1969

Principles and Practices in Comedy: Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett

John Michael McInerney

Loyola University Chicago

Recommended Citation
http://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/997

This Dissertation is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License.
Copyright © 1969 John Michael McInerney
PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES IN COMEDY:

SHAW, GIRAUDOUX, AND BECKETT

by

John Michael McInerney

A Dissertation Submitted to the Faculty of the Graduate School
of Loyola University in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

February

1969
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I  Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II On Shaw</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III On Giraudoux</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV On Beckett</td>
<td>146</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V Conclusion</td>
<td>210</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>221</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

Throughout this investigation, we will be examining selected comedies by Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett, and we will attempt to show how the dramatic theories of the authors affect the comic techniques employed. To put it another way: the conception of the nature and function of the theater held by these men have, we hope to show, a shaping influence on their plays. In pursuing the proof of these assertions, we will be determinedly eclectic and tentative: eclectic in the sense that we will adopt various critical opinions and viewpoints as they seem relevant without committing ourselves to them for the duration; tentative in the sense that we will not attempt to exhaust the possibilities of this type of analysis and in that we will not be at all dogmatic about the conclusions reached from this study — especially since these conclusions have to do with matters of aesthetic judgment. One more cautionary note: there will be no effort made to jam every aspect of technique into the pattern we are describing. A skilled dramatist's technique is a very complicated thing, and most frequently has a complex origin: dramatic theories make up only a part of that origin.

The plays to be discussed are: (by Shaw) Mrs. Warren’s Profession, Caesar and Cleopatra, Man and Superman, Major Barbara, Heartbreak House, Back to Methuselah, Saint Joan, and The Millionairess; (by Giraudoux) Siegfried, Intermezzo, L’Impromptu de Paris,
Ondine, La Folle de Chaillot, and L'Appolon de Bellac; (by Beckett) En Attendant Godot, Fin de Partie, All That Fall, Krapp's Last Tape, Embers, Happy Days, and Play. The techniques discussed will be grouped under the headings of Plot, Characterization and Language.

But before the discussion can begin, we must first determine that all of these plays belong to the same genre -- specifically, Comedy. We can reach this determination first by negative means, by a process of exclusion.

None of the works mentioned belongs in the category of tragedy, as that category is traditionally described. There are no noble characters engaged in empathic struggles with the fates; Shaw's characters are engaged in struggles, not with their stars, but with each other or with the mores of the people around them, and Shaw destroys the possibility of complete audience-identification with any one of them by presenting the opposition in an equally plausible, forceful manner, and by showing that even enlightened characters have their dark or ludicrous contours. Moreover, as we shall see later, they all exemplify Susanne Langer's concept of comedy as the celebration of human survival; Shaw characters are nearly always indomitably persistent.¹ The objects of attack for Giraudoux, people or institutions, are almost invariably treated as annoying but basically foolish or unworthy obstacles, not as formidable and ineluctable forces. Beckett's

characters are in the grip of a cruel and universal fate, but they are not in conflict with it; they suffer despairingly and often unknowingly. And if tragic heroes fall from a height, Beckett's characters only sink deeper into defeat. Moreover, they are so strange -- in appearance, in speech, in habit -- so removed from the context of ordinary reality that we cannot actually identify with them. We can recognize them as symbols of the human condition; we realize that we face the same dilemmas in which they flounder helplessly, but perhaps because they are so spare and so isolated, we cannot submerge ourselves in them, as we can in a Hamlet, or even in a Willy Loman.

By the same kind of negative reasoning we can remove these plays from the type of drama which focuses our attention on the immediate action taking place on the stage to the exclusion of nearly everything else, a classification that we will call, for want of a more accurate term, melodrama. In melodrama, the primary goal is to involve the audience in an incident-filled plot; however, plot is reduced to secondary importance in the plays of the three authors under discussion. Some critics have, in fact, complained that there is too much talk and very little action in Shaw's plays, and Giraudoux's works have frequently been praised for their dazzling displays of language and style, displays in which the plot is usually overshadowed. As for Beckett, it has become a cliche to say that nothing happens in his plays, but the cliche still rings true. As we watch a Beckett drama, a good deal happens to us and our awareness, but not many things take place on the stage.
By a process of elimination, then, we can say that if the plays under discussion fit into any of the standard classifications of drama, that one must be comedy. To make the identification more definite, we can also cite some positive distinguishing or separating marks of comedy that all these plays bear.

First, we notice that Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett keep us at a considerable distance from their characters and situations. We suggested earlier that the characters created by all three men are often arresting, but not capable of generating a high degree of empathy. We can now add that the distance thus established is the right one for the creation of comedy. Because we must stand back from these people and their situations, we can view them through several perspectives, including those which make them ridiculous.

Second, we can also say positively that all of these plays are laced with the kind of incongruities which produce laughter: in Shaw, among other things, we can point to those famous reversals of expectation and those equally famous flashes of wit and raillery in *Man and Superman* and *The Millionairess*, for example. Giraudoux's talent for turning the everyday, "dull" world comically inside-out is obvious to anyone who has ever read *Ondine* or the *Madwoman of Chaillot*. Even the agonies of the characters in Beckett's bare, devastated dramatic worlds are darkly humorous; these aging decrepit figures look like clowns and insist on playing out foolish, music-hall routines and word games. They reveal their anguish in the terms of these jokes, so their plight itself takes on the shape of a joke -- a bitter one, but laughable just the
same. Let us recall again here: we are not maintaining that one can discover in these plays the secret of comedy in general or of what generates all laughter. We are simply saying that the incongruities in these works are capable of being funny. This assertion, indeed, is supported by the fact that producers and actors work Back to Methuselah, the Madwoman of Chaillot, Waiting for Godot, and the others to produce laughter, and that audiences generally respond.  

Finally, and here we move more obviously into the realm of the characteristics of comedy, we observe that the plays of Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett share another attribute frequently found in dramatic comedy — they remind us that we are, after all, earthly, limited creatures. Tragedies highlight the noble side of man; even though the anguished tragic hero, whether he is Oedipus, Hamlet, or Faustus, always loses the contest with the fates, he is invariably godlike in the attempt. But if these heroes show us the rarefied heights to which human dignity, passion, daring, and even folly, can climb, comedies, in contrast, are usually concerned with the foibles and the weaker side of man. Frequently, even the heroes in comedies demonstrate that they are as foolish, as mistaken, as petty as most of us are at times. To make their point almost painfully clear, comic authors often puncture our easily-

---

2To support this assertion, we need only to recall that such masters of light comedy as Mr. Rex Harrison won their reputations, in part, by performing in Shaw's plays, that the Madwoman of Chaillot was described by the N.R.T. as a "glowing French comedy of dreams come true," and that, in its first production in the U.S., Godot was billed as "the laugh hit of two continents," and featured Bert Lahr.
inflatable pride in the spiritual capacities of man by dwelling on our annoying physical problems and limitations. The grand figures in tragedies barely seem to have bodies at all, but the people in comedies are commonly and embarrassingly troubled by lameness, or deafness, or stomach trouble.³

All three of the authors under discussion display this trait with gusto. Shaw mercilessly exposes the slips and crotchets of nearly everybody in his plays -- even those of the people who think as he himself did: his Caesar disposes of revolutions in brisk Shavian fashion, but does not like to be reminded of his baldness; Jack Tanner is a made-to-order Shavian radical who is also a gabby gull for Ann Whitefield. Giraudoux is especially fond of making pompous people look ridiculous, as anyone who has ever enjoyed Hans, the knight in Ondine, or the Inspector in Intermezzo can testify. When, for example, the Inspector grandly asks the town officials to read the letter from the government that turns out to be a letter from his mistress, the forces of order, common sense, and ostentatious dignity are in amusing disarray.⁴ Beckett carries the tendency to extremes that remain humorous but are, at the same time, disturbing and moving. His shabby, bedraggled people -- Estragon with his swollen feet, blind, cruel, crippled Hamm, Krapp with his ludicrous addiction to bananas, etc. -- show us mankind immersed in existential mire, mankind in collapse, with his hopes, his

³Witness Noah's complaints about his pains in the Wakefield Mystery Play and old Gobbo in Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice.

⁴See the Valency translation (The Enchanted) in Giraudoux-Four Plays, (New York, 1958), pp. 133-134.
pretensions, his defenses stripped away.

For all these negative and positive reasons, we can say that the plays to be considered belong in the broad range of dramatic comedy. Now, we can proceed to place them more particularly.

In attempting to determine what kind of comedy they exemplify, and, indeed, if they can all be put into the same classification, our task is magnified by the fact that neither the proposed classes nor the plays being classified permit rigid, entirely homogeneous descriptions. It is impossible to say with a high degree of precision exactly what fits and what does not fit in low comedy or in society comedy, for instance, because so many different plays seem to qualify in a general way for several categories. In the case at hand, the usually urbane G. B. Shaw often indulges in low-comedy slapstick, as in the scene where the millionairess (of *The Millionairess*) throws her gourmet-admirer down a flight of steps. Giraudoux's romantic comedies frequently seem pleasantly escapist, but there are also strong traces of cynicism, in his treatment of even sympathetic characters. Alcmena and her husband are serene at the close of *Amphytrion* 38, unaware that their precious marital fidelity has been twice violated without their knowledge. In Beckett, low-life tramps grovel along in primitive routines, and then suddenly stop long enough to utter philosophical aphorisms, such as, "They give birth astride a grave. The light gleams an instant, then it is night once more."5

Still, it is possible to place these complex plays in one

class: without denying that they contain other elements, we will call the comedies of Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett **High Comedies.** Of course, this is a vague, highly debatable term, and I do not propose to define it conclusively here. Let us just say that, strictly for our present purposes, **high comedy** will refer to those comic plays which are concerned with ideas in a major way, and which seem designed to stimulate thought and the growth of public awareness as well as laughter.

This definition is loose, and open to all sorts of questions, qualifications, etc., but its very lack of precision makes it spacious enough to include some elusive concepts and an amorphous group of plays. Indeed, a number of critics have found the term useful for these reasons. One is Wylie Sypher, who evidently has such an understanding of high comedy in mind when he says, "The high comic vision of life is humane, an achievement of man as a social being."* Theodore W. Hatlen is even more explicit:

> High comedy has a different basis for objectivity. Its appeal is intellectual. The reaction to it arises out of perception and insight rather than emotion.**

Accordingly, we will now attempt to justify our classification, by showing that the comedies of Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett are meant to be persuasive, to lead audiences to acceptance, or at least recognition, of their authors' ideas.

---


It seems scarcely necessary to dwell on the content of Shaw's concerns. In the course of a very long lifetime, he did change his emphases, becoming, in the main, more radical as a political thinker and a philosopher. Still, his Marxism, his belief in creative evolution, his iconoclastic views on morals, manners, and social classes, his theories about women, and all the rest, were cherished from start to finish, were explained very clearly in endless essays by the author himself, and have been re-explained by legions of biographers and critics. Moreover, it is almost transparently evident that these theories became the subjects of his plays. The Millionaires "demonstrates" that making money is inevitable for vital capitalists, just as Back to Methuselah dramatizes the future of creative evolution.

We should stress, however, that the ideas in Shaw's plays are supposed to capture our attention, not just serve as springboards or backdrops for comic pyrotechnics, despite what we read from time to time about Shaw being simply an entertainer whose philosophizing can be ignored. Shaw's own testimony confirms this:

Now there are ideas at the back of my plays, ... without a stock of ideas, mind cannot operate and plays cannot exist. The quality of a play is the quality of its ideas. ... One playwright is capable of nothing deeper than short-lived fictitious police and divorce court cases of murder and adultery. Another can rise to the masterpieces of Aeschylus, Euripides, and Aristophanes, to Hamlet, Faust, Peer Gynt, and -- well, no matter: all these having to be not only entertaining, but intensely didactic (what Mr. Rattigan calls plays with ideas.)

Again, this tart self-defense is not simply a facile exercise in the art of critic-confounding; it represents a frequently-stated

---

6 Shaw, Shaw on Theatre, Edited by West, pp. 291-292.
conviction and a continuing practice. Witness:

I tried slum landlordism, doctrinaire Free Love (pseudo-Ibsenism), prostitution, militarism, marriage, history, current politics, natural Christianity, natural and individual character, paradoxes of conventional society, husband-hunting, questions of conscience, professional delusions and impostures, all worked into a series of comedies of manners in the classic fashion.  

If Giraudoux's plays are not so topical or so socially-based as Shaw's, they are just as intellectual; indeed, they are more directly philosophical than most of Shaw's efforts. Whether his topic is fundamental national character (Siegfried), or the surprisingly well-balanced virtues of an ideal bourgeois family life (Amphytryon 38), or the tension in the human soul arising from the call of the heroically ideal existence and the attraction of a comfortably human life (Intermezzo), or the limitations of man's capacity for nobility and spiritual intensity (Ordine), or the emotional secrets of every man (The Apollo of Bellac), Giraudoux reaches immediately for the pure essence of the type, the quality, or the idea. The secret of a good life, he believes, lies in discovering and submitting to the set terms and firm conditions of our situations: "The innocence of a being is its absolute adaptation of the universe in which it lives." Even for those civilized human beings who are too wise and experienced to be still really innocent, the goal is conformity to both what is and what could be:

It is a state of modesty which moves the civilized man to live according to nature . . . to assign, by a just evaluation of


human capacity, ... the least possible to life ... and, on
the other hand ... so as not to complicate it (life) on earth
with other than human exigencies, to exercise, without harming
others and by gymnastic skill, the qualities which would be
necessary if life were just, agreeable, and eternal, such as
courage, dispatch, some parsimony, charity.9

And in case anyone doubted that Giraudoux regarded these ideas as
the key to his plays, let us cite his comment to Mr. Eustis, the
American critic, about the priorities in production: "The impor-
tant thing is not how you do it, but how to get the idea over the
footlights."10

In passing from Shaw, who merged economic theories with
philosophical speculations about "thought vortexes," to Giraudoux,
who, from the beginning of his career, was perpetually concerned
with essences and archetypes, we have set up a kind of ascending
order of philosophically-based drama. Beckett brings the trend to
a peak. In his plays, the familiar, comforting shell of society
and routine surrounding nearly everyone in the twentieth-century
has been lifted away. Gone are the social connections, the personal
histories, the mundane concerns that normally keep us too occu-
pied and too pacified to confront ourselves. Indeed, the tramps in
Godot, Winnie in Happy Days, and the three figures in the urns in
Play, etc. are not even permitted to consider, much less aspire
toward, any proposed ideal, any Aristotelian, fixed nature. They

9Giraudoux, Siegfried et le Limousin (Oeuvre Romanesque, I),
p. 514.

10Giraudoux, from Morton Eustis, "Jean Giraudoux -- Play-
wright, Novelist and Diplomat," Theatre Arts Monthly (Feb., 1938),
p. 132.
all must concentrate on dealing with the fundamental fact of existence, the fundamental fact of philosophy -- consciousness and sensitivity, especially to pain. In Beckett's dramatic worlds, at the barren roadside of Godot, on the barren desert of Happy Days, systems of thought, religions, societies, emotions, languages, logic, and all other distractions/consolations make no sense and have no validity. There is only confused perceptivity and pain, and these must be wondered at, if not by the characters, then by the spectators.

And here, having suggested how it can be demonstrated that Beckett's plays, like those of Shaw and Giraudoux, are constructed upon and around serious intellectual concerns, we can pause to summarize, briefly, the background building process. So far, we have attempted to show that the works under discussion are comedies, what some of their comic qualities (distance, emphasis on human creaturehood, etc.) are, and that they are "high comedies." Expanding now upon this last assertion, we can proceed to an examination of the relationships between these plays and their audiences -- as intended by Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett. In other words, let us now ask what each man hopes to achieve, with regard to spectators or readers, through his plays?

To begin: Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett all feel that the theater's most important function is to express the author's vision or convictions. "Express" is the right word for this generalization, because it has a range of meanings broad enough to embrace three different viewpoints on exactly what should be conveyed across
the footlights, and how it should be done. We will explore those viewpoints, and from that beginning we will attempt to proceed to the tentative conclusion that each man, in his own fashion, belongs to the comedy as "correction" school; that they all want to impress their ideas on their audiences in the hope of bringing about useful change.

Shaw, of course, insists most strongly on the didactic function of the theater. For him, plays were juvenile time-wasters if they did not deal with serious themes in a deliberately educative manner. Although his irreverent Irish wit sometimes got the better of his earnest intentions, his view of the theater's status as the teaching agency of the social, philosophical and religious revolution always endured, no matter what ludicrous situation occupied his stage:

I must, however, warn my readers that my attacks are directed against themselves, not against my stage figures. . . . If people are rotting and starving in all directions, and nobody else has the heart or brains to make a disturbance about it, the great writers must. In short what is forcing our poets to follow Shelley in becoming political and social agitators, and to turn the theatre into a platform for propaganda and an arena for discussion, is that . . . the political machinery . . . is so old-fashioned . . . that social questions never get solved until the pressure becomes so desperate that even governments recognize the necessity for moving. And to bring the pressures to this point, the poets must lend a hand to the few who are willing to do public work in the stages at which nothing but abuse is to be gained by it.11

The above is certainly a frank affirmation of Shaw's belief that the playwright should use his plays to convince his unsuspecting audiences of the truth, as he sees it, and to move them to

action. But Shaw was not content to let matters rest there, not content to have the theater acting as a kind of subliminal medium of public persuasion; as the following remarks indicate, he felt that the dramatic artist should also probe and stimulate the deepest emotions, the most profound reaches of thought -- in short, the dramatist, in Shaw's view, had what might be called the mission of an evangelist:

Indeed art has never been great when it was not providing an iconography for a live religion. . . . Ever since Shakespeare, playwrights have been struggling with the same lack of religion; and many of them were forced to become mere panderers and sensation-mongers because, though they had higher ambitions, they could find no better subject-matter. . . . But this (his own early success with plays about current social topics), though it occupied me and established me professionally, did not constitute me an iconographer of the religion of my time, and thus fulfill my natural function as an artist. . . . Accordingly, in 1901, I took the legend of Don Juan in its Mozartian form and made it a dramatic parable of Creative Evolution.12

Jean Giraudoux could never be so publicly intense and obviously dedicated. The young student who did not like his compatriots to know how long he worked on his compositions became the man who would claim airily that he only worked at being a playwright one month out of the year. With this cast of mind, Giraudoux could not, and would not have wanted, to mount a platform in a park and harangue a throng on the merits of this or that philosophy, as Shaw could and did; nor would Giraudoux ever seek to transform the stage into a debate-platform, as some say Shaw did.13

12Shaw, "Preface" to Back to Methuselah, pp. 63-70.

