransom or reason with his mute assassin are both terrible and painfully funny. Brecht

insisted on making his plays humorous, because he felt audiences would be more willing to learn about the serious side of life if they could enjoy themselves in the process. At the same time he strived for the incongruous juxtaposition of the tragic and the comic in order to provoke his audiences to greater levels of understanding. He wanted the spectator to say: "That's great art: nothing obvious in it--I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh."<sup>88</sup>

Ionesco claims not to understand how one can distinguish between the tragic and the comic. "Le comique étant intuition de l'absurde, il me semble plus désespérant que la tragique. Le comique n'offre pas d'issue. ... le comique est tragique, et la tragédie de l'homme, dérisoire."<sup>89</sup> The tragic dimensions of life must be revealed for man to understand his limits and the nature of the forces he confronts. However, it is the comic which destroys the restraints inherent in the understanding of the tragic nature of things and permits man to create new possibilities for himself. The power of laughter to shatter those social constraints which deform human life and oppress the individual is recognized by Irma in Le Balcon ("The Balcony") who bans it from the world of fantasy she controls: "Un éclat de rire, ou même un sourire fout tout par terre."<sup>90</sup> Laughter creates healthy people capable of accepting themselves and the fact of their mortality. For these people who are in communion with their authentic natures, there is no need to cower behind the façade of a second self.

At first glance, it may appear surprising, even paradoxical to find Bertolt Brecht associated with playwrights of myth and ritual. What possible relation can Brecht's sociological theater have with the metaphysical world of myth? The examination of Brecht's objectives, the dramatic problems posed by them and the solutions he devised to overcome them serve to answer this question. Brecht shared Ionesco's contempt for the manner in which the traditional play portrays the individual. The "bourgeois" theater, as Brecht referred to realistic or naturalistic drama, concentrates on psychological motivation "as though the individual had not simply collapsed long ago." The excuse that such theater presents "just life" is rejected "as a motive force of the play's dynamics." Brecht insisted that man must be shown as "the sum of all social circumstances." With this end in mind, he sought ways to dramatize "theoretical" situations in order to make the social forces which dominate man perceptible to the spectator. It is not surprising that the theatrical means devised to solve the problems raised by Brecht's philosophical objectives have much in common with myth and ritual.

The dichotomy between what one feels one's authentic self to be and the social mask imposed by social convention or necessity is found in all the playwrights under consideration, but it is Genet who presents this split on the level of myth. The clearest expression of Genet's mythical concept

of self and mask is found in Le Balcon where man's social functions clash with the need for authenticity. To be wholly absorbed in one's social functions--presented as a costume fantasy played out in a bordello--means a renunciation of self, movement towards absence and death. Authenticity requires complete truthfulness, renunciation of fantasy and adherence to reality. Its victory is expressed by the ability to love.

## Endnotes

1

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Otto Rank, The Myth of the Birth of the Hero, trans. F. Robbins and Smith Ely Jelliffe, in The Myth of the Birth of the Hero and Other Writings, ed. Philip Freund (New York: Vintage-Random House, 1964), p. 86; Otto Rank, Don Juan: Une étude sur le Double, trans. Dr. S. Lautman (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1932), throughout.

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8

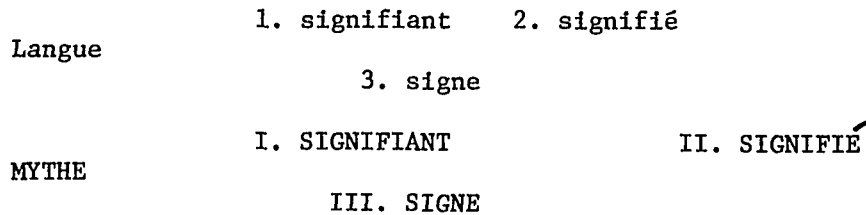
Roland Barthes, Sur Racine (Paris: Seuil, 1960), pp. 67, 68, 164n.

9

Jean Racine, "Seconde Préface" to Bajazet in Théâtre complet (Paris: Garnier Frères, 1960), p. 355.

<sup>10</sup>Barthes explains the nature of myth in terms of semiology which recognizes two overlapping levels of understanding: 1) language and 2) myth. Each level contains a signifier (signifiant) and the signification (signifié). Since the signifiant and the signifié are not substantial, they must be carried by a sign (signe). On the level of language, meaning is literal or denotative. On the level of myth, the signe becomes the signifiant and takes on a figurative or connotative significance. For example, on the level of language: the signifier and sign of the flower, rose, is a rose. Literally the rose signifies nothing more than a rose. On the level of myth, the rose (signifiant) is the carrier of passion (signifié). The two separate

objects are united in a third, the sign. Barthes illustrates the relation between the two levels of language in the following chart:



Roland Barthes, Mythologies (Saint-Amand: Seuil, 1957), pp. 197-200; "C'est encore ce que Lévi-Strauss dit de la pensée mythique, qui crée sans cesse, comme le remarquait Boas, de nouveaux univers, mais en inversant les fins et les moyens: 'les signifiés se changent en signifiants, et inversement.'" Genette, p. 148.

<sup>11</sup>Lillian Feder, Ancient Myth in Modern Poetry (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971), p. 344.

<sup>12</sup>Claude Lévi-Strauss, Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke Grundfest Schoepf (Middlesex: Penguin, 1963), pp. 203, 217, 229.

<sup>13</sup>Harold Osborne, "Artistic Unity and Gestalt," Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. XIV (1964), p. 218.

<sup>14</sup>Lévi-Strauss, p. 324.

<sup>15</sup>Eugène Ionesco, Notes et contre-notes (Saint-Amand: Idées-Gallimard, 1966), p. 252.

<sup>16</sup>Northrop Frye, "The Archetypes of Literature," in John B. Vickery, ed., Myth and Literature: Contemporary Theory and Practice (Lincoln, Neb.: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1966), p. 91.

<sup>17</sup>Jean Rousset, Forme et signification: essais sur les structures littéraires de Corneille à Claudel (Paris: José Corti, 1962), p. xviii.

<sup>18</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 15.

<sup>19</sup>Ernst Cassirer, The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms, Vol. 2 of Mythical Thought, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1955), p. 24.

<sup>20</sup>Cited in Genette, p. 196.

- <sup>21</sup> Artaud, IV, p. 91.
- <sup>22</sup> Charles Baudelaire, Oeuvres complètes, ed. M. Jacques Crépet (Paris: Louis Conard, 1923), II, p. 305.
- <sup>23</sup> Ionesco, Notes, p. 145.
- <sup>24</sup> The present society of North American and Industrial Europe deviates from the "common Human Pattern" (CHP), according to a theory developed by Jan Roheim, because it is no longer experienced, as in other societies, by the individual, "as a structured Gestalt of which he himself was an inherent part, ..." Anton C. Zijderveld, The Abstract Society (Harmondsworth, Eng.: Penguin, 1970), pp. 21, 65.
- <sup>25</sup> Francis Fergusson, The Idea of a Theater (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1968), p. 3.
- <sup>26</sup> Francis Fergusson, The Human Image in Dramatic Literature (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1957), p. 167.
- <sup>27</sup> Rank, Hero, pp. 103, 105.
- <sup>28</sup> Rank, Hero, pp. 116, 117, 120.
- <sup>29</sup> Martin Esslin, "Naturalism in Context," TDR, XIII (Winter 1968), p. 72.
- <sup>30</sup> Rank, Hero, pp. 137, 209-210.
- <sup>31</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals, trans. Francis Golffing (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1956), pp. 58, 62-63, 132.
- <sup>32</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Nietzsche, sa vie, son oeuvre avec un exposé de sa philosophie (Paris: P.U.F., 1965), p. 16.
- <sup>33</sup> Nietzsche, pp. 101-102.
- <sup>34</sup> Stéphane Mallarmé, Oeuvres Complètes, ed. Henri Mondor and G. Jean-Aubry (Paris: Pléiade-Gallimard, 1945), pp. 300, 313.
- <sup>35</sup> Haskell M. Block, Mallarmé and the Symbolist Drama (Detroit: Wayne State Univ., 1963), p. 85.
- <sup>36</sup> Mallarmé, p. 300.
- <sup>37</sup> Mallarmé, pp. 304, 313, 323.

- <sup>38</sup>Mallarmé, pp. 302, 316; Symbolist, pp. 83-103.
- <sup>39</sup>William Butler Yeats, The Autobiographies (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1958), pp. 233-34.
- <sup>40</sup>Richard Ellmann, Yeats--The Man and the Masks (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1958), p. 128.
- <sup>41</sup>Ellmann, p. 128.
- <sup>42</sup>Ellmann, pp. 115-134.
- <sup>43</sup>William Butler Yeats, Essays and Introductions (New York: MacMillan, 1961), pp. 203, 206.
- <sup>44</sup>Yeats, Essays, p. 249.
- <sup>45</sup>Ellmann, pp. 133-134.
- <sup>46</sup>Yeats, Essays, p. 221.
- <sup>47</sup>Yeats, Essays, pp. 224, 235; Feder, p. 186.
- <sup>48</sup>Northrop Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1957), p. 136.
- <sup>49</sup>Ezra Pound and Ernest Fenollosa, The Classic Noh Theater of Japan (New York: New Directions, 1959), p. 4.
- <sup>50</sup>Ellmann, p. 215.
- <sup>51</sup>Eric Bentley, The Dramatic Event (Boston: Beacon, 1954), p. 134.
- <sup>52</sup>Bentley, p. 135.
- <sup>53</sup>Guillaume Apollinaire, Les Mamelles de Tirésias in Oeuvres complètes, ed. Michel Decaudin (Paris: André Balland et Jacques Lecat, 1966), III, pp. 612, 619.
- <sup>54</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 147.
- <sup>55</sup>Anna Balakian, Surrealism: The Road to the Absolute (New York: E. P. Dutton, 1970), p. 132.
- <sup>56</sup>Bettina L. Knapp, Antonin Artaud: Man of Vision (New York: Discus-Avon Books, 1969), pp. 48-50, 55; Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1961), p. 55.
- <sup>57</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 39.

- <sup>58</sup>Artaud, IV, pp. 89-91.
- <sup>59</sup>Artaud, IV, pp. 67, 72, 83.
- <sup>60</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 67.
- <sup>61</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 72.
- <sup>62</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 84.
- <sup>63</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 99.
- <sup>64</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 122.
- <sup>65</sup>Artaud, IV, p. 109.
- <sup>66</sup>Artaud, V, pp. 262, 307.
- <sup>67</sup>Eugène Ionesco, "Ni un dieu, ni un démon," Cahiers de la Compagnie Madelaine Renaud - Jean-Louis Barrault, IX (May 1957), p. 24.
- <sup>68</sup>Bettina Knapp suggests Artaud's hypersensitivity to myth and ritual had its source in his unstable mental condition and the severe migraines which accompanied him all his life. Knapp, Artaud, p. 45.
- <sup>69</sup>Alfred Simon, Dictionnaire du theatre français contemporain (Paris: Larousse, 1970), p. 76.
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- <sup>71</sup>Bertolt Brecht, Collected Plays, eds. Ralph Manheim and John Willett (New York: Random House, 1970), VII, p. xvii; Absurd, p. 267; Bertolt Brecht, Brecht on Theatre, ed. and trans. John Willett (New York: Hill and Wang, 1964), pp. 220-221, 236.
- <sup>72</sup>Willett, pp. 107-115, 230.
- <sup>73</sup>John Fuegi, The Essential Brecht (Los Angeles: Hennesey & Ingalls, 1972), p. 175.
- <sup>74</sup>Willett, p. 192; Fuegi, p. 190.
- <sup>75</sup>Willett, pp. 193, 204, 196.
- <sup>76</sup>Bertolt Brecht, The Threepenny Opera, trans. Desmond Vesey and Eric Bentley (New York: Evergreen-Grove Press, 1960), pp. 42, 48, 50.

<sup>77</sup>Willetts, pp. 44-45.

<sup>78</sup>Willetts, pp. 91-99.

<sup>79</sup>Oscar Budel, "Contemporary Theatre and Aesthetic Distance,": in Brecht: A Collection of Critical Essays, ed. Peter DeMetz (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1962), p. 77.

<sup>80</sup>Willetts, pp. 130-135; Baal was inspired by the life of Rimbaud through the tragedy by Hans Johst, Der Einsame ("The Lonely Man") which was published in 1917. Gray, p. 23.

<sup>81</sup>Willetts, p. 95.

<sup>82</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre provides another interesting example of how far from his mark Brecht strayed. Sartre is a dramatist, a philosopher and a Marxist. Who could be better suited to establish an immediate rapport with epic theater? Yet Sartre testifies that he and Simone de Beauvoir, seeing the first French production of a Brecht play in 1930, missed the political import of Die Dreigroschenoper ("The Three-Penny Opera"). "C'était très amusant. C'était charmant. Bon. Mais le vrais propos de Brecht nous a complètement échappé." Twenty years later, Sartre finally found out who Brecht is and what the play is about. "Le côté positif de la double critique m'a échappé comme à tout le public alors..." Obviously the play did have an effect on Sartre and de Beauvoir as well as the rest of the audience, but not of the kind Brecht intended. (Less to Sartre's credit is the fact that he ignores his own reaction to Brecht and goes on to consider Brecht's "A-effects" as though they actually work as intended.) Jean-Paul Sartre, Un Théâtre de situations, ed. Michel Contat and Michel Rybalka (Saint-Amand, Cher: Idées-Gallimard, 1973), p. 99.

<sup>83</sup>"The latest incarnation of Oedipus, the continued romance of Beauty and the Beast, stands this afternoon on the corner of forty-second Street and Fifth Avenue, waiting for the traffic light to change." Joseph Campbell, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, Bollingen Series (2d ed., rev.; Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), p. 4. Campbell is probably too discreet to suggest that some of our more terrifying myths are probably sitting in the New York Public Library keeping the reading room guards on their toes. In any case, it is reassuring to know that the students of literature at the Graduate Center are sitting on top of our contemporary sources of myth.

<sup>84</sup>Edward Bullough, "'Physical Distance' as a Factor in Art and as Aesthetic Principle," in Aesthetics: Lectures and Essays, ed. and introd. Elizabeth M. Wilkinson (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1957), pp. 91-130.

<sup>85</sup>Robert Benedetti, "Metanaturalism: The Metaphorical Use of Environment in the Modern Theater," The Chicago Review, XVII (1964), pp. 24-26, 28, 31.

<sup>86</sup>Charles Baudelaire, "De L'essence du rire," in Curiosités, Esthétiques in Oeuvres, I, p. 379.

<sup>87</sup>R. A. Swanson, "Ionesco's Classical Absurdity" (to be published in Fall, 1977), p. 119.

<sup>88</sup>Willett, pp. 69-76.

<sup>89</sup>Ionesco, Notes, p. 61.

<sup>90</sup>Jean Genet, Le Balcon (Décines: L'Arbalète, 1956), p. 63.

<sup>91</sup>Willett, pp. 45-46.

## Chapter 2

### Brecht: Myth, Ritual and Ideology

Through a combination of ideology and theatricalism, Bertolt Brecht produced many plays, including his most important, which bear the characteristics of myth and ritual. Brecht's adoption of Communism in 1928 resulted in the addition of a metaphysical dimension essential to the creation of myth. The plays written after Brecht's political reorientation follow a definite pattern which is markedly different from that of his previous works. In the new plays the situation of the individual is set in context by a dramatic concretization of the social forces which act upon him. The common theoretical background in drama as well as the shared dramatic practices of Brecht, Eugène Ionesco and Jean Genet are discussed in the first chapter. This chapter is concerned with the nature of myth in Brecht's plays, its sources in Marxist thought and examples from his plays.

Brecht found in Marxism the kind of perspective which was lacking in his work. It explains and organizes historical phenomena while, at the same time, showing how the problems they present can be resolved. Brecht made

drama by giving substance to the theoretical clash between thesis and antithesis which is basic to the Hegelian interpretation of history without, save in exceptional cases, proposing a vision of the final synthesis.<sup>1</sup> From Marx, Brecht learned to select and construct historically significant situations and characters. This understanding permitted Brecht to escape the impossible difficulty of making sense of the world through such helpless and unidimensional individuals as Kragler and Garga. As Hannah Arendt points out, Brecht recognized, as many of his contemporaries did not, "how deadly ridiculous it would be to measure the flood of events with the yardstick of individual aspirations."<sup>2</sup> Instead, Brecht learned to create characters who are typical and commonplace in the sense that their experiences as individuals embody those of the masses.<sup>3</sup>

In Brecht's plays there is a doubling of personality in which the instinctive nature of man is presented in mortal conflict with the role imposed upon him by society. As a consequence of the doubling of personality, the characters become more abstract and their personal conflicts are transformed into a mythical clash between man and the super-human forces of society.

A graphic example of the split is found in the personality of the Good Woman of Setzuan whose quixotic nature requires its own Sancho in order to protect her and make her desire to help others possible. The Shen-Te/Shui-Ta

combination is an irreducible Marxist model of the human personality caught in an imperfect world. In Shen-Te Brecht personified Marx's idea of the authentic person. Shui-Ta, who appropriately wears a mask, is the abstract personality each person must create in order to survive. Shen-Te is charged by the gods to live according to the rules of heaven, but finds that, in this world, such a course is impossible. As she says in her apology to the gods:

Your injunction  
 To be good and yet to live  
 Was a Thunderbolt  
 It has torn me in two  
 But to be good to others  
 And myself at the same time  
 I could not do it.<sup>4</sup>

To be human and to survive in this world requires, according to Brecht's vision, antithetical qualities. The human traits of Shen-Te--instinctiveness, love, a sense of human equality and justice--are irreconcilable with the personality traits of Shui-Ta which are required for survival--the insistence on contractual bonds, whether fair or not, such as those between employer and worker, hierarchical relations between people and the dominance of reason.

In other of Brecht's plays the elements of the split personality, clearly delineated in the double nature of the Good Woman of Setzuan, are either divided between two or more characters or they co-exist uneasily in a single personality. Shen-Te, for example, can be equated with Joan Dark,

Simone Machard, the Young Comrade, Grusha and Old Dogsborough. Shui-Ta, on the other hand, can be equated with Brecht's scoundrels: Pierpoint Mauler, Soupeau and Arturo Ui. In Mother Courage, Galileo and Puntila these characteristics are mixed as they are in all humans and they assert themselves according to the situations in which the characters are placed. Mother Courage and Galileo are, perhaps, Brecht's greatest characters because of his success in creating believable humans who contain within them such violently opposing tendencies. Regardless of how he apportions the elements of man's dual nature, the lines of the conflict between them are always clearly drawn and of mythical proportions.

Because it is in his presentation of conflict between the real and the ideal that Brecht creates myth, I shall dwell a moment on some of the basic manifestations of this split. I have already noted examples of the split between the natural self and the abstract self as well as the gap between the utopian and the real. It should not be overlooked that Brecht refers to Christianity--as well as using it--perhaps more than to Communism.<sup>5</sup> Brecht often plays the ideals of Christianity against its actual practice. Moreover, despite his ideological position, his Christian heroes are often his most esteemed. Obviously, here I am thinking of Joan Dark, Lillian Holiday, of Galileo's friend,

Cardinal Barberini. Brecht does not quarrel with his Christians, except in that they have proved incapable of changing the world. His opinion of religion in general is reflected in his ironic use of gods and angels and is emphasized by his demonstration that, while they may be well intentioned, they are ineffectual. Simone Machard's Angel leads her to behave patriotically but does not intervene when the poor child could use some divine help. Likewise, once the gods have put Shen-Te on the spot, they are unable to find a solution to her problems.

In his capacity as a dramatist, Brecht did for Marx what Dante did for Thomistic theology.<sup>6</sup> It follows, therefore, that without an examination of the influence of Marx on his work, Brecht cannot be fully understood.<sup>7</sup> In conducting such an examination, I must point out that I am not attempting to summarize or evaluate Marxist thought in the space of a few pages. I am not proposing to explore what Marxism or Communism meant to Brecht. I am only interested in the use Brecht made of his ideological perspective to create myth and ritual for the stage. The first step in this examination is to see in what manner Marxism lends itself to being conceived of as myth.<sup>8</sup>

Some of Brecht's best known critics in the United States have found little constructive to say about the relation of Marxist thought to Brecht's work. Instead they indulge in irrelevant personal attacks on Brecht's espousal

of communism.<sup>9</sup> More essential questions are ignored. What use did Brecht make of Marxism in his work? In what ways did his ideological orientation affect the content and structure of his plays? What is the relation of ideology to the work of art? I shall restrict myself to critical studies which deal with the above questions while demonstrating that they contribute to an understanding of Brecht in terms of myth and ritual.

One does not need recourse to personal weaknesses to explain why Brecht was attracted to the integrating vision of the world which Marxism offers. Amidst the political and social chaos of the Weimar Republic and the nihilism of the arts, Communism gave Brecht order, a set of priorities, a means of interpreting empirical information about the world and goals to achieve. The need for such a vision is reflected in Brecht's pre-Marxist work in which one finds, according to Martin Esslin, a "loss of contact with reality" and "the inability to control events,"<sup>10</sup> that is, characteristics which typify much of twentieth-century literature. Brecht's plays written soon after World War I reflect this lack of orientation and purpose. In Trommeln in der Nacht ("Drums in the Night"), Andrew Kragler returns home after four years as a prisoner of war in Africa to find Anna, his fiancée, pregnant and engaged to a man who became wealthy while shirking his military obligation. Kragler is about to commit suicide by joining the ranks of the doomed

Spartacist revolutionaries when Anna, who has followed him in the streets, manages to convince him that she still loves him and wants him back. Kragler renounces war and society to go home with Anna. "I'm a louse and the louse is going home." Aside from "lying in bed...multiplying myself so as not to perish from the earth," Kragler finds no other reality worth living for. "Cheap theatricals, that's all it is. There's some boards and a paper moon and a butcher shop in back--that's the only real part."<sup>11</sup> Kragler may feel like "a louse" for deserting his comrades but, aside from friendship, he has no overriding reason to join them. In a similar vein, the struggle between Shlink and Garga in Im Dickicht der Staedte ("In the Jungle of Cities") is gratuitous. Looking back on this play in 1954, Brecht said: "I wanted my new play to show the conclusion of a 'fight for fighting's sake,' a fight with no object except to decide who is 'the best man.'"<sup>12</sup> Except for fighting for the fun of it, Brecht seemed to say there is no meaning to life or real communication between people:

SHLINK: And never, George Garga, there will never be an outcome to this fight--never an understanding?