Again, the glow of his style, the pleasant, frequently playful mood that flows uninterruptedly through his comedies, and their air of being somehow raised above the rough textures and sharp angles of ordinary reality, invite us to call Giraudoux an "escapist." Some of his critical comments also cooperate with this impression; after complaining, in *L'Impromptu de Paris*, that the state sends people to the theater in the evening worn out from the day's failures, crises, wars, and advertising, Giraudoux has Jouvet declare:

And we in exchange, what do we do with them? We soothe them, cheer them. We give to these downtrodden slaves all the might of colors, sounds, airs. We give to these automatons hearts of flesh with all of their components well-checked, with generosity, tenderness, hope. We send them back sensible, handsome, omnipotent.14

As is often the case concerning Giraudoux, however, the easy generalization covers less than the whole truth. The remarks quoted above are almost immediately followed by: "We give them equality and truth, those before the tears and the laughter."15 In his own restrained fashion, he did believe that the theater had a kind of educative function:

The Theatre is the only form of moral or artistic education for an entire nation. It is the only evening course valid or valuable for adults and old men, the sole means by which the humblest and least educated people may be put in contact with the highest conflicts, and it creates a lay religion, a liturgy and its saints, of sentiments and passions. There are people who dream, but for those who do not dream, there remains the theatre.16

15Ibid., p. 131.
Notice again the phrase "a lay religion . . . of sentiments and passions." Although at first glance they are surprisingly reminiscent of Shaw, these words are actually indicative of Giraudoux's special view of what drama should communicate; as might be expected of a man preoccupied with ideals and essences, Giraudoux wants to turn the audience's attention inward, into themselves, not outward on society. He seeks to educate our sensibilities and our emotional capacities. His admirers, concerned that he has been regarded by some as no more than an unworldly master of style, have occasionally attempted to paint him as a political theorist or philosopher, but these ingenious defenses are always undercut by Giraudoux himself:

The lucky thing is that the real public does not understand, it feels. . . . The theater is not a theorem, but a spectacle, not a lesson, but a filter. That it has less need to enter into your spirit than into your imagination and your senses, and . . . it is for that reason, in my opinion, that the talent of writing is indispensable to it, for it is the style that brings back upon the soul of the spectators a thousand reflections, a thousand irradiations that they have no more need to comprehend than the spot of sunshine coming through the window.  

Still, it would be wiser to say that if Giraudoux wants to soothe men, it is because he wants them relaxed enough to start learning to dream and to love more intensely, and they cannot do this until, with his help, they recognize and reject the blindness and hardness encrusting the world around them. He himself indicates that his object is the reform of society when we read still further in *L'Impromptu*:


I ask, in the name of the . . . theater that the State . . .
give us great desires, and require of us great deeds. . . . The
destiny of France is to be the nuisance of the world. . . . The
mission of France is accomplished, if in the evening upon going
to bed, every complacent bourgeois, every rich priest, every
successful tyrant says to himself as he pulls up the sheet:
everything wouldn’t be going too badly at all, but there is that
cursed France, and you imagine the opposite of this dialogue in
the bed of the exile, the poet, the oppressed. . . . all is not
lost if each evening the parvenu, the extortionist, the cad must
say to himself: Everything would be going well, but there is
the theater, and if the youth, the scholar, the modest house-
holder, the brilliant householder, the one that life has dis-
appointed, the one that hopes in life, says to himself: every-
thing would be going badly, but there is the theater.19

In this connection, we should also remember that the whimsical ideal
worlds presented in most of his plays serve as models of sorts.
(Intermezzo and The Madwoman contain excellent examples of this
tendency.) For these reasons, then, we can say that Giraudoux is
a gentle, unconventional member of the "corrective" school of
comedy.

As different as their concepts of the theater’s expressive
task were, Shaw and Giraudoux agreed that the theater can and
should have a beneficial or enlightening effect on its audiences.
One believed that the drama should convince people to become Marxist
in their political thinking and to cooperate actively with Creative
Evolution’s Life Force, and the other wanted to develop man’s
capacity for feeling and dreaming, but both held out hope that time
spent in the theater would help audiences lead happier, more aware
lives.

Samuel Beckett has no such optimistic visions. There is no
hope in his universe, and there is none in his art either. Since he

does not recognize the possibility of an ideal existence or even an improved existence, he can have no thought of showing us the way to one on the stage. In fact, he is not even sure that art can succeed according to its own, self-enclosed standards: "To be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail."20

However, he does have, at least in what might be called an inchoate sense, something of an exalted conception of the artist and his task: "The artist who stakes his being comes from no particular place. And he has no brothers."21 And again: "Art is the sun, moon, and stars of the mind, the whole mind."22 If the artist risks his whole being in the performing of his art, then the creative work must be something of considerable importance and impact. In what way? For whom? To what purpose? Beckett never answers these questions directly, but we do get some indications from occasional cryptic remarks. For example, we learn that Beckett does not believe that art can communicate, at least not in the traditional sense of conveying concepts from one mind to another, without changing them radically:

And art is the apotheosis of solitude. There is no communication because there are no vehicles of communication. Even on the rare occasions when word and gesture happen to be valid expressions of personality, they lose their significance on their passage through the caustic of the personality that is opposed to them.23

---

The above is one of many remarks among Beckett's critical observations revealing his belief that the artist's primary responsibility is to himself and his own experience. He seems to hold with those who declare that art must be above all a valid expression of the artist's search for meaning within his own life, and that he (the artist) should not be concerned with "pleasing" or "instructing" anyone else.

To some extent, this is undeniably Beckett's position. He does lay first stress upon the necessity of searching out and capturing his own personal sense of anguish in a literary form; again, a man who has never bothered to be scrutable or accessible in his works, and who permits only a few people to know his addresses, does not fit the description of the typical "teaching artist."24

And yet, Beckett publishes his works, and indeed, even takes care to translate them from French into English or from English into French. Moreover, although he does produce novels, a more "private" art form, he also continues to turn out plays, which are built on the premise that an audience will be present. Are we to believe that so unworldly a man (Shenker records that his clothes often have that "slept-in" look.25) would take such trouble solely for the money involved? Again, his art does not seem especially personal; instead, his characters, as we shall establish more carefully later, are most frequently unparticularized "types"


in which a great many men can find their own traits. Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm, Clov, Winnie, and the rest do not have personal histories or peculiar problems; they speak only of universal questions (like the relevance of religion), and common complaints (like boredom and loneliness).

Perhaps we are given a clue to his more basic position in this statement of his aims: "I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-caner (somebody who cannot)." The key word is anyone; Beckett clearly implies here that his intuition into the absurdity of the human condition is shared by most other men. Not only himself, but all other men too, discover that they are ignorant and impotent. When we combine this attitude with his fondness for theatrical forms and conventions (like the clown tradition relied on so noticeably in Waiting for Godot), and the widely-applicable character types he creates, we can come to the conclusion that, in writing about his personal despair, he intends to shock the people in his audiences into awareness that they too must despair. This is the high mission for which the artist gambles his being, the reason why art is so central to the mind -- if art cannot communicate concepts, it can convey the shock of a common awareness.

When we next attempt to understand the intended relationship between Beckett's drama and the state of society, we encounter more difficulties. At least on the surface, his plays don't seem to explore or reflect society at all. They do not take place in

26 Ibid., p. 3.
any recognizably social setting, and social issues are neither mentioned nor represented. Beckett insists that, "The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction. And art is the apoth­ esis of solitude."\(^{27}\) His characters, who invariably and inexorably tunnel into themselves, comply with a vengeance. They do not prompt us to find answers to urban problems or the nuclear threat; indeed, their halting, painfully metaphysical dialogues and monologues compel us to ask the oldest, most universal questions once more: "What does it mean to exist?" "How can we know anything?" "Is any action, and word real?" And these problems have nothing to do with the manipulation of circumstances or the restructuring of phenomena.

Nevertheless, Beckett's introspective people and their constructed arenas are so strange, so opposed to what we are accustomed to, that the contrast seems to bring our gregarious, exploding world more clearly into view. In Happy Days, for example, because Winnie and Willie, alone on a desert, toy with a toothbrush, a magnifying glass, and a newspaper as if they were the artifacts of a lost civilization, we must wonder if our products and institutions actually are that useless and irrelevant. If Beckett's unworl­ dly vision rests far out at one pole of human concern, it still calls attention by its very position to the other pole -- where the community and its headlines dominate. Again, as we suggested earlier, despite their skeletal nature, Beckett's characters are twentieth-century everymen; in their lonelines and their existential

\(^{27}\)Beckett, Proust, p. 47.
preoccupations they typify the modern man confronted on one side by
the oblivion of the bomb and on the other by the oblivion of life
in the cold-steel warrens of technological societies. Ruby Cohn
puts it this way:

On Samuel Beckett's planet, matter is minimal, physiology and
physiology barely support life. . . . But all the cluttered com-
plexity of our own planet is required to educate the taste that
can savor the unique comic flavor of Beckett's creation. Our
world, . . . so stingly admitted to Beckett's work, is never-
theless the essential background for appreciation of that work.
. . . . His simplified syntax mocks the simple-minded syntax of
advertisements and abridgements in our contemporary tower of
Babel. . . . By the middle of the twentieth century we have
become skeptical about expansion, . . . All faiths are totter-
ing -- religion and science, personality and ideology, family
and nation, freedom and imperatives, subject and object -- and
Beckett's prose totters with them.28

We cannot push the point too far, and it is still certainly
arguable, but we can say that Beckett's plays are, in some ways,
astringent, radical medicine for the malaise of modern life-in-the
mass. They attack our presuppositions -- about technology and
communication, about love and God, about knowing and being -- and
as our cardboard props crumble around us, we are challenged to
confront absurdity -- our own and that of the world -- in more
meaningful ways. Thus, if Beckett's works can be said to have any
relation to society, it is that they are intended to produce mem-
bers of society newly aware that they have to deal with despair,
including the despair of the isolated individual in our programmed
crowds, and the despair experienced by any feeling person who is
compelled to press to the limits of our conventions and patterns

---

28 Ruby Cohn, Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut (New Jersey,
1962), pp. 3-5.
(as the tramps in Godot do when they test the claims of religion, and as Hamm does when parents, the process of artistic creation, and even "pain killers" fail him in Endgame). As such, the plays are correctives, and Beckett himself can be placed in the corrective school of comedy, even though he rests near its darkest border.

We have now outlined our reasons for maintaining that Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett all produce "high comedies," and that they all can be grouped with those artists who seek to make dramatic comedy an instrument for public expression and education. Having established, or at least suggested, this link, this common ground for all three, let us proceed to examine each one's work individually. Specifically, let us attempt to determine how each playwright fulfills his theories concerning the nature and requirements of drama, and his didactic or corrective intentions with regard to his audiences, in his works.

We can conclude this chapter with a few remarks on the value of such a study. First, the conclusions developed from this examination of the interactions between theories and intentions on the one hand, and techniques on the other should bring us closer to a complete understanding of the plays we analyze. We should be better able to comprehend why they take the forms and directions they do when we know more about where the authors were aiming.

Second, this study ought to make one basis for evaluating the work of Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett much clearer and more workable. When we grasp more precisely what they wanted to achieve and how they sought to proceed, we should be able to estimate their
success, from that angle, more confidently.

Third, the procedures of this study may prove valuable to anyone wishing to conduct similar studies of these or other playwrights.

Fourth, this investigation will explore the wide range of devices, styles, attitudes, and forms open to the dramatist who wants to use comedy for serious, educative purposes. In the process, we may throw new light on the limitations and possibilities of "high comedy" of the "corrective" school. (We will develop this point particularly in the last chapter.)

These are the hopes and promises. Now we will proceed to the fulfillment and delivery.
Of all the masks that George Bernard Shaw wore during a long lifetime of image-making, none was more successful than that of the invincible rationalist. His early contemporaries, of course, declared his plays to be propaganda debates, not real drama at all. A newer generation, superficially enlightened and unable to be shocked by a celebrity they had grown up knowing about, decided he was simply a delightfully irreverent spoofer, but even they recognized that Shaw always played with logic, with ideas, with rational opinions.

The rationalist mask also fitted well with his persistently self-publicized subsidiary roles: i.e. socialist lecturer, apologist for "Creative Evolution," popularizer of phonetic spelling and speech education, and habitual critic of all events cultural and political. Yeats' famous nightmare vision of Shaw as a sewing machine clacking on endlessly may have seemed quite apt, occasionally, but everyone admitted that his clackings were determinedly rational.

Finally, we would almost have to assume that Shaw was a thorough-going rationalist because of the things he opposes. Ranging from conventional religion to conventional politics, from heroic soldiers to comfortable "mother-women," from Grubby philistines to precious art-lovers, the gallery of Shaw's targets includes almost every visible type of mindlessness. As soon as he uncovered an entrenched convention, encrusted with murky
sentiment but soft in the intellectual center, G.B.S. began slashing away. He gave no quarter -- not to Mrs. Warren's alternately "courageous" and weeping excuses for her commercialized degradation, and not to those liberals who were too righteous and too comfortable in their opposition to monolithic power, whether in St. Joan's France or in Stalin's Russia.

Nor was this logic-bound Persona simply a pose, however much Shaw delighted in displaying it and exaggerating its features. His lifelong fidelity to his key ideas (or their logical development), and his matter-of-factly selfless willingness to spend his time, energy, and cash to propagate them, demonstrate that he was quite serious when he enthroned thought at the pinnacle of human evolution in Back to Methuselah. We will discover in succeeding chapters that Giraudoux and Beckett are equally loyal to their key themes, but not nearly so committed to Reason -- Giraudoux being more preoccupied with feelings and dreams, and Beckett with existential anguish.

And it is probably their rationalist bias and basis that give his plays the schematized frameworks they seem to rest upon. Because Shaw is devoted to reason and to tidy logic, a representative of one viewpoint has to be balanced by a representative of the opposite viewpoint: Don Juan the realist must play against Satan the romantic; the radical Barnabas brothers have to counterweight temporizers like Burge and Lubin.

Similarly, in any Shaw play, very little is left strictly to the audience's imagination: every situation, every opinion
(worth and unworthy) every force, and every person is explained clearly and in some detail. We know exactly why Joan recants her confession, and precisely how the millionairess earns her money. Shaw was not one to trust mute symbolizing.

It is perfectly plausible, then, to maintain that Reasoning is both a Shavian goal and a Shavian artistic principle; Shaw wrote his plays to enhance the force and attractiveness of his various reasoned positions, and he uses distinctively rational techniques, as we shall see, to stitch those plays together.

One should not, however, declare that Shaw was a rationalist and then go on to other matters. To do so would be to ignore the emotional temperature of his reasoning -- and that is a serious mistake for anyone who wants to understand Shaw or the plays. Shaw once said, for instance: "What you will find (in his plays) ... is the belief that intellect is essentially a passion, and that the search for enlightenment ... is far more interesting and enduring than, say, the sexual pursuit of a woman by a man." And in Mrs. Warren's Profession, the concluding glimpse of Vivie, at her work table, reveals once more her unsentimental vision, unyielding determination, and invincibly practical mind. No Hamlet would ever accuse her of frailty; she seems to be the perfect Shavian New Woman in her rejection of silly "feminine softness" and embracing of cooly rational reality.

And yet, in the last act, when Frank and Praed are attempting to talk Vivie out of her new career, they discuss the two

---

1Shaw on Theatre, p. 184.
operating gospels in the world -- the Gospel of Art and the Gospel of Getting On. Frank asks Viv to give him a dose of the second:

Frank: Have another try to make a successful man of me, Viv. Come: let's have it all: energy, thrift, foresight, self-respect, character. Don't you hate people who have no character, Viv?

Fraed: (remonstrating) My dear Frank: aren't you a little sympathetic?

Vivie: No; it's good for me. It keeps me from being sentimental.

Frank: (bantering her) Checks your strong natural propensity that way, don't it?

Vivie: (almost hysterically) Oh yes: go on: don't spare me. I was sentimental for one moment in my life -- beautifully sentimental -- by moonlight; and now --

Let us suggest that what Frank says about Vivie can be applied to Shaw, too. Just as she rechannels her emotional responses into a thorough-going, quite passionate embrace of mathematics, Shaw turned his own strong enthusiasms away from romance and sex, and enlisted them in the service of thought, Marxism, and the Life Force. In The Sanity of Art he himself declares that life is "not the fulfillment of a moral law or of the deductions of reason but the satisfaction of a passion in us of which we can give no account whatsoever."³

Unlike most of his twentieth-century contemporaries, and, indeed, unlike many great dramatic artists from every era -- including Sophocles, Shakespeare, and his own favorite Ibsen -- Shaw never regards man as a doubtful wanderer in a dark, trackless, probably malevolent universe. He reacted to traditional

²Mrs. Warren's Profession from Plays Unpleasant (Baltimore, 1961), p. 274.

expressions of existential despair -- such as Shakespeare's "As Flies to Wanton boys, so are we to the gods, they kill us for their sport." -- with uncomprehending exasperation, and one is certain he would have felt the same way about Ionesco, Genet, and Beckett. Let Giraudoux be gently despairing about the chances for complete human happiness; let Beckett cry out from his Wasteland country -- Shaw will have none of it. No matter what the style or rationale, all nihilism is alien and irrelevant to Shaw. With a certainty and a buoyancy unmatched since the days of those confident Desists with their well-knit chains of being, or perhaps since medieval dramatists constructed their cycles of sin and redemption, Shaw looks at the universe and sees purposeful order and the promise of a better life ahead -- if only men will give up their ruinous daydreams and get down to evolutionary business.