GARGA: No, there won't.

SHLINK: But you'll get away, with nothing but your life?

GARGA: It's better to have that life than any other.<sup>13</sup>

Brecht believed, or came to believe, that one of the goals of literature is "to form the 'ideological superstructure' for a solid, practical arrangement of our age's way of life."

Obviously, the thought that life is without meaning is unacceptable to a man such as Brecht. After all, how can the artist help his fellows if he is just as confused as they are? Or, as Brecht put it, "It is scarcely possible to conceive of the laws of motion from the tennis ball's point of view."<sup>14</sup>

Robert Tucker, in his study of the development of the thought of Karl Marx, demonstrates how a myth in which personifications of Labor and Capital are the main protagonists was created. Marx inadvertently created myth, explains Tucker, in moving from a philosophical plane-- "original" Marxism--to a sociological one--"mature" Marxism. Original Marxism is based on a philosophical examination of the individual's self-alienation which results from man's urge to self-aggrandizement. This urge alienates man from his real self because it leads to a suppression of his natural creative powers. Original man thwarts his authentic self becoming, in the process, an abstract individual, a victim of history. "The demonic force in man that leads him to reach out for the absolute and unlimited in his own person or nation is one that also divides him against himself, deprives him of happiness, and ultimately encompasses his ruin." This inner conflict, in mature Marxism, is displaced and becomes an external struggle between the classes. "Marx projected upon the real conflicts of ... society a conflict out of the inner life of man." Thus an intangible

and abstract philosophical problem finds a corollary in the external world. "It fills the field of mental vision as an overwhelmingly immediate and tangible presentation of external reality." The result, according to Tucker, is that in the mature Marxism, one finds the mythological representation of the original Marxism.<sup>15</sup>

It is not surprising that mythological qualities can be discerned in Marxist thought. After all, how can an ideology with a world view, even one which purports to be founded on the bedrock of reason, avoid projecting itself in a unified and believable manner without the aid of myth? Although a Marxist might object that his ideology is sullied by the association with myth, such a reaction could only be termed an emotional response to the word itself. In any case, the recognition of the split between the conscious self and the unconscious self is neither an original formulation of Marx nor is it unique to him. His contribution was in attributing the split within the individual to exterior economic causes, that is, the exploitation of labor by capital. What has hitherto been perceived as an individual problem is thus identified with the class struggle: the conflict between the individual, acting alone or as a member of a group, and the forces of oppression. The individual cannot escape the sense of coercion exercised by civilization although he can find many ways to explain it.

Regardless of how it is stated, the conflict exists

and, considering the diffuse nature of coercion in modern society, it is felt by all of its members whether they are proletarian or bourgeois.<sup>16</sup> The myth, derived from Marxist thought, verifies the existence of the conflict between what the individual is, or wishes to be, and the pressures which oblige him, consciously or unconsciously, to suppress his true self in deference to the demands of society. This is an idea to which Brecht often gives expression when he asserts that the presence of virtue in the citizens of a nation is not a sign of a happy people. He has Mother Courage say: "In a good country virtues wouldn't be necessary. Everybody could be quite ordinary, middling, and, for all I care, cowards."<sup>17</sup> Regardless of the theoretical definition of the problems which concern him--that is, the struggle of the masses against Capitalist coercion--Brecht's preoccupation with the superhuman forces that distort and define the limits of human aspirations and desires sets him squarely in the domain of myth. Even in the guise of epic drama, one cannot place the class struggle on stage except indirectly--that is, by treating it in the manner of ritual and myth. The experiences of the masses must be condensed into representative situations involving a handful of equally representative characters of whom only two or three can be fully developed. In the choice of situations, it is important not to represent the central or most decisive events of an era. However, it is essential that the events

be representative of the period; thereby permitting the spectator to comprehend the logic of the social forces leading to the great cataclysmic events of history.<sup>18</sup> Thus Die Gesichte der Simone Marchard ("The Visions of Simone Machard"), which is set in June, 1940, in a French town about to be captured by the advancing German army, the heroine, who represents the resistance of the entire French nation, is only a simple, little country girl. Her employer, Soupeau, represents the hypocritical monied class which welcomes the arrival of the Germans and which eagerly cooperates with them. Mother Courage follows in the train of whichever of the opposing armies fate has placed her. The central concern is not with questions of military strategy or the personalities of kings and generals, but with the suffering and the struggle of the little people to survive and even turn a profit. In Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis ("The Caucasian Chalk Circle"), Grusha is only accidentally on the spot when the Governor is led to his death by the Iron-Shirts. She spends the rest of the war "on the other side of the mountain" trying to survive with the child until Simon returns. The "love story" of MacHeath and Polly is played out in the London underworld far from the monumental preparations for the Queen's coronation. In each case, Brecht is concerned with showing the circumstances in which the common people are obliged to live and their reactions to these conditions. Brecht did not try to

create "real" people, instead he wanted characters whose destiny and psychology are representative of social trends and historical forces.<sup>19</sup> "The characters," said Brecht, "are not simply portraits of living people, but are rearranged and formed in accordance with ideas."<sup>20</sup>

Brecht's recasting of the story of Joan of Arc in the Chicago stockyards presents not a struggle between people, but a mythical revelation of the power of social and economic forces to destroy those who would oppose them and the ability of the same forces to raise their chosen representatives above the ranks of mere mortals. Mauler, the king of the stockyards, is invested with a superhuman Midas' touch which augments his wealth and power even when he seeks to escape it. Graham, one of his fellow businessmen, can only describe Mauler in terms suitable for a god:

There's no hindering  
The rise of this monstrosity: to him  
Nature is goods, even the air's for sale.  
What we have inside our stomachs he resells to us.  
He can squeeze rent from ruined houses, money  
From rotten meat; throw stones at him  
He's sure to turn the stones to money; so  
Unruly is his money-lust, so natural  
To him this lack of nature that he himself  
Cannot deny its driving force within him  
For I can tell you: himself, he's soft, does not love money  
Cannot bear squalor, cannot sleep at night....

Mauler, himself, testifies to Joan that he is only the mask, the embodiment, of a force which he does not and cannot control. He tells her that it is impossible for him to escape its power: "I would be like a fly / Ceasing to hold

back a landslide. There and then / I would become a nothing and it would keep on going over me." In the person of Mauler an inhuman force acquires a human face. At the same time, however, the force remains inhuman and independent of its human host. In describing his own personal insignificance, Mauler is setting the stage for Joan's futile struggle and her destruction by the very forces which make him so powerful. At the same time he is indirectly explaining why Joan will be unable to save him and, through him, rescue the workers from their misery. Later, when, in remorse for the life he has led, Mauler attempts to find consolation in Christianity as professed by the Black Straw Hats--the Salvation Army type organization to which Joan belongs--he finds that they would prefer to have access to his money rather than his soul. He is rejected scornfully by Snyder, the head of the mission. The Black Straw Hat chorus echoes Snyder, albeit more gently:

His heart  
He brought to us, but not his money.  
Therefore our hearts are moved, but  
Our faces are long.<sup>21</sup>

In any case, Mauler's effort to find consolation and salvation does not entail his destruction, because he cannot escape his fate as ruler of the stockyards any more than Oedipus can avoid murdering his own father. Without hesitation, he returns to his old life the moment the meatpackers and the stockbreeders arrive to entreat him to make things function again.

Joan, on the other hand, is doomed to die from the beginning because she refuses to yield to the system and, worse yet, because she attempts to take it on by herself. Brecht does interject the possibility of united resistance by the workers under the leadership of the Communists, but this, in terms of the struggle between the individual and society as it is presented on the stage, is little more than a symbolic alternative. When Joan announces that she intends to learn the truth about the conditions of the workers, she is warned by her fellow missionaries to keep above the battle--which for Brecht is a euphemism for siding with the exploiters--in the stockyards:

He who meddles in a quarrel becomes its victim!...  
 You will disappear in dirt!  
 For only dirt is stuffed into the mouths  
 Of those who ask without caution.<sup>22</sup>

Refusing to heed the warnings of her colleagues, Joan begins a ritual movement towards her death in an atmosphere which Brecht has charged with Christian symbolism. Joan makes three "descents" into the depths of the stockyards. The first time she leads an unsuccessful march of the Black Hat shock troop in search of souls to save. In her innocence, she attempts to explain to the workers their situation as a result of their lack of interest in higher things and their laziness. Her second descent is at the side of Sullivan Slift, Mauler's lieutenant, who seeks to prove to her the wickeness of the poor. Had he succeeded, Slift would

have simply re-enforced the attitudes which Joan demonstrated in her first descent. This time, however, Joan learns from what she sees instead of imposing a self-serving interpretation upon it. She begins to understand that morality is too dear for the pockets of the poor: "Not the wickedness of the poor / Have you shown me, but / The poverty of the poor."<sup>23</sup> When Joan attempts to act on her newfound knowledge, she begins to learn about the forces which control the world.

Despite Mauler's apparently genuine affection for her (he seems to see in Joan an aspect of himself which has been suppressed as a result of his complete submission to the forces of the marketplace) and his promises to help change things, nothing happens. The system, as described in this Brechtian icon of Hell, feeds on the misery of the poor and Mauler would be acting against his nature if he effected real change. When Joan recognizes that she cannot rely on Mauler and his cohorts, she expels them, as Christ did the money-changers, from the house of God. The reward for her behavior is expulsion from the ranks of the Black Straw Hats. As Snyder points out in his sermon to the business community, their interests complement each other. The mission cannot survive without financial support and the businessmen need the Black Straw Hats in order to distract the attention of the workers from the true causes of their misery and to direct it heavenward.<sup>24</sup>

Bereft of any support, Joan decides to act alone. Her final descent into the stockyards follows and it lasts three days. She is tempted by the possibility of practical action in the form of giving her services to the Communist strike organizers. Joan agrees to deliver a message to the workers to hold out just a little longer. The success of the strike depends on her carrying out her mission, but, once she is in the stockyards again, she chooses not to deliver the message and to carry on the struggle alone. Her behavior resembles that of the Young Comrade in Die Massnahme ("The Measures Taken"): she disobeys orders because she permits her humanity to intrude on her duty; she sets back the organizing efforts of the workers and, as a consequence of her failure, she dies. In a vision, Joan recognizes the folly of her ways, but it is too late. She has been broken and is dying.

Joan's heroic behavior has not gone unnoticed and she is received at the mission by the Black Straw Hats, the slaughterers, the stockbreeders and the wholesalers as a heroine. Dying of pneumonia, she attempts to make a speech which is a denunciation of Mauler, a denial of God and a revelation of the split nature of the world: "There is a gulf between top and bottom, wider / Than between Mount Himalaya and the sea." However, her words are drowned out by the "Hosannas" of the meatpackers. In a scene which bears a striking resemblance to the death and instant

canonization of Chantal in Le Balcon, the dead Joan is transformed into a symbol of the very forces she sought to combat. As Slift says: "We will cultivate her as a saint and refuse her no jot of respect. The fact that she is shown under our auspices will prove that we hold humaneness in high regard."<sup>25</sup> The system is so voracious and all-consuming that it finds a way to turn a profit even on the remains of its victims. Just as the hapless Luckerniddle, who slipped and fell into a boiler, emerges from the slaughterhouse as bacon, Joan's spiritual legacy falls, by default, into the hands of her enemies.

The significance of Brecht's combination of ideology with theater becomes clearer if we consider two plays which are related to Heilige Johanna by content and the fact that all three plays were written in the same period--between 1928 and 1930. Happy End preceded the other two plays and itself is a light-hearted offshoot of Die Dreigroschenoper ("The Threepenny Opera"). Set in Chicago, Happy End pits the Salvation Army against local gangsters in a comic conflict which reappears in Heilige Johanna, in a more tragic mode. Die Massnahme is a purely ideological Lehrstücke in which the issues underlying Joan Dark's struggles and death--and, indeed, all of Brecht's subsequent plays--are treated in a straightforward manner.

Die Massnahme is a learning play about the need for the individual to submit to Party discipline as a means of

assuring the success of their common revolutionary goals. The play demonstrates, according to Brecht, that the young comrade was a revolutionary as far as his feelings were concerned, but that he possessed too little discipline and failed to follow his intellect, so that he unwittingly became a serious danger to the movement.<sup>26</sup> The questions of discipline are considered by a Control Chorus before which the Three Agitators who accompanied the young Comrade on a mission to China explain why they executed him. Ironically, the reason for the Young Comrade's failure lies in his inability to suppress his natural self. Before leaving for China the agitators are reminded by the Leader: "One and all of you are nameless and motherless, blank pages on which the revolution writes its instructions." There is little to distinguish the relation of the agitators to Party discipline from Mauler's symbiotic relation to Capitalism. In a ritual donning of Chinese masks, the revolutionaries hide their Russian and German origins to become "fighters, Chinese, born of Chinese mothers, with yellow skin, speaking Chinese in fever and in sleep." However, the Young Comrade cannot prevent his personal feelings from intruding upon his mission. As a result, he subverts his own efforts and those of his comrades by acting impetuously to immediately find a solution to the human problems which confront him. He finds a way to ease the burden of coolies pulling barges. He intervenes in the arrest of a worker distributing revolutionary leaflets.

He refuses to negotiate with a capitalist arms peddler out of disgust. In each case the cause of revolution is set back. The coolies whose suffering has been mitigated will be less willing to revolt. The organizing activities of the agitators at the factories are curtailed because their cover is exposed. The lack of weapons enfeebles the revolutionary capacity of the masses. In the end, the Young Comrade totally renounces Party discipline and appears to the people of the city--"his naked face, human, open, guileless"<sup>27</sup>--to lead them to a premature and abortive revolt. Acting on his own and without a full knowledge of the situation, the Young Comrade sets back the cause of revolution. In a similar manner, Joan Dark, by not delivering the message for the workers to hold out a little longer, defuses the potential for a successful confrontation with Mauler and his associates.

The Young Comrades, as well as Joan, are cut down like helpless children caught in the struggle between superhuman forces whose cruel logic makes no allowances for human weakness. It does not come as a surprise, therefore, that, in 1941, when Brecht uses the story of Joan of Arc again in Die Gesichte der Simone Machard ("The Visions of Simone Marchard"), his heroine, Simone, is only a child of eleven. In one of her dreams, The Angel who resembles her brother charges Simone to follow in the footsteps of Joan of Art and to rally the French in their struggle against the Germans. Acting alone, without guile or a sense of the need for covert

behavior, Simone is exposed to the machinations of those who, at least outwardly, have chosen to adapt themselves to the puppet government represented by Colonel Fetaïn. Brecht linked events in Simone's village to those which held throughout France--in the past and the present--by having the villagers appear as noble characters in the visions where Simone plays the Maid of Orleans. The lesson implicit in this play is that individual effort is doomed unless it is allied to and guided by a force capable of measuring up to the forces of oppression.

In Die Massnahme Brecht made the above point too explicit and incurred the wrath of his fellow Communists.<sup>28</sup> Like the Young Comrade he was guilty of removing the mask of Party rhetoric and exposing its workings to outside scrutiny. Most of Brecht's plays do not make their political lesson explicit. In theory, they permit the audience to draw its own conclusions from the examples given and not from precept. Mother Courage, Galileo, Shen-Te/Shui-Ta, Puntilla, all of Brecht's characters who manage to survive in this world do so, because they have learned to balance their emotional natures against the demands placed on their intellect to survive. Those who cannot adjust to reality are doomed.

The love story of Happy End, with the exception of a handful of overtly political comments, serves basically as an apolitical pretext for tying together a collection of songs with lyrics by Brecht and music by Kurt Weill. Without the

ideological dimension of Heilige Johanna, it is possible for the protagonists to meet, fall in love, survive all the intrigues against them and marry in the end.<sup>29</sup> Lieutenant Lillian Holiday, an officer in the Salvation Army, bears a close surface resemblance to Joan Dark. Bill Cracker, the Chicago gangster, has much in common with Pierpoint Mauler. Considering that Brecht saw little difference between gangsters and business men, one can say that the two men shared the same source of power, their ill-gotten gains. In addition, both men have a sentimental side which makes them susceptible to the appeal for spiritual reform of a missionary, especially when she is also an attractive woman. But the similarities end on the surface level. Hallelujah Lil and Cracker meet one another as mere humans. Lil bends her Christian beliefs enough to get drunk with Cracker and to arouse his interest in her as a woman. Likewise, Cracker is willing to skip an important bank robbery, in order to spend some more time with Lil. Neither character has a destiny which can prevent them from fulfilling their instinctive needs and desires. On the other hand, Joan and Mauler could never come together in such a manner, because they do not confront each other as individuals but as embodiments of forces greater than themselves. When Joan and Mauler clash, the instinctive aspirations of humanity clash with the forces of social and economic reality. And it is this added dimension which makes Heilige Joanna and Die Massnahme mythical plays and which distinguishes them

from Happy End which precedes Brecht's political conversion.

In Brecht's plays one finds the gap between the idea and the real expressed in many ways and often on several levels at the same time. Usually the ideal is played against the real in order to emphasize the discrepancy between them and to make the need for change unavoidably obvious. In general, he follows the model of Marx who restricted himself to describing the world as he found it. With the exception of a few utopian scenes, Brecht likewise sticks to the real world. The possibility of a better world for all breaks through the dark clouds of reality for an instant in Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis ("The Caucasian Chalk Circle"). Azdak, displaying the wisdom of Solomon and the cunning of Odysseus, gives Grusha Michael, the child the Governor's wife abandoned, in recognition of a higher form of maternity. Such justice cannot be expected on either side of the Iron Curtain; it remains for a world to come to be implemented. Azdak's short rule as judge only serves as a visible, palpable standard of comparison between the world we live in and the world as it might be. In a similar manner, Puntila's drunken lapses from the ranks of the exploiters reveals a generous and sympathetic being who will never realize his human potential in this world.

Thus far I have dealt mainly with the mythical characters and situations found in Brecht and their sources, particularly in the Marxist interpretation of the world.

Next I wish to turn to more detailed examination of Der Kaukasische kreidekreis and Leben des Galilei. I shall examine the first play in order to give a better overall idea of how Brecht utilized his epic techniques in the former to create ritual. In the latter play I shall consider the problems involved in creating mythical characters.

The techniques used by Brecht to create the A-effect in Der Kaukasische kreidekreis, because they are more distinct than in other plays, lend themselves more readily to analysis. First, Brecht uses the device of a play-within-a-play which constantly reminds the audience it is in the theater. At the same time, this technique makes the dramatic moments more intense and concentrated. The play itself takes place after World War II among the ruins of a Caucasian Village and is a celebration of the just settlement of conflicting claims advanced by two Kolkhoz villages for the same land. The Singer, Arkadi Tscheidse, is invited to entertain with his ballads. While he sings, the story he is recounting comes to life beside him on the stage. With a technique adapted from the Japanese Noh, Brecht sets a permanent reminder on the stage to keep the audience from forgetting that it is watching a play.<sup>30</sup> In addition, the Singer serves to speed up the movement of the play and makes sure that the dramatic scenes concentrate only on the heart of each situation. The third scene, for example, begins with Grusha's flight into the mountains with the child and ends with its being taken

from her by the Iron-Shirts. The third scene comprises less than one sixth of the play, but it is tightly packed with dramatic situations. Grusha is obliged to leave her brother's home because of her sister-in-law's "moral" objections to having an unwed mother around. Grusha buys shelter at the price of marrying a dying peasant who "miraculously" becomes well during the combination wake/wedding celebration and proceeds to make the life of his bride miserable. And just before the return of Simon, Grusha's betrothed, and the coming of the Iron-Shirts, Brecht manages to slip in another play-within-the-play. Michael, the son of the governor, demonstrates the role of the milieu in determining personality. Michael's little companions reenact the execution of the Governor and, although he is offered the role of his father, Michael insists upon and gets to play the executioner of the Governor.

Brecht uses similar techniques in the next scene. Azdak stages another play-within-the-play when he sets up a moot court to demonstrate the kind of justice he would dispense if he were judge. In his production of the play in 1954, Brecht used the same actor to play the Singer and Azdak. In this way, by having the same actor go from one level of the play to another, Brecht emphasized the fact that, as in the moot court scene, the spectator is observing a theatrical performance. At the same time the unity and the intensity of the presentation are increased because the attention of the

audience, as well as its sympathy, are focused on the actor who combines the personalities of the Singer and Azdak.

The mythical and ritual qualities of the play are reinforced in other ways by the Singer. By introducing the characters and explaining their actions, the Singer does away with the need for traditional plot development--or even the need for a plot. There is also no need for character development of the sort which involves the audience in petty details of the protagonist's life. One can concentrate on the actions themselves. As a result, it is the form of the play, not its content, which determines the nature of the audience's participation. Of course, the use of music and the Singer are only two elements used by Brecht which contribute to the ritual effect.

John Fuegi's discussion of Brecht's model book for the 1954 staging of Der Kaukasische Kreidekreis and his interviews with some of the participants in that production reveal ritual possibilities not suggested by a reading of the play. Fuegi emphasizes the ritual movement of the play, its unity and powerful emotional effect. He notes that Brecht drew obvious parallels between Azdak and Christ. The soldiers raise Azdak to the rank of judge by crowning him and placing a robe about his shoulders as the Romans do to Christ when they crown him king of the Jews. Azdak helps the poor where he can. He is later taken off to be hanged as Christ was crucified. In addition, Grusha's flight into the mountains recalls

the flight to Egypt. And she is, in effect, the virgin mother of Michael.<sup>31</sup> In his production Brecht transferred to the secular stage ritual elements of the passion play whose emotional significance for the spectator precedes their Christian interpretation. Two thousand years of Christian imagery, ingrained in the sensibility of the spectator, could only serve to augment the emotional response to Brecht's play.