This happy conviction, when combined with this aesthetically intense reaction against social evils, lent Shaw unusual ardor. When he is urging people to cooperate with the purposes of the Life Force, or when he is picturing the new order it will bring about, Shaw does not really sound like a scientist or a rational philosopher; he is too insistent, too eager for that. The intensity of Eve's speech in Back to Methuselah on what the race will come to is a good example:

They (the dreamers) can remember their dreams. They can dream without sleeping. They have not will enough to create

---

instead of dreaming; but the serpent said that every dream could be willed into creation by those strong enough to believe in it. There are others who cut reeds of different lengths and blow through them, making lovely patterns of sound in the air; and some of them can weave the patterns together, sounding three reeds at the same time, and raising my soul to things for which I have no words. Man need not always live by bread alone. There is something else. We do not yet know what it is; but some day we shall find out; and then we will live on that alone; and there shall be no more digging nor spinning, nor fighting nor killing.\(^5\)

The hope in these sentences is the hope of the missionary. The conviction glows with the serenity of faith. It is ever thus with Shaw: inside the cynically knowing jester, inside the inveterate logician, resides the prophet of salvation.

And Shaw the prophet is like all prophets -- a man of intense emotion, a man whose longings, romantic and otherwise, have been transmuted into passionate idealism, with their force undiminished. How else can we account for the depth of feeling in his Joan's final plea: "O God that madest this beautiful earth, when will it be ready to receive thy saints? How long, O Lord, how long?"\(^6\) Or how else can you account for the fact that Adolphus Cusins sounds much more passionate about the poor and power than he ever does about Major Barbara?

This is the second major principle of Shavian temperament and art: religious passion. It is the natural supplement to his carefully rational approach. First, Shaw turns an unsparing intelligence on the defects and pretenses of society. He then offers solutions, compounded equally of advanced reason and rather


wishful optimism. Finally, he surrounds the criticisms and the proposals with the aura of religious fervor.

And so, Shaw's dramatic art is designed to serve both principles; it is the vehicle for rational argument and spiritual enthusiasm. As we have already seen in Chapter one, Shaw himself acknowledges that "there are ideas at the back of my plays." As we have also seen, Man and Superman and Back to Methuselah were written explicitly to advance the cause of evolutionary religion.

Shaw does not announce the emotional content of his work so readily or so frequently. Still, he does recognize the element of feeling occasionally:

Drama is no mere setting up of the camera to nature: it is the presentation in parable of the conflict between Man's will and his environment: in a word, of problem. . . . Later on, when he (the serious dramatist) has driven the tea services out and made the people who had come to use the theatre as a drawing room understand that . . . they . . . are the intruders, he has to face the accusation that his plays ignore human feeling, an illusion produced by that very resistance of fact and law to human feeling which creates drama. . . . Mrs. Warren's Profession is no mere theorem, but a play of instincts and temperaments in conflict with each other and with a flinty social problem that never yields an inch to mere sentiment."  

The only thing our analysis need add to the above self-analysis is that sometimes the characters' emotions are not the only ones in conflict with intractable reality; frequently, Shaw's own half-scientific, half-religious feelings enter the lists as well. (Later, we will compare this position with Giraudoux's

---

7Shaw on Theatre, p. 290.
8Preface to Back to Methuselah, p. 70.
9Preface to Mrs. Warren's Profession, pp. 197-199.
theory about the sensitizing capabilities of art, and with
Beckett's somewhat contradictory insistence on the futility and
necessity of the aesthetic attempt.)

Therefore, since Shaw viewed all the arts as fundamentally
didactic devices -- "I am convinced that fine art is the subtlest,
the most seductive, the most effective instrument of moral propa-
ganda in the world."\(^\text{10}\) -- when we attempt to recount Shaw's theory
of dramatic art, we should begin by setting forth his two most
important didactic goals: to give people ideas, both negative
(about the current state of society); and positive (about the way
it might be); and to give them the mystical or spiritual passion
that will energize them to act upon the new ideas. We should
expect, then, that his theatrical techniques will be shaped so
that they can best serve these propagandistic aims.

The next most important premise in Shaw's dramatic theory
has to do with what he saw as the natural medium of expression for
the kind of dramatic confrontation described above: conversation.

Witness:

I find myself possessed of a theme in the following manner.
I am pushed by a natural need to set to work to write down
the conversations that come into my head unaccountably. At
first, I hardly know the speakers, and cannot find names for
them.\(^\text{11}\)

This confession, even allowing for Shavian exaggeration,
is a fairly good indication of the primacy of the word in Shavian
plays. Shaw does not mine the vein of theatrical suggestion or

\(^{10}\)\text{Ibid.}, p. 185.

\(^{11}\)\text{Shaw on Theatre}, p. 116.
indirection, at least not consistently or in any depth. His effects are primarily achieved in precise, clearly-structured language. Further, he wanted actors and directors to respect the position of the dialogue. In a letter to a fellow-author-director on "The Art of Rehearsal", he observes:

Many star actors have surprisingly little of what I call positive skill, and an amazing power of suggestion. You can safely write a play in which the audience is assured that the heroine is the most wonderful creature on earth, full of exquisite thoughts, . . . though . . . you find yourself unable to invent a single speech or action that would surprise you from your aunt. No matter; a star actress at $1000 a week will do all that for you. She will utter your twaddle with such an air, and look such unutterable things between the lines, and dress so beautifully and move so enigmatically and enchantingly, that the imagination of the audience will supply more than Shakespeare could have written . . . And you may be tempted to say: 'If this woman is so wonderful when she is making bricks without straw, what heights would she not reach if I were to give her straw in abundance?' But if you did, you would be rudely disillusioned. You would have to say to the actress: 'Here suggestion is no use here. I don't ask you to suggest anything: I give you the actual things to do and say. I don't want you to look as if you could say wonderful things if you uttered your thoughts: I give you both the thoughts and the words; and you must get them across the footlights.' On these conditions your star might be dreadfully at a loss.\(^\text{12}\)

Again, in The Quintessence of Ibsenism, he affirms that the technical achievement of Ibsen and his followers was to infuse probing moral discussion into the structure of the action in drama.\(^\text{13}\)

His advice to various actors on the way in which gesture and facial expression can smooth over awkward passages of dialogue -- see his suggestions to Ellen Terry on how to cut and manage

\(^{12}\)Ibid., p. 154.

the awkward patches of *Cymbeline* -- demonstrates that Shaw did have a properly visual theatrical imagination; still, there is no doubt that he saw drama as a series of conversations, however relieved and embellished. (This is an attitude he shares with Giraudoux, who was -- as we shall see -- equally convinced of the primacy of dialogue.)

What did Shaw think about those fundamental dramatic forms, Comedy and Tragedy? His opinions were quite traditional; in an essay called "Tolstoy: Tragedian or Comedian?" he declares flatly:

> The classical definition is, of tragedy, drama that purges the soul by pity and terror, and, of comedy, drama that chas- tens the morals by ridicule. These classical definitions, illustrated by Eschylus-Sophocles-Euripides *versus* Aristophanes in the ancient Greek theatre, and Corneille-Racine *versus* Moliere in French theatre, are still much the best the critic can work with.

When it comes to tragi-comedy, however, Shaw expands familiar observations about the persistent and successful British habit of mixing comedy with tragedy into a definition that is really his own. He feels that the tragi-comic artist is "a satirical rogue and a discoverer of essentially tragic ironies," an artist who exposes man's more harmful inanities and society's darker foibles with melancholy or even bitter humor. This kind of artist is a very serious man with a serious purpose, and the plays produced in this vein -- Shaw finally calls them Comedies -- reach the summit of theatrical accomplishment. Indicating once more that even


15*ibid.*, p. 252.
this fresh description has classical roots, Shaw makes his point concrete by comparing All's Well That Ends Well with Romeo and Juliet — and making the former come out ahead.¹⁶

Similarly, one cannot imagine Shaw enjoying or approving modern attempts to change radically the traditional modes and forms of the stage. He would have had little patience with "non-matrixed," "non-structured" happenings, or with the most therapeutic "game theater." He was, as a matter of fact, a thorough-going traditionalist in matters of form also, one who never pretended to have invented new gimmicks or fresh devices:

Technically, I do not find myself able to proceed otherwise than as former playwrights have done. True, my plays have the latest mechanical improvements ... But my stories are the old stories; my characters are the familiar harlequin and columbine, clown and pantaloon ... my stage tricks and suspense and thrills and jests are the ones in vogue when I was a boy, by which time my grandfather was tired of them.¹⁷

Predictably, he does not think that others can do what he cannot; in his view, there are absolute limits to the reach of technical facility: "The writing of practicable stage plays does not present an infinite scope to human talent; and the playwrights who magnify its difficulties are humbugs. The summit of their art has been attained again and again."¹⁸ And he buttresses this estimate by pointing out that it is a freshness of vision or insight that marks the artist or genius, while his technical achievements are soon matched and then surpassed by legions of imitators -- none of whom earn more than a footnote in history.¹⁹

¹⁶Ibid., pp. 253-254. ¹⁷Ibid., p. 221.
¹⁸Ibid., p. 217. ¹⁹Ibid., p. 217.
His comments on form and technique suggest another basic Shavian artistic principle: an unconcerned acceptance of the view that form and matter are separate elements in a work of art. This, of course, is one of the oldest and most persistent debating questions in criticism: those who think the two terms are separate are answered by those who insist that form is content, and there is no widespread consensus on the problem. Nevertheless, it seems to have been settled in Shaw's understanding without his ever giving it much attention. He simply assumes the separability as a first premise in his criticism.

For example, this dichotomy lies at the roots of his ambivalent response to Shakespeare, an ambivalence which is most clearly displayed in the famous essay, "Blaming the Bard," which appeared in The Saturday Review for September 26, 1896, as his review of a performance of Cymbeline:

There are moments when one asks despairingly why our stage should ever have been cursed with this 'immortal' pilferer of other man's stories and ideas, with his monstrous rhetorical fussian, his unbearable platitudes, his pretentious reduction of the subtlest problems of life to commonplaces... The intensity of my impatience with him occasionally reaches such a pitch that it would positively be a relief to me to dig him up and throw stones at him, knowing as I do how incapable he and his worshippers are of understanding any less obvious form of indignity.20

Following this burst of Shavian invective at its most perverse and vulgar, he almost immediately reverses field to tell us why he admires this shallow, barren entertainer:

But I am bound to add that I pity the man who cannot enjoy Shakespeare. He has outlasted thousands of abler thinkers,
and will outlast a thousand more. His gift of telling a story (provided some one else told it to him first); his enormous power over language, as conspicuous in his senseless and silly abuse of it as in his miracles of expression; his sense of idiosyncratic character; and his prodigious fund of that energy which is, it seems, the true differentiating property behind the faculties . . . of the man of genius, enable him to entertain us so effectively that the imaginary scenes and people he has created become more real to us than our actual life.21

It is the same throughout Shaw's criticism of Shakespeare: everywhere he voices arrogant despair at what he sees as Shakespeare's sterile "claptrap," and everywhere he expresses grudging but extremely sensitive appreciation of Shakespeare's "word magic" and theatrical magic. In other words, Shaw rejects the content of Shakespeare's plays as mindless and barren, but he respects and responds to their execution, their form.

When we remember how important his favorite ideas were to Shaw, and when we recall that he saw all the arts as more or less efficient conductors of those ideas, we should not be at all surprised at the ease with which he separates concepts from the forms they inhabit. What we should be surprised at is the sensitivity this dedicated ideologue displays to non-sensible, non-didactic matters of form. Imagine a serious Marxist and evolutionist waxing enthusiastic in the following manner about the language of Othello:

It remains magnificent by the volume of its passion and the splendor of its word-music, which sweep the scenes up to a plane on which sense is drowned in sound. The words do not convey ideas: they are streaming ensigns and tossing branches to make the tempest of passion visible. 22

21Ibid., p. 55. 22Ibid., p. xxi.
"Streaming ensigns and tossing branches" indeed!

We must examine Shaw's plays carefully, then, to see the results in technique of this tension between the critic who divided content from subservient form so sharply and certainly, and the critic who was so romantically sensitive to the resonances of form -- both of whom were named Bernard Shaw.

We come now to the question, "Given these presuppositions about theatrical art in general, what kinds of drama does Shaw favor? Where does he look for theatrical models?" And the first step in framing the answer should be a correction of the facile, familiar opinion about Ibsen's influence. Perhaps Shaw himself is to blame for the cliche; after all, he did campaign vigorously for Ibsen as the initiator of the New Drama, even going so far as to Shavianize the Norwegian in *The Quintessence of Ibsenism*. In any event, it has been said too often, and too quickly, that Shaw followed Ibsen in introducing the conflict of ideas into drama. That's true enough in itself, but it is a mistake to slide from that proposition to the assumption that Shaw regarded Ibsen's style as the ultimate and most desirable one.

Shaw himself disclaimed this supposed dramatic influence in the Preface to *Major Barbara*; contending that his philosophic and dramatic outlooks were actually shaped first by such English-speaking figures as Charles Lever, author of *A Day's Ride; A Life's Romance*, he complains:

Now why is it that when I also deal in the tragi-comic irony of the conflict between real life and the romantic imagination, critics . . . confidently derive me from a Norwegian author of whose language I do not know three words, and of whom I knew
nothing until years after the Shavian Anschaunung was already declared in books full of what came, ten years later, to be perfunctorily labelled Ibsenism. 23

Of course, much of this non-acknowledgement must be put down to Shavian perversity, but the thirty percent or so of truth should be carefully regarded. For Shaw did not look exclusively, or even in the main, to Ibsen as his dramatic model. His sources were actually more classical and more various.

On many occasions he made this point explicitly, and, there is reason to believe, quite seriously. In a letter to Alexander Bakshy, for example, Shaw says:

Again you are right when you say that my technique is classic and Molieresque (the Commedia dell' Arte was improvised Molier) . . . the fact that I was brought up on Italian and German opera must have influenced me a great deal: there is much more of Il Trovatore and Don Giovanni in my style than of The Mourning Bride and The School for Scandal. 24

In "My Way with a Play," the catalogue is even more extensive:

Thus, instead of taking a step forward technically . . . I threw off Paris (the Scriban influence) and went back to Shakespeare, to the Bible, to Bunyan, Walter Scott, Dickens, and Dumas pere, Mozart, and Verdi, in whom I had been soaked from my childhood.25

We could continue to buttress the point with similar citations, but the ones presented should demonstrate the catholicity and flexibility of Shaw's approach to dramatic construction. He did not want to commit himself consciously to the Ibsenite pattern of gradual revelation in the drawing-room -- or to any one style.

As a matter of fact, perhaps because form ranked second on his


24Shaw on Theatre, pp. 185-186. 25Ibid., p. 268.
scale of literary values, he does not appear to be the least dogmatic or prescriptive in his consideration of its problems and modes. He suggests, for example, that the influence of the film has revived the fluid Shakespearian manner of quickly dissolving scenes with no regard for unity of place, and maintains that the theaters of the future should be designed to accommodate plays constructed around as many as fifty scenes without a break. His own practice, he says, varies greatly.

Clearly, then, Shaw's theories on dramatic models and techniques are both traditional and eclectic: traditional in the sense that he looks back to the classics for instruction in successful theatrical devices; eclectic in the sense that he feels the form should be chosen to suit the subject matter at hand and the stage resources available. The consequences of this no-nonsense, very professional attitude should also be visible in his plays.

Next, we come to Shaw's own views on the mimetic or representational elements in drama -- a topic which can be illuminated by first turning again to his criticism of Shakespeare. On the character of Lady Macbeth, he wrote to Mrs. Campbell:

If you want to know the truth about Lady Macbeth's character, she hasn't one. There never was no such person. She says things that will set people's imagination to work if she says them in the right way: that is all. I know: I do it myself. You ought to know: You set people's imagination to work, don't you? Though you know very well that what they imagine is not there, and that when they believe you are thinking ineffable things you are only wondering whether it would be considered

---

26Ibid., pp. 179-180.
vulgar to have shrimps for tea, or whether you could seduce me into ruining my next play by giving you a part in it.27

Of course, Shaw was interested in dramatic realism and appropriateness. His advice to Ellen Terry on the scene in Cymbeline where she takes Posthumus's letter from Pisanio -- "And oh, my God, don't read the letter (aloud). You can't read it; no woman could read it out to a servant." -- and his vigorous, if arch, defense of his chocolate soldier's comments on and conduct in war, demonstrate that he wanted his characters and situations to be plausible.28

Nevertheless, he sought to create an approximation of life in order to illustrate his themes, not to display his talents as a mimic.

Thus, long before Brecht, Beckett, and the others made it so revolutionary, and in common with such a practical, neo-classical figure as Sam Johnson, Shaw had scant interest in imitating life exactly on the stage. His lifelong deprecation of the convincing powers of painted scenery and bewigged actors leaves no doubt concerning his negative reaction to the "realistic" school of playwrights and directors. He could see no sense in copying details and using minor visual tricks so assiduously. He was, in fact, as negative as Giraudoux -- who inveighed against elaborately convincing scenery -- and Beckett -- who thought such imitative techniques beneath his serious concern. What imitation there is in a play should be designed to illuminate the material to be taught dramatically, not to create the impossible illusion that

27 Shaw on Shakespeare, p. 128.
28 Ibid., p. 45, and Shaw on Theatre, pp. 18-37.
real life is taking place on the stage.

As usual, Shaw himself argues the point most convincingly:

Neither have I ever been what you call a representationist or realist. I was always in the classic tradition recognizing that stage characters must be endowed by the author with a conscious self-knowledge and power of self-expression, and . . . a freedom from inhibitions, which in real life would make them monsters of genius. It is the power to do this that differentiates me (or Shakespeare) from a gramophone and a camera. 29

We must recognize, therefore, that Shaw was neither forgetful of nor unhappy with the "as if" or "pretend" quality of stage action; the obvious artificiality or theatricality was, to him, entirely natural and quite expected, a factor to be manipulated to greatest advantage.

This list of theoretical canons should not, however, leave the impression that Shaw had a diagrammatic approach to play construction. Far from it: one of his cardinal rules was the importance of spontaneity and improvisation. Archibald Henderson observes: "And what he was then as a youth he was as a playwright: A Man Without a Plan." 30 Shaw never contradicts him. He freely acknowledges that he always let the moment, the characters, and the situation guide his pen where they would, just as Giraudoux did. And, although we can't be sure whether he derived the principle from his practice, or whether the practice was determined by the principle, he did regard the natural, improvised manner of

29 Ibid., p. 186.


31 Shaw on Theatre, p. 268.
construction as a dramatic necessity: "The scenes must be born alive. If they are not new to you as you write, and sometimes quite contrary to the expectations with which you have begun them, they are dead wood."\(^{32}\) Quite obviously, we should then look for the effects of this trust in spontaneity when we analyze the plays.

Although this discussion of Shaw's dramatic theories is far from exhaustive -- we might, for example,spend some time on the wealth of practical rules for production he sets forth -- let us use these few more general precepts as guides to the techniques they should determine. Therefore, as we consider Shaw's practices as a playwright, we should keep in mind his declared premises, which may be summarized as follows: that the didactic goals of drama should be to give the audiences new ideas and new fervor; that the essence of drama is the confrontation of human emotions with each other and reality, as expressed in dialogue; that, for Shaw, the classical definitions of comedy and tragedy still applied, supplemented by an ironical, satirical hybrid he called tragicomedy; that traditional theatrical forms are limited in number and are the only ones that need be considered; that form and content are separate constituents in any work of art; that the classics -- from Shakespeare and Moliere to Wagner and Verdi -- as well as Ibsen, offer viable structures and devices to suit particular dramatic contexts; that drama should imitate life only to the extent required to make the themes and characters clear, not exactly or slavishly; that diagrammatic, over-structured plays

\(^{32}\text{Ibid.},\ p. 184.\)
should be replaced by plays growing naturally, in improvised manner, from impulse and inspiration.

Let us begin the process of seeing how Shaw carries out his theories by examining his way with characterization. Perhaps the most remarkable feature shared by almost all of Shaw's stage figures is one that they also share with Giraudoux's people, and do not share with Beckett's enigmatic clowns -- volubility. A Shaw character is rarely at a loss for words. More than that, almost all of them talk very well. Just as Giraudoux's characters speak with the fluency and imagination of Giraudoux (see the next chapter), Shaw's people explain themselves and the world in the well-ordered, lucid language of the veteran debator -- which Shaw was.

In some cases, this rhetorical skill is quite naturalistic and unsurprising; Burge and Lubin of *Back to Methuselah* should orate skillfully -- they are supposed to be wily old politicians. On the other hand, Shavian articulateness pops up in unlikely places, as when Snobby Price opens his mind on the reasons for not going to work:

I'll tell you why: First: I'm intelligent . . . yes: intelligent beyond the station o life into which it has pleased the capitalists to call me; and they don't like a man that sees through 'em. Second, an intelligent bein needs a doo share of appiness; so I drink somethink cruel when I get the chawnce. Third, I stand by my class and do as little as I can so's to leave arf the job for me fellow workers. Fourth, I'm fly enough to know wots inside the law and wots outside it; and inside it I do as the capitalists do: pinch wot I can lay me ands on.33

33 Major Barbara, Act II, p. 367.
Shaw may have the dialect right, but one wonders how Snobby the derelict came to be so articulate, and how he got those socialist arguments down so pat. The man becomes quite as fantastic in these passages as Giraudoux's sewer worker in The Madwoman of Chaillot.

These and other examples of unreality in his characterization did not, however, seem to disturb Shaw in the least. And we should recognize that his serenity had a rather sound theoretical basis. We quoted his own observation that, in order to be dramatically effective, stage characters must be gifted with extraordinary, "unrealistic" powers of speech and self-analysis. Thus, Shaw might have argued, the real Snobby Price would have mumbled incoherently and ungrammatically, but the stage Snobby must have reasons and clear phrases at instant command -- or else he would simply bore the uncomprehending customers. Besides, his clinching argument might run, since I believe that discussion is the heart of drama, I must have discussions in my plays -- even if they detract somewhat from character believability.

Returning now for a moment to Snobby's self-explanation, we notice that it is essentially a skillful rationalization. If his arguments were to appear in the press today, a no-nonsense right-winger like William Buckley would undoubtedly call them a smoke screen designed to hide incorrigible laziness. Shaw, no uncritical do-gooder, might very well have agreed -- but he would have insisted that the rationalizations had real merit just the same.
Rationalization is important to Shaw -- so important, that nearly all his characters are rationalizers. Cleopatra and Rufio continually rationalize their natural aggressive instincts when they try to convince Shaw's Caesar that successful statecraft requires ruthlessness in the traditional manner for enemies. He, in turn, answers them with elaborate rationalizations. Eppie, The Millionaires, is even more vigorous and persuasive in her defense of the insensitive acquisitiveness of the wealthy class than the Ragpicker in Giraudoux's Madwoman. Cain is allowed to defend romantic notions of chivalry and war -- foolishness that Shaw himself despised -- with the most compelling reasoning.34

Again, we should not be surprised by this fondness for logic-play. We saw at the very beginning of this chapter that Shaw was above all a rationalist who wanted to inculcate the rational habit in his audiences. Nor should we be surprised that he permits characters to reason coherently in favor of positions he thought were wrong (even though he takes care to make his personal opinions either win out or appear the most attractive).

Rationalizing from all quarters is actually the natural consequence of Shaw's theory about the relationship between reason and impulse. We have already heard him say that life is "not the fulfillment of a moral law or of the deductions of reason but the satisfaction of a passion in us of which we can give no account whatsoever," and that "intellect is essentially a passion." This suggests that Shaw was a more accurate observer of "human

34 Back to Methuselah, pp. 92-95.
psychology than we might suppose; he knows that people do not
reason in a disinterested vacuum, that they use their intellects
most frequently to fathom and justify what they are impelled to
do by irrational impulses. The only caution Shaw urges is that
we pick the right impulse to support with reason. As he explains
in *Man and Superman*, we should put our rationalizing powers in the
service of the Life Force; we should attempt to give it intellec-
tual vision and direction.

However, the fact that the characters are rather uniformly
gifted as orators should not lead us to conclude that they are not
differentiated; Shaw's talkers do have separate, strong personal-
ities. It is true that Ellie of *Heartbreak House* is quite remi-
niscent of Vivie in *Mrs. Warren's Profession*; both display the
same brand of abrasive realism. It is also true that Caesar's
Britannus and the Chaplain Stomburger of *St. Joan* are very much
alike, and we could point to a few other duplicate characters
as well.

For the most part, however, Shaw created different people,
not several repeated personality-patterns. Both Ann and Violet
in *Man and Superman* are dominant females, but no one would ever
call them alike in anything else. Violet is a practical manager,
while Ann is a subtle siren. Burge and Lubin are both short-
sighted, pseudo-sophisticated politicians, but Burge is also
an earnest, humorless moralizer, and Lubin is a charmingly amorous
classicist. Praed of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* and Adrian of *The
Millionairess* are both ineffectual aesthetes, but the resemblance
ends there. The point is that Shaw's characters are extraordinarily skilled in self-analysis and perhaps inordinately fond of rhetoric, but they are gifted still with distinguishable identities—proof that Shaw fulfills his desire to be an accurate and perceptive portrayer of life in all its complexity, within the limits imposed by the stage's special requirements.

The question now arises, "Are Shaw's characters unique individuals, or are they types?" The answer is, of course, that, for all their individual charm and vivifying energy, they are types, stage figures designed to reproduce sets of familiar characteristics (much as Beckett's weary bums are easily identifiable types). Rufio, for example, and La Hire, for another, are intended to be typical good soldiers (at least as Shaw sees them): gruff, practical, sensible, loyal, and limited. Although Rufio has more shrewdness and self-mastery (and a bigger part), the two could be interchanged without much difficulty. After all, is there much difference of temper between Rufio's practical advice: (Giving Caesar dates to eat at a crucial point in a battle) "That's what's the matter with you. When a man comes to your age, he runs down before his midday meal. Eat and drink; and then have another look at our chances," and La Hire's practical advice: (urging the powers that be to give Joan her chance) "De Baudricourt is a blazing ass; but he is a soldier; and if he thinks she can beat the English, all the rest of the army will think so too." 35

35 Caesar and Cleopatra, p. 78; Saint Joan, p. 69.
Again, it is easy to see why Ann Whitefield and Mrs. Hushabye (as well as Canida) belong to the same type; they are all alluring, dominant "Mother-Women," with a magnetic power over men imbued in them by the Life Force. Each delights in the tantalizing process: Ann is obviously relishing her own talents in the scene where she manipulates her feather boa and Tanner with equal dexterity; Mrs. Hushabye weaves her spells around poor Mangan rather perfunctorily, even after he knows her true motives; her demeanor suggests that she is fascinating him simply for the pleasant exercise he affords.

We should remember once more, however, that Shaw's type-characters are not shallow, one-dimensional props. They may fit into a pattern, but within that mold they take on contours all their own. The outstanding example is the type Shaw admired and idealized most often: the Supermen. All of the Supermen are masterful, clear-sighted, and impatient with deadening popular myths. All of them ignore prejudices and codes that have not caught up with them, and all of them amaze and perplex ordinary mortals. But each also has his own style, his own mystique. Andrew Undershaft is the coldly realistic, coldly efficient industrialist who is at the same time a courtly victim of his estranged wife's sharp tongue. Shaw's Caesar also has his minor weaknesses -- designing females, sensitivity about his advancing age -- but his special trademark is a combination of cheery urbanity (i.e. the scene in which he appears in Ptolemy's court with Cleopatra) and childlike enthusiasms (see the scene in which he excitedly
leaps into the sea).

Saint Joan not only brings the standard characteristics of the Superman to the personality of a young girl; she adds her own earthy peasant wit, charming simplicity, and a soaring poetic imagination (as seen in her description of the sounds of bells in the afternoon). Eppie (The Millionaireess), on the other hand, is an undisguised, undiluted eccentric -- as are most of the main characters in the play. She is drawn in broad, energetic strokes, and everything she does or says is exaggerated; she breaks a chair, throws Adrian downstairs, instructs her lawyer in the law, and wins her Egyptian doctor by flaunting her pulse -- all in the same outlandish, peremptory manner, reminiscent, somehow, of the herky-jerky movements in silent-film comedies.

What do these lively, individualized types have to do with Shaw's dramatic theories? They could very well be related to his view that art must be essentially an educative process. Along with Giraudoux, as we have seen, Shaw held that the theatre was the most efficient medium for mass instruction -- and the remarks we have already quoted -- e.g. "Now there are ideas at the back of my plays," -- leave no doubt that Shaw was quite openly intent on using his works to instill in the public his own views on the state of society and the state it should be in, if people were acting as Shavians should.

Accordingly, since Shaw wanted his plays to be illustrative and corrective, he was almost compelled to produce type-characters. In order for his audience to recognize conditions
and situations that needed reform, Shaw had to populate his stage stories with the kinds of people they would recognize, with people obviously in need of or receptive to the programs Shaw was advocating -- in other words, with type-characters. Thus, such familiar figures offered two advantages to Shaw the propagandist: they could easily remind the audiences of people and circumstances he wanted to describe; and they could embody faults or virtues Shaw wanted to emphasize.

Another facet of Shavian characterization worthy of comment here is the fact that nearly every one of his characters is in conflict, not just with other people, but with large social forces as well. The outstanding example, perhaps, is Saint Joan. Quite unconsciously, she opposes enemies far more complex than the English armies: the authority of the church and the feudal system. The conversations in Scene IV among Warwick, Cauchon, and de Stomberger make this clear. As Warwick says: "Men cannot serve two masters. If this cant of serving their country once takes hold of them, goodbye to the authority of their feudal lords, and goodbye to the authority of the Church. That is, goodbye to you and me."36

Barbara and her co-religionists must do battle with the entrenched economic system managed by the likes of the whiskey baron and Undershaft. The Millionairess, on the other hand, who is preeminently in a managerial position, is in conflict with a myriad of forces which are intent on despoiling her of her fortune:

36Saint Joan, p. 87.
Mr. Sagamore: a woman as rich as I am cannot afford anything. I have to fight to keep every penny I possess. Every beggar, every blackmailer, every swindler, every charity, every testimonial, every political cause, every league and brotherhood and sisterhood, every church and chapel, every institution of every kind on earth is busy from morning to night trying to bleed me to death. If I weaken for a moment, if I let a farthing go, I shall be destitute by the end of the month. 37

Take another example from another play: for a brief moment, Violet of Man and Superman encounters the horrified ostracism society keeps in reserve for unwed mothers -- until she reveals that she is secretly married after all. Or consider how the first long-livers in "The Thing Happens" from Back to Methuselah have to hide their unique accomplishment from the wrath of a civilization geared exclusively for short-lived people. (He differs from Beckett in this regard only in that the forces in opposition to Shaw characters are evident and understandable -- to us and to them.)

Of course, these confrontations between people, with all their physical, imaginative, and emotional needs, and such massive and threatening social structures are inherently dramatic -- as Shaw observed many times. You will recall that he described these conflicts as the nuclei of all real drama. In setting up such matches between warm impulsive and solid reality, Shaw is simply following his own formulae for effective plays.

Finally, let us complete our survey of Shaw's techniques in characterization by remarking that very few people in his plays are ever really defeated. It is true that Mangan is presumably

37The Millionairess, p. 268.
killed in the explosion at the end of Heartbreak House, but his
case is notable only because it is an exception. The typical Shaw
character does not even have to undergo the kind of gentle, muted
catastrophes that Giraudoux people like Alcmena (Amphitryon 38)
experience. Cleopatra, we know, will be only temporarily forlorn;
Caesar has promised to send Antony of the "round arms" to her.
Alastair Fitzfassenden loses face and his glamorous wife, yet he
seems quite content to be soothed by Polly Seedystockings. Vivie
gives up her chance for conventional happiness and romance, but
plunges gaily into her actuarial tables. Even the desultory sur­
vivors at Heartbreak House are looking forward to more fireworks
at the end of the play.

As a matter of fact, some critics object to this determined
optimism. Homer Woodbridge, for example, declares that the epi­
logue to Saint Joan detracts from the power of the play, which he
sees as essentially tragic:

From the point of view of the acted drama, I think the critics
are right. Undeniably the epilogue is in itself theatrically
effective; but it is also undeniably anti-climactic, it is out
of keeping with the tone of the play, and worst of all, it is
unnecessary. It somewhat weakened the effect of even the
Theatre Guild's fine production in 1923. . . . One wonders
whether Shaw was thinking of it when he said in 1928: 'I have
got the tragedian and I have got the clown in me, and the
clown trips me up in the most dreadful way.'38

Whatever one thinks of the epilogue, one must agree that
it fits the Shavian pattern; it is qualifiedly affirmative, cau­
tiously optimistic. It demonstrates that the ideas of the

---

38 Homer E. Woodbridge, *George Bernard Shaw -- Creative Artist* (Carbondale, Ill., 1963), pp. 122-123.
Superwoman have won out, and that she herself is recognized as a heroine-saint. It is not a completely rosy picture, however; the world is not yet ready to receive its saints on a permanent basis. The important thing is that life is continuing; everybody is going on with their work or their fights, everybody from Warwick to Dunois to Charles. Even Joan is still waiting for her day to come. In *Saint Joan* as in most Shawian plays, the emphasis is on character survival.

The connection to Shawian dramatic theories? Endings in which the people are back on their feet and still working for their interests reflect Shaw's longstanding aversion to what he saw as the tragic ending's unprofitable melodrama. Earlier we saw that Shaw believed comedy, or at least tragi-comedy, to be the highest form of drama because it teaches real lessons about real life, whereas tragedy, although purgative, depends too greatly on accidents, like Othello's handkerchief. Indeed, on that occasion, he declared that the rising popularity of tragi-comedy meant the "road was open to a sort of comedy as much more tragic than a catastrophic tragedy as an unhappy marriage, or even a happy one is more tragic than a railway accident."\(^{39}\)

Shaw's characters, then, in their persistence, conform to both their creator's sense of reality and the demands of effective drama. People in real life do not often, according to Shaw, solve problems in heroic, absolute gestures; even after the greatest trials, the deepest humiliations, most of them get up.

\(^{39}\)Shaw on Shakespeare, p. 254.
keep going, and make the best of the situation. Furthermore, plays which show them doing so are more instructive, and therefore, better art. After all, suicides, murders, and self-tortures don't really make practical advice.

Beyond that, these indomitable figures are particularly comic characters — in the sense of comedy Shaw favored implicitly. They are creatures that might have been designed to fit Langer's concept of comedy as the celebration of human survival. Just as Langer says they should, the Shavian people encounter all kinds of obstacles, get involved in all kinds of ludicrous, often humiliating scrapes, and still manage to stay afloat.