Leben des Galilei, because of the reports on audience response to it which are available, serves to illustrate the gap between Brecht's didactic intent and the actual reaction aroused by his dramatic creation. The difficulties experienced by Brecht in his attempts to regulate audience reaction is perhaps best ascribed to the fact that his work is essentially ritualistic and mythic in character. Therefore, it is better suited for arousing emotions rather than stimulating intellection. Brecht had several political points to make. To ensure that the spectator remained sufficiently "reasonable," he packed the play with epic elements. Galileo, despite his achievements, is not to be admired if Brecht can help it. Brecht emphasizes the unsavory character of his protagonist: Galileo tries to bilk the Venetian senate by posing as the inventor of the telescope discovered in Holland; he peddles his ideas for commercial and military uses without moral qualms; he recants his theory of the solar system and, in effect, temporarily inhibits the movement of

scientific progress. "If he had only understood his historical situation dialectically," we are supposed to tell ourselves, "things might have been different." Lack of insight into one's situation, says Sartre, explaining the need for a dialectic perspective, keeps one from choosing the proper course of action. "Il se méconnaît lui-même au même temps qu'il crée ce qui transformera sa condition."<sup>32</sup> Galileo, with the future of humanity in his hands, gives in before the threat of torture because of a softness symbolized by his gourmandise. Galileo lacks the proper attitude of the Young Comrade who willingly sacrifices himself for the good of the Party and, by extension, all humanity. While his dialectical ability may be defective, Galileo knows a good wine and enjoys his goose liver fried with an apple. Besides his flesh would find the tortures of the Holy Inquisition unsupportable. Unlike the semi-divine Prometheus, whom he resembles in many respects, Galileo is not capable of resisting the threat of torture. Galileo's love of learning and of good food spring naturally from his personality, as in the person of Brecht's pre-Marxian character, Baal. In reaction to the pressures of the Inquisition he saves his life and retains the joys of the flesh at the expense of science. Although Galileo hypothetically has an opportunity to exploit the power his knowledge gives him to effect changes, he submits almost too willingly. On seeing Galileo yield, the spectator is supposed to compare him to a model such as

Azdak, who "is able to make use of the potentialities of his situation, of the chances offered by 'chaos. . . .'"<sup>33</sup>

All of his very human failings, emphasized by Brecht, are supposed to make Galileo difficult to identify with and, hence, subject to being considered in a reasonable manner.

Because audiences seemed to miss Brecht's point, he revised the play to make Galileo recognize his reprehensibility publicly in a self-denouncing criticism of his acts:

. . . for years I was as strong as the authorities, and I surrendered my knowledge to the powers that be, to use it, no, not use it, abuse it, as it suits their ends. I have betrayed my profession. Any man who does what I have done must not be tolerated in the ranks of science.<sup>34</sup>

Yet, after recanting a second time, this time before the Holy Inquisition of the historical dialectic, one can imagine Galileo muttering: "Yet, I am tolerated . . . even admired."

Galileo is admirable not only in spite of his faults, but also because of them. Regardless of the fact that some one else might eventually come to the conclusions found in the Discorsi, Galileo remains their discoverer. Are we supposed to overlook the fact that in Brecht's own play Galileo ruins his eyes because, despite his promises to give up science, he works at night to avoid discovery? The magnitude of his discovery puts him among the ranks of those who bring fire to humanity. He rearranges the movement of our solar system--or rather of our concept of it--sending shudders through the ranks of heaven's earthly representatives and

and invites their wrath upon him. Yet Galileo is only human, he cannot endure torture and has only one irreplaceable life.

Galileo wears a janus mask of good and evil. If he is Promethean in his bringing of new knowledge to the world, if his discoveries mark a watershed in history, the movement from a theologically dominated to a rational scientific universe, he is also responsible for helping pry open a Pandora's box of evils. If his discoveries mean ships can navigate better and more safely on the high seas, they also portend space travel. If his stolen inventions give the Venetian fleet an advantage over its enemies, they are only a part of a series of weapons leading to our unenviable present capacity for complete annihilation.

The telescope fraud, which depends on the covetousness of Venetian commercial and military interests for its success, is similar to Prometheus's tricking Zeus into preferring bones and fat as his proper offering from the human race, rather than the flesh of the bull. This trickster aspect of Galileo, instead of making him unlikable, makes his character more interesting and links him with another recurring mythic figure. In addition there is his passion for good food and wine. The pleasures of the flesh make him no more repulsive than Falstaff. Galileo's girth is almost a measure of his humanity. Galileo may represent the cold impersonal forces of science and technology, but in his person these forces are supplemented by the most human of traits.

Galileo's personality makes the play a comedy in which both evil and good coexist. A heroic pose would have demanded a tragic turn and a more limited, intense protagonist to bring the crisis to a head. Galileo does exactly as he should because he represents a force that cannot be killed or permanently stilled. His response to events simply defuses their tragic implications and asserts, despite the claims of history, that the highest human values are in serving life.

As with any play of value, Leben des Galilei will continue to be anachronistic. Any play which is able to endure the test of time because, regardless of the point in historic time it refers to, it remains contemporary and, therefore, anachronistic. Brecht composed the play during World War II, but continued to revise it until his death. Hiroshima convinced Brecht to alter his original thesis that it is each person's duty to aid science to progress unfettered by adding a moral caveat. While Leben des Galilei is the product of entirely contemporary considerations, Brecht increased its scope and power by setting it in the seventeenth century where his manipulation of historic events creates a correspondence between historical events four hundred years apart. Thus in Leben des Galilei, Brecht was concerned not with historical events in the life of Galileo, except in that they serve to illustrate "man's failure to understand the laws governing his life in society."<sup>35</sup> In selecting the illustrious historical figure, Brecht clearly violated the criteria

for the selection of historical characters to which he usually adhered. As a consequence, the historical image of Galileo with its traditional associations created many intractable problems for Brecht, who needed a scientist who could typify qualities not associated with Galileo's historical image. Whatever Brecht might have intended to illustrate, he had to contend with already established attitudes engrained in Western man's perception of the historical figure.<sup>36</sup> Brecht, in attempting to remake Galileo into a villain, went against a deeply rooted emotional sympathy for the scientist and found it impossible to overcome.

Ionesco errs in complaining about Brecht: "Son homme est incomplet et il n'est souvent qu'un pantin. . . ." Or when he says, "l'homme brechtian est infirme, car son auteur lui refuse sa réalité la plus intérieure."<sup>37</sup> On the contrary, Brecht succeeds because he does not attempt to put "realistic" people on the stage, but because the abstract humanity of his characters resembles the inner reality of spectator. Indeed, in the occasional grotesqueness caused by Brecht's striving for the A-effect, the humanity of his characters is magnified to the point where it touches our own. In the same manner we are not repelled by the extravagant gestures of puppets which emphasize what is latent in the real people they imitate.

Brecht's characters and the situations in which they are

obliged to act render to us, aside from his dialectical interpretation of history, some of the social and psychological verities of our time. In a world which interprets human behavior in a determinist, or behaviorist, manner, the individual is little more than a complex marionette whose strings are pulled by forces beyond its control--regardless of whether these forces are psychological or social and economic. The sometimes pitiful, sometimes magnificent, characters Brecht creates fit perfectly well with our own diminished perception of ourselves. Brecht can add lines making Galileo reproach himself for cowardice and cupidity, but for those of us living in a time when the police powers of state are constantly being improved to the point of seeming invincibility, when they become impervious to human considerations, we can only sympathize with the characters who bend. Thus, instead of serving Brecht's purposes, his characters affirm their own humanity and escape all attempts to diminish them. This is true of Mother Courage, MacHeath, Puntila, and even Mr. Peachum. Brecht's use of Marxist theory to organize his subject matter and his attempts to vary psychic distances through a variety of theatrical devices produce a ritual presentation of man's metaphysical reality.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup>T. W. H. Metscher, "Brecht and Marxist Dialectics," Oxford German Studies, VI (1972), p. 134.
- <sup>2</sup>Hannah Arendt, "What Is Permitted to Jove," New Yorker, November 5, 1966, p. 90.
- <sup>3</sup>"The Brechtian world . . . a place dominated by Marx's monster capital, and peopled by the reified victims of exploitation and class warfare." Ralph J. Ley, "Compassion and Absurdity: Brecht and Marx on the Truly Human Community," in German Literature of the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries, ed. Frederic E. Coenen (Chapel Hill, N. C.: Univ. of N. Carolina Press, 1970), p. 226.
- <sup>4</sup>Bertolt Brecht, The Good Woman of Setzuan, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Evergreen-Grove, 1966), pp. 134, 136.
- <sup>5</sup>"Once when asked . . . to name the strongest literary influence in his life, Brecht replied . . . : 'You will laugh: The Bible!'" Martin Esslin, Brecht: The Man and His Work (rev. ed.; Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1971), p. 112.
- <sup>6</sup>Or, as Sartre puts it, Brecht like the writers of the classics, is the possessor "d'une idéologie collective, d'une méthode et d'une foi; comme eux, il replace l'homme dans le monde, c'est à dire dans la vérité." Sartre, Situations, p.82.
- <sup>7</sup>Frank R. Borchart, "Marx, Engels and Brecht's Galileo," Brecht Heute/Brecht Today, II (1972), p. 149.
- <sup>8</sup>Esslin devotes two chapters--"Brecht and the Communists" and "The Communists and Brecht"--mainly to Brecht's non-literary relations with Communism. Esslin, Brecht, pp. 157-235.
- <sup>9</sup>Robert Brustein, The Theatre of Revolt: An Approach to the Modern Drama (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1962), p. 232; Eric Bentley, "Brecht Was a Lover, Too," The Village Voice, May 3, 1976, p. 85; Esslin, Brecht, pp. 85, 149.
- <sup>10</sup>"The visions of Kafka . . . the dramatization of the absurd from Alfred Jarry and Apollinaire to Brecht and Ionesco, are the expressions of such a loss of contact with the real world." Esslin, Brecht, p. 256.

<sup>11</sup>Bertolt Brecht, Drums in the Night, trans. Frank Jones, in Jungle of Cities and Other Plays (New York: Evergreen-Grove, 1966), p. 161.

<sup>12</sup>Cited in the program notes to the ASTA production of In the Jungle of Cities, Washington, D.C., March 24-April 24, 1977.

<sup>13</sup>Jungle of Cities, trans. by Anselm Hollo, in Jungle of Cities and Other Plays, p. 84.

<sup>14</sup>Willett, pp. 23, 274.

<sup>15</sup>Tucker adds that even the change in terminology found in Capital reveals Marx's tendency to mythify his philosophical ideas: e.g. "the urge to self-aggrandizement" becomes "My Lord Capital"; "the creative powers" becomes "The Collective Worker." Robert Tucker, Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx (New York: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 66, 227, 224, 239 and, in particular, chapter XV, "The Myth and the Problem of Conduct," pp. 218-232.

<sup>16</sup>Nicholas Berdyaev, The Fate of Man in the Modern World, trans. Donald A. Lowrie (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1961), pp. 66-67; Helmuth Schelsky. Auf der Suche nach Wirklichkeit (Dusseldorf-Cologne: Eugen Diederichs Verlag, 1965), p. 341, quoted in Zijderveld, p. 72.

<sup>17</sup>Bertolt Brecht, Mother Courage, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Evergreen-Grove, 1966), p. 39.

<sup>18</sup>"Today when the human being has to be seen as the 'sum of all social circumstances' the epic form is the only one that can embrace these processes which serve the drama as matter for a comprehensive picture of the world." Willett, p. 46.

<sup>19</sup>Fuegi, Essential, pp. 131, 146.

<sup>20</sup>Willett, p. 278.

<sup>21</sup>Bertolt Brecht, St. Joan of the Stockyards, trans. Frank Jones, in Plays (London: Methuen, 1945), II, pp. 103, 150, 179.

<sup>22</sup>St. Joan, p. 102; Brecht treats the question of neutrality in a didactic manner in Die Gewehre der Frau Carrar. The entire play is intended to prove the words of the Worker to Senora Carrar: "Not to fight for us, Teresa, doesn't mean he isn't fighting. It only means he is fighting on the other side." Bertolt Brecht, The Rifles of Senora Carrar, trans. George Tabori (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1971), p. 30.

<sup>23</sup>Brecht, St. Joan, p. 118.

<sup>24</sup>In his sermon to the business community, Snyder makes it clear that the "neutrality" of the Black Straw Hats is tantamount to serving them. Brecht, St. Joan, pp. 138-142.

<sup>25</sup>Brecht, St. Joan, pp. 192, 194.

<sup>26</sup>Bertolt Brecht, Schriften zum Theater 2 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), pp. 138-139, cited in Julian H. Wulbern, Brecht and Ionesco: Commitment in Context (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1971), p. 100.

<sup>27</sup>Bertolt Brecht, The Measures Taken in the Jewish Wife and Other Short Plays, trans. Eric Bentley (New York: Evergreen-Grove, 1965), pp. 81-82, 102.

<sup>28</sup>Wulbern, pp. 108-112; Esslin, Brecht, pp. 162-166.

<sup>29</sup>Of course, Happy End recalls Die Dreigroschenoper which it followed. Brecht and Weill, in collaboration with Elizabeth Hauptmann, hastily put Happy End together in order to cash in on the success of its predecessor. Esslin, Brecht, p. 298.

<sup>30</sup>Andrzej Wirth, "Brecht and the Asiatic Model: The Secularization of Magical Rites," Literature East & West, XV (Dec., 1971), pp. 601-615; Metscher finds three levels of style in the Caucasian Chalk Circle--dramatic, epic and lyric--which produce the contrasts intended to bring about the A-effect or the "negative dialectics of the drama." Mescher, pp. 143-144.

<sup>31</sup>Fuegi, pp. 143-159.

<sup>32</sup>Sartre, Situations, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup>Metscher, pp. 140-146.

<sup>34</sup>Bertolt Brecht, Galileo, Eng. version Charles Laughton, ed. and introd. Eric Bentley (New York: Evergreen-Grove, 1966), p. 124.

<sup>35</sup>Willett, p. 133.

<sup>36</sup>Galileo is described as a mythical figure of the scientific age in Joseph Campbell, Hero, p. 388.

<sup>37</sup>Ionesco, Notes, pp. 49-50, 194.

### Chapter 3

#### Genet: The Ritual of Exorcism

Jean Genet's mythical vision of the relation between self and social mask has led him to create what have been called by Rose Zimbardo "ritual approaches to the liberation of the self."<sup>1</sup> Genet's myth is a vision of the social mask and its functions as an inhuman mechanism masquerading as life. The preoccupation of Genet's characters with the social reflection of their personalities recalls the myth of Narcissus.<sup>2</sup> Just as Narcissus is inextricably ensnared by his reflected image, Genet's characters are transfixed in the contemplation of their social masks and functions. The narcissistic involvement with function includes behaving, not as an individual, but in a ritual manner, according to the attributes of the function. Thus, on one level, it is not human beings who are the oppressors and the oppressed, but projections of their social attributes. Regardless of rank or power, the humanity of the individual is denied and reduced to a passivity which presents itself as an absence of humanity and of life. It is as though the beings on stage have been possessed by alien spirits who lead them to act out fates not their own. In this manner, Genet reverses the relation between the real and the metaphysical. However, by giving the mask a reality of its own, independent of its

human source, Genet demonstrates its absurdity and, finally, reduces it to nothingness.

As Sartre has remarked of Genet's examinations of self and mask: "ils transforment l'être en apparence et dissolvent l'apparence dans le néant."<sup>3</sup> Humanity escapes through the faults in the mask: an actor/character forgets his lines or delivers them poorly and, thus, betrays fear suffering or anguish. Humanity appears in the expression of a desire for love or for the possibility of love. In the first plays, as in the myth of Narcissus, the human being is unable to escape his reflection. Later, beginning with Le Balcon, the possibility of deliverance, through laughter and the adherence to truth, is posited by Genet. By pushing the masks to their ultimate absurd end, Genet liberates the self from its narcissistic spell.

Too much is made of Genet's preference for criminals and others on the edges of society to populate his plays.<sup>4</sup> What is usually ignored is that Genet's criminals, blacks, servants and colonized persons are not "real" in the sense that they possess distinct personalities. Rather they are a mixture of authentic human needs and desires and the elements of the social stereotype, or function, associated with them. The authentic aspect of man is presented, not in terms of a realistic individual, but as representative of all humanity.

Genet's preoccupation with the rituals of society bears comparison with the ideas of Henri Bergson, whose theory of

laughter is founded on the premise that the natural performance of the rituals of society is the sign of a healthy relationship between the individual and his community. The appearance of naturalness is essential to the performance of the rituals of society. On the other hand, the inability to adapt gives the offending individual's behavior a puppet-like appearance, as though his movement were guided by strings. The person becomes an object of laughter because an aspect of his behavior has lost its appearance of naturalness, "cet aspect des événements humains qui imite, par sa raideur d'un genre tout particulier, le mécanisme pur et simple l'automatisme, enfin le mouvement sans la vie."<sup>5</sup>

Genet, from his perspective as social outcast, turns the Bergsonian theory of laughter upside down. Genet is the unadapted individual. However, in this particular case, the candidate for society's scorn becomes its observer and describer. The change in perspective brings with it a change of attitude. When only one person is shown to be acting mechanically, like an object, he can be subjected to corrective measures. On the other hand, what is the result when all of society perceives the mechanical lifelessness of its collective beliefs and rituals? For Bergson, who dwells on the therapeutic effects of laughter, the role of society vis-à-vis its members is beneficial. In Genet, laughter is used to chastise society and to make it more responsive to human life.

Unlike Brecht, Genet or Ionesco, Bergson viewed social rites positively--as natural as eating and drinking. In Genet, however, the narcissistic preoccupation with social roles brings out their abstract and inhuman qualities. Ionesco has attempted to explain why social functions were once considered natural whereas today they can assume menacing proportions. Ionesco says that, in the past, people saw themselves as distinct from their social functions.

The unpleasant thing about society nowadays, is that there's a confusion between people and their functions; or rather, people are tempted to identify completely with the function they perform: instead of a function taking on a human face, you get a man dehumanising himself, losing his face. . . . He's swallowed up by the social machinery. And the social machinery is society turned monster, turned ogre.<sup>6</sup>

Rather than have us conform to our social roles so perfectly that we are indistinguishable from them, Genet makes us realize the difference between ourselves as authentic beings and as narcissistic prisoners of social functions which are alien to us. The ensuing struggle is between man and mask. It is, for example, the struggle of the blacks to shake off the deadening restraints of the racial archetype which has been imposed on them. The struggle against the pressures of society for men to become "machines" in its service is found in Brecht and Ionesco, as well. If these playwrights differ, it is not because they doubt man's oppression by society, but in their perception of its sources and its manifestations.

In Saint Genet comedien et martyr, which was completed

when Genet had written only his first two plays, Sartre makes an important observation about Genet's handling of character which is also useful as a means of comparison with Brecht and Ionesco. Sartre notes that in contemporary literature, for the most part, characters are complementary to one another. Each character expresses a part of the author's ideas, feelings or thoughts and, as a result, the work must be considered as a whole in order to understand the author's world. In Genet, Sartre finds "la composition métaphysique du monde médiéval." Genet's characters are analogous to one another and not complementary. They are "des images ordonnées suivant les hiérarchies d'une société noire et dont chacun symbolise tout, dit tout sur les autres."<sup>7</sup> Although in his later plays, especially Les Paravents ("The Screens"), Genet does present us with distinct and independent personalities, such as Saïd, his mother and Leïla, Sartre's observation remains valid. In Ionesco's plays there tends to be a definite and complementary split between the characters who are either fully possessed by the mechanisms inherent in their social functions or they are, like Bérenger, representative of the human spirit in a free state. Brecht, on the other hand, can be said to create both kinds of characters. For example, Puntila and Matti can be said to be roughly analogous in that Brecht makes it clear that both men are aware of the conflict between their human inclinations and the necessity to conform to the demands of society. The relation between Joan Dark and

Pierpoint Mauler, in which one represents the interests of humanity and the other the superhuman powers of the marketplace, is an example of the complementary relation between characters. Thus, in Genet, one must seek the focal point of the mythical struggle in the narcissistic relation of the individual and his social function. The struggle between different functions--between master and servant, black and white, colonizer and colonized--is secondary in importance.

The spectator only gradually comes to recognize the nature of the struggle and of the protagonists. As Joseph McMahon says, the experience of Genet's work brings about a "nude moment in which the moved viewer is simultaneously stripped of his visual information and assurance to become a victim of the presentation of the phenomenon."<sup>8</sup> Genet's conception of the role of the actor and his ideal of the theatrical performance is closely related to Artaud's theories for a theater of myth and ritual.<sup>9</sup> Genet speaks of Japanese, Chinese and Balinese theaters which make him dream of a theater "des symboles actifs, capable de parler au public un langage où rien ne serait dit mais tout pressenti." He echoes Artaud when he calls for actors who can abandon the star cult to become "un signe chargé des signes." Like Artaud, Genet would prefer a theater with liturgical functions, whose spectators come to the performance as the faithful to a religious service. "Sans doute une des fonctions de l'art est-elle de substituer à la foi religieuse l'efficace

de la beauté." Unlike Artaud, Genet knows that a religious event is unlikely. Lacking such conditions, Genet declares that a less direct manner must be found to bring about a similar experience. First, individual characters must be done away with "au profit des signes aussi éloignés que possible de ce qu'ils doivent d'abord signifier, mais s'y rattachant tout de même afin d'unir par ce seul lien l'auteur au spectateur."<sup>10</sup>

Genet's objective, as well as the means he uses to accomplish his goals, is comparable to the Noh theater concept of yūgen. Suggestion rather than explicit statement is the objective of the Noh theater which is so closely related to myth and ritual. The actor, in the Noh drama and in Genet's plays, does not seek to convince us that he is in fact the character he is performing. It is not unusual, for example, for an old man to play the role of a young woman, because it is not expected that he will become a convincing young woman on the stage. Instead, he seeks to give the characteristics of the role an existence of their own on the stage.<sup>11</sup> In this manner, the actor rises above individual personality traits and conjures up a metaphysical vision of the archetypal character being performed. The actors are expected to give the impression that their acting is flawed in order to magnify the distinction between the actor and the role being performed. In this manner, paradoxically, the narcissistic relation between actor and role becomes

clearer and more intense.