Critics have always been intrigued by the special verve that seems to inform good Shaw plays. Bertold Brecht, another Marxist playwright who works in a completely different vein, declares:

What draws people to the theater is, strictly speaking, so much nonsense, which constitutes a tremendous buoyancy for those problems which really interest the progressive dramatic writer and which are the real value of his pieces. . . . Shaw actually succeeds in giving the impression that his mental and bodily health increases with every sentence he writes. Reading him is perhaps not exhilarating in the Dionysian manner, but it is undeniable that it is amazingly conducive to good health.40

This sense of health and well-being does not seem to spring from the plots themselves. Although his stories do not end tragically, they cannot be said to follow traditional upbeat patterns either,

at least not often. If *Man* and *Superman's* finish can be said to meet familiar romantic standards, then it must be acknowledged that *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, *Saint Joan*, *Caesar* and *Cleopatra*, and many others definitely do not. Similarly, there are speeches which glow with religio-evolutionary optimism, as we have already pointed out, but they are far outnumbered by unsparing, insistently grim critiques of status quo. Accordingly, Shaw's much-admired buoyancy seems to be generated primarily by the strong appeal and essential vitality of his characters.

St. John Ervine suggests as much when he praises Shaw's characters for their "remarkability":

The commonplace man or woman did not interest him. It was his sense of notability in people that enable him to make all the parts in his plays distinctive; and *Man* and *Superman* is a brilliant example of his skill in this respect. The secondary parts are as well etched as the principal parts. John Tanner and Ann Whitefield are gifts to actors and actresses, but all the remaining parts, and especially that of Henry Straker, the chauffer, are so finely drawn that any actor or actress must be pleased with them.

And since many of these people say and do perfectly logical and conventional, if unexpected, things, we can suggest that their remarkability is largely the product, again, of their indomitability, their insistence on maintaining themselves and their special identity, whatever the circumstances. (In this connection, we should note that Shaw's people are extremely stable: nearly every one of them remains true to the fundamental attitudes and traits with which he began; there are few "changes of heart." Joan is a

---

pert shepherd girl from beginning to end; Ann Whitefield is always the charming temptress for the Life Force; and Polly Seedy-stockings never varies her homey shrewdness.)

One can regard these characters as effective proof that Shaw really did learn from novelists like Dickens. Especially when Shavian characterization follows identity and liveliness into the realm of the bizarre, as it does with people like the blue-tinted Britannus of Caesar and Cleopatra and the positive Lady Undershaft of Major Barbara, it is easy to see the influence of Dickens’ memorable portraits of peculiar individualists.

One can also see how much vital characters dovetail neatly with Shaw’s evolutionary cast of mind. In his perennially optimistic view, the Life Force is irresistible; it may stumble and stall; it may be forced to liquidate its costlier mistakes, but it pushes on; it moves toward its objectives inexorably. The durability of the characters, their refusal to be permanently discouraged, thus mirror the onrush of evolution.

We can now close this brief and preliminary survey of Shaw’s ways with characters. Before we leave the subject, however, let us recall that the rhetorical skill and volubility displayed by Shavian characters reflect his view that the heart of drama is discussion and that stage people need extraordinary verbal talents to create and sustain audience attention; that the reliance of Shaw’s characters on reason and rationalization spring from his wish to inculcate rational habits in his audiences, and his belief that reason is the servant of impulse; that the
individuality of most characters is sufficient to fulfill his wish to be an accurate observer of life -- as far as stage requirements would permit; that Shaw created type characters because their familiarity helped him convey his didactic messages concerning reform; that his characters' conflicts with large, immovable social structures fulfill his dicta that drama should involve the clash of human emotion and unyielding facts; that the persistence and reasonably cheerful endings for his people reflect his preference for the more instructive realistic patterns of comedy, as well as his equal preference for vital, Dickensian comic characters.

As we move on to discuss Shaw's techniques in dialogue, we should recall at once that we will be discussing what Shaw himself saw as the most important element in drama -- the medium through which almost all stage effects are created. We pointed out earlier, for instance, that he regarded Ibsen's emphasis on discussion as his major contribution to the development of drama.

This in itself should account for the preeminence of discussion and dialogue in Shaw's plays. Like Giraudoux, who also thought speech was the key to drama, as we shall see in the next chapter, and unlike Beckett, for whom words are only some of the devices available to a stage poet, Shaw constructed his plays around key discussions and important speeches. He did this because he wanted, for dramatic and didactic reasons, to focus the audience's attention on what was being said: if drama sprang from discussion, then the discussions should be prominent and
frequent. Shaw sees to it that they are both.

Support for this judgment can come from any Shaw play -- for in any of them, most of the dramatic moments people remember grow out of or climax in discussions: the relationship between Vivie and her mother, upon which the action of *Mrs. Warren's Profession* turns, unfolds in two heated debates; the conflict between Adam and Cain is worked out, not in action, but in words -- a long argument only partially settled by Eve; the contending forces in *Man and Superman* -- the realists, idealists, and mother-woman -- clash only in words, whether the setting is turn-of-the-century England or Mozaiian hell; the climactic battle in *Saint Joan* occurs in the courtroom scene, which is discursive by definition.

Of course, there are some famous moments created by action in Shawian plays; Shaw was too much the master showman not to utilize visual opportunities when they came to hand. Perhaps the most famous is the scene in which the frightened Cleopatra is tensely waiting to receive the Monster Caesar and then the Roman legions burst in to hail the kind "old gentleman" at her side as Caesar. We could also mention the slapstick highlight of *The Millionairess*, in which Eppie throws Adrian downstairs. Indeed, Shaw's works are not nearly as static as Beckett's *Godot* and *Endgame*. The point here is that Shaw was neither unmindful of nor unable to satisfy the stage's need for visual action -- he simply felt that action should be subordinated to discussion.

Someone once made the observation that people in Shaw's
plays are always talking about going into the bedroom to make love, but they never seem actually to go in there to do anything. Part of this tantalizing reluctance can be attributed to Shaw's puritanism, but the major cause is Shaw's belief that drama is basically discussion. We can also guess that this belief is supported by his didactic intentions. As he said so often, he wanted his plays to convince and persuade his audiences. Accordingly, Shaw does not want to shock and titillate their senses with a great lot of motion; he seeks to work quietly on their minds -- through rational discussions.

The next quality of Shaw's dialogue we will discuss is a natural corollary to the observation we made earlier that all of Shaw's characters are skilled, trained speakers. This obviously implies that the speeches themselves are constructed rhetorically, that they display the devices trained speakers use to make their points striking and memorable.

The implication is certainly just. Nearly every one of the longer speeches in Shaw's plays is packed with standard rhetorical gambits, like antithesis, parallelism, balanced sentences, and alliteration, as well as repetitions of key words and phrases. The following example comes from Major Barbara, and in it Andrew Undershaft is voicing his contempt for parliamentary government:

Do you suppose that you and half a dozen amateurs like you, sitting in a row in that foolish gabble shop, can govern Undershaft and Lazarus? No, my friend: you will do what pays us. You will make war when it suits us, and keep peace when it doesn't. You will find out that trade requires certain measures when we have decided on those measures. When I want
anything to keep my dividends up, you will discover that my want is a national need. When other people want something to keep my dividends down, you will call out the police and the military. And in return you shall have the support and applause of my newspapers, and the delight of imagining that you are a great statesman. Government of your country! Be off with you, my boy, and play with your caucuses and leading articles and historic parties and great leaders and burning questions and the rest of your toys. I am going back to my counting house to pay the piper and call the tune. 42

In the above address, we find parallel "when" clauses and parallel infinitive phrases, as well as a series of nouns separated by "ands," and a few other devices to boot. For more confirmation, listen to Caesar making peace with Cleopatra at the end of the play, just before his departure:

Come, Cleopatra: forgive me and bid me farewell; and I will send you a man Roman from head to heel and Roman of the noblest; not old and ripe for the knife; not lean in the arms and cold in the heart; not hiding a bald head under his conqueror's laurels; not stooped with the weight of the world on his shoulders; but brisk and fresh, strong and young, hoping in the morning, fighting in the day, and revelling in the evening. Will you take such a one in exchange for Caesar? 43

It is not our intention to make a catalogue of Shaw's rhetorical practices, or to compile statistics on his favorite devices. We are interested in the relationship between this reliance on the standard tools of rhetoric and his theories about drama. Therefore, our first comment is that Shaw may have regarded rhetoric as the natural handmaid of dramatic discussion.

If drama consists basically of discussion, then those discussions have to be clearly conducted and somehow memorable --


43Caesar and Cleopatra, pp. 124-125.
so that they can achieve the desired results, dramatic and didactic, in the audiences. In other words, the ideas at the back of Shaw’s plays must be set forth understandably and arrestingly, or else they will neither convince nor entertain, but simply bore.

Given this need, Shaw probably turned to rhetoric -- whose methods were already second nature to him from his years of lecturing, pamphlet-writing, and reviewing -- as the easiest and most familiar of structuring his discussions successfully. By using these devices, he could separate, emphasize, and reiterate his thoughts -- thus rendering them quite clear, without expending too many words. In addition, the strongly-marked patterns such devices build into a piece of prose can make the key thoughts striking and easy to recall. Thus although we can’t be at all sure that he planned it out this way carefully beforehand, that he didn’t write in rhetorical patterns simply because he had gotten used to that style, it is still objectively true that the emphasis on rhetoric helps make those important dramatic debates more viable on the stage.

One could also maintain that Shavian rhetoric is one more sign of Shaw’s classicism. As we pointed out, Shaw was conservative enough to believe that there were no new dramatic forms to be discovered, that the Ancients had already reached the limits of technical inventiveness. We further maintained that Shaw was a traditionalist when it came to searching for theatrical models and techniques; he looked to the established giants of the past. In these classics, finely modeled speeches were considered
one of the chief excellences to be attained; most of the names in the Shavian gallery of great dramatists were, in fact, remembered especially for their verbal skills and great utterances, Shakespeare being the prime example. (The reader will recall how warmly Shaw appreciated Shakespeare's word music.)

In view of this, it is hardly surprising that Shaw should attempt to produce some word music of his own. And, since the medium of blank verse was no longer really open to him in his era, the patterns of rhetoric offered one of the few means available for heightening his dialogue. Was he conscious of doing so? His remarks about the need for extraordinary or "unreal" powers of expression on the stage may suggest that he was, but we have no direct evidence. Nevertheless, the result -- an elevation of the dialogue to a plane considerably above "normal" speech -- is there.

Let us next take a closer look at Shaw's use of rhetoric -- to discover if the patterns employed create a pattern themselves. In this connection, it is useful to consider Richard Ohmann's evaluation of Shaw's language:

Throughout his life, Shaw wrote as an opponent; and this stance had its origins in his reaction against the entrenched Victorian smugness which prevailed during his boyhood and through his first quarter-century in London. . . . Often when Shaw gets up steam for one of those colossal series (of argumentative 'that clauses'), his fires are those of anger. The syntactical heaping up that betokens a similarity relationships also serves him rhetorically, to smother his audience. . . . he confronts the opposition, not with one argument, but with ten. 44

---

Ohmann thus aptly describes a salient quality of Shaw's rhetoric -- it is based upon negations. Shaw was a prophet and a reformer, and prophets and reformers must stand opposed to the status quo because they want to replace it with something else. This habit of opposition shows up, naturally enough, in his prose habits; it is responsible for the unusually high number of denials, negative assertions, contradictions, and "not" phrases.

Ohmanncatalogues Shaw's negatives quite inclusively:

To begin with macrosyntactically, Shaw frequently compounds the structure of a whole piece from a set of negations. ... The patterns of negation that give structure to Shaw's arguments are naturally reticulate in miniature on the level of sentence and phrase: one cannot constantly refute without ever saying 'not' and negative forms abound in his prose. ... Consider another page, this time from the Preface to John Bull's Other Island. ... To begin with, there are nine negative forms. In addition, there are several words that imply opposition or denial somewhat less directly: 'without,' 'only' ... and the prefixes 'un' and 'out.' ... Then there are the signs of syntactical opposition, 'although' and 'instead.' But the largest group of negative words are those that have a looser association with invective, those with negative connotations. ... A Shaw concordance would show the word 'hypocrisy' and its derivatives to have unusual prominence in his vocabulary; ... A number of similar words are favorites of his too. 'Humbug,' 'sham,' 'defraud,' 'pretense,' 'imposture,' 'farce,' 'deception' -- these and others are the common coin of Shavian invective.45

By thus saturating his prose with contradictory elements, Shaw fulfills at least two of his own theoretical precepts. First, he is obviously carrying out his didactic intentions; Shaw the prophet-reformer, we said a few sentences ago, stood opposed by definition to society's current state. If he wanted to use drama to spread this opposition, what better means could he employ than

to fill his plays with concrete denials of the conservative belief in "this best of all possible worlds"?

Everyone knows that his large themes embody his opposition; it isn't hard to figure out that *Mrs. Warren's Profession* discredits conventional moral hypocrisy, especially in its concern for appearances and its indifference to the real problems of poor girls. Ohmann simply points out that Shaw extends these obvious thematic oppositions into his sentence-structures and word-choices as well. The extension makes good teaching sense. By reenforcing his negative stance even on the level of language mechanics, Shaw makes his position both more persuasive and more persuasive.

Secondly, Shaw's negatives makes his language more dramatic. We have already established that Shaw's plays depend to an unusual extent on words. As if in recognition of the strain thus created, Shaw takes care to make those words as dramatically potent as possible by hurling them constantly against conventional walls and barricades of all kinds. Even his sentences, therefore, create the kind of sharp clash Shaw knew to be inherently interesting on the stage.

Now, let us consider one of the more surprising and elusive characteristics of Shaw's prose -- the way in which his always orderly, always clear and smooth-flowing sentences can frequently be emotionally affecting as well as logically persuasive. Perceptive critics have often wondered aloud about this side of Shaw.46

46 See Bruce R. Park, "A Mote in the Critic's Eye: Bernard
There are, we may be sure, many sources of Shaw's power over the imagination, but let us concentrate here on just one: his use of affecting metaphors and imagery. Throughout his works, Shaw the inveterate lecturer has the saving habit of suddenly lifting his argument onto another level with the aid of striking figures and pictures. These phrases, interrupting the steady progress of logic, involve the senses and the memory in basic, primary ways, and often smooth the path for conviction.

For instance, in Caesar and Cleopatra, Caesar is expressing his kinship with the Sphinx as an immortal giant above the race of men, and to crown his declaration he recalls:

Sphinx, Sphinx: I have climbed mountains at night to hear in the distance the stealthy footfall of the winds that chase your sands in forbidden play -- our invisible children, O Sphinx, laughing in whispers.47

Or, listen to Joan renouncing the confession of heresy she has signed:

But to shut me from the light of the sky and the sight of the fields and flowers; to chain my feet so that I can never again ride with soldiers nor climb the hills; ... all this is worse than the furnace in the Bible that was heated seven times. ... I could let the banners and the trumpets and the knights and soldiers pass me and leave me behind as they leave the other women, if only I could still hear the wind in the trees, the lark in the sunshine, the young lambs crying through the healthy frost, and the blessed church bells that send my angel voices floating on the wind.48

Again, in Heartbreak House, Captain Shotover explains to Ellie how a man's concerns change as he grows:


48Saint Joan, Scene VI, p. 138.
A man's interest in the world is only the overflow from his interest in himself. When you are a child your vessel is not yet full; so you care for nothing but your own affairs. When you grow up, your vessel overflows; and you are a politician, a philosopher, or an explorer and adventurer. In old age the vessel dries up: there is no overflow: you are a child again.49

One could cull similar expressions from almost every one of Shaw's plays. And, with a minimum of effort, the student can deduce the position such language fills in Shaw's array of techniques. On the most obvious level, it relieves the talkiness of the plays, as we suggested earlier. Whenever the discussions threaten to become tedious and overly abstract, Shaw has the ability to recapture the audience's attention, as well as their understanding, by appealing in his figures and images to their physical senses. In brief, the pictures and the comparisons prevent the debates from ossifying into a wearying drone of sound; instead, they make the words live in the concrete life of the imagination.

Beyond this, Shaw's more "poetic" skills, precisely because they engage the imagination, satisfy the emotional requirements of Shaw the prophet. We said earlier that one of Shaw's chief didactic aims was to give people the emotional impetus they needed to take action on behalf of the Life Force. To meet this aim, Shaw had to be as much concerned with the audience's imagination as Giraudoux was: For a playwright, the key to the emotions is in the imagination. What people can imagine, they feel. The poet or playwright's task, then, is to make them

49Heartbreak House, Selected Plays, Act II, p. 566.
imagine what he wants them to feel.

In order to stir the public into the right kind of life, Shaw had to make them see the horrors and degradation of their daily lives, and to give them dreams of the future with clear outlines and attractive contours. The images and the figures do the job for him, at least partially. Working in conjunction with those marvelously vital characters, they are sometimes able to lift his ideas above the area of interesting speculations into the realm of emotionally compelling causes.

Thus, Saint Joan, Caesar, Undershaw, and the other superpeople reach out for the affection of the people they entertain, not just for their intellectual assent. They put their force of character into concrete, imagination-provoking terms. Even villains and weaklings, like the devil in Man and Superman, are allowed to betray their inadequacies in picturesque remarks. Shaw's issues then clash feelingly as well as abstractly. Shaw was not as sensitive or as whimsical a dramatic poet as Giraudoux, but he could be powerful and effective when he chose to be.

Before we finish with Shaw's dialogue, we should ask the question, "Is his dialogue universally well-adapted to his theories?" The answer is, not quite. The problem is his verbosity; too often, his discussions and orations drag on fatiguingly. Of course, the outstanding example is the interminable debate in Man and Superman; even played by itself, the piece underlines, expands, and reiterates itself to yawnful lengths. We might add that, when it is performed with the original play, the
whole scene is of debatable value to the romantic comedy.