Genet may have had something similar to the concept of *yūgen* in mind when he suggested that Claire and Solange in *Les Bonnes* ("The Maids") be played by men. His desire to dissociate the characteristics attributed to a certain category of persons from those persons is also evident in his rhetorical response to the actor who asked him to write a play about blacks: "Mais, qu'est-ce c'est donc un noir? Et d'abord, c'est de quelle couleur?"<sup>12</sup> *Les Bonnes* is not about maids, just as *Les Nègres* ("The Blacks") is not about blacks. For many spectators, the plays must be experienced as they are described by Bernard Dort: "Ses bonnes et ses nègres sont des domestiques et des noirs tels que nous les concevons plus ou moins inconsciemment en notre qualité de bourgeoises et de racistes."<sup>13</sup> However, it does not matter if we are racists or not, because the underlying conflict--between self and function, oppressor and oppressed--has more general significance. What we encounter are not experiences alien to us, but experiences shaped in our own minds and imposed, often with crushing oppressiveness, on ourselves and the world around us. What Genet seeks from the theatrical experience for himself and for his audiences are the ideas and thoughts which people prefer to ignore.

For Genet, the theater is a distorting mirror wherein the soul of the spectator is captured and reflected.

Je vais au théâtre afin de me voir, sur la scène (restitué en un seul personnage ou à l'aide d'un personnage multiple et sous forme de conte) tel que je saurais--ou n'oserais me voir ou me rêver, et tel pourtant que je me sais être. Les comédiens ont accoutrements qui leur permettront de me montrer à moi-même, et de me montrer nu, dans la solitude et son allégresse.<sup>14</sup>

Through distortion, extreme make-up, bizarre costuming, careful use of gesture and by varying the levels of presentation--sometimes sincere and realistic and, at others, heavy-handed and false--Genet gives a ritual and mythical character to the unspoken. He superimposes upon the "naturalness" of everyday behavior a metaphysical dimension which makes its hidden motives blatantly and unavoidably obvious.

In the manner described above, Genet fulfills a function of myth described by Rank in his essay, "The Myth of the Birth of the Hero." Myth issues from the "internal repudiation" of "revolting thoughts," according to Rank. This repudiation led myth-making people to project revolting thoughts "onto the firmament." Rank's description of the kind of thoughts which engender myth is clearly influenced by his mentor, Sigmund Freud. These thoughts include the mythological motifs of "incest with mother, sister, or daughter; murder of father, grandfather, or brother." The meaning and emphasis of these thoughts were shifted in order to make the truth more bearable.<sup>15</sup>

Through the interplay of realism and sham, the mundane and the bizarre, Genet presents a vision of the contemporary world whose validity is subscribed to by the intellect and

verified by the emotions. Those who dwell on the surface strangeness of his plays see merely the expression of a private myth of a poète maudit. But Genet's vision is universal. The "real" underworld, had he intended to show it, could have been presented in a realistic manner. Strangeness, or, as Barthes says, "cet état de dépaysement métaphysique," is essential to the plays. As in Racine, whom he resembles especially in Haute Surveillance ("Deathwatch") and Les Bonnes, Genet's setting, which is alien to his audience, makes the underlying reality of his plays more evident. The oppression from which Genet's characters suffer, says Wallace Fowlie, "is so hostile, so incomprehensible, as to be easily the oppression of mankind."<sup>16</sup> From his unique perspective as an outsider and social outcast, Genet has identified a basic myth and its ritual manifestations which constitute the core of human relationships. His plays confirm our status as victims of oppression and our need for authenticity. At the same time, it becomes quite evident that, through our refusal to confront reality, we are the creators and supporters of the structures which serve to oppress us and others.

The individual contributes to the shape of society and, in turn, is shaped by it. Society, being larger and more powerful than any of its constituent elements, has the individual at its mercy. In Les Paravents, the Lieutenant explains to the Sergeant the enduring power of society to

impose its functions on the individual:

Ce n'est pas d'intelligence qu'il s'agit: mais de perpétuer une image qui a plus de dix siècles, qui va se fortifiant à mesure que ce que'elle doit figurer s'effrite, qui nous conduit tous, vous le savez, à la mort.<sup>17</sup>

Many of Genet's characters seek consolation for their frustration and suffering by attempting to replace the function which oppresses them by another. This attempt always proves fruitless because it results only in the exchange of one kind of oppression for another. Lefranc, for example, privately harbors illusions of power and sexual conquest. The maids assume the role of their mistress when she is absent and, at the end of the play, they prepare to inhabit the mask of the murderess. The clients of the Balcony, lacking a sense of personal authenticity, posture in the accoutrements of the roles they covet. The blacks, denied their authenticity, create a masque in which they embrace all that is terrible and contradictory in the white stereotype of their race. However, the blacks play their roles with ironic laughter which they use as a weapon in the process of exorcising the stereotype of the black and freeing themselves from its oppressiveness. In Les Paravents the rebel guerrillas, even as they move to victory, take on the garb and the manners of the colonial troops they are fighting. The problem with countering sham with sham is that it is neither satisfactory nor safe. Instead of securing the independence of the individual, it means no more than the

transfer of submission from one mask to another. There is the danger of being caught while attempting to make the transfer as in Haute Surveillance and Les Bonnes. Perhaps worse is the danger of succeeding and being entangled anew in another narcissistic and sterile fantasy as in Les Nègres, Le Balcon and Les Paravents. The possibility of authenticity is glimpsed occasionally and then lost again among the endless illusions through which the fascination with social functions maintains its grip on humanity. The clients of the Balcony taste responsibility momentarily and prefer it to their barren illusions. Their recognition comes too late, they have been instrumental in destroying the revolution which would have placed reality in control. Village and Vertu try to escape the snares of illusion for the sake of love. But only Saïd and Leïla, with the help of his mother, forego love and the other fetters of this world for the cruelty of reality.

Haute Surveillance, the most realistic of Genet's plays, centers on the efforts of Lefranc to escape the role with which he has been attributed and to become the equal of his fellow prisoner, Yeux-Verts. Lefranc murders his cellmate, Maurice, in hopes of gaining the mask of "Le Vengeur," but he does not realize until it is too late that such changes are not merely a matter of volition. Yeux-Verts's position amounts to a calling as he explains to Lefranc: "Ce n'est rien savoir du malheur si vous croyez qu'on peut le choisir. Je n'ai pas

voulu le mien. Il m'a choisi."<sup>18</sup> Yeux-Verts has his position ratified--one could say sanctified--by the signs of favor bestowed on him by Boule de Neige whose offstage presence is almost divine. Says Lefranc to Maurice of Boule de Neige: "Il est exotique. Tous les gens de sa cellule la reconnaissent. Ceux des cellules autour et toute la forteresse, et toutes les prisons de France. Il brille, il rayonne...Personne ne pourra l'abattre."<sup>19</sup> Boule de Neige personifies the power of fantasy which determines each man's attributes wherever he may be found. His power is not unlike that of the Greek gods who could capriciously take decisions which affected the fates of individuals and of entire nations. And, like a god, Boule de Neige is not subject to any sort of influence, he simply radiates power.

Unable to realize his desires, Lefranc seeks refuge in private fantasies. However, his fantasies escape his control, one by one, bringing him, each time, closer to a metaphysical recognition of the forces which rule his world. Anticipating Yeux-Verts's imminent execution, Lefranc has imagined himself as the future lover of his cellmate's widow. Unfortunately, for him, Yeux-Verts finds out and warns him against aspiring to be what he is not. "Mais pour être dans ma peau il faut être de ma taille. Pour être de ma taille il faut faire comme moi." Being like him, Yeux-Verts suggests, requires paying the price, "il faut y mettre le prix," which is having a murder to one's credit.<sup>20</sup> Lefranc's murder of Maurice

shows that he has misunderstood Yeux-Verts's words. To be like Yeux-Verts is not the result of an act of volition, but of passivity and absence of self. Yeut-Verts acquired his rank because he committed a murder, not by choice, but because he was impelled to do it by a force beyond himself. It is that same force which provides him with honors and privileges in prison. For Lefranc demystification does not come until it is too late and he, too, has become a murderer, but not one acceptable to the governing order.

The nature of the governing order is not made explicit but its presence and power are manifested in a ritual expression of hierarchical relations. Boule de Neige is the highest ranking member of the criminal hierarchy. Everyone defers to his power, even the guards. His influence invests even the most insignificant gesture with meaning. Yeux-Verts's giving cigarettes to Maurice and the prison guard, but not to Lefranc, is an expression of rank and privilege. As in all of Genet's plays, the acquisition of social position is tantamount to self-renunciation. The position of Le Vengeur, a mask which has been worn by several men before being coveted by Lefranc, is open for occupancy. Lefranc seeks to become worthy of the mask by murdering Maurice. He fails to comprehend, however, that he is merely a pawn in a world of ritual and that his behavior is not authentic. A ritual position is assigned without consideration of the worthiness of the individual who

occupies it, because power and value reside in the position itself and not with the individual who temporarily occupies it. Therefore there is no room for acts of volition, such as Lefranc's, because they disturb the preordained unfolding of the ritual. To attempt to assert oneself by sidestepping the hierarchical order is to be automatically excluded from participation in its rituals.

Les Bonnes, Genet's second play, constantly crosses the thresholds between illusion and reality, belief and disbelief. Initially, Genet tricks the spectator into confusing the nature of his characters by beginning with a play-within-the-play which takes up almost a third of the performance. Only gradually does it become evident that the two women performing are not really mistress and servant. The tone is false. Their behavior is too extreme and the language too direct. And there are many mistakes: the actresses playing the maids are expected to give the impression of being maladroit and of forgetting their lines. In a similar manner, Claire and Solange, playing maid and mistress, perform their roles ineptly. Claire plays Madame and Solange, Claire, in a ritual which occupies them when their mistress is absent. We recognize that they are play-acting as they forget their lines from time to time and lapse into their natural selves. The maids conduct a litany of abuse against Madame as a means of finding vicarious relief from their oppressive situation. By directing our

attention to the struggle between the functions of mistress and servant and away from the specific problems of the maids, Genet focuses on the mythical and ritual aspects of their functions. The functions of maid and mistress attain a reality of their own, independent of the persons who carry them out. At the same time, we are made inescapably aware of the suffering of the maids as human beings whose own lives have been totally deformed by their condition. Claire and Solange take turns in assuming Madame's privileges and wear the rich finery they both covet. Their ritual is a rehearsal of their intended murder of Madame and it is an opportunity for them to make explicit the suspicion and contempt implicit in her attitude and behavior toward them.

In addition, there is an undercurrent of competition between Claire and Solange over their common desire for the young milkman. So powerful is the competition that Solange/Claire, who begins the ritual vilification of Madame, cannot restrain herself from also abusing her sister. Claire, in turn, must remind Solange of their purpose:

Solange/Claire: Vous croyez pouvoir dérober la beauté du ciel et m'en priver? Choisir vos parfums, vos poudres, vos rouges à ongles, la soie, le velours, la dentelle, et m'en priver? Et me prendre le laitier...Sa jeunesse, sa fraîcheur vous troublent, n'est-pas? Avouez le laitier. Car Solange vous emmerde!

Claire: Claire! Claire!

Solange: Hein?

Claire: Claire, Solange, Claire.  
 Solange/Claire: Ah! oui, Claire. Claire vous  
 emmerde!<sup>21</sup>

The awareness that these are Madame's maids playacting calls into question all that has been said or has gone before. To whom do the words belong? To whom are they directed? By creating an ambivalent situation, Genet arouses a multifaceted metaphysical complement to what, in other hands, might have been a rather mundane game between two idle maids. In the mythical revelation which ensues, Genet explores not only the relation between servant and mistress, but also the spiritual infection which such a relation injects into the private lives of the participants.

Claire/Madame's first words are filled with hate which seems to come from both Claire and Madame: "Et ces gants! Ces éternels gants! Je t'ai dit assez souvent de les laisser à la cuisine. C'est avec ça, sans doute, que tu espères séduire le laitier."<sup>22</sup> The contempt for the maids is Madame's. The reference to the milkman concerns the sexual competition between the two sisters.

The sexual competition between the maids is further complicated by their situation. In a world where everyone plays at being what one is not--whether the role is that of mistress or servant--it is impossible to love. Both maids desire the milkman, but Claire/Madame voices the fear that, "Ce jeune laitier ridicule nous meprise...." Where people treat one another as objects in a complex, pre-determined ritual which makes no allowance for human feelings,

to determine what is real and what is false is impossible. Love is indistinguishable from exploitation. And because society cruelly scorns those who permit themselves to be deceived, it is safer to avoid exposing oneself.

Only in their private ritual is it safe for the maids to express their feelings with complete sincerity. In Madame's presence they must forego any true expression of their sentiments. The only kind of sincerity Madame would care to encounter is the flawless execution of ritual fawning inherent in the function of the servant. She wants the maids to be as she conceives them, because this would bestow upon her the attributes she seeks of a loving, generous mistress. Thus she reacts to the proper, but insincere, behavior of her maids with irritation and exasperation. "Votre gentillesse m'agace. Elle m'accable. Elle m'etouffe. Votre gentilless qui depuis des années n'a jamais pu devenir affectueuse."<sup>23</sup> Madame, too, in the final analysis, seeks to be considered and treated as an object--an object much more precious than her maids.

In Madame's view, her relation to her maids is that of the divine to the mortal. "Par moi, par moi seule, la bonne existe," says Claire/Madame, "Par mes cris et par mes gestes."<sup>24</sup> The relation between Madame and her maids cannot be justified in human terms. However, Genet finds a warped justification for this pathological social relationship--a relationship which is repeated in all of Genet's plays--in

terms of a mythical and ritual relation between semidivine superior beings and those whom they dominate. Madame could not exist without her maids. The Judge needs his thief. The white his blacks. And the colonizer the colonized. In Les Nègres, after Félicité has prophesied that the blacks will rule the world one day, the Queen responds: "Et vos Nègres? Vos esclaves? Où les prendrez-vous?...Car il en faut...."<sup>25</sup> By juxtaposing the metaphysical situations of the maids, as well as of other "inferior" beings, with the pretense of their "real" world of social rituals, Genet accomplishes the kind of demystification of the cruelty of the world which Artaud considered essential to myth. Genet destroys the façade of benevolence and philanthropy which often serves to excuse and obscure the social injustice of the world and lays bare the substratum of evil.<sup>26</sup>

Regardless of what Genet reveals in Les Bonnes, the play itself does not entertain the idea of change. For their part, the maids do not even consider the possibility of an authentic existence. Like Lefranc, Warda and Diouf, they cannot even conceive of the possibility of change except in terms of the system which holds them in thrall. Like Lefranc, the maids merely dream of a new identity as false as the one which oppresses them. Claire commits suicide by drinking the tea intended for Madame in order that Solange may escape for both of them. As Solange says, looking forward to their new identity: "Maintenant nous

sommes Mademoiselle Solange Lemercier. La femme Lemercier. La Lemercier. La fameuse crimminelle."<sup>27</sup> Instead of escape and freedom, the struggle of Claire and Solange has led merely to a transfer to a new function within the system of oppression. The ritual of the maids having been performed with its necessary offering of a human sacrifice, there is nothing to look forward to, because there is no prospect of resurrection. Claire chooses to die, but her death is futile because it changes nothing. Instead of the affirmation of the presence of humanity, the result of the mythic struggle in Les Bonnes is the victory of death and the acceptance of absence.

In the plays which follow Les Bonnes, the power of superhuman functions is more effectively challenged. Les Nègres and Les Paravents are filled with optimism because they suggest the possibility of active resistance against the social mechanisms which oppress the individual. Le Balcon is a bridge between the two kinds of situations. The characters of Le Balcon impersonate the roles of the important figures of society, but they do it within a milieu almost as limited as that of the family.

The criticism of societal institutions inherent in Genet's plays has led critics, such as Goldman and Esslin, to see the works in terms of social and political criticism. Esslin places Genet's plays in the category of an anti-bourgeois "theater of violence." Goldman finds the

situations presented in the plays have parallels in the experience of West European Communists.<sup>28</sup> However, it seems evident that Genet is trying to realize far more subtle and complicated goals. His plays analyze, in terms of myth and ritual, the manner in which people structure their perceptions of themselves and others. They are more than an attack on bourgeois society, because they go deeper into the nature of social structure itself. The institutions and functions of society are seen as human creations which, in becoming ritualized, are transformed into instruments for the oppression of their makers. Les Paravents, for example, was banned in France during the Algerian war for independence because it attacked colonialism. However, it is still banned in Algeria where it is rightly seen as a criticism of the social institutions established during and after the revolution. Thus Genet's approach to ritual behavior can be seen to have applications even to non-bourgeois societies.

Before class, social, racial or colonial oppression can be alleviated, the oppressed must overcome the self-hatred as well as the admiration of those who possess power inherent in ritual relations. In Les Nègres, the blacks attempt to overcome the demeaning characteristics attributed to them by embracing them. In Les Paravents, the victorious guerrillas slowly become like the colonial troops against whom they are fighting. Only Saïd and Leïla escape, not by

joining the revolt or any act of resistance, but by refusing to deliver themselves to any forces outside themselves. Le Balcon spares neither the Grandes Figures of society nor its inferior figures, all of whom are possessed by an almost irresistible yearning for the absence which is the reward for those who willingly participate in the social masquerade. Le Balcon demonstrates the evolution of Genet's mythical presentation of man in relation to function. The revolt is no longer against a particular function, but against all functions.

Le Balcon opens with the symbols of the sacred and the profane set before the eyes of the spectator in seeming antithesis. There is the woman in the peignoir, the unmade bed reflected in the mirror. And there is the large Spanish crucifix and the larger-than-life Bishop. The two worlds clash and unite in the red screen which symbolizes both erotic passion and the promise of resurrection. The clash of symbols serves to fix the spectator's attention on the form of the play which is contained in the Bishop's meditation on his holy function. He asks: Should the heart or the intelligence govern the actions of a prelate? Or, should the human qualities be allowed to wither away in order that the mannequin of flesh and blood which remains be subsumed under the traits of the Bishop?

C'est même d'autre chose encore que d'intelligence qu'il s'agit... Ce serait de cruauté. Et par delà cette cruauté--et par elle--une démarche habile,

vigoureuse vers l'Absence. Vers la Mort. Dieu? (Souriant). Je vous vois venir! (A sa mitre): Toi, mitre en forme de bonnet d'évêque, sache bien que si mes yeux se ferment pour la dernière fois, ce que je verrai, derrière mes paupières, c'est toi, mon beau chapeau doré... C'est vous, beaux ornements, chapes, dentelles...<sup>29</sup>

The Bishop, who in his everyday life fulfills a lowly function, contemplates the significance and value of surrendering himself to a function greater than himself. But, like Lefranc, the transfer he wishes to accomplish is, for him, impossible. However, it is the Bishop's intense narcissistic preoccupation with a role he cannot achieve which makes him become a mythical character. Paradoxically, the intensity of the desire to merge man and function only emphasizes the metaphysical distinction between the two.<sup>30</sup>

Before the Bishop can satisfactorily complete his reflections, Irma, the proprietress of the establishment, interrupts to announce the end of the session and to demand payment. It is necessary to move quickly. A revolution is taking place and the rebels are approaching the house of illusion. Soon it will be too late for the clients to return home safely. But the Bishop insists on continuing to perform his role. He insists on discussing the function of the bishop and the sacrifice of authenticity it entails

...pour devenir évêque, il eût fallu que je m'acharne à n l'être pas, mais à faire ce qui m'y eut conduit. Devenu évêque, afin de l'être, il eut fallu...je ne cesse de me savoir l'être pour remplir ma fonction.<sup>31</sup>

The Bishop speaks of a sublime function which the spectator can associate with being reborn in Christ. That is, to

subdue the personal will and to array it with that of God. But, in Genet, this self-abnegation finds less noble echoes in the words of Solange:

J'ai servi. J'ai eu les gestes qu'il faut pour servir. J'ai souri à Madame. Je me suis penchée pour faire le lit. Pencher pour éplucher les légumes, pour écouter aux portes, coller mon oeil aux serrures.<sup>32</sup>

It is echoed by Warda who spends the better part of her twenty-four years making herself one and the same with her function. "Une vrai putain," she says, "doit attirer par ce qu'elle s'est réduite à être."<sup>33</sup> The Bishop is only a creation of his attributes, he is not an individual who has endowed a sacred calling with authentic human qualities. There is no rebirth, only the striving to reduce the self to nothing. The ritual function replaces the human being.

Even later, when the Bishop is called upon to serve in the stead of the real bishop who has been killed by the rebels, he is still concerned with playing his role properly. It involves petty details of appearance and behavior: "mitres, dentelles, tissus d'or et de ver-roteries, génuflexions..." It is a matter of following the directions of the photographer: "Vous ne savez pas vous disposer pour la prière? Alors, à la fois face à Dieu et face à l'objectif. Les mains joints. La tête levée. Les yeux baissés. C'est la pose classique."<sup>34</sup> Through the monologues of the Bishop and the instructions

of the Photographer, Genet fixes attention upon the ritual qualities of the Bishop. We are forced to consider the function, as such, and its mythical and ritual relation to the individual.

The revolt outside the brothel is a strong, literal, almost realistic statement of what is happening everywhere. Revolt is incipient even within the temple of illusion. The client playing the Judge, for example, pleads with the woman assigned to him to be a proper thief. "Ecoute: il faut que tu sois une voleuse modèle, si tu veux que je sois un juge modèle. Fausse voleuse, je deviens un faux juge."<sup>35</sup> Without her cooperation he cannot exist. The Judge, and Roger as well, have understood what never occurred to Lefranc or to the maids. The system cannot exist without the adherence and support of the oppressed. "Mon être de juge est une émanation de ton être de voleuse. Il suffirait que tu refuses d'être qui tu es...pour que je cesse d'être...et que je disparaisse, évaporé. Crevé. Volatilisé. Nié."<sup>36</sup> It is understood that, underlying the archetypal power and functions attributed to a judge, a bishop or a general, there should exist the consent, whether voluntary or imposed, of the oppressed.

The system is so fragile that Irma must constantly police her employees and her clients to prevent even the slightest smile or a joke. "Je n'accorde pas qu'on

blague, en effet. Un éclat de rire, ou même un sourire fout tout par terre. S'il y a sourire, il y a doute."<sup>37</sup> Laughter exposes the cracks in the mask and sets in motion the process of demystification. It is the liberating byproduct of Genet's mythical vision. Although Le Balcon is often funny, one of the weaknesses of the revolutionaries is their lack of humor. The success of the revolutionaries depends solely on how close they remain to reality. Their lack of humor robs them of an important defense against their enemies. Their failure to laugh at the idea of turning Chantal into a symbol of the revolution is the beginning of the end of their struggle. Chantal can be said to have died before her assassination, because she surrenders herself to become a symbol.