We can add the non-stop examination of art, morality, and thought in "As Far as Thought Can Reach" from Back to Methuselah to the list. Though there are some affecting scenes in this playlet -- notably the emergence of the Newcomer from her shell -- there are also many moments when the action seems to stop completely while abstract propositions are explained and elaborated. Shaw's final vision of the course of evolution has force and sweeping vision, but it bogged down in a torrent of polysyllabic words. The following, for example, is one speech from "As Far As Thought Can Reach":

I assure you that these details are intensely interesting.

You will see their bearing presently. I promise you I will not detain you long. We know, we children of science, that the universe is full of forces and powers and energies of one kind and another. The sap rising in a tree, the stone holding together in a definite crystalline structure, the thought of a philosopher holding his brain in operation with an inconceivably powerful grip, the urge of evolution: all these forces can be used by us. For instance, I use the force of gravitation when I put a stone on my tunic to prevent it from being blown away when I am bathing. By substituting appropriate machines for the stone we have made not only gravitation our slave, but also electricity and magnetism, atomic attraction, repulsion, polarization, and so forth. But hitherto the vital force has eluded us; so it has had to create machinery for itself. It has created and developed bony structures of the requisite strength, and clothed them with cellular tissues of such amazing sensitiveness that the organs it forms will adapt their action to all the normal variations in the air they breathe, the food they digest, and the circumstances about which they have to think. Yet as these live bodies, as we call them, are only machines after all, it must be possible to construct them mechanically.50

And the reader should not be surprised to learn that this speech

50 Back to Methuselah, "As Far As Thought Can Reach," pp. 281-282.
is just one part of a prefatory discussion to one bit of action -- the introduction of Pygmalion's created "people" to the crowd -- after which the robots themselves deliver extended speeches.

Now, these long speeches do serve the author's didactic intentions -- after a fashion. They explain the author's opinions and prejudices with clarity and great detail. And yet, they ignore some very good advice Shaw gave himself, which we have quoted before:

If in occupying the playgoer's mind agreeably I take advantage of his pre-occupation to extirpate his worn-out convictions and substitute fresh ones: . . . then the last thing I desire is that he should be conscious of the operation. The pickpocket does not want to be caught in the act.\(^{51}\)

Throughout many of Shaw's longer discussion scenes, viewers or readers are painfully conscious of Shaw the intellectual pickpocket of false notions; he and his tools and his opinions and his tricks and his crotchets are all to plainly visible. Sam Johnson once complained that Shakespeare was simply unable to turn away from puns and "quibbles." Shaw is equally unable to turn away from long-winded elaborations of his ideas; it is this habit, no doubt, that gives rise to critical titles like Is Bernard Shaw A Dramatist? (by Eric Bentley). Even from the didactic dramatist's point of view, as we have pointed out, the wordy stretches are failures; they make ineffectual drama, and therefore ineffectual propaganda.

Why does Shaw fall into this trap? The easy answer is

\(^{51}\)Shaw on Theatre, p. 237.
that he was primarily a propagandist, and only secondarily an entertainer, and thus miscalculated the public's tolerance. But that answer is too easy. It ignores Shaw's theatrical talents when he is successful, and it ignores the respect and awareness he expressed for the theater as a medium of entertainment. Remember the passage we quoted above in which he acknowledged that drama must be first of all entertaining. Remember also that he spoke of the theater's great classics with admiration and looked to them for examples and precedents—especially in the technical elements of stagecraft. Bear in mind finally that he was a critic and director with a sharp eye for successful and unsuccessful stage effects.

In view of all this, we should look elsewhere for a complete explanation of Shaw's undramatic volubility. It seems to this author that the trouble springs ultimately from his presupposition that form and subject-matter are two distinct things. This may well have induced him, every now and then, to treat the two separately, to pay too little heed to the indispensable coordination of these two vital factors. Bruce Park, for instance, discusses the rather strange and strained view Shaw held about the function of the poet:

The poet (for Shaw) is not only the man who can take cold hard facts; he is also the man who feels he must do something about them. . . . The lesser poetic power is that of spinning tales and putting words together effectively, but Shaw does not think this power sufficient to earn a writer the name of poet.52

52 Park, pp. 46-47.
This attitude betrays an artistically dangerous tendency to make art a matter of ideas and form a matter of mere entertainment. It comes uncomfortably close to relegating dramatic appropriateness, affecting action, and other technical skills to the status of frosting and decoration. Shaw was thus intrigued by purely theatrical effects, and skillful in producing them when he tried, but he did not, apparently, think they were of crucial importance.

Seen from within the Shavian gap between form and matter, then, those windy debates become instances where Shaw failed to mesh theatrical effects with radical opinions. His mind on the importance of his ideas, he sometimes forgot that they must be organically united with effective stagecraft, if they were to be impressive to an audience.

Thus the major points concerning Shaw's dialogue are: we have seen first that the prominence of dialogue in Shaw's plays and the number of key scenes culminating in discussions reflect his theory that drama is basically discussion and his intention to persuade audiences rationally. Second, we speculated that Shaw may have filled his dialogue with rhetorical devices in order to make his discussions, upon which the plays depended, clearer and more arresting, and also because, as a classicist, he considered well-heightened language the hallmark of good drama. Third, we observed that the prevalence of negative forms in his speeches springs quite naturally from his reformer's need to tear down corruption so that it can be replaced with virtue, and from his desire to make his very speeches create the dramatic conflicts
between impulse and fact he valued so highly. Fourth, Shaw's imagery and metaphors were seen as his attempts to insure interest, and to satisfy men's emotional needs. Fifth, it was suggested that Shaw's verbosity proceeded from his unfruitful assumption that form and matter are separable.

As we begin our discussion of Shaw's plot techniques, compared with his theories, we must first rid ourselves of the superficial impression that there isn't much to say, that his structures are rather conventional and unremarkable. This notion -- even though it is propounded by some very reputable figures like Milton Crane, who, in his article "Pygmalion: Bernard Shaw's Dramatic Theory and Practice" declares that Shaw actually wrote standard well-made plays and Victorian farces instead of new-fashioned discussion plays\(^{53}\) -- seems to be based on an inaccurate view of Shaw's traditionalism.

It is quite true that he did not pretend to be an innovator of new technique, that he thought the classic masters and their masterpieces represented a standard to be imitated rather than surpassed, but it is not true that he produced threadbare "formula" plays. Instead, he borrowed old devices and utilized them in his own fresh, intelligent manner.

He was, in fact, generally successful in avoiding theatrical cliches. As we saw earlier, Shaw was always contemptuous of playwrights who relied on material drawn from the police and

divorce courts. True to his prejudices, he does his best to steer clear of conventionally easy and sentimental romances, and of slick, mindless melodrama: time after time, he insists on eliminating infatuations and grand passions from situations that seem to cry out for them. His brave, rudely shocked Vivie is not tenderly melted by her young man. His Caesar does not have an affair with a voluptuous Cleopatra; he educates a skittish girl-queen instead. Shaw's Joan of Arc has no love-interest at all. Major Barbara does have a romance between Barbara and Adolphus Cusins, but it is quite thoroughly overshadowed by the expose of the Salvation Army and power economics. There are several romances in The Millionaires, but all of them are treated in broad, satirical, even slapstick fashion. The pairing of Eppie and the Egyptian doctor, for instance, which finally comes about because he cannot resist her pulse, is a burlesque of the conventional, happy-ending love story. In this respect, Shaw is much closer to Beckett than to Giraudoux. Beckett has no interest at all in "young love," but Giraudoux is fascinated by the emotion and its players -- even though he often treats them ironically.

In those plays where there is a strong romance in the central focus, Shaw gives the material unusual treatment. Ann Whitefield's successful pursuit of Jack Tanner is played as a demonstration of the workings of the Life Force. And the romances in Heartbreak House are dissected clinically and shown to be destructive, not soothing.

Shaw was not able to banish melodrama so successfully.
Archibald Henderson remarks about *Mrs. Warren's Profession*:

"Shaw has not yet acquired a real mastery of the theater, or that power of self-control which modern tragicomedy ruthlessly imposes. The play has queer quirks of melodrama."\(^{54}\) Indeed it does: the emphasis on sensational revelations from the past, the scene with the gun being waved about -- these and other gimmicks smack of well-made play trickery. Even in *Back to Methuselah*, his most self-consciously serious play, the human puppets create a blood-tinged melodramatic interlude when they murder their creator, and there are a few gory slayings added to spice up *Caesar* and *Cleopatra*. It is clear, then, that for whatever reasons, Shaw did not quite escape the police-court level of interest.

It can still be maintained, however, that, with the possible exception of *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, Shaw subordinates the melodramatic elements to the larger issues and personalities involved. The fact that Pothinus and Ptataetea die violent deaths does not obscure the power of Caesar's personality or the cogency of his political lessons for a moment. The melodramatic struggles of Pygmalion's ill-starred creatures are employed deliberately to evoke contempt for twentieth-century style humans, and they enhance the compelling qualities of the Ancients by contrast.

In short, Shaw scorned dramatists who looked no further than sentimental sex and sensational action for their subject-matter. In the main, he took care to see that he didn't fall into

\(^{54}\)Henderson, P. 532.
that category himself.

If Shaw did not build his plays around romance and melodrama, what did he use? True to his conviction that drama should concretize ideas, and true to his determination to use the stage as a teaching device, each Shavian play grows outward from a key issue. In *Mrs. Warren's Profession* it is the unrealistic and ruinous behavior society expects of rich, sheltered girls like Vivie, and of poor girls like her mother. *Major Barbara* turns on the fruitless labors of fundamental religion to help the poor, and the potentially fruitful capabilities of economic power in that same area. As we said before, *Man and Superman* offers visual and verbal explanations of Life Force activity. In the same vein, *Back to Methuselah* shows us the course of Creative Evolution -- as plotted by Shaw. *Caesar and Cleopatra* offers lessons in truly effective statecraft from a superman. *Heartbreak House* exposes the decaying structure of a civilization on the brink of disaster. We see how a vital superperson can manipulate the capitalist system with ease, and thus lacks only more important and beneficial work to do, in *The Millionairess*. *Saint Joan* pits the superior individualist against the demands and requirements of large social systems, for our instruction.

In each of these plays, as we should expect of Shaw the propagandist, the issue at the core dominates the whole structure. In fact, every aspect and resource of dramatic skill seems to be pressed into the service of the central issue, to render it more evident and more forceful. The long, rhetorically-organized
speeches we discussed before are invariably devoted to clarifying some aspect of the message. The speeches of Eve, Lilith, and the Ancients in *Back to Methuselah* are prime examples of this tendency, as are the remarks of Cauchon and the Inquisitor in *Saint Joan*. Those marvelously vital characters, attractive as they are in their own right, often embody Shaw's ideas in their every phrase and gesture. What could be a better illustration of Shaw's conception of real governing genius than the compelling person of his Caesar? No explanation of what Shaw means by "protestantism" (against any established organization) could equal the clarity of Joan's innocently free-speaking ways.

Again, not only does Shaw prevent sentimental love from overshadowing his message, he manipulates other plot devices, even the melodramatic ones, so that they draw attention to the issues. Notice what use he makes of the murder of Pothinus, which was ordered by Cleopatra and defended by her on the grounds that practical politics necessitated this departure from Caesar's habit of clemency. Caesar explains the resulting uproar from the people in harsh terms:

> Do you hear? These knockers at your gate are also believers in vengeance and in stabbing. You have slain their leader; it is right that they shall slay you. If you doubt it, ask your four counsellors here. And then in the name of that right . . . shall I not slay them for murdering their Queen, and be slain in my turn by their countrymen as the invader of their fatherland? Can Rome do less then than slay these slayers too, to shew the world how Rome revenges her sons and her honor? And so, to the end of history, murder shall breed murder, always in the name of right and honor and peace, until the gods are tired of blood and create a race that can understand.55

---

55 *Caesar and Cleopatra*, Act IV, p. 112.
This made-to-order melodramatic murder, complete with blood, revenge, and political intrigue, is transformed into an object-lesson in long-range political wisdom; it thus takes its place in the service of Shaw's point.

The same thing happens to the comic business of Ellie's hypnotizing Mangan in Heartbreak House. This bit of farce becomes the excuse for Ellie to reveal, as Mangan listens, imprisoned in the trance, how she has faced up coldly to the sexual slavery society forces on women; she plans to marry the boss because, as many women in similar circumstances have realized, a loveless match is her only way to security. The point should need no more illustration; Shaw's plot twists and tricks are designed to enhance his themes -- as they should be in the works of a playwright-teacher.

Let us now consider the way Shaw constructs these issue-centered plots. We pointed out earlier that many of Shaw's heroes and heroines are forced to battle large social forces; we should now point out that the plays take their structures from the course of these struggles; they ebb and flow as the battles do; they follow the progress and failure of the contestants.

Of course, all drama is based on conflict, and the phases in any play match the phases of its most important conflict. In so far as the Shavian plays simply chart a struggle, they are unremarkable. However the kind of battle waged in the typical Shaw play is quite distinctive. We do not generally find conflicts that build up inexorably to a climax -- tragic or comic.
Instead, we see a see-saw motion, a back and forth "tug of war" between opposing elements, in which first one side and then the other seems to be winning.

This movement is pronounced even in an early play like Mrs. Warren's Profession. In the tug of war between Vivie and her mother, Vivie first seems, at the dinner party and its aftermath, absolutely cool and invulnerable. Then Mrs. Warren drops her acquired airs and lashes out with the facts of her life; Vivie is stunned into admiration for her mother's courage and energy. When she discovers that her mother, though now wealthy, is still in the business of prostitution, Vivie's antagonism returns, and in their next confrontation, she turns back all blandishments and arguments with steely resolve.

Major Barbara follows a similar pattern, evident especially in the settings. We start out in a Great English house, and the claims and prejudices of the English upper class are put forward by Lady Undershaft. Next, we move to a Salvation Army headquarters, where first the strengths, and then the weaknesses, of this fundamental religion are explored. After a kind of interlude in the Undershaft family home again, we go to the munitions factory to listen while Undershaft and then Cousin make the case for economic mastery.

Back and forth, almost dialectical motion also informs Saint Joan. At first Joan tackles convention, the French, the Church, and the English with irresistible momentum. Then the forces of feudalism and the Church gather against her during the
trial. The Epilogue shows her and her ideas triumphant -- but not entirely. The world is still not "ready" for its saints.

This characteristic Shavian structure was not invented by him, and many other dramatists employ similar formulae, but it is quite appropriate for his style and his theory of drama. He bases plays on conversation and debate, and the structures of his plays parallel the structure of debate. One side and then the other is put forward in debate; one force and then the other emerges in the plays. There is affirmation and rebuttal in every debate; similarly, the large action in the plays swings back and forth. In short, the movements of Shaw's plays obey his precepts.

What is true in general is also true in particular: critics have often remarked that the device Shaw uses most often to keep his plays moving is the quick reversal of expectations. He loves to pile up clues in one direction and then suddenly turn them the other way.

Man and Superman is particularly rich in this tactic. For instance, we first see Ann Whitefield acting the part of the demure girl obeying her dead father's wishes -- a typical romantic heroine. As soon as she is alone with Jack Tanner, that image is shattered; she becomes a purposeful huntress stalking her prey. Or, take Tanner himself: we watch him face down and humiliate Roebuck Ransden, and we are sure he is a very modern socialist radical-hero, the very echo of G. B. S. himself. But the rest of the play makes it clear that he is also a gabby gull in Ann's practiced hands. And before we leave the play, we should mention
the reversal built into the incident of Violet's pregnancy. At first, Shaw lets us see and hear the conventional uproar an unwed mother stirs in an upper-class family. Then Jack rises to her defense in a splendidly rhetorical speech in favor of instinct and freedom -- only to be silenced by Violet's angry revelation that she is married after all.

Reversals show up in the other plays as well. Caesar has bitterly condemned Cleopatra's order to slay Pothinus, but when he discovers that Rufio has dispatched Flattateeta, the murderess, Caesar praises him for the "natural" killing of a dangerous enemy. Or, in Saint Joan, when the stage is set for a traditional struggle between an unjustly maligned heroine and her cynical persecutors, we discover that the prosecutors are, in Joan's words: "As honest a lot of poor fools as ever burned their betters."56

In terms of dramatic effectiveness, the use of reversals has a two-fold value. First, it contributes to the see-saw movement we described earlier. Second, it gives the plays a higher surprise quotient, a sure way of guaranteeing more audience-interest. We can thus look upon the device as one more means Shaw employs to direct our attention to his dramatic conversations; for unless an audience is listening carefully, it will miss the reversals, which are most often announced in dialogue.

We should pause here to mention a special kind of reversal very popular with Shaw -- the anticlimax, which is also a

favorite with Giraudoux. It is surprising how often and against whom Shaw uses this puncturing weapon. One of the most famous and perhaps the funniest needles great Caesar himself. At the beginning of Act I, Caesar addresses the sphinx by moonlight in elevated, poetic language, claiming his brotherhood with this divine symbol. He finishes magnificently:

My way hither was the way of destiny; for I am he of whose genius you are the symbol: part brute, part woman, and part god -- nothing of man in me at all. Have I read your riddle, Sphinx?57

Whereupon, we hear the girlish, giggling voice of Cleopatra coming from the statue: "Old gentleman." Shaw certainly admired his version of Caesar, and gives him splendid things to say and do throughout the play, but he seems distinctly less godlike after the above sequence.

Again, in Heartbreak House, we are listening to Hector prophesy the imminent doom of Heartbreak House and the surrounding civilization because of their uselessness and idleness, when Lady Uttenword interrupts to say she knows what's wrong with the house: it lacks horses:

Yes: horses. Why have we never been able to let this house? Because there are no proper stables. Go anywhere in England where there are natural, wholesome, contented, and really nice English people; and what do you always find? That the stables are the real centre of the household.58

This leads into a little discussion of the point -- right in the middle of everyone's loudly-proclaimed agonies.

Henderson has a theory about the origin of this taste for anticlimax:

A sort of game played with George by his father ... illustrates this irresistible thrust toward anticlimax. Whenever George scoffed at the Bible, he would rebuke his irreverent son with vigor and assertiveness. But as soon as he had reached the zenith of his impressiveness, his comedic instinct asserted itself; and with a repressed mirth ... he would declare, 'with an air of perfect fairness, that even the worst enemy of religion could say no worse of the Bible than that it was the dammedest parcel of lies ever written.'

Whatever the beginnings of the habit, it has strong dramatic advantages, especially in Shaw's terms. Previously, we saw that Shaw rejected the traditional tragic formula, because it depended too much on accidents like dropped handkerchiefs, and plumbed human misery on a grand scale without attempting to solve human problems. We saw also that his vital characters fulfill his conception of comedy as the celebration of human survival amidst bumbling. And so, in addition to providing excellent comic relief for serious passages, the anti-climaxes emphasize Shaw's preference for the comedic approach. These deflating twists prevent the characters and the situations from slipping into self-conscious melodrama. Just when people are beginning to inflate their problems into pseudo-tragedy, or when the sermonizing becomes a bit pompous, the anticlimax restores Shaw's customary ironic viewpoint, and the spotlight once more picks out human foibles.

In this connection, we might mention here that Shaw's plays obviously fulfill his definition of tragi-comedy, which was

59 Henderson, p. 59.
the kind of drama he felt to be the most important, and the kind he wanted to write. He said that the tragi-comic artist was "a satirical rogue and a discloser of essentially tragic ironies," and no one who has watched him lay bare the hollow core of conventional idealism in Man and Superman, or the cash-consciousness of the highest-minded religionists in Major Barbara, can question his credentials as a satirist. As for irony -- those comic reversals we spoke of earlier are the stuff of light irony, and the darker ironies he explores when the canonized Joan finds herself still unwanted on earth, and when the inhabitants of Heartbreak House talk aimlessly while their dreary world explodes around them, can be as sad as anything we will find in Giraudoux's work, as savage as anything by Beckett.

Let us close our examination of Shaw's plots by examining the way he adapts form to the subject-matter at hand. We saw earlier that, contrary to some familiar opinion, Shaw did not regard the Ibsenite drawing-room discussion play as the one ideal dramatic format. Nor does he rely exclusively on the discussion play formula in his own practice. As a matter of fact, he varies the form to suit the needs of the individual play.

Sometimes, to be sure, Shaw did produce a discussion play: Mrs. Warren's Profession certainly fits in that genre -- with its series of revelations of past action. The third act of Man and Superman, the Don Juan in Hell scene, also comes from the same mold.

However, plays like Caesar and Cleopatra and Saint Joan,
which sweep over great chunks of time and space, and which deal with unfolding action, have different requirements. To meet those requirements, Shaw casts both works in a time-honored form -- the English chronicle or history-play. The choice was a wise one: this form adapts easily to much action, many characters, and varied locales. In fact, both plays make effective use of the chronicle-play's distinguishing features: many scenes, a variety of sets, complete disregard of the unities, and a strong storyline.

The comedy envelope for the interlude in hell in Man and Superman offers another set of dramatic needs, and Shaw turns to still another popular form -- the traditional romantic comedy. Indeed, he serves up all the standard ingredients: a well-born, beauty, a chivalrous, shy, romantic youth (Octavius), a strange will, an eccentric friend (Tanner), even a pregnancy and a concealed marriage. Of course, Shaw then proceeds to turn the safe little formula inside-out with his reversal technique, but we should remember that he takes off from the standard format.

Again, Shaw himself announces that Heartbreak House is "A Fantasia in the Russian Manner on English Themes," and explains at the beginning of the Preface that his vision of "Heartbreak House and Horseback Hall" was inspired by Chekov's plays. Some critics claim that the imitation is something less than exact:

As in The Cherry Orchard, the dramatist presents a picture of a middle-class family and their friends, all more or less conscious of the futility and triviality of their lives, over whom hangs the threat of catastrophe. Neither play can be
said to have a plot. This is about as far as the similarity goes.60

Even the resemblances Woodbridge cites above seem more important than he recognizes, but when you add to them what he overlooks -- namely, the way conversational themes like Ellie's proposed marriage, the relationship between parents and children, and the uselessness of men enslaved by women, drift in and out of focus, Chekov style, and the Chekovenian feelings of sadness and frustration that grip everyone -- Heartbreak House begins to emerge as a successful Russian fantasia.

Back to Methusaleh's short plays belong to various formats, but the overall structure borrows a good deal from the Medieval mystery cycle play; it is, after all, a history of man from the garden of Eden to Shaw's agnostic version of the Beatific Vision.

One more example: Shaw also announces the theatrical ancestry of The Millionairess in the subtitle, "A Jonsonian Comedy in Four Acts," and in the Preface: "This play of the Millionairess does not pretend to be anything more than a comedy of humorous and curious contemporary characters such as Ben Jonson might write were he alive now."61 Here the similarities and resemblances are really unmistakable; the characters are drawn in broad strokes, and most of them are dominated by a single "humour" -- with Eppie it is comic imperiousness, with

60Woodbridge, p. 103.

Adrian it is aestheticism, with Polly it is placidity; the action is generally fast and farcical, quite physical: there are collapsing chairs and wrestling scenes. Of course, the play is definitely Shaw's and could never be mistaken for an updated Jonsonian effort, but the influence is evident.

Shaw's use of these various forms is yet another instance of his fidelity to his own precepts. The reader will recall that Shaw regarded Shakespeare, Jonson, Moliere, and other classics as his guides, not really Ibsen, and that he thought stage forms and conventions should be flexible. The catholicity of his techniques in play construction prove that he was not just speaking in the abstract.

Finally, let us revert briefly once more to the role of Devil's Advocate: are there aspects of Shaw's plot techniques which do not conform to his theories? We can mention one factor which seems to cut both ways. Every Shavian student can point out passages even in superior plays which seem to disturb the rhythm of the whole work, or break its organic unity. One example is the "Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman" in Back to Methuselah. Most people agree that this playlet is a mistake -- a wordy interlude that adds little to the progress of the chronicle and indeed detracts from it by means of excessive length.62 "Tragedy's" real function seems to be to give Shaw an excuse to rehearse his familiar prejudices about British habits, politics and imperialism.

62Woodbridge, p. 110; Ervine, p. 479.
It is also argued persuasively that the third act of *The Millionairess* is an unskilful interpolation. Ervine, for example, objects to it on realistic and dramatic grounds:

This scene is not even plausible in the context of the time in which the play is laid. G. B. S. had forgotten that sweat shops such as he describes had ceased to exist long before *The Millionairess* was written. . . . The whole of this scene could be cut. Any value it has as a revelation of Epifania's character is made much more effectively in the succeeding and final act.63

We might add that it is too serious, too argumentative for the broad farce in the other four acts; it serves up heavy earnestness where light madness is needed.

Now, quite obviously, these structural lapses violate Shaw's belief in good dramatic craftsmanship, in measuring up to the standards of the classics. They also ignore his preference for unobtrusive, painless dramatic lessons. Seen from this angle these two scenes and others like them are useless excrescences.

On the other hand, they may be fulfilling one of Shaw's less profound precepts: the need for spontaneity, the need to do "whatever comes to hand" in a rush. The sweatshop scene and "The Tragedy of an Elderly Gentleman" do seem to be the products of a man who wrote "without a plan"; if any careful plan were followed, they would have never been written, or soon expunged. As such, they illustrate the fact that, if Shaw's penchant for following his whims led to some brilliant successes, it also produced some jarring false notes.

63Ervine, p. 539.
We can now summarize our conclusions concerning Shaw's techniques with structure and plot. We saw first of all that Shaw avoided melodrama and sentimental romance as often as possible, and subordinated them to his message when he could not -- just as he promised in his remarks on theory. Next, we concluded that, true to his conviction that the stage was for teaching, Shaw built each of his plays around a key issue or idea, and every element in a Shavian play serves to emphasize the claims of its key issue. Third, we showed that Shaw's plays generally depend upon dialectical, see-saw patterns of action and conflict -- a kind of movement well-suited to mirror and enhance the debates upon which Shaw felt good drama should rest. Fourth, we saw that his favorite plot device, the reversal of expectations, tends to draw attention once more to the dialogue. Fifth, the number of humorous anticlimaxes helps maintain the plays' ironic, comedic viewpoint, which was the one Shaw sought. Sixth, we saw that Shaw succeeded in creating tragi-comedies according to the formula he developed. Seventh, we maintained that the variety of forms Shaw employed demonstrated that he practiced what he preached about the success of many different classical models and the need for flexibility in construction. Finally, we suggested that his occasional off-key mistakes in construction were both failures to conform to his standards and evidence that he trusted too much to improvisation.

Looking back over this chapter as a whole we can reach the tentative judgment that, with certain exceptions, Shaw did
work out his dramatic theories in his own plays. Whatever their intrinsic merit, his works at least attempt to embody his concepts of effective drama and to affect audiences in the way he intended. Shaw wanted to produce tragi-comic, didactic, discussion-oriented plays which would convince his audiences that they badly needed to cooperate with the Life Force, and which would imbue them with the required quasi-religious fervor. *Saint Joan*, *Heartbreak House*, *The Millionairess* and the others aim in those directions.

Looking ahead to the succeeding chapters, we should also recall one more general observation concerning Shaw: that his work is firmly oriented toward society. Shaw is not much given to introspective probing of emotional states, and we really cannot call his plays psychological dramas. He stays in the crowded arena. His techniques (which emphasize rather formal rhetoric, debate-like structures, and characters jousting with monolithic, impersonal forces), and his themes (which so often deal with mass problems) mark the plays, at least partly, as the weapons of a social reformer. Shaw couldn't care less about exploring some sensitive oaf's Oedipal complex; he is too busy telling us what's wrong with our economics, or our political structures, or our manners, and showing us what we need to do about them.

Giraudoux and Beckett, we will find, constitute a trend in the opposite direction -- toward more emphasis on personal or interior concerns. This is not to say that they work in depth and that Shaw stays on the surface, but simply that the focus and
the range of dramatic interest change as we move from Shaw to Giraudoux to Beckett. The problems become more private and emotional, the dialogue more philosophical and less formal, and the characters more sensitive and self-concerned. Let us see how this process begins with Giraudoux.
CHAPTER III

At the outset of our treatment of Giraudoux, we must recognize that the man and the style both place obstacles in the path of analysis. Unlike Shaw, who delighted in analyzing himself and everything else for us, Giraudoux and his prose tend to be deliberately opaque.

Giraudoux had a deserved reputation for being one of the most sociable and engaging personalities on the French scene; his affability and urbanity were unfailing.¹ Still, very few people were allowed to probe beneath the smile and the easy camaraderie. It was very difficult to know for certain what he really felt, what he really thought. It would seem for example, that if anyone could be described as Giraudoux's confidant, particularly with regard to his views on drama, that person would be Louis Jouvet. Indeed, Giraudoux himself describes their rapport in warm terms: "My intimacy with him is so great, our dramatic yoking is so firm, that the ghostly apparition (a newly-imagined character) in a minute has already taken his mouth, his sly eye, his pronunciation . . . "²

And yet, Giraudoux's close, frequent collaborator, his friend, Jouvet, recalls: "Giraudoux was very secret, very silent . . . I had to divine his thoughts, I had to read in his face his agreement or, in contrast, his disapproval. Sometimes a single word: 'Too long' "¹

¹Le Sage, pp. 53-54.
gave me an indication."

Again, Giraudoux's style -- so bright, so arresting, so amusing -- often interposes its incandescence between his actual opinions and our understanding. As we know, he wrote fluently, and gave free rein to an imagination that was at once spectacularly fertile, delicate, and mischievous in a fey manner. When he composed his plays or novels, he did not work from a carefully elaborated geometrical design; he improvised, recording his impressions as they struck him, and following his quirksome inventions into whatever path they seemed to suggest. The results are nearly always delightful; when the Inspector in Intermezzo suddenly and inexplicably insists on an analysis of everyone's dreams in order to gauge the normality of the town's atmosphere, the ensuing dialogue describing a series of fantastic dreams in a triumph of witty whimsy.

In some contexts, however, the improvisations, however talented, seem to break off an important comparison before it is finished, or obscure the edges of a serious idea. In L'Impromptu de Paris, a serious indictment of the popular French theater for its excessive reliance on "hits" and its fear of innovation is answered, not by any reference to prevailing tastes or an analysis of theatrical conditions, but by the spoofing argument that the

---


4Le Sage, pp. 169-171.

5Intermezzo, Valency translation, p. 135.
Theaters (the buildings) are tyrants that demand a full house, and will make life miserable for the actors if the house is empty.\(^6\) One can say that such a capricious twist is needed to sustain the audience's interest in a theoretical discussion, but that does not satisfy our desire for a flight of fancy springing from a more meaningful base. This kind of quick exit from reality happens with somewhat troubling frequency in Giraudoux's other critical works as well.

We must recognize, then, that our analysis of Giraudoux's theories, themes and techniques will be hampered throughout by the author's reticence and his playfulness. He never says enough, and we cannot always be sure how to take what he does say. Recognizing that these difficulties will be constant, we can proceed -- with caution.

First we will outline and analyze Giraudoux's theories concerning the nature and function of drama, and then we will show how these theories are served by the techniques actually employed in particular plays. Finally, we will attempt to show how his techniques are especially suited to his dramatic intentions.

Giraudoux did not produce a great body of dramatic criticism or theory, but we do have a variety of sources from which to draw, the largest and most fertile of which are, of course, the essays in Littérature and the one-act play about drama, L'Impromptu de Paris. Visitations, the slim volume of scenes and lectures published posthumously, provides more critical statements, as do

\(^{6}\) L'Impromptu de Paris, pp. 101-105.
several interviews and articles.

As we begin that promised outline and analysis of this theory, we must deal with what seems to be a basic contradiction at its core. On the one hand, Giraudoux insists, with considerable force and on several occasions, that the playwright should be simply one member of a dramatic troupe, whose task is to turn out new plays and then surrender them entirely to the control and execution of the actors and the director. "My property is where I find it," said Moliere. Because there is no plagiarism in dramatic art -- and there is no plagiarism because there is no property. . . . It is enough (for him) to enter a theater where they are performing his play to understand, from the time that the first representation is given to it by the troupe, that it does not belong to him, that it never belonged to him."7 In the same context, he reduces the importance of the playwright's function to that of an "actor who does not play."8 In *Visitations*, in the course of describing how a playwright draws inspiration from his actors, Giraudoux says,

It is thus that he reclaims unconsciously his ancient role, which was to be the regular supplier of a theatrical troupe, the poet that the medieval engravings and the tableaux of Italian comedy show us at the right of a group of actors, in a garment of an infinitely duller color . . . and a manuscript rolled in his hand.9

---

7 *Littérature*, pp. 242-243. Unless otherwise specified, the English translations from Giraudoux's theoretical works (*Littérature, L'Impromptu de Paris, Visitations*), are to be credited to the author of this study.

8 Ibid., p. 243.

9 *Visitations*, p. 63.
Even the text itself and the characters he has created tend to divorce themselves spiritually from their author, Giraudoux maintains; speaking of the independence characters come to acquire, he makes the wistful complaint:

The first actor who plays him begins a series of reincarnations by which he draws himself away more and more from his author and steals off forever. . . . The independence of those characters who are successful is total, the life they lead in the provinces, or in America, is a constant denial of their filial obligations. . . . It is largely to punish them for their independence that Goethe, that Claudel, that so many of the others remake versions of their favorite heroines; in vain. The new Marguerite, the new New Helen, or the new Violaine, were not less prompt to abandon them.10

The playwright can maintain his rights of ownership only with his failures; successful plays slip beyond the reach even of their companies: "From the time of the 100th performance . . . it belongs to the public."11

This apparent downgrading of the playwright’s importance shows itself again in his often extravagant descriptions of the importance of actors. In several places, he gives them the status of co-creators, who must contribute their skills, personalities, and bodies before the characterizations or the play can be considered finished:

The actor is not only an interpreter, he is an inspirer; he is the living mannequin by which most dramatists personify very naturally a still-vague vision; . . . You will not be surprised then, if I tell you that it very frequently happens that one of these phantoms, still wet from non-existence and silence, seems to take immediately the free and voluble form of Louis Jouvet. . . . Such is the immense service the great actor renders to the author, to spare him from that interval when his character, all naked, wanders awkwardly in search of his clothing, his

10 Ibid., pp. 122-123. 11 Ibid., p. 123.
Similar sentiments seem to underlie Giraudoux's warm praise of popular theater and the tradition of improvisation in the commedia dell'arte and in the drama of such prolific figures as Calderon and Lope de Vega, in which the author simply rearranges old materials. The authorial function is here reduced to the point where "Love and honor actually write plays in the minds and hearts of playwrights."13

When you add to these ideas the most obvious interpretation of his definition of Drama's function -- to teach people to dream and imagine more powerfully, as we have already discussed -- the result seems to be a further depersonalization of the Theatre. Giraudoux appears to deny that there should be a communication of ideas between the playwright and his audience:

The lucky thing is that the real public does not understand, it feels. . . . Those who wish to understand in the theater are those who do not understand the theater.14

Statements like these, considered in themselves, tend to downgrade the objective importance of plays, making them simply the initiators of, or necessary conditions for, the desired subjective reactions from the audience.