On the other side of the battlelines, Irma, the merchant of illusion, dons one of her own outfits to convince the populace of the city in revolt that their queen still lives. Once the revolt is put down, Irma finds that she is now the victim of her own devices. She is trapped in the guise of the queen. In aiding the Chief of Police, she has elevated him to the ranks of the Grandes Figures where the functions dominate in the absence of man. When he was a mere man, they could love each other, but now they must simply endure their masquerade. She protests when it is finally too late:

Irma/Reine: J'aime l'amour et j'aime le pouvoir, et  
je veux les éprouver dans mon corps.  
Envoye: Il fallait alors vous mettre du côté des  
révoltés. Chez eux, à la rigueur, on  
pouvait dominer grâce aux qualités  
personnelles....<sup>38</sup>

Roger, the defeated revolutionary leader, now becomes a client of the brothel and the first to play the role of the Chief of Police. His choice is significant because he does not ask to pretend to assume any of the functions of society. He asks to play the role which represents the undergirding of all the others, the force which obliges all of us to arrange our lives and think in terms of the various functions imposed on us by society. In a society where the individual is only an object, Roger's symbolic self-castration demonstrates his realization that he cannot hope to become an authentic being.<sup>39</sup> Although Roger's appearance at the brothel is an admission of defeat, it does not mean the end of the revolt.

Roger's presence in the brothel is enough to cause shudders in the triumphant establishment. He upsets Carmen by reminding her of Chantal who left the house of illusion to fight in the revolution. Next to Irma, Carmen has the closest ties to reality. She is linked by love to a daughter who lives in the care of others. She is also a whore because she wants to be and harbors no illusions about her profession. She is on the bottom of the social scale and needs no illusions.<sup>40</sup> Thus, she is

both capable and likely to go the way of Chantal should the rebellion break out again. After all, Roger took Chantal away from the brothel. Her role is predicted in Irma's explanation of why Chantal went over to the rebels and became the symbol of their revolt as well as the source of their defeat. "Dans toute révolution, il y a la putain exaltée qui chante une Marseillaise et se virginise."<sup>41</sup> In addition, it should not be overlooked that Genet allocates a special significance to the prostitute in his other plays. Village is encouraged to revolt by Vertu, a prostitute. In Les Paravents the prostitutes play an important role in the revolt. Perhaps someone will encourage Carmen to join the next revolt.

Perhaps the encouragement will come from the gasman who comes to the brothel to play the Bishop. In aiding the authorities to put down the rebels, he and his fellow clients, the Judge and the General, tasted reality and found it preferable to the sterility of the narcissistic relation to the outward signs of a function. As the Bishop says to the Queen and the Chief of Police: "...nous avons goûté...aux douceurs amères de l'action et de la responsabilité. Nous étions juge, général, évêque, afin d'être évêque, juge, général, sous une parfaite, totale, solitaire et stérile apparence."<sup>42</sup> There will be more revolts and more defeats, because the legions of illusion are endless and ever ready to react. But they are incapable of a decisive defeat.

Les Nègres, Genet's next play, was inspired by Jean Rouch's ethnographical film, "Les Maîtres-fous." The 1955 film records the attempt of a West African tribe to exorcise complexes caused by white colonials by "introducing into their ritual performances masks representing European officials, identifying themselves with their oppressors."<sup>43</sup> Les Nègres is an exorcism as are all of Genet's plays; however, the exorcism is not directed at blacks alone. The most dangerous spirits associated with blacks lurk in the unconscious mind of the spectator and haunt blacks and whites alike.

Les Nègres contains a mythical struggle between the mutually exclusive stereotypes of the whites and of the blacks. Genet creates a metaphysical struggle in which the whites and the blacks, whose humanity has been strained and refined until all that remains are two racial masks, confront each other as superhuman forces. To the struggle Genet introduces laughter as a means of subverting the racial poses and bringing about a resolution of the hostility. Written for an all-black cast, the play calls for the actors playing members of the Court--the Queen, the Governor, the Judge, the Missionary and the Valet--to wear white masks in addition to their finery. Those who play blacks wear invisible masks of blackness in addition to their costumes. The play incarnates the racist image of the black as well as the racist's self image.<sup>44</sup> Unlike

his previous plays in which escape is sought in the imitation of oppressive figures of authority, the blacks have come together to take upon themselves the characteristics attributed to them. Archibald exhorts his fellow actors: "Que les Nègres se nègrent. Qu'ils s'obstinent jusqu'à la folie dans ce qu'on les condamne à être, dans leur ébène, dans leur odeur, dans l'oeil jaune, dans leurs goûts cannibales."<sup>45</sup>

In giving substance to the disparate elements of the stereotype of the black, Genet makes the audience uncomfortably aware of how imperfectly they serve to describe the human characters on the stage. As Archibald says to the white court: "Nous sommes ce qu'on veut que nous soyons, nous le serons donc jusqu'au bout absurdement."<sup>46</sup> By pushing their racial image to its most absurd ritual manifestation, the blacks are attempting to break the narcissistic spell which has transfixed whites and blacks in poses of mortal enmity.

A nous aussi. On nous l'a dit, nous sommes de  
grands enfants. Mais alors, quel domaine nous reste!  
Le Théâtre! Nous jouerons à nous y réfléchir et  
lentement nous nous verrons, grand narcisse noir,  
disparaître dans son eau.<sup>47</sup>

What will drown in the water will indeed by the blacks, or better yet, the mask of blackness; the humans behind the mask will be saved.

Thus, for purposes of liberation, of demystification, Genet places black actors onstage to participate in a

mythical battle on behalf of their humanity against the metaphysical reification of their racial image. Blacks are savage, like wild animals, sensual and sexy. They drive Cadillacs and tremble before white superiority. In the jungles the blacks inhabit even the plants are dangerous. They indulge in magic midnight dances. Their women are the white man's whores. Just as Madame cannot tell Solange from Claire, because she sees them as interchangeable objects contained in the category of maids, the blacks are indistinguishable from one another in white eyes. "Les Blancs," says Village, "distinguent difficilement un nègre d'un nègre." As the Valet reminds the blacks: "Songez au mal que je me donne pour vous trouvé humains."<sup>48</sup> Communication under such circumstances is impossible.

As Archibald explains to the audience, the impossibility of communication is accepted by the blacks as the basis for their performance:

...vous soyez assurés qu'un tel drame ne risque pas de pénétrer dans vos vies précieuses, nous aurons encore la politesse, apprise parmi vous, de rendre la communication impossible. La distance qui nous sépare, originelle, nous l'augmenterons par nos fastes, nos manières, notre insolence--car nous sommes aussi des comédiens.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, Archibald is telling only a partial truth. The actors shall create a distance between themselves and the audience, but not for the purpose of separating themselves from the spectator. For the actor, distance is a means of

altering the perception of the audiences through the distortion and magnification of reality into its ritual and mythical components.

The harmless performance, as it is described by Archibald, is meant to subvert the ritual expectations of the whites, because the long-awaited and drawn out re-enactment of the white woman's murder will prove nothing less than the complicity of the audience. "The incentives for the crime are not the characters'," as Susan Taubes points out, "but the public's."<sup>50</sup> The archetypal figure of the black is as fated to commit homicide as Orestes or Oedipus. On the level of the confrontation between the whites and the blacks, the murder of a white woman is not inevitable, but it has already been committed. The play is a celebration of the murder and, by extension, the racial stereotypes which it confirms. Without the murder there would be no proof that the blacks are blacks. And without blacks, there would be nothing special or superior in being white. As Félicité says to the Queen: "Soite, que vous seriez plate, sans cette ombre qui vous donne tant de relief."<sup>51</sup>

As in the previous plays, Genet creates an ambivalent atmosphere as a means of subtly establishing the metaphysical level while giving the impression of doing something else. The pretense of the blacks, that they are re-enacting the murder of the white woman, is an increasingly elusive decoy

which serves only to bring into the open what the whites prefer to ignore, their blood lust. From behind the racial conflict emerges the central situation of Genet's myth: the struggle between the oppressor and the oppressed. On the level of the individual, we have the self seeking to escape the toils of his social mask.

Archibald, feigning forgetfulness, stumbles over his lines as he introduces the re-enactment of the murder.

...nous avons donc tué une Blanche. Elle est là.  
 (Il montre la catafalque....) ...seuls nous étions  
 capable de le faire comme nous l'avons fait,  
 sauvagement. ...écoutez...ah, j'oubliais, voleurs,  
 nous avons tenté de dérober votre beau langage.  
 menteurs, les noms que je vous ai livrés sont faux.<sup>52</sup>

Village recounts how he approached the white woman only to be accused by Neige of desiring her. "Dans votre haine pour elle il entraînait un peu de désir, donc d'amour."

Village suggests that the white woman humiliated him before he killed her. Later, he says she desired him, "car mes cuisses la fascinaient. ...interrogez-là."<sup>53</sup>

The humiliation is collective. It is suffered by the blacks at the hands of the whites. The tinge of sexual desire of Village for the white woman and vice versa exists, in part, to satisfy the whites. Watching the white woman, played by Diouf, yield to Village's advances, the Governor finds the scene quite natural. "La femme succombe. On peut dire d'eux ce qu'on veut, ces gars sont de fiers baiseurs."<sup>54</sup> The sexual innuendo and the

desire for blood become more substantial as the existence of the white woman is put in question. Bobo is a tramp whose death at the hands of black men alone makes her worthy of "funérailles solonnelles." Neige reminds Village of previous testimony that he found the white woman seated at her sewing machine. Village contradicts himself saying that she was standing behind her counter.<sup>55</sup> From a homeless, smelly tramp, the white woman becomes a worker and a homemaker with a mother to care for. She is described in so many ways that the Court and the audience become impatient because they insist on having their victim, even as they realize that her existence is doubtful.

Finally, it is revealed that there is no body. The danger is recognized by the Judge who protests: "mais pas de mort du tout, cela pourrait nous tuer."<sup>56</sup> The Court feels offended and betrayed by the blacks whom it expected to live up to the attributes of blackness. Just as Madame, in Les Bonnes, requires two inferior creatures in exchange for her generosity, the whites wish to exchange their beneficence for proof that they are indeed dealing with a savage race. The body of the white woman would have been proof of blackness. Without it the whites must face and accept the evil which they have attributed to others as their own.

In Genet's last plays the question of oppressive relationships and authenticity moves toward resolution.

In Le Balcon, the Judge begs the prostitute assigned to him to play the role of the guilty party convincingly so he can be assured of his existence. In Les Nègres, too, the jury needs a murderer in order to fulfill its role and to justify its existence. The Queen needs a criminal so she can pardon him. The Missionary needs a criminal to baptize before his savage soul is dispatched to the other world by the authorities.<sup>57</sup> The blacks, however, refuse to supply the body and thereby complete the circle of collusion. The narcissistic fascination with the mask of the black is broken and, with it, the acceptance of the previous relation between self and other. The oppressor may still have the power to enforce the status quo ante, but the laughter of the blacks is the signal that the revolution is at hand.

However, in Genet's next play, Les Paravents, the revolution is only a pretext to celebrate the appearance of the example of authentic freedom, Saïd. For Saïd the struggle is over because he has accepted himself as he is and without illusions, without narcissistic images to enthrall him. At the same time, Les Paravents is a complex play and it is about more than just Saïd and his family. It is a recasting and a re-evaluation of the ritual forms found in the plays which preceded it. The pessimism and despair which dominate Genet's presentation of the myth of the self against the power of the social mask is complemented by the optimistic promise of self-liberation. Thus Saïd

pursues his adventure not as a solitary figure, but as part of a complex dramatic structure in which Genet simultaneously presents a metaphysical vision of heaven, earth and hell. Heaven is for those who have died and have transcended their earthly condition. Saïd and his family live on earth which they share with their fellow mortals who have, because of their concern with social function, created their own living hell. Hell is an earthly state of being for those who are caught in the narcissistic fascination with their ritual forms of behavior.

Among those in Genet's hell are the colonials, the soldiers of both sides and some of the prostitutes, such as Warda and Kadidja. The colonials and their military defenders watch their world and the images it supports disintegrate. Before being overrun by the native forces, the colonial troops put on one last display of their civilization's military beauty in order to infect the enemy with the desire to imitate them. The colonial civilization has been brought to the edge of destruction by its narcissistic preoccupation with its own image. Thus the colonials act in the knowledge that success in making the Arabs imitate them will constitute a form of victory. With this in mind, the Lieutenant charges his men to shine even in defeat:

...que l'image que vous offrirez aux rebelles soit d'une si grande beauté, que leur image qu'ils ont d'eux ne, pourra pas résister. Vaincue. Elle

tombera en morceau. Cassée... Ou comme la glace:  
fondue. Victoire sur l'ennemi: morale.<sup>58</sup>

Contrary to appearances, Genet is not presenting a simple battle between two opposing groups of human beings. The colonial troops are not fighting for themselves, but for the system of illusions which seeks to expand its hold. In the last analysis, it is the Arab guerrillas who are defeated.

Instead of liberating themselves and their people, the revolutionary troops interiorize the oppressive system they have opposed. The camaraderie which has prevailed among the natives, regardless of their previous social functions, is slowly stifled. Once the rebels begin to perceive themselves as fulfilling specific functions, they lose the capacity to consider themselves or others as human beings. They begin to treat themselves and their fellow countrymen as objects just as their enemies did before them. They have absorbed the lesson once taught the colonial General:

Nos chefs nous ont toujours encouragés à nous considérer comme de parfaits objets, toujours plus parfaits donc plus insensibles, merveilleuses machines à donner la mort. La connaissance de notre solitude nous donnait ce pouvoir et le pouvoir ajoutait à notre solitude...<sup>59</sup>

Infected by "la beauté guerrière" the rebels transmit the malady to their countrymen and restore the old forms of behavior. The departure of the colonials leaves more roles for the natives to play without actually liberating them.

Before, although Genet would raise the possibility of demystifying social function, each play would conclude with the acceptance of defeat of human aspirations as unavoidable. In Les Paravents, on the contrary, the possibility of a true victory for humanity is encountered for the first time. Saïd is the prototype of the authentic person. He accepts himself as he is despite a crushing load of "faults." His lack of illusions about himself and his possibilities is the key to his liberation. His situation, as Tom Driver notes, expresses the paradoxical "coincidence of freedom and dejection."<sup>60</sup> With the poverty he has inherited from his mother comes the weapon which liberates: laughter. As his Mother says: "Je suis le Rire, mais pas n'importe lequel: celui qui apparait quand tout va mal."<sup>61</sup> His freedom is the basis of Leïla's freely given devotion to him. He accepts her as she is, without possessions and the ugliest of women to be his wife. His behavior towards her, despite its seeming treacherousness and cruelty, is authentic.<sup>62</sup> Initially, Saïd does consider going to Europe to find work in order to raise the bridal price for a more attractive wife, but he is finally obliged to accept himself as he is. Saïd is too poor and too miserable to find a way out of his situation through the luxury of a compensatory fantasy. He is, in a way, like Genet's Stiltano, the pimp, thief and drug pusher, who, finding himself trapped by the

reflections in a house of mirrors, gives up the effort to find his way out and sits on the floor.<sup>63</sup> Saïd, because of his poverty, begins on the floor where he cannot be deceived. With no way to escape, Saïd accepts reality and it becomes the basis for his authenticity and freedom.

Because of her ugliness, Leïla, too, is free of illusion. She is too ugly to gaze in a mirror and be transfixed by her image. Despite their apparent misery, her marriage to Saïd entails the acceptance of their condition. Saïd tells Leïla not to attempt to hide her ugliness through any form of cosmetic ruse. He wants the entire world to know that he has "la femme la plus laide du monde et la moins chère: ma femme." And Leïla, who permits herself no illusions about her man, accepts and exults in her condition: "Je t'obéirai. ...Mais moi, je veux--c'est ma laideur gagnée heure par heure, qui parle, ou qui parle?" Leïla is prepared to follow Saïd wherever he leads and even encourages him.<sup>64</sup> Leïla joins Saïd in a life of crime, prison and treachery and, when she is no longer able to keep up with him, he deserts her. Having accepted the cruelty of reality, both Saïd and Leïla are prepared to overcome the snares of illusion and falseness. In Les Nègres, Village cannot escape with Vertu because he cannot free himself. He has not suffered enough, unlike Vertu, who can claim: "Je suis la seule à aller jusqu'au

bout de la honte..."<sup>65</sup> While Saïd and Leïla cannot be said to indulge in dreams of romantic love, they share a mutual affection which their relation to reality permits.

Having freed himself of all illusion, even the illusion that destroyed Roger, the pious hope that the world of fantasy can be overthrown, Saïd is both threatened and tempted by his rebel compatriots to become a hero for their rebellion. He will, they promise, become a hero after the rebels have executed him for betraying them. His image, like Chantal's, will become a unifying symbol for the revolution. The temptation does not work. Fearing that her son might yield to the rebels and lose his distinction, his mother shouts to him from among the dead: "Saïd! ...Tu ne vas pas flancher? ...je t'ai gardé dans mes tripes pas pour devenir un de plus un de moins." But Saïd has already answered for himself. He refuses all blandishments, including the promise by the Surveillant to write songs about the beauty and love of Leïla. "A la vieille," says Saïd, "aux soldats, à tous, je vous dis merde."<sup>66</sup>

In the last tableau of Les Paravents Genet not only summarizes the play, but all of his plays. All four levels of the stage set, including the floor of the stage, have action going on at the same time. On the top level are the dead whose numbers have been swollen by the fighting. On the other levels various aspects of life--including the

temptation and death of Saïd--are taking place. Genet's myth finds its fullest expression in this stage setting. Through it the struggle between self and other is clearly delineated in the real and metaphysical dimensions of the play. The conflict is between Saïd and the rebels who are acting according to their functions as representatives of the superhuman order.

In addition, the level of the dead constitutes another metaphysical aspect of the struggle between life and death which can be associated with the shamanistic encounter with the forces of death. The trance of the shaman, discussed more fully in the chapter on Ionesco,<sup>67</sup> among whose recurring motifs is the struggle of the shaman with death or death-dealing monster as well as the visit the underworld, has the practical effect of helping the living cope with the fear of death. The confrontation between life and death is salutary because it makes death a known and, therefore, less terrifying quality.<sup>68</sup>

In a manner not unlike that of the shaman, Genet's final tableau in Les Paravents makes the worlds of the living and the dead simultaneously accessible to the spectator, if not to the characters. It is a vision of life and death comparable to that of the shaman as it is described by Mircea Eliade. It is a world in which:

Everything seems possible, where the dead return to life and the living die only to live again, where one can disappear and reappear instantaneously, where the "laws of nature" are abolished, and a certain superhuman "freedom" is exemplified and made dazzlingly present.<sup>69</sup>

Genet's characters die on one level and reappear on another. While life for many of the dead was a form of hell, death with its laughter and camaraderie is a paradise. In death, there is liberation from the power of the mask, it is the ultimate demystification of the world of illusion and it provides the justification for Saïd's behavior. Without the added dimension of the world of the dead, Saïd would be no more than a traitor and a thief. However, the dead prove not only the vanity of choosing sides, but such action is shown to be treasonous to life and to humanity. Saïd's mother comes to the level of the dead with the soldier she accidentally strangled. The Lieutenant joins Si Slimane and Kadija, but the former enemies show no hate. Bereft of the masks of the oppressor and the oppressed, without illusions of social or economic distinctions, they are mere humans. Thus Saïd's refusal to take sides or to permit himself to be deified in his abjection is shown to have its basis in the common humanity of all men. In the final analysis, the world of the living is revealed as the true world of death because of its domination by lifeless masks and rituals. Death, on the other hand, is the way to resurrection.

As Sartre has pointed out, Genet's characters represent only a fragment of his sensibility. These fragments must be totaled up in order to recreate the entirety

of his universe. Les Paravents is such a summary. In it Genet deals again with the basic questions of life: suffering, love, oppression and death, by turning human experience into myth and ritual. Each play represents a step away from his former life as a thief and outcast from society and self. Having achieved liberation in his final play, written almost twenty years ago, it would appear that Genet has completed his mythological examination of himself and the world.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Rose A. Zimbardo, "Genet's Black Mass," Modern Drama, VIII (December 1965), p. 247.
- <sup>2</sup> Tom F. Driver, Jean Genet (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1966), pp. 22, 43.
- <sup>3</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, Saint-Genet comédien et martyr, Vol. I of Jean Genet, Oeuvres complètes (Paris: Gallimard, 1952), p. 467.
- <sup>4</sup> Brustein, p. 391; Esslin, Absurd, pp. 188, 196.
- <sup>5</sup> Henri Bergson, Le Rire (Paris: P.U.F., 1940), p. 67; "In our awkward moments, Bergson saw what he called a mechanical something grafted on life: in our best moments, we discover ourselves to be but a living something grafted upon mere mechanism." J. S. Doubrovsky, "Ionesco and the Comic of Absurdity," Yale French Studies, XXIII (Summer, 1959), p. 10.
- <sup>6</sup> Claude Bonnefoy, Conversations with Eugène Ionesco, trans. Jan Dawson (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970), p. 16.
- <sup>7</sup> Sartre, Saint-Genet, p. 499.
- <sup>8</sup> Joseph H. McMahon, The Imagination of Jean Genet (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1963), p. 121.
- <sup>9</sup> Above, pp. 31-32.
- <sup>10</sup> Jean Genet, "A Pauvert," Obliques 2 (1972), pp. 2-4; The only example of such a religious experience given by Genet is that of Sartre's concentration camp experience. During World War II, Sartre and other French prisoners of a German concentration camp were seized by an almost religious fervor when fellow inmates performed a French play which gave life to the sense of homeland. Sartre, Situations, p. 62.
- <sup>11</sup> Donald Keene, Nō: The Classical Theatre of Japan (Tokyo, Palo Alto, Ca.: Kodansha, 1966), pp. 28-31.
- <sup>12</sup> Jean Genet, Les Nègres (Décines: L'Arbalète, 1958), p. 11.
- <sup>13</sup> Bernard Dort, "Le jeu du théâtre et de la réalité," Les Temps Modernes, no. 23 (April 1968), p. 182.

- 14 Jean Genet, Les Bonnes & Comment jouer les bonnes (Décines: L'Arbalète, 1963), pp. 10-11.
- 15 Rank, Myth, pp. 11-2.
- 16 Roland Barthes, "Le Balcon," Théâtre populaire, No. 38 (2nd Quarter, 1960), p. 96; Wallace Fowlie, "New Plays of Ionesco and Genet," TDR 5 (September 1960), p. 48.
- 17 Jean Genet, Les Paravents (Décines: Marc Barbezat, 1961), p. 157.
- 18 Jean Genet, Haute Surveillance (Mayenne: Gallimard, 1965), p. 53.
- 19 Genet, Haute, p. 14.
- 20 Genet, Haute, pp. 40-41.
- 21 Genet, Bonnes, pp. 24-25.
- 22 Genet, Bonnes, p. 13.
- 23 Genet, Bonnes, p. 59.
- 24 Genet, Bonnes, p. 22.
- 25 Genet, Bonnes, p. 131.
- 26 Above, p. 30.
- 27 Genet, Bonnes, p. 90.
- 28 Martin Esslin, Reflections: Essays on the Modern Theater (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor-Doubleday, 1971), p. 166; Lucien Goldmann, Structures mentales et création culturelle (Paris: Anthropos, 1970), p. 305.
- 29 Genet, Balcon, p. 12.
- 30 Brecht's agitators in Die Massnahme embrace roles greater than themselves with the fervor of those who are about to change the world--in this case, the desire of the individual can be said to conform to the function being assumed. However, characters such as Pierpoint Mauler and Puntila are as aware of the deadening power of their functions as Genet's Bishop. They are aware of what is surrendered and gained. Brecht parallels the movement toward absence, as is found in Genet, most closely in Leben des Galilei in the elevation of Cardinal Barberini. A scientist and staunch supporter of Galileo, Barberini is completely

transformed as the vestments of the papacy are placed upon him. By the end of the ceremony, his personality has been subsumed by the function of the Pope and he loses his capacity to support his friend.

<sup>31</sup>Genet, Balcon, p. 42.

<sup>32</sup>Genet, Bonnes, p. 88.

<sup>33</sup>Jean Genet, Les Paravents (Décines: Marc Barbezat, 1961), p. 26.

<sup>34</sup>Genet, Balcon, pp. 22, 157-158.

<sup>35</sup>Genet, Balcon, p. 38.

<sup>36</sup>Genet, Balcon, p. 38.

<sup>37</sup>Genet, Balcon, p. 63.

<sup>38</sup>Genet, Balcon, p. 211.

<sup>39</sup>Another interpretation of Roger's castration is Brustein's statement that it proves "the divinity of the Police Chief--for mutilation is the destiny of the Man-God, whether he be Christ, Osiris or Dionysus." Brustein, p. 401. Nevertheless, the Police Chief is not divine or deified, just imitated.

<sup>40</sup>Genet, Balcon, pp. 64-68, 75, 237.

<sup>41</sup>Genet, Balcon, p. 86.

<sup>42</sup>Genet, Balcon, p. 207.

<sup>43</sup>Anthony Graham-White, "Jean Genet and the Psychology of Colonialism," Comparative Drama 4 (1970), p. 211.

<sup>44</sup>Susan Taubes, "The White Mask Falls," TDR VII (Spring 1963), p. 87.

<sup>45</sup>Genet, Nègres, p. 66.

<sup>46</sup>Genet, Nègres, pp. 179-180.

<sup>47</sup>Genet, Nègres, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup>Genet, Nègres, pp. 21, 35, 76, 96, 30, 119, 112, 19, 48, 67, 88.

<sup>49</sup>Genet, Nègres, p. 19.

- <sup>50</sup>Taubes, p. 88.
- <sup>51</sup>Genet, Nègres, p. 127.
- <sup>52</sup>Genet, Nègres, p. 21.
- <sup>53</sup>Genet, Nègres, pp. 24, 26, 76.
- <sup>54</sup>Genet, Nègres, p. 96.
- <sup>55</sup>Genet, Nègres, pp. 29, 65.
- <sup>56</sup>Genet, Nègres, p. 121.
- <sup>57</sup>Genet, Nègres, pp. 144-145.
- <sup>58</sup>Genet, Paravents, p. 158.
- <sup>59</sup>Genet, Paravents, p. 167.
- <sup>60</sup>Driver, p. 43.
- <sup>61</sup>Genet, Paravents, p. 149.
- <sup>62</sup>Amidou, the Moroccan actor who played Saïd in Blin's production of Les Paravents, found that the relation between Saïd and Leïla had a positive basis. "It's not cruelty, but a form of love with Genet. Saïd likes his wife Leïla and yet both in the text and the mise en scene they act cruelly toward each other. Genet touches us through this harshness of his. His cruelty is a kind of humanity. He is sincere, not soft." Ed. by J. Later Strahs, TDR XI (Summer 1967), pp. 105-108; "Idealistic and singular of purpose, Genet leads Leïla and Saïd relentlessly through every act of dejection into freedom and song, into authenticity and the world of art." Margaret Scarborough, "The Radical Idealism of The Screens," Modern Drama, XV (March 1973), p. 355.
- <sup>63</sup>Esslin, Absurd, p. 282.
- <sup>64</sup>Genet, Paravents, p. 144.
- <sup>65</sup>Genet, Nègres, p. 48.
- <sup>66</sup>Genet, Paravents, p. 257.
- <sup>67</sup>Below, pp. 148-150 and throughout.
- <sup>68</sup>Lucille Hoerr Charles, "Drama in Shaman Exorcism," Journal of American Folklore, LXVI (April-June 1953), p. 122.

<sup>69</sup>Mircea Eliade, Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy, trans. Willard R. Trask (rev. and enlarged; Princeton, N.J.: Bollingen-Princeton Univ. Press, 1964), p. 511.

## Chapter 4

### Ionesco: The Journey of the Shaman

An examination of Ionesco's work demonstrates how the playwright has gradually reworked his personal experiences into shamanic itineraries whose various elements are archetypal dramatizations of contemporary myth and ritual. Ionesco's plays cannot be considered in terms of a progression from one theme to another. Instead, each succeeding play can be seen as an elaboration, or restatement, and a clarification of recurring images and situations with the express purpose of attaining a level of archetypal expression. L'homme aux valises ("Man with Bags"), his most recent play, is, as will be shown, the product of the evolution of the ritual and the mythical elements found in most of Ionesco's works for the theater.

The images of death and life, of flight, entrapment, obstacles and monsters--all of which are encountered in the shamanic trance--are drawn from Ionesco's personal experience:

Je tâche de projeter sur scène un drame intérieur (incompréhensible à moi-même) me disant, toutefois, que le microcosme étant à l'image du macrocosme, il peut arriver que ce monde intérieur, déchiqueté, désarticulé, soit, en quelque sorte, le miroir ou le symbole des contradictions universelles.<sup>1</sup>

Ionesco's description of the self as a reflection of the cosmos resembles, both in language and concept, Carl Gustav Jung's theory of the secret behind great art.

That secret, according to Jung, "consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work." Jung held that for an individual to become wholly conscious of himself and his desires as a human, he must overcome the limitations of the "conscious outlook" of the epoch in which he lives. Art, in as far as it offers the individual access to archetypal images lacking in his normal, everyday experience, brings about a "compensatory adjustment" necessary for spiritual well-being.<sup>2</sup> Precisely because it is this compensatory knowledge which he is seeking, the Premier Homme in L'homme aux valises can describe himself to the Police in seemingly paradoxical terms: "Vous voyez bien que je suis un autre." The Premier Homme is a "touriste étranger,"<sup>3</sup> as he describes himself, in a world--an amalgam of France, Rumania and Italy--which he knows better than any other. Seeing the places where he grew up or has lived his adult years in the manner of a shaman carried away in a trance, the Premier Homme is a stranger, because he is seeing everything as though for the first time. The successful completion of the voyage on which he has embarked reconciles the Premier Homme with himself and the world. The voyage itself can be considered in terms of

the ecstatic experience of the shaman.

Ionesco's concern with the ecstatic experience of life and his ongoing battle with the forces of death mark him as a modern-day shaman. His recasting of his own experience in archetypal images is similar to the function of the shaman who acts as an intermediary between his people and the spiritual realms beyond their ken. Ionesco's main objective is the liberation of the human spirit through a theatrically contrived exorcism. To achieve this end, his plays are not simply about death, but they are intended to involve the spectator, as Elizabeth Wright points out, in "death as a felt experience."<sup>4</sup>

Ionesco's mystical war against the contemporary demons and pestilences which besiege the human spirit shows that he shares with Yeats and Artaud the idea of the sacred calling of the dramatist.<sup>5</sup> Without implying that Ionesco is consciously playing the role of shaman for a technological society, it is worthwhile and enlightening to examine the congruence between Ionesco's application of contemporary theories of theater and myth and the ancient practices of the shaman.

The shaman, according to Eliade, one of Ionesco's close friends and an advisor on matters related to myth,<sup>6</sup> "defends life, health, fertility, the world of 'light,' against death, diseases, sterility, disaster, and the world of 'darkness,'" Although Ionesco does not pretend to deal

with physical maladies, it can be said that, like the shaman, he is a "specialist in the human soul."<sup>7</sup>

Before discussing the works of Ionesco, it is important to deal with certain basic questions concerning the role of the shaman and shamanism which are relevant to the discussion: What is a shaman? Where does he get his experience and how does he transmit it to his people? What experiences does he communicate and in what manner? The answers to the above questions can be found in Eliade's study of shamanism. Eliade's primary definition of shamanism is that it is a "technique of ecstasy." Typical of this ecstatic state is a "trance during which his soul [the shaman's] is believed to leave his body and ascend to the sky or descend to the underworld." The shaman also experiences "suffering, death, resurrection." The experiences of the shaman, instead of being passive and random, are chosen and directed by him. Thus, the shaman communicates "with the dead, 'demons,' and 'nature spirits,' without thereby becoming their instrument." The form and content of the shaman's encounters are determined by the traditions and the experience of his own people. He differs from other people in that he experiences "in concreto a symbolism and mythology that, by their very nature, are not susceptible of being 'realized' on the 'concrete' plan." As a result, what for the shaman is a "real" experience is only a "cosmological ideogram" to

others. Having undergone the ecstatic experience, the shaman, consequently, must find a way to make its content and meaning accessible to his fellow mortals.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to being a priest, mystic and poet, the shaman is a "psychopomp," that is, he recreates the spiritual itinerary of his trance and leads others through it. His method is dramatic. The representation of the voyage of the shaman's soul becomes a staged, theatrical production--"a spectacle unequalled in the world of daily experience."<sup>9</sup> The kind of staging does not matter, because it varies from shaman to shaman. It is the kind of experience he presents which is important insofar as it is related to Ionesco's plays.<sup>10</sup> The shaman visits the underworld, paradise and the past and he explores the future because he has learned to escape the limited physical plane of human existence. The shaman experiences magical flight or he moves by physical means--"rainbow, bridge, stairs, ladder . . . mountain"--from one plane to another. The shaman brings back knowledge of the nature of evil and death and makes them familiar to his people and, therefore, less frightening and inhibiting. "The unknown and terrifying world of death assumes form, is organized in accordance with particular patterns; it finally displays a structure and, in the course of time, becomes familiar and acceptable."<sup>11</sup>

Ionesco's mythical material comes from inner feelings,

the unspoken or unspeakable, those human experiences which do not possess a visible substance of their own, but which find concrete expression in his plays. "Le théâtre est finalement révélation de choses monstreuses, ou d'états monstres, sans figures, ou de figures monstreuses que nous portons en nous."<sup>12</sup> Ionesco attaches great importance to dreams as a means of revealing the state of the unconscious self. His plays, however, are neither psychological studies of himself nor stage versions of his dreams. Ionesco uses his knowledge of human psychology and of dreams to express what is universal in the human experience. Or, as they are described by Paul Vernois, "les archétypes oniriques communs à l'auteur et aux spectateurs."<sup>13</sup> Ionesco gives the following as the proper goal of the playwright: "Tâchons au moins de 'particulariser' le moins possible; de désincarner le plus possible ou, alors, faire autre chose: inventer l'événement unique."<sup>14</sup> The objective is to consciously fulfill the need for a theater of myth and ritual. Upon a world whose reality and organization are not readily evident to the individual, the playwright, according to Ionesco, imposes an organized vision whose reality is felt and not reasoned: "Rien de plus évident et 'logique' que la construction imaginaire." Ionesco points out what is often overlooked in discussions of the theater of the absurd, that it is the world which is absurd, not the theater--"c'est le monde que me semble

irrationnel, qui se fait irrationnel, et échappe à ma raison."<sup>15</sup> Ionesco not only directs attention "away from the apparently coherent and rational patterns of the outer life to the dynamic tempests of the inner life," as Patrick Roberts says,<sup>16</sup> he rejects the façade of reason which the world wears. As a consequence of this rejection, Ionesco must logically deny himself a rational critique of the world. Instead, he identifies the basic experiences of contemporary man and imposes upon them the form of a spiritual journey not unlike that of the shaman.

Ionesco's major themes and images which he shapes into archetypes are found in embryo form in his first plays where they are aspects of his preoccupation with language. These plays are dominated by a form of ritual expressed principally through the manipulation of language. Vernois refers to the failure of communication and the disintegration of language as archetypal elements of Ionesco's drama.<sup>17</sup> The inability to communicate is one of the obstacles set in the path of the protagonist. However, language plays a more varied and fundamental role. It is more than just one element among others. Rather, from it grow the others.<sup>18</sup>

The emptiness of their existence and the absurdity of their world are veiled from the consciousness of many of Ionesco's characters by automatic forms of communication which give the impression of life where, in fact, there is

only death. It is a veil which Ionesco tears away and pushes the audience, if not his characters, into a confrontation with the basic concerns of myth: life, love, death, struggle and suffering. In an essay published in 1959, Leonard Pronko discovered in the first plays the incipient form of one of Ionesco's major themes: death.

For Ionesco's characters are dead, all of them entombed within his restricting universe closing in upon them, and buried also within their own solitude, each one separated from all others in a world where communication is absolutely impossible.<sup>19</sup>

However, as was to become evident later, Ionesco is interested in death only as a means of making the spectator take a fresh look at life. Amid the meaningless chatter of the Smiths and the Martins, one can discern the prototypes of the sterile marriages which suppress the creative, libidinal impulses of his heroes. The total immersion in bankrupt clichés and senseless explanations anticipate Ionesco's attacks on ideological, scientific and pedagogic cant. The human automatons in thrall to language are the prototypes of those to follow. These themes, situations and characters are discussed in greater detail in the pages to follow.

There are essentially two kinds of characters in Ionesco's plays and neither is realistic. Rather, they occupy two archetypal extremes of human nature. At one extreme, there are the beings who have totally abandoned

their humanity and, at the other, are Ionesco's protagonists whose goal is the pursuit of life and the fulfillment of their human identity. Pronko describes these characters in the following manner: "They seem inhuman not because they behave differently than we do, but because they behave precisely as we do, only with an intensity so increased that they become improbable."<sup>20</sup>

The first kind of character clings to the forms and rituals of society. Theirs is a desperate and self-defeating search for identity which, in actuality, represents a separation of man from his instinctual self. Such a person, according to Jung, seeks security behind the façade of the ordered world of science and reason. "The ordered cosmos he believes in by day is meant to protect him from the fear of the chaos that besets him by night."<sup>21</sup> It is to such fears which the shaman ministers in order to liberate the members of his community from the spiritual paralysis and anti-life behavior which they engender.

Vernois calls this character "le personnage rouge," that is, a cog in the machinery of society. The "cog" is a symbol both of "toute la société et le néant." By means of the "personnage rouge" Ionesco, according to Vernois, is able to attack "une forme de société hostile à tout individualisme."<sup>22</sup> The adherence of these characters to their social functions to the point of spiritual annihilation recalls the characters of Genet. The main difference

is that Genet's characters are aware of their situation and struggling with it. Ionesco's automatons usually lack even the least amount of self-awareness, or, if they are aware, they seem incapable of acting on their knowledge." In L'homme aux valises, the Infirmière-Secretary to the French Consulate is surprised because the Premier Homme is incapable of establishing his identity. The Consul responds with an insight untypical of Ionesco's bureaucrats. "Connaissons-nous la nôtre? [i.e. our identity]. Nous la connaissons en gros, grâce à nos fonctions."<sup>23</sup> Despite the self-knowledge implied, the Consul's statement only emphasizes the passive acceptance by the personnage rouage of his machinelike character.

Ionesco is less charitable than Vernois in his designation of his dehumanized characters. He calls this kind of character a "monster" and an "ogre."<sup>24</sup> In Rhinoceros, Ionesco quite literally transforms his conformists into rampaging beasts. In other plays he is occasionally more subtle, but his target remains the same.

Il s'agit, surtout, d'une sorte de petite bourgeoisie universelle, le petit bourgeois étant l'homme des idées reçues, des slogans, le conformiste de partout: ce conformisme, bien sûr, c'est son langage automatique qui le révèle. ... le "parler pour rien dire", le parler parce qu'il n'y a rien à dire de personnel, l'absence de vie intérieure, la mécanique du quotidien, l'homme baignant dans son milieu social, ne s'en distinguant plus.<sup>25</sup>

The mechanisms which govern Ionesco's monsters are not always immediately identifiable. They appear reasonably

normal until the action of the play picks up tempo and the inner monster reveals itself.

In striking contrast to the above character, Ionesco presents an elemental protagonist who struggles on behalf of humanity. Because he appears in several plays, Ionesco's Everyman character is often identified with the name of Bérenger. "Bérenger," according to Rosette Lamont, "is visceral man stripped bare of his epidermis, quivering before our eyes."<sup>26</sup> Bérenger has predecessors in the persons of Choubert and Amédée and successors in Jean, le Personnage and Le Premier Homme. The generic, rather than specific, names of his most recent protagonists reinforce the impression that Ionesco's objective is to create archetypal characters for whom even the name, Bérenger, is too easily identifiable with a single individual.

As if to underline the universal qualities of the Premier Homme, Ionesco has him lose any official papers which might help establish his identity. Even his name cannot be ascertained. The Premier Homme's attempt to be specific about his function in life obtains an effect opposite from the one intended.

P. H.;           Je suis un existant.  
 Le Consul;       Il y en a des quantités.  
 P. H.;           Pas tous comme moi.  
 Le Consul;       Mettons: "existant spécial".  
 P. H.;           Non, pas spécial, spécialisé, si'il vous  
                   plaît, "existant spécialisé."<sup>27</sup>

In order to establish his identity the Premier Homme is obliged to undergo, as though for the first time, basic experiences common to all human beings.

Because Ionesco's protagonists, like the Premier Homme, usually meet even the most mundane experience as though it were new and unique, they give the impression of being simple and innocent, sometimes to the point of absurdity. Regardless of what they appear to be, their basic function is to emancipate the spectator. Morton Gurewitch's description of the role of the Fool in literature applies to Ionesco's protagonist. "The spiritual freedom of the Fool is ultimately made out to be an analogue of heavenly emancipation, for the Fool is held to deliver us from the imprisoning facts of the earth."<sup>28</sup> Because he sees with the eyes of the Fool, whatever Ionesco's protagonist encounters is experienced with an intensity beyond the ability of the average person. The Premier Homme, for example, takes what he considers to be real risks. "Je me suis mis tout seul dans la gueule du loup. Dans l'antre du diable. Dans le ventre de la baleine. Aux portes de l'enfer. Dans l'enfer même."<sup>29</sup> However, what constitutes a real danger for the Premier Homme is, to others, only a tourist attraction.

In order to help the spectator penetrate the façade of banality which estranges from the vital truths of existence, Ionesco's protagonist, under the guise of the

Fool, acts as a surrogate shaman. He guides the spectator on a spiritual voyage whose itinerary has been charted by Ionesco. It is a voyage into realms of light and darkness, an experience of lightness and flight and of heaviness and forced descent. It is a struggle to escape entrapment and to surmount obstacles such as human automatons, material obstacles and others raised by human monsters and, most dangerous, the spiritual or psychological restraints which exist within them. These images occur and multiply arousing a nightmarish sense of "la vie prise au piège."<sup>30</sup> Through these images Ionesco attempts to "matérialiser des angoisses, des présences intérieures."<sup>31</sup> He has endeavored to reproduce the sensations of "weight and thickness," the qualities he ascribes to his experience of our time. He has described this experience to Bonnefoy in the following manner:

This difficulty of being and this heaviness are the result of what people call totalitarianism, collectivism, the crowd, the mass, or else 'the stresses and strains of modern life,' and so on. . . . Or else the totalitarisms are themselves the thickness, the asphyxia, the oppression that the modern world inflicts upon us and that we in turn inflict upon it: tyranny and suffocation are human secretions.

Together, the archetypal images of his plays constitute a dreamlike representation of "an imbalance between heaven and earth, a lack of synthesis, of integration."<sup>32</sup>

Wherever possible, Ionesco makes the interior obstacles of the protagonist concrete through the use of

masks and other stage properties. The old couple's solitude and the orator's inability to communicate have their physical correlative in the stage filled with empty chairs. The surrender of one's humanity through submission to some form of ideology wears the mask of the rhinoceros. At the same time, all those who have contracted "rhinoceritis" serve as an army of monsters besieging Bèrenger, the only human to hold out. In Le Nouveau locataire ("The New Tenant") the invasion of contemporary man's life by material objects receives mute expression as the movers slowly fill the stage with furniture and announce that there is more overflowing into the hallways, the streets and the countryside. Madeleine brings in endless coffee cups in an act of mindless dutifulness, while Choubert is obliged to stuff down dry bread in submission to the mundane. The Premier Homme is surrounded, at different times, by soldiers who turn their bayonets on him and by two motorcyclists who enclose him within a ring of steel and flesh. Thus the entrapment of the character is physically represented by the proliferation of matter.