Thus, at one end of the spectrum of Giraudoux's theories, the text of the play, the author's rather un-filial offspring, is actually little more than a formless potency, requiring the talents of the director and the actors to give it shape and vitality, so

that it can perform its proper function -- to provoke the right kind of dreams.

The statements upon which the foregoing summary assertion was based are, as we have seen, clear and definite -- and Giraudoux made them himself. And yet, we can find many other statements -- also by Giraudoux -- which seem to contradict this view, statements which elevate the author's conceptions, language, and style to an all-important, inviolable position, and make the actors and the production vassals in the service of the sacred word:

The heart of literature, that magnet which goes to bring back into one bundle the many separated members, is recovered (today), and this heart is the writer, it is writing. The whole great reversal of spirits and manners diminishes the importance of the genres of literature in themselves, but it augments a hundredfold the role of the writer and gives back to him his universality. . . . It (the public) is (attentive to) the one who reveals his truth from himself, who confides to the age, in order to permit himself to organize his thought and his sensibility, the secret of which the writer is the sole trustee: style. . . . It (the public) loves work well done in verse, the conscience and the care they suppose to be natural in a poet. But when a writer reveals to them that his prose is not lax, not filthy, not obscene, not superficially facile, they do not ask more than to believe him, and they are moved to see all at once, instead of the paper money that is the theatrical style, the actor and the actress exchanging phrases which reveal to them that the most precious thing a people possess, their language, has a reserve of gold.15

In passages reflecting this view, Giraudoux does not hesitate to put production values, set, costumes, etc. in their own very circumscribed place, especially when they are contrasted with language:

All that he (the French playgoer) requires in the ballet or the opera, he reprouces in comedy. He comes to a comedy to listen, and becomes tired there, if one is particularly obliged to see.

15 Littérature, pp. 237-240.
In fact, he believes in the word, and he does not believe in decor. . . . The true stroke of the theater is not, for him, the clamor of two hundred figures, but the ironic nuance, the imperfect subjunctive, or the litotes that underlies a phrase of the hero or the heroine. Combats, assassinations, or rape, which the Russian theatre pretends to present on stage are replaced with us by a speech before the bar, . . . It is the power of the dialogue, its efficacy, its form, therefore, the purely literary merits of the text, that he loves to test by itself. 16

Nor are the actors, those much-deferred to co-creators and inspirers of the other passages, allowed much freedom of action or choice in the exercise of their proscribed function; they are supposed to be the vehicles by which the author's words come to the waiting public, and their abilities must be bent to the task of becoming efficient, enhancing vehicles. Good actors, Giraudoux implies, are devoted to this rather self-effacing task, and find their creative joy in it:

Where would he (the actor) find the reward and the rationale for the mimicry, for the coughing, the stuttering under which he hides the poverty of a text for a hundred evenings, except in the kind of role which gives him the modulations, the amplitudes, the silences, of real language, and where he does not have any more to do than to be a statue painlessly animated by words. 17

We can also add to this critical reversal Giraudoux's frequent insistence that the theater must be literate because it should elucidate human problems and conditions. 18 Such assertions lead logically to the position that Drama is, ideally, a medium of rational public instruction, and as we have seen in Chapter One, Giraudoux does make this claim, calling the Theatre "the only form of moral

---

or artistic instruction for a nation."

The dichotomy is now complete. On one side, we have the Giraudoux who proclaims the need for a theatre in which the dramatist is self-effacing, the play takes life only from the production and the performances, and the goal is to allow the audience to feel and dream more sensitively. On the other side, Giraudoux proclaims the necessity of a theatre of language, where the production and actors must simply be faithful, efficient transmitters of what the author has to say, and the audience must respond with the closest rational attention.

We might expect a writer of Giraudoux's ironic and quirksome turn of mind to leave this contradiction unresolved -- if only to thwart overly logical, humorless critics -- but, as a matter of fact, he does not. The paradox can be unravelled by examining his elliptical remarks more closely. For example, in his account to Mr. Eustis of the way his plays take shape, which is an expanded version of other accounts in _Visitations_ and _Littérature_, we can grasp something of his full position by giving careful attention to the process:

The first thing Giraudoux does with a new idea is to talk it over with Jouvet. When he has convinced the actor-manager that the theme is good, and Jouvet has made certain technical suggestions as to the best method in which to express it dramatically, Giraudoux proceeds to write the first act... This draft completed, Giraudoux and Jouvet have another conference and then the dramatist 'finishes the play in a year or two.'... Like Priestly, ... Giraudoux attempts to free his mind entirely from the settings, props and costumes of an actor's stage while he is writing. He considers the drama solely as a piece of literature. Only after it is finished does he, with Jouvet at

19Ibid., p. 233.
his right and left hand, think of it concretely as a play to be acted. Even when, as is often the case, he creates a part specifically for a certain actor . . . the part is not molded around the actor's personality. He regards the players as des muses secondaires; they furnish the role with a physical background and he supplies the spiritual entity . . . When the play is completed, he and Jouvet collaborate in earnest. They discuss the mise-en-scène, the music, the casting, everything that pertains to a physical theatre production. Giraudoux's relation to the script, from this moment on, is that of a theatre-ridden dramatist. He takes the play that he has written objectively, without thought of a stage, and proceeds to shape it into a theatre piece. Usually, he re-writes it at least three times before rehearsals commence. Then, when the government's schedule permits, he attends each rehearsal and works with Jouvet and the members of the cast on 'that fascinating development, the theatrical growth of a play.' Jouvet is such an excellent director that Giraudoux rarely makes any but superficial suggestions about the staging or the acting. . . . His main concern is to write and re-write, to cut and edit, to substitute passages from one version for passages in another that do not play well, to satisfy himself, in short, . . . that each scene expresses the idea in the language of the actor and the tempo of the theatre.20

From the strictly literary character of the first drafts and his careful supervision and collaboration in every phase of production, we can conclude that Giraudoux's first concern is indeed his ideas and their expression, . . . just as Shaw put his opinions and programs first. Much as he professed to admire Lope de Vega and his hundreds of plays, Giraudoux valued his own language far too much to imitate such careless fecundity. He could not have given up his opportunities for painstaking revision, because the words which gave "a local habitation and a name" to his imaginative insights were the raison d'être of his work in Drama.

His praise for Jouvet and the actors sprang from the conviction that they translated his language faithfully and excitingly

20Dustis, pp. 130-131.
into the language of the stage. His remarks about the actors being statues animated by his words do not cancel out his admiration for their ability to vivify his pale, bodiless characters from the text: as Jouvet and others have testified, and as Giraudoux well understood, his complicated, delicate prose could be rendered intelligible and viable on the stage only by highly-skilled performers. Jouvet himself recalls: "When I had Siegfried in production, it required many days for me to enter into this new domain of the word, into this enchanted domain of the Giraudoux style. It was a new language to assimilate." Fortunately for Giraudoux, Jouvet regarded such effort as the actor's proper task: "The actor is thus the instrument which delivers the text and offers it to the spectator as it had been conceived by the author." No wonder Giraudoux was full of grateful admiration: he was in need of a specially-tuned medium to embody his words on stage, and Jouvet's troupe was the most sensitive medium available. He said it himself:

> It happens through the efforts of Jouvet that, like those Japanese paper cut-outs which were only paper, I, who believed myself to be only paper, become . . . now a chrysanthemum, now a gladiolus, and it is not forbidden to foresee for my next existence, a blossoming into a lily or a rose.

His penchant for lamenting the "unfilial" ways of plays can be attributed to his taste for whimsy, a habit of modesty, and his realization that, once the words are written, he and every other dramatist are absolutely dependent upon the director and the actors. They must deliver that all-important message to the spectators, and the most anxious, determined author can only hope they

---

will be successful. Furthermore, once a play has been performed, and once the public is familiar with a certain production of it, Giraudoux knew, it does become public property, a phenomenon so well-known by playgoers, that the playwright can no longer exercise control over it. This ultimate helplessness, however, does not alter the fact that this now permanent, independent thing was created out of the author's personal language.

As for the audience, Giraudoux did indeed want to help them to become more sensitive and more adept at dreaming life-enriching dreams, and he did not really see any contradiction between that desire and his insistence on their listening to lucid, if intricate, very rational dialogues. He believed that the language of discussion nourished the soul as well as the intellect: "For the Frenchman, the soul may be opened in the most logical manner, like a strong box, in a word, by the word, and he repudiates the method of the blowpipe and explosion."24 Once the soul is opened, it can receive a thousand impressions, and benefit from all varieties of dreams, but this necessary unfolding can only result from the stimulation of the intellect by words.

When we examine Giraudoux's dramatic techniques, then, we should expect to find that they are suitable to the effective presentation of drama-in-language, that they are capable of embodying and enhancing the nuances of style and sensitivity, in other words, that they conform to his conception of what drama is and what it should do. If, in Eastis' words, Giraudoux sought to work

24Ibid., p. 281.
in a form of dramatic expression which is both new and old, a form in which the beauty and majesty of the spoken word is used to heighten and fulfill the inner meaning of the drama -- a literary theatre, in short, which, like the theatre of the Greeks, of Shakespeare and of Racine, is both literature and theatre. Then the devices actually employed in his plays should have been chosen with a view to how well they could serve the needs of a literary drama.

We are now prepared to examine those techniques, and we shall do so under the headings of Characterization, Language, and Plot, as was indicated in the first chapter, and as we did with Shaw.

Taking up Characterization first, we find from the plays that all of his characters, whatever their individual situations and traits, share the following characteristics:

First, they are all articulate, and, just as Shaw's people are invariably skilled in rhetoric and argumentation, Giraudoux's creations speak the elegant, ironic, humorously whimsical language of Giraudoux himself. In an age when various forms of dramatic realism were in vogue, even Shaw made attempts to write dialectically accurate speeches for his characters, but Giraudoux never troubled himself to do so. Consequently, his sewer-worker in The Madwoman of Chaillot speaks as correctly and as complexly as his Jupiter in Amphitryon 38. When we listen to this courtly man of the lower regions;

Oh, now, Countess, that's another of those fairy tales out of ________________

25Eustis, p. 132.
the Sunday supplements. It just seems those writers can't keep their minds off the sewers! It fascinates them. They keep thinking of us moving around in our underground canals like gondoliers in Venice, and it sends them into a fever of romance! The things they say about us! They say we have a race of girls down there who never see the light of day! It's completely fantastic! The girls naturally come out -- every Christmas and Easter. And orgies by torchlight with gondolas and giggers! With troops of rats that dance as they follow the piper! What nonsense! The rats are not allowed to dance.26

we are forced to wonder if he does not practice his phrasing and vocabulary as he sloshes along every day. And like everyone else in Giraudoux's plays, he must also work to develop his natural aptitude for whimsical irony. Even Gilberte, one of Isabel's pupils in Intermezzo, gives evidence of her diligence in this regard:

> A tree is a tall person who is rooted to the ground. He spreads out his arms and holds his stomach in his hands. In tree language, a murderer is called a woodcutter, a corpse is called lumber, and woodpeckers are fleas.27

In short, when we listen to Giraudoux's characters we are instantly aware of being in the company of a group of conversational virtuosos.

If one cannot help finding sparkling talkers in these plays, one will look in vain for anyone in the grip of unrestrained passion. In keeping with the traditions of French theatre, there are no deeds of violence performed on stage, and even the love scenes feature more enraptured dialogue than action. Giraudoux's people sometimes exhibit passion, to be sure, but it is always subject to the restraints of politeness and well-ordered rhetoric. When Alcmena and Amphitryon believe that they will soon be forced to

---

27Intermezzo, Valency translation, p. 121.
they do not fill the air with desperate lamentations, but with a gentle and lyrical dialogue in which they try to imagine the delights of the shared old age they think will be denied them. When the Supervisor in Intermozzo declares his love to Isabel, he does not seek to sway her with exalted metaphors or sweetly extravagant promises; instead, he tells her of the tamer delights of a life in the civil service:

People talk of sailors' eyes. It's because when they pay their taxes, they never look into the eyes of the collector. It's because when they pass the customs, they never look at the eyes of the official. It's because in a courtroom, it never occurs to a litigant to take the judge's head in his hands, and turn it gently to the light and gaze into his pupils. In the eyes of a government official, believe me, they would see the reflection of an ocean no sailor ever saw. It is the ocean of life, Miss Isabel.28

To look at the same matter from a slightly different angle, the varieties and modes of emotion are a favorite topic for Giraudoux, and the people in his plays are forever probing and exploring their feelings, but they do so in the civilized Giraudoux manner. Rather than give vent to what they feel, they savor the experience carefully, and then report on it in exact, well-modulated, drawing-room language. In Ondine, for example, Hans says:

I'm annoyed because I'm vain just as she said. When she said I was handsome, though I know I'm not handsome, I was pleased. And when she said I was a coward, though I know I'm no coward, I was hurt. I'm annoyed with myself.29

It is clear, then, that in Giraudoux's drama, emotion is something to be considered, not indulged in, and that excesses of feeling are

28 Ibid., p. 162. 29 Ondine, Valency translation, p. 186.
never allowed to interrupt the light, urbane tone which is Giraudoux's trademark. (As we saw in the last chapter, Shaw was equally restrained, but more puritanical and less interested in the subtle examination of emotional states.)

Next, we can observe that Giraudoux's people are quite frankly types; they are clearly intended to typify or personify a certain class of people, sometimes to the point of caricature, . . . again, just as Shaw's were. The inspector in Ondine represents all petty, narrow bureaucrats; Alcmena is the quintessential housewife; Bertha, of Ondine, is the typical woman of society; the Broker and the President from The Madwoman of Chaillot stand for all the faceless, soulless "captains of commerce"; and Eva, in Siegfried, represents the dangerously dedicated German of the period between the two wars.

The most famous and easily recognized type in the crowded gallery, however, is the young girl -- on whom Giraudoux lavished his most winning skills, and in whom he seemed to see a compelling blend of the divine and the mortal elements of humanity. Valency makes this point with eloquence worthy of Giraudoux himself:

The young girl is Giraudoux's supreme achievement as a dramatist. She is, in his view, a point of incandescence in the darkness, a being through whom the two worlds communicate, in whom everything is possible and nothing ever happens . . . . In their eyes the supreme light is reflected, we see in them the love that moves the sun and the other stars, but they have excellent appetites and are accustomed to put away a hearty breakfast. . . . The mystery of the young girl in whose eyes one sees the ineffable, and in whose arms one finds the cook, has troubled many a writer since the time of Dante. There are two sides to our souls, it is very noticeable. There is the side that yearns for the infinite. There is the side that yearns for its dinner. The claims of the ideal are no more
to be denied that the claims of the stomach, but their interests are not the same. For Giraudoux the young girl is the living embodiment of this conflict in both its tragic and its comic aspects. In her we see the freshness of that marvelous instant in which life bursts into bloom in its most charming form. The moment is precious, but it is ephemeral: it is intolerable that it should endure. 30

Whether her name is Agnes (The Apollo of Bellac), Genevieve (Siegfried), Ondine or Bertha, or Isabel, Giraudoux intends her to capture and display for us that universal magic moment.

The fact that these people are types does not make them flat or dull; indeed, the liveliness and appeal of these "type"-characters urges upon us the necessity of distinguishing between the stereotype and the type. The stereotype, as seen in sweet young ingenues, or in the prostitute-with-the-heart-of-gold (of the more pretentiously daring among inept plays), or, more recently, in the angry young men, is dull because it simply repeats, in stale colors and phrases, a characterization that was never very insightful to begin with. The stereotype, in other words, remains bloodless because it only skims along a worn surface.

The vital kind of type-character employs commonly recognized traits, but probes deeper to find them, and therefore, the recognition of their familiarity assumes something of the value of a renewed recognition of enduring reality. This kind of type is also drawn in fresh, strong, and graceful language.

That Giraudoux's characters have these qualities is easily demonstrable. One has only to look at the pompous Inspector of Ondine. He interests us, and thereby easily escapes the tiresome-

ness of the stereotyped version of the narrow official, because Giraudoux takes the trouble to take us behind the standard screen of pomposity so that we can see the rationale for which such a person sets out to be dour:

Is it possible that you don't yet see where this system of education tends? It's aim is nothing less than the release of these young minds from the net of truth in which our magnificent twentieth century has finally caught the universe... The facts are the facts. Death is nothing but bones and worms. And as for life -- Listen to me, you! Life is nothing but a tiresome journey. For a man, it consists of false starts, snail-like advances, nasty setbacks, and lost collar buttons. For a woman, it consists of chatter and clatter, shopping and mopping.... It's quite clear to me that there is a concerted movement on foot here to undermine the basis of established government, which is founded, necessarily, on a sound acceptance of the fact that in this world we can never get what we want. There is entirely too much happiness in this community for the good of the nation.31

Beyond this, although most of Giraudoux's characters have a dominant chord to play, they are given some fascinating minor ones as well, additions and variations that tend to enlarge them to three dimensions. The Madwoman, for example, is not only the sensible eccentric who saves humanity, she is a faded lady mourning her lost love and her youth, and, along with her friends, she has taken refuge in the world of illusions. Major characters are not the only ones enlarged in this fashion; minor figures often get the same energizing treatment. Take the case of Leda, in Amphitryon 38, who might simply have been a comic plot device; Giraudoux lets her have a series of revealing speeches that mark her as a lady concerned with her immortal glory -- and with her creature-comforts:

Leda:  Of course, I could never endure a liaison, even with a god. A second visit, yes, perhaps, but he neglected this point of etiquette... (After it has been arranged for Leda to take Alcmena's place secretly) Are there steps going down? I have a horror of slipping in the dark.

Alcmena: No, a smooth level floor.
Leda: I hope it isn't a cold marble couch?
Alcmena: There is a thick wool rug.32

In the same play, an even more perfunctory and incidental character is granted his touch of dotty and memorable life -- the trumpeter who sounds the proclamation of peace