The setting of the plays often serves to reflect the sense of physical isolation and encirclement. The home of the old couple in Les Chaises ("The Chairs") is a lighthouse built on an island and surrounded by the water and darkness which later swallows up the evidence of their joint suicide. Likewise, the cité radiieuse in Tueur sans gages

is described by its architect as an island:

Ici, c'est tout simplement un îlot ... avec des ventilateurs cachés que j'ai pris pour modèles dans ces oasis qui se trouvent un peu partout, dans les déserts, où vous voyez surgir, tout à coup, au milieu des sables arides, des cités surprenants, recouvertes de roses fraîches, ceinturées de sources, de lacs...

In his innocence Berenger points out to the Architect that such cities are also called mirages.<sup>33</sup> The cit  radiuse, with all its paradisaical promise, is only a deadly mirage which lures B renger to his death. In a similar manner, the lighthouse whose function it is to facilitate navigation and provide security in treacherous waters is, in Ionesco's inverted symbolism, the scene of death and the failure to communicate.

Ionesco's protagonists often find themselves entrapped because, like B renger, they have been beguiled by a mirage. The mirage is usually the product of an inner desire to regain an edenic existence no more substantial than a vaguely recalled memory. Thus, the Old Man in Les Chaises insists on seeing not what is before him, but a mirage:

Le Vieux: Je veux voir; les barques sur l'eau  
font des taches du soleil.  
La Vieille: Tu ne peux pas les voir, il n'y a pas  
de soleil, c'est la nuit mon chou.<sup>34</sup>

The Old Woman, like most of Ionesco's wives, is pragmatic and incapable of missing such details as the lack of sunlight.

The mutually exclusive pragmatism of the wives and the willful self-deception of the husbands generally is a source of an antagonism within a stagnant or dying marriage which serves as a prison for the unhappy protagonist. The physical counterpart of the unhappy marriage is, in most cases, a misleadingly peaceful domestic setting. In several plays the setting is a comfortable middle-class dwelling, such as the Smith's genuine English living room, the apartments of Choubert and Amédée.

The false security and comfort of Ionesco's homes is recreated in his other settings. The cité radiieuse, despite the difference in proportions, can be considered as an example of the ultimate in middle-class living. The hotel in L'Homme aux valises is actually a detention center for people fated to be executed by the resident medical staff. Jean seeks refuge in a monastery and finds himself imprisoned in a place where the inmates are subject to constant brainwashing. Whatever their appearance, once the action of the play begins it becomes evident that the settings serve only to further stifle the instinctive impulses of the protagonist.

Contrary to his customary usage, Ionesco opens La Soif et la faim ("Thirst and Hunger") with a depressing, prisonlike setting which corresponds directly to its spiritual function. The grey-walled cellar apartment, with its disintegrating furniture, stands in direct

contrast to the "jardin lumineux" just outside the door. Nevertheless, changing the place of residence would have no fundamental influence on the protagonist's feeling of entrapment. The previous apartment shared by Jean and Marie-Madeline was filled with light, but he is content nowhere. Marie-Madeline says of her husband: "Il pense que cette maison est un tombeau. Pourquoi se met-il dans un tel état? Toutes les maisons sont des tombeaux."<sup>35</sup> As do most of Ionesco's wives, Marie-Madeline accepts things as they are and seeks to reconcile her unwilling spouse to the same conditions.<sup>36</sup>

In a similar manner, Queen Marguerite seeks to reconcile Bérenger Roi to his physical demise. Meanwhile, in an ultimate image of material encirclement, the entire universe closes in on the King paralleling his movement to death. As in the myth of the Fisher King, the state of the kingdom and that of the king are inseparable.

Marie: Ils ont grandi ensemble, son royaume et lui.  
Marguerite: Ils disparaissent ensemble.<sup>37</sup>

King Bérenger's kingdom is the universe. His history is at once the history and the myth-history of mankind. The Guard gives an interminable catalogue of Bérenger's accomplishments. Here begins the most far-flung of Ionesco's shamanic excursions into the past--mythical and historic--to the farthest reaches of the universe. Bérenger stole fire from the gods, created the first forges on earth, invented steel,

the first hot air balloon, trains, the airplane and the Eiffel Tower. Not to his credit is his cruelty, meanness, the heads he had cut off, the members of his family he killed to do away with competition. According to Marie he created the sun and, Juliette adds, fire.<sup>38</sup> But now, the glory and power are at an end. The heat of the sun has decreased radically, comets have lost their power, the King's once-fertile lands have become deserts, his subjects are dying and a huge, growing fissure in the earth is swallowing up everything. The entire universe is closing in on the King and wrapping itself around his dying figure like a shroud. At the end of the play, only the King, Marguerite and a few objects remain in the throne room. Beginning with the queen, everything, including the King, disappears and the play ends.<sup>39</sup>

A second kind of entrapment is the product of those beings who have abdicated their humanity in the service of some abstract social function or ideology. In La Leçon ("The Lesson") the Professor literally circles the student "en une sorte de danse du scalp"<sup>40</sup> before killing her. Jacques is surrounded by his entire family who perform a similar dance around him while harranguing him, first, into marriage and, next, into producing children.<sup>41</sup> "A cause du devoir imposé sur lui ... il perd sa valeur humaine et devient lui-même objet destiné à la fabrication d'autres objets."<sup>42</sup> The movements of the Old Couple in Les Chaises,

as Vernois points out, is usually choreographed as a series of circles.<sup>43</sup>

Only in succeeding plays does Ionesco begin to create characters capable of breaking the circle which encloses them. Now, with the experience of the more complex protagonists, it is possible to look back at the characters of the student, Jacques and the Old Couple and recognize the signs of incipient revolt. Any evidence of resistance in the early plays was fated to be put down and the façade of oppressive normality restored.

The circular movement of the characters and the encirclement by objects are often paralleled by the cyclical nature of the action. La Cantatrice chauve ("The Bald Soprano") begins and ends with the same scene. Only the Martins have been exchanged for the Smiths, an event of little importance considering the fact that both couples are little more than automatons programmed to behave in the same manner. In La Leçon, after the Professor has done away with his student, the maid enters to pick up in preparation for the next student victim. Bérenger's tryst with the Killer will be repeated again and again as others meet their death. In a similar manner, the death of Bérenger Roi is not the end, but merely a mythical and ritual rehearsal for the death of every mortal. The circle can be broken only by the recognition that another response to life is possible.

The shaman is an anti-demonic champion of humanity.<sup>44</sup> In a similar manner, Ionesco is a self-styled opponent of the demonic in everyday life. The demonic expresses itself in many ways which Ionesco attempts to describe concretely in his plays. Like the shaman, Ionesco seeks to familiarize the spectator with the nature of the demonic and thereby protect him from its power. "Sentir l'absurdité du quotidien et du langage, son invraisemblance, c'est déjà l'avoir dépassée."<sup>45</sup> The spectator is driven into the embrace of the demonic because of his fear of death. By revealing the affinity between the demonic and death, Ionesco makes it possible to consider alternative paths which bring one closer to life. While the shaman encounters and battles with demons and other monsters in his ecstatic trance, Ionesco confronts the enemy by putting it on the stage in the form of possessed humans.

These anti-life and anti-human creatures are the most important obstacles to the progress of the protagonist. The role of the wife in such a capacity has already been discussed, but there are other kinds of monsters. Among them are government functionaries and political fanatics. In Victimes du devoir ("Victims of Duty"), the Policeman turns Choubert's quiet evening into a nightmare with the excuse that he is only doing his duty--"Je ne suis qu'un soldat, monsieur."<sup>46</sup> Bérenger is impeded in his pursuit of the Killer by, among other things, the political rally of

Mère Pipe and her cheering minions and by the traffic policemen who are so specialized that they are little more than living traffic signals. The Premier Homme in L'Homme aux valises meets one human obstacle after another in the form of customs officers, secret police and station clerks. His most threatening foe is the Doctor in the Hotel/Hospital where beds are made available by liquidating their previous occupants. The more sophisticated evil of the Doctor is also found in Bérenger Roi's personal physician who doubled as the executioner of the King's real or imagined enemies. A similar lack of humanity is found in the unfeeling person of the Architect of the cité radieuse and in the homicidal Professor of La Leçon.

The next kind of obstacle comes from within the protagonist. The wall, in particular, is a recurring obstacle in the path of Ionesco's protagonists as they approach what for the shaman is the breakthrough plane. Usually the product of past fears and frustrations, the wall is only a symbol for the inner spiritual condition of the protagonist. When Jean realizes that the rendezvous with his ideal woman will not take place, he wishes he could once again find shelter in his pre-escape self "où j'étais si bien calfeutré dans ma fatigue de vivre, où j'étais emmuré dans ma peur de mourir."<sup>47</sup> Bérenger, in Le Pieton en l'air ("The Stroller in the Air"), explains to Joséphine the origin of the creature from the "anti-monde":

Bérenger: Il est de l'anti-monde; il est passé  
de l'autre côté du mur.  
Joséphine: Quel mur?  
Bérenger: De l'autre côté du mur invisible. A la  
fois invisible et pas transparent.<sup>48</sup>

The possibility of an anti-world, which one can enter and leave at will, is a restatement of the surrealist theory that the realms of the conscious mind and the unconscious mind are capable of communication with the help of art.<sup>49</sup> Ionesco, through his plays, sets up a line of communication between the two realms in order to bring about a liberating synthesis.<sup>50</sup> Mere recognition that a wall exists is enough to set the protagonist apart from the other characters, because it entails the realization that beyond the limited confines of contemporary man's existence there is another, complementary world waiting to be explored. To surmount the wall, usually by flying over it, and the other obstacles is to release oneself from the bonds of reality and to enter unheard of worlds.

The ability to fly identifies Ionesco's protagonist with one of the shaman's most characteristic powers. According to Eliade: "Magical flight is the expression both of the soul's autonomy and of ecstasy." The mythological motifs of flight are an integral part of shamanistic practice, although, as age-old expressions of the desire to imitate the flight of a bird or to dissociate the human soul from the body, they precede shamanism.

A number of myths refer to a primordial time when all human beings could ascend to heaven, by climbing a

mountain, a tree, or a ladder, or flying by their own power, or being carried off by birds. The degeneration of humanity henceforth forbids the mass of mankind to fly to heaven; only death restores men (and not all of them!) to their primordial condition; only then can they ascend to heaven, fly like birds, and so forth.<sup>51</sup>

The ability to fly is proof that both the shaman and Ionesco's protagonist have transcended the limitations of a fallen humanity.

Flight is an experience which everyone has known and most people have forgotten. As Bérenger, in Le Piéton en l'air, says: "Vous êtes malheureux sans le savoir. Car de la vient la misère de l'homme; de ne pouvoir s'envoler, de l'avoir oublier."<sup>52</sup> When Ionesco's characters regain the ability to fly, they have begun the ecstatic experience which has its beginnings in the playwright's own experiences as described to Bonnefoy:

"You have to know how to look at things, how to see them. It's wonderful. Everything is miraculous, everything is a glorious epiphany, the tiniest object looks resplendent." . . . Take the house opposite, for instance, it looks very ugly with its triangular windows. Yet it's filled with light, if I look at it lovingly or kindly; I mean it suddenly lights up, it's an event that takes place.

Thus, ecstasy depends on how one sees the world. Ecstasy consists of seeing everything for the first time as though through the eyes of a child. Familiarity with the wonders of the world is the "original sin, . . . a slackening of attention, . . . it's losing the faculty of wonderment; oblivion; the paralysis bred by habit." It is not

surprising, therefore, that Ionesco equates the vision of paradise with his childhood memory of La Chapelle-Anthenaise where he spent "days of fullness, happiness and sunlight."<sup>53</sup>

A similar memory sustains Bérenger despite the misery of the world until he finds the cité radiieuse--"cet instant lumineux qui me permettrait de tout supporter, qui devait être ma raison d'exister, mon appui." Bérenger gives premature thanks to the Architect to whom he says: "Vous me l'avez rendue ma lumière oubliée...".<sup>54</sup> As the situation of the Premier Homme becomes more constricting and discouraging, he actually begins asking directions for La Chapelle-Anthenaise.<sup>55</sup> In fact, L'Homme aux valises as a whole can be considered as an attempt to recapture those lost moments of luminosity.

Choubert, Amedée, several of the Bérengers and Jean undergo the ecstatic experience of luminosity and flight. Unfortunately, for them, the moments of lightness and joy are of brief duration. Life almost invariably intervenes to bring Ionesco's protagonists back to their former unhappy state. The images are reversed. The new images are of falling, of being sucked into a primal slough of hopelessness and anguish:

Joséphine: Envole-toi plus loin de l'autre côté,  
plus loin que les Enfers.

Bérenger: Hélas! Je ne peux pas ... Rien. Après  
il n'y a plus rien, plus rien que les  
abîmes illimités ... que les abîmes.<sup>56</sup>

Choubert's spirit is carried into the heavens, but his earth-bound body can go no higher than a chair placed on a table. While Madeleine and the Policeman are frantically trying to retrieve him, Choubert attempts to take off physically but lands in a wastebasket instead. The Policeman grabs him and force feeds him bread, explaining: "Il n'adhère pas à la réalité."<sup>57</sup> The eating of bread becomes an act of submission. In the same manner, Jacques is forced to declare that he likes "pommes de terre au lard." It is a surrender of individuality in the face of social pressures. Neither Choubert nor Jacques make any effort to escape after their submission. They have accepted a form of living death against which Ionesco uses all of his talents as a dramatist.

Ionesco uses myth and ritual as weapons against death in order to break its hold upon life and to push back its frontiers.<sup>58</sup> His target is death in language, in objects, the living death of those who have lost their humanity and, finally, death as the inevitable fate of those not infected by the other anti-life maladies of our time. Ionesco says his own awareness of death came at the age of fifteen when he ceased to live in the present, but in the "passé se précipitant dans le future ...". From that moment he became aware of the passage of time, aging and the inevitability of death: "je me suis senti vieux et j'ai voulu vivre."<sup>59</sup> In his plays Ionesco seeks to remind

us and himself of what is often forgotten, ignored or even hidden in contemporary society, the truth one finds in great plays: "cette verité à laquelle nous ne pensons pas et qui est simple et infiniment banale: je meurs, tu meurs, il meurt."<sup>60</sup> "Man is born and dies with a primal fear," according to Rank. It is, at once, a fear of life and of death: a fear of losing one's individuality and of being separated from the whole. Facing death is therapeutic because it permits man to once again regain his equilibrium.<sup>61</sup> The denial of death carries with it a crushing penalty which is the denial of life itself. In Ionesco's words, "Sans le crise sans le menace de mort, il n'y a que la mort."<sup>62</sup>

Bérenger must be reminded by his friend, Edouard, that everybody knows of death. They are so familiar with death that they can ignore it. "La chose est sue, assimilée, cataloguée. Même les enfants des écoles savent..."<sup>63</sup>

Naturally, this is only a pose representative of those who ignore death in hopes that it will pass them by. Everyone, Bérenger excepted, is hiding from death behind the various disguises of their social functions. The Architect is absorbed by his work. Dany, the Architect's secretary, who ignores Bérenger's professions of love, is totally occupied with herself. The sickly Edouard is trying to forget death.

The awareness of death is, as Erich Fromm says, "One

of the strongest incentives for life, the basis for human solidarity, and an experience without which joy and enthusiasm lack intensity and depth."<sup>64</sup> Human solidarity can only be preceded by communication which is genuine and direct and, by reducing dead language, ideological cant and the materialistic sham of science and progress to litter on the stage, Ionesco prepares us for this communication. By means of a shamanistic confrontation with human mortality, Ionesco creates an emotional awareness of the meaning and quality of death for the modern man and, as a consequence, an opportunity for the desire for life to reassert itself as the most basic human value.

Ionesco claims to have written Le Roi se meurt ("Exit the King") to help prepare himself to meet death himself. "Cela devrait être une leçon, comme une sorte d'exercice spirituel, une marche progressive, étapes par étapes, que j'essayais de rendre accessible vers la fin inéluctable." Not unlike King Bérenger, Ionesco found that the effort did not reconcile him to death.<sup>65</sup> Reconciliation with death is difficult. At best we can be consoled for the fact that we must die.

We learn that all men die a lonely death, that pain is a form of consciousness and thus of life, that death is a threshold we do not want to cross, that no one can die for us, instead of us. We become what Marguerite accuses her husband of not having been, apprentices of dying.<sup>66</sup>

In Ionesco's plays we are led to reject the false

consolations, one by one, until a process of elimination is completed. Philosophy and science, constructed as a defense against death and the terror of life, have turned against us. They have become tools for our oppression. With all our science and technology we can do no better than Bérenger with his pistols in Tueur sans gages when he meets death. The weapons science has made for us only bring death, they cannot kill it. Thus, Bérenger cannot pull the trigger to his pistols. We recognize, despite the failure of logic to support us, the desire to continue living. No matter how ineffective the arguments against death, the desire to exist remains when all else is stripped away. Our only consolation for death is the realization that we are alive.

Both Tueur sans gages and Le Roi se meurt are ritual preparations for death.<sup>67</sup> Bérenger unwittingly seeks his confrontation with death. King Bérenger knows from the beginning he will die and struggles against his fate with all his weakened might. In both plays there is a race against time and death. Bérenger insists on finding the murderer before sundown, before he can strike again. Queen Marguerite announces to the king that he shall die at the end of the play, in an hour and a half. The route to death differs for each Bérenger. Only their goal is the same.

The cit  radi use which B renger has come to visit is no ordinary housing development. Ionesco intends its qualities to contribute to the archetypal image of a lost paradise. It is, as he has said, the "home of prelapsarian man, the rest is the fall."<sup>68</sup> In order to arrive, B renger has undergone the "difficult passage" of the shaman. He has passed by a labyrinth of roads, dead ends, walls, a river--even friends who inhibit his progress--to reach what promises to be the city of his dreams.

All of B renger's repressed exuberance and love of life is released in his reaction to the city. It gives him a sense of being reconciled with the repressed and forgotten aspect of himself, the part an oppressive world made him forget.

Voil  ce que je suis en v rit  et que j'avais oubli , un  tre souriant, dans un monde souriant... En somme monde int rieur, monde ext rieur, ce sont des expressions impropres, il n'y a pas de v ritables fronti res pourtant entre ces deux mondes; il y a une impulsion premi re  videmment, qui vient de nous, et lorsqu'elle ne peut s'ext rioriser, lorsqu'elle ne peut se r aliser objectivement, lorsqu'il n'y a pas un accord total entre moi du dedans et moi du dehors, c'est la catastrophe, la contradiction universelle, la cassure.<sup>69</sup>

B renger's hope that the rupture between the inner and outer worlds can be healed in a new world is a restatement of one of the key tenets of the surrealist credo: the affirmation that a synthesis of the separate planes of human reality is possible. Ionesco, like Brecht, presents man as a double being divided from his true self by the crushing

demands of the world which deform and deaden the spirit. The playwrights differ in that Brecht's characters are not repressed, but have learned from bitter experience to suppress their instinctive desires in order to survive. Unfortunately, Bérenger's enthusiasm is misplaced. The city is not what he imagined it to be.

All the joy and promise and beauty of the city fade before the fact that there is a killer at large. Even as he speaks with the Architect three bodies float by on the river. The recognition of the danger posed by the Killer stirs Bérenger to action. Find the killer, turn him over to the authorities and all the problems are solved. From this moment until his fatal meeting with the Killer, Bérenger is involved in a series of episodes which serve mainly to retard his movement while presenting different death-denying attitudes of man.

Despite Bérenger's efforts to impress him with the need to act, Edouard easily permits his mind to wander. He listens to Mère Pipe's doubletalk and responds like a future rhinoceros. "C'est ininteressant ce que dit la mère Pipe!" Before Bérenger can get him away, Edouard is shouting: "Vive la mère Pipe!"<sup>70</sup> Next, there is the drunken hero. His only interest is in baiting Mère Pipe's supporters and asserting the rights of former heroes such as himself. Bérenger appeals to two traffic policemen. They listen sympathetically for a few momenets, but chasing

after murderers is not in their line. While Bérenger insists that they take action, they become increasingly absorbed in directing traffic. They take time out only long enough to shoo away a young soldier--who else is innocent enough to purposely set out seeking Death--who offers to help. He is the only character who shows any interest in Bérenger's quest. The police become so involved with directing traffic that they become little more than rapidly moving automatons. Suddenly, they disappear. Bérenger is left alone. Bérenger has talked insistently throughout the play about life and death. Everyone else has been avoiding the basic questions. Afraid of death, they have insulated themselves from life.

It should be noted too that there has been a ritual movement as Bérenger moves from person to person. In each case, the same ritual of appeal for help and understanding followed by rejection is repeated with variations. Beginning with the impassive Architect and the rather phlegmatic Edouard, each repetition of the pattern becomes more frenetic, more mechanical and less human. When the police disappear we are left at the summit of excitement and in an uneasy humor. Bérenger is ready to meet the killer.

Bérenger's meeting with the killer is one of the most powerful scenes Ionesco has created. Only the killer's shadow appears. His only response to Bérenger is an occasional laugh. Bérenger is left to deliver a monologue

addressed to Death. It contains, with allowances for Ionesco's style, a catalogue of human responses to death. In addition, there is a rhythm to the monologue which is determined by the alternation between being threatening, offering understanding, asking for mercy and, finally, surrender. Bérenger tries to understand why the killer spares nobody, not even children. Does he hate people? He appeals to the killer in the name of Christianity, science, modernity, idealism. He offers a bribe. Nothing works against the killer. Having expended all of his resources, Bérenger says, "Il est possible que la vie du genre humain n'ait aucune importance, donc sa disparition non plus ...". Finally, Bérenger casts aside all arguments in an ultimate, naked appeal for his life. "Vous tuez sans raison, dans ce cas je vous prie, sans raison je vous implore, oui, arrêtez-vous ...". The killer draws his knife and approaches. In one last desperate effort, Bérenger pulls out two pistols, but lacks the will to pull the trigger. "Oh ... que ma force est faible contre la froide détermination, contre la cruauté sans merci! ... Et que peuvent les balles elle-mêmes contre l'énergie infinie de ton obstination?"<sup>71</sup> Bérenger kneels, drops his pistols and accepts his rendezvous with death.

Ionesco seeks to isolate death and exorcise it from the sphere proper to life. This effort is most evident in the pursuit of the erotic impulses manifested by his

protagonists. It is expressed by the pursuit of ideal love and ideal worlds of light and harmony. It is a force which grows out of an "eros constructeur et créateur," according to Vernois.<sup>72</sup> It is an abstract primal urge which underlies man's strivings for the unattainable and his eternal dissatisfaction with the mundane. The socially determined, therefore inauthentic, expressions of love--love for one's parents or children, marriage and procreation--are rejected by Ionesco as are other institutions which transform humans into monsters. They are expressions of love subverted and an acceptance of the forces which draw one down. The explosive charge which shatters these dead institutions is primed by libidinal forces which escape the efforts of society to curtail or manipulate them.

Typical of Ionesco are the married couples for whom love is an unknown or completely forgotten passion. In the case of the Martins and the Smiths, the absence of love is characterized by their lack of communication on any level. The comfortable sitting-room of the Smiths in which every object is quite proper and English is little more than a comfortable mausoleum in which their sterile relationship is entombed. The residents of the sitting-room are not there because they are drawn by a mutual passion for one another, but simply because they are two random beings fulfilling a proper social function and nothing more.

Often, where there is no direct expression of the various faces of love, its presence is suggested by libidinal overtones. According to Vernois, "plus que par les images, Ionesco suggère la libido par des rythmes."<sup>73</sup> For example, the abuse of his student by the Professor, in La Leçon, and her subsequent murder contains undertones of overwhelming passion and sexual violation. Madeleine's responses to the Policeman in Victimes du devoir, although indirect, is definitely sexual. Obviously impressed and excited by the Policeman's display of authority and aggressiveness, Madeleine leaves to prepare coffee, but returns without it. Instead, she has changed into a low-cut dress. According to the stage directions, "elle est une autre, sa voix a changé; elle est devenue tendre et mélodieuse."<sup>74</sup> Madeleine expresses her sexual excitement by making erotic gestures to her husband, but the source of her aroused behavior is the Policeman, with whom she allies herself in order to extract information from Choubert.<sup>75</sup> In Le Roi se meurt, we see Bérenger Roi stripped of everything--his empire, physical strength and life--while the characters around him reflect aspects of his former self. Marie, his youthful second wife, represents the king's libido. As Lamont says of her: "Marie is an extension of Bérenger's own senses: his youth, his sensuality, his eros." In the above examples, the sexual instinct is either wildly out of control, thwarted or

repressed. Only in L'Homme aux valises, in which the Femme meets the Premier Homme barebreasted, is there a sense of health and balance as well as the promise of fulfillment.

Ionesco's protagonists suffer as a result of their unhappy marriages, or, if unmarried, they avoid wedlock in the naïve expectation that someday the dream of ideal love could be realized. Agnès, in Ce Formidable bordel!, attempts to overcome the contemptuous refusal of the Personnage to participate in the pursuits of his fellow mortals. She offers herself to him with promises of love: "Il y a de l'amour, ici. Tu as l'amour près de toi. Enfin je t'aime bien? Je t'aime ou je t'aime bien, je ne sais pas au juste mais je suis de l'amour."<sup>76</sup> The Personnage rebuffs Agnès's offer because he is waiting for Lucienne. Lucienne, whose name combines the pursuit of ideal love with its etymological reference to light and, by extension, to the breakthrough level of shamanistic flight, never appears. When Agnès presses him to be more specific about his dream woman, the Personnage is incapable of describing her. He can only affirm that she is unlike any other woman:

Elles était grande. ... Elle avait des yeux... des yeux bleus ou verts, ou les deux tons mélangés. Pas comme les tiens. C'était une autre sorte de femme. Elle était blonde, non elle était brune. Ou alors elle était rousse.<sup>77</sup>

In La Soif et la faim, following the dictates of a desire

for an equally insubstantial woman, Jean deserts his wife and home in order to keep a rendezvous with his ideal woman.

Almost a third of La Soif et la faim, the entire second episode, is devoted to Jean's attempt to describe the woman for whom he is waiting. We never learn what the woman is like, but we do become aware of Jean's longing and desire for the impossible perfection she represents. Jean has forgotten her name. He has somehow worn out or lost her photo. He cannot recall the exact time of his rendezvous. There are only two things of which he is certain: her promise to come to him and his inability to live without her.

Quel souvenir a-t-elle réveillé en moi, quelle nostalgie perdue, quels desirs cachés, quelle nécessité oubliée! Elle m'a réveillé à moi-même, elle est le besoin absolu; et moi qui croyais me passer de tout!<sup>78</sup>

The perfect woman appears for neither the Personnage nor for Jean. Both men are condemned to eternal dissatisfaction with flesh and blood women.

The endless waiting for an elusive and perfect love transcends the individual. It is a longing proper to all humanity. "Depuis des siècles je l'attends," says Jean of the woman. His statement indicates that that wait is part of the human condition. His failure to find the woman of his dreams is not a personal failure, it is a characteristic of life. "Cette vie est passée. Hélas! Encore une

fois, il est trop tard."<sup>79</sup>

The Personnage explains the significance of Lucienne's arrival in the same manner which would serve to describe the arrival of the shaman at the threshold of another world. He is waiting for an opening, an end to the walls which enclose him. Finding the woman of one's dreams is tantamount to achieving a breakthrough to the realm of light where the spirit can soar. However, waiting without end is not in itself liberating. In opposition to the image of escape, Agnès sees in Jean's waiting a form of death, of self-imprisonment.

En attendant tu t'enfermes et tu m'enfermes avec toi.  
Et nous somme cloîtrés et tu mets des matelas aux  
fenêtres, et tu ajoutes des volets aux volets, et tu  
ajoutes des murs aux murs qu'il y a déjà.<sup>80</sup>

As surely as the New Tenant closes himself away from the rest of the world with his endless material possessions, the Personnage has created a spiritual prison for himself.

Until L'homme aux valises it was possible to say that Ionesco's protagonists were condemned to unrequited longing for the ideal woman and for the creative impulses of eros to be realized. However, in the penultimate scene of L'homme aux valises, the much-awaited meeting between man and woman finally occurs. The Premier Homme finally meets the woman all of Ionesco's protagonists have so ardently sought. She too has been waiting. "J'y suis venue tout de suite après ton départ, dans l'espoir que

tu passerais. Je t'ai attendu." For the first time in Ionesco's plays, the efficacious powers of love seem to be within grasp. Finally, there are sympathetic ears to hear the words of the lover:

Je t'aime désespérément. Les eaux deviendront claires, le ciel transparent, les gens ne s'écarteront plus sur ton passage, il te béniront et je serai avec toi. Je t'aime. ... Tu verras, demain, tout sera neuf.<sup>81</sup>

The Premier Homme has not escaped to another universe. Like the shaman, he has completed the ecstatic journey through the mythical domains of his psyche and has returned to the world from which he started. The woman who meets him is none other than the person who, in scene VI, identifies herself as his wife. Everything is the same and everything has been transformed, because the Premier Homme has overcome the obstacles to his reconciliation with his mortal human nature. Everything is new because he has acquired a new way of seeing the world. The Premier Homme becomes Adam, the first man, and, with his Eve, he is prepared for life and for the re-creation of mankind.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Ionesco, Notes, p. 226.

<sup>2</sup>Carl Gustav Jung, "On the Relation of Analytical Psychology to Poetry," in The Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature, trans. R. F. C. Hull, Bollingen Series (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1972), pp. 82, 98; "The helpful medieval view that man is a microcosm, a reflection of the cosmos in miniature, has long since dropped away from him [modern man], although the very existence of his world-embracing and world-conditioning psyche might have taught him better. Not only is the image of the macrocosm imprinted on him as a psychic being, but he also creates this image for himself on an ever-widening scale. He bears this cosmic 'correspondence' within him by virtue of his reflecting consciousness, on the one hand, and, on the other, thanks to the hereditary, archetypal nature of his instincts which bind him to his environment." Carl Gustav Jung, The Undiscovered Self (New York: Mentor, 1958), pp. 72-73; References to Ionesco's connection with Jungian thought can be found in: Rosette Lamont, "L'Homme aux valises: Ionesco's Absolute Stranger," Performing Arts Journal, I (Fall 1976), p. 23; Bonnefoy, p. 36; Paul Vernois, La Dynamique théâtrale d'Eugène Ionesco (Paris: Klincksieck, 1972), p. 264.

<sup>3</sup>Eugène Ionesco, L'Homme aux valises suivi de Ce formidable bordel! (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), p. 61.

<sup>4</sup>Elizabeth G. Wright, "The Vision of Death in Ionesco's Exit the King," Soundings, LIV (Winter 1971), p. 436.

<sup>5</sup>Above, pp. 22-24; 32; 34-35.

<sup>6</sup>Bonnefoy, p. 33.

<sup>7</sup>Eliade, pp. 8, 509.

<sup>8</sup>Eliade, pp. 4, 5, 6, 33, 265.

<sup>9</sup>Eliade, p. 511.

<sup>10</sup>Charles, pp. 92-122.

<sup>11</sup>Eliade, pp. 5, 259, 492, 510.

<sup>12</sup>Ionesco, Notes, pp. 63-64, 254.

<sup>13</sup>Vernois, p. 54.

<sup>14</sup>Ionesco, Notes, pp. 299-300; "He turns the commonplace into a myth, forces us to see anew what we forget to see when we look at it." Rosette Lamont, "The Proliferation of Matter in Ionesco's Plays," L'Esprit Createur, II (Winter 1962), p. 197.

<sup>15</sup>Ionesco, Notes, p. 85.

<sup>16</sup>Patrick Roberts, The Psychology of Tragic Drama (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 11.

<sup>17</sup>Vernois, p. 29.

<sup>18</sup>Language, in Ionesco's plays, is a ritual object whose contribution is almost entirely on the emotional level. Ionesco reveals a form of diseased language which takes over the minds and bodies of human beings and controls them as though they were automatons. The responsibility for communication and thought has been abdicated by the individual characters and given over to grammatically based models, mechanisms which, because they lack human control, acquire a life of their own. The product is a grotesque deformation of language and thought; language becomes as monstrous as the physical objects which often occupy Ionesco's stage settings. During the last decade or so, Ionesco's characters and situations have become more "normal" in appearance without completely eliminating those elements which keep the spectator's linguistic habits constantly on edge. In these more recent plays the ritual use of language and objects continues in a more subtle and less alienating form. Vasile Covaci, "Procédés métalinguistique dans les pièces d'Eugène Ionesco," Revue Roumaine de Linguistique, XVI (1971), pp. 203-213; Olga Revzine and Isaak Revzine, "Expérimentation sémiotique chez Eugène Ionesco (La cantatrice chauve et La leçon)," Semiotica, IV (1971), pp. 240-262.

<sup>19</sup>Leonard Cabell Pronko, "The Anti-Spiritual Victory in the Theater of Ionesco," Modern Drama, II (May 1959), p. 34.

<sup>20</sup>Leonard Cabell Pronko, Avante-Garde: The Experimental Theater in France (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1966), p. 124.

<sup>21</sup>Jung, Spirit, p. 124.

<sup>22</sup>Vernois, pp. 136, 137.

- <sup>23</sup> Ionesco, Homme, p. 67.
- <sup>24</sup> Bonnefoy, p. 16.
- <sup>25</sup> Ionesco, Notes, p. 253.
- <sup>26</sup> Rosette Lamont, "The Double Apprenticeship: Life and the Process of Dying," in The Phenomenon of Death: Faces of Mortality, ed. Edith Wyschogrod (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), p. 210.
- <sup>27</sup> Ionesco, Homme, pp. 37, 65.
- <sup>28</sup> Morton Gurewitsch, Comedy: The Irrational Vision (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell Univ. Press, 1975), p. 234.
- <sup>29</sup> Ionesco, Homme, p. 48.
- <sup>30</sup> Vernois, p. 77.
- <sup>31</sup> Ionesco, Notes, p. 63.
- <sup>32</sup> Bonnefoy, pp. 36, 37.
- <sup>33</sup> Ionesco, Tueur sans gages, II, pp. 71-72.
- <sup>34</sup> Eugène Ionesco, Les Chaises, Théâtre (Paris: Gallimard, 1954), I, p. 132.
- <sup>35</sup> Eugène Ionesco, La Soif et la faim, Théâtre (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), IV, pp. 77, 97.
- <sup>36</sup> According to Vernois, the state of marriage in Ionesco "n'est qu'une pâle et trompeuse approximation de l'extase" promised by wedlock, Vernois, p. 111.
- <sup>37</sup> Ionesco, Le Roi se meurt, IV, p. 62.
- <sup>38</sup> Ionesco, Roi, pp. 57-58, 61-62, 63.
- <sup>39</sup> Ionesco, Roi, pp. 15-20, 74.
- <sup>40</sup> Ionesco, La Leçon, I, pp. 88-89.
- <sup>41</sup> Ionesco, Jacques ou la Soumission, I, p. 127.
- <sup>42</sup> Marie Claude Depraz-McNulty, "L'Objet dans le théâtre d'Eugène Ionesco," French Review, XLI (October 1967), p. 94.

- <sup>43</sup>Vernois, p. 78.
- <sup>44</sup>Eliade, p. 508.
- <sup>45</sup>Ionesco, Notes, p. 283.
- <sup>46</sup>Ionesco, Victimes du devoir, I, p. 224.
- <sup>47</sup>Ionesco, Soif, I, p. 117.
- <sup>48</sup>Eugène Ionesco, Le Piéton en l'air (Paris: Gallimard, 1963), III, p. 145.
- <sup>49</sup>Above, pp. 28-29.
- <sup>50</sup>Jung, Self, p. 74.
- <sup>51</sup>Eliade, pp. 479, 480.
- <sup>52</sup>Ionesco, Piéton, III, p. 166.
- <sup>53</sup>Bonnefoy, pp. 30, 31, 11.
- <sup>54</sup>Ionesco, Tueur, II, pp. 79, 80.
- <sup>55</sup>Ionesco, Homme, pp. 84-85.
- <sup>56</sup>Ionesco, Piéton, III, pp. 197-198.
- <sup>57</sup>Ionesco, Victimes, I, p. 221.
- <sup>58</sup>Rosette Lamont, "An Interview with Eugène Ionesco," The Massachusetts Review, X (Winter 1969), p. 145.
- <sup>59</sup>Eugène Ionesco, Journal en miettes (Saint-Amand: Idées-Gallimard, 1967), p. 29.
- <sup>60</sup>Ionesco, Notes, p. 66.
- <sup>61</sup>Rank, Myth, pp. 268-269.
- <sup>62</sup>Ionesco, Notes, p. 313.
- <sup>63</sup>Ionesco, Tueur, II, p. 122.
- <sup>64</sup>"The fear of death lives an illegitimate existence among us. It remains alive in spite of the attempt to deny it, but being repressed it remains sterile. It is one source of the flatness of other experiences, of the restlessness pervading life, and it explains, I would venture

to say, the exorbitant amount of money this nation pays for its funerals." Erich Fromm, Escape from Freedom (New York: Rinehart, 1941), pp. 245-246.

<sup>65</sup>Ionesco, Journal, pp. 124-125.

<sup>66</sup>Ionesco, Lamont, "Apprenticeship," p. 204.

<sup>67</sup>Lamont, "Apprenticeship," p. 199.

<sup>68</sup>Bonnefoy, p. 30.

<sup>69</sup>Ionesco, Tueur, II, p. 73.

<sup>70</sup>Ionesco, Tueur, II, pp. 139-40.

<sup>71</sup>Ionesco, Tueur, II, pp. 170-171.

<sup>72</sup>Vernois, p. 59.

<sup>73</sup>Vernois, p. 122.

<sup>74</sup>Ionesco, Victimes, p. 194.

<sup>75</sup>The two poles revealed in Victimes du devoir are described in the following manner by Vernois: "La polarisation positive du mouvement vertical s'identifierait par exemple à un eros constructeur et créateur auquel viendrait s'opposer un thanatos, mouvement d'acceptation et de résignation vers la terre et vers la mort"; p. 59.

<sup>76</sup>Ionesco, Homme, p. 185.

<sup>77</sup>Ionesco, Homme, p. 185.

<sup>78</sup>Ionesco, Soif, IV, p. 117.

<sup>79</sup>Ionesco, Soif, IV, p. 116.

<sup>80</sup>Ionesco, Homme, p. 186.

<sup>81</sup>Ionesco, Homme, pp. 95, 96, 186.

## Chapter 5

### Conclusion

My objective has been to establish a definition of myth and ritual and to demonstrate their function in contemporary European drama. The theater of myth and ritual--exemplified by the works of Brecht, Genet and Ionesco--is the product of a variety of influences, some seemingly unrelated and many outside the realm of art. The importance and validity of myth found a scientific basis in psychology and anthropology. The discoveries of Frazer, Freud and Jung were crucial, as Feder points out, because they "united the behavior, the thoughts, the dreams and fantasies of the twentieth-century man of letters with his primordial past."<sup>1</sup> In the theater itself, theory and practice were transformed by Mallarmé, Jarry, Yeats, Apollinaire and Artaud. Under their influence the theater became more ritualistic and mythical. The plays of Genet and Ionesco are the result of aesthetic theories formulated by symbolism, dadaism and surrealism. Brecht articulated his own theories of dramatic practice which were intended to demonstrate and propagate his ideological interpretation of reality. In comparing the plays of Brecht, Genet and Ionesco, I have shown that, despite important differences,

they all have characteristics of myth and ritual.

The desire to create myth and ritual (closely related to the impulse has lead others to reshape ancient myth for use in contemporary literature) is a response to the apparent meaninglessness and chaos of contemporary existence which has obscured man's vision of his condition and his role in the world. Nietzsche, Yeats and Artaud helped form the idea that by re-establishing myth and ritual, the theater could regain its ancient efficacy as a means of consoling, informing and orienting man. The source of myth, according to Artaud, should not be literary myths but the world in which the artist resides. Inspiration for the contemporary theater of myth and ritual can come from psychological, political or social phenomena and from private experience as well.

Brecht approached his work from an ideological and sociological perspective and, rather than seeking to re-establish myth and ritual, he had revolutionary goals in mind. Genet and Ionesco, on the other hand, fashioned myths and rituals by reworking their personal experiences. Genet transformed perceptions of the relation of the individual to society, of the social mask to the inner self, into abstract social rituals for the stage. Although the affinity of Genet's dramatic analysis of self and social mask to the myth of Narcissus is quite clear--the myth itself is not the playwright's point of departure.

Likewise, Ionesco can be said to have consciously reworked a combination of dreams, personal experiences from waking life and historical reality into archetypal dramas of contemporary life. Myth is Ionesco's objective. However, his source of ideas and images has not been the myths and rituals of ancient civilizations or of traditional societies, but the world in which we live.

Brecht, Genet and Ionesco have given substance to a mythical vision of the human condition and the situation of the individual within it. This has been accomplished by creating protagonists with representative, Everyman qualities. Bérenger, the Premier Homme, Saïd, Galy Gay and Shen-Te/Shui-Ta, to mention a few, are examples of the Everyman character. The nature of their sufferings, desires and actions makes them representative of all humanity.

The protagonist encounters sundry monsters who represent the forces which oppress modern man. In the plays of Genet and Ionesco, although we are made to feel the tyrannical power of society, the most potent enemies of the protagonist are projections of his inner fears. For Brecht, on the other hand, economic forces, particularly those of capitalism, generate the monsters which thwart man's instinctive drives and desires.

For all of these playwrights, reality, the aggregate of those elements which define the human condition, is not

to be found either in the inner desires of the protagonists or in the forces which oppress them, but in the dramatic spectacle of the struggle between them. The juxtaposition of the struggle of the individual with a concrete expression of the metaphysical context in which he acts is intended as a revelation which demystifies existence. The spectator encounters reality and, hopefully, is liberated by the communal celebration of the dramatic performance.

The theater of myth and ritual has been the testing ground for the over-optimistic expectations of its prophets and early practitioners. Nietzsche argued that European civilization had reached a spiritual impasse because of an unhealthy devotion to the intellectual side of man. Nietzsche's ideas could be implemented in the theater where the Dionysian, by bringing Western man into contact with his emotional self, would restore powers long suppressed and permit man to surpass his present condition. In a similar manner, Artaud and Yeats expected the theater to work miracles on the spectator. The feeling that they were capable of generating spiritual awareness and health in their audiences led Yeats and Artaud to mistakenly expect miraculous results for their efforts.

Although the extravagant expectations for the theater of myth and ritual proved unfounded, it is possible to make certain observations about the rapport of the audience with this particular form of theater. The psychic distance

between the stage and the audience is manipulated in a unique manner. For example, there is the juxtaposition of theatrical and formal effects. The latter remind the audience that it is watching an artistic counterfeit of life, while the former sets up highly charged emotional moments in which the invisible barrier separating audience and stage is abolished. The discussion of Der Kaukasische kreidekreis shows how Brecht interspersed moments of drama with narrative and song within a framework of ritual. In Victimes du devoir, Choubert's flight into the vastness of the unconscious mind establishes a powerful contrast to the simple device of having the actor physically rise only as high as a chair set on a table can take him. The result of the manipulation of psychic distance is a form of theater which short-circuits intellection and arouses varying levels of emotional response in the audience without totally abolishing psychic distance. As Ionesco has explained, the objective is not to discuss or describe the human condition, but to present that condition in such a manner that the spectator actually experiences it.

Ionesco's statement of his objective is a modest reiteration of the optimism which his predecessors shared about the power of the theater to influence, or even transform, human consciousness. Although their goals are not congruent, Ionesco, Brecht and Genet share the feeling that the theater is capable of doing more than describing life, that it is

capable of influencing human consciousness and thereby altering reality.

Whether or not these playwrights and others like them have actually had an effect on society or on the individual is a moot point. Nevertheless, they are important to this study for several reasons. Their plays are a demonstration of the functional role played by myth and ritual in contemporary European drama. Brecht, Genet and Ionesco have not attempted to implement a particular aesthetic manifesto; nevertheless their plays display characteristics common to the theater of ritual and myth. Finally, I have examined an approach to the theater which has not played itself out in the works of these men, but which remains the source of a continuing revolution in Western drama.

Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Lillian Feder, "Myth as Self-Revealing Instrument,"  
Books Abroad, 48 (Winter 1974), p. 7.

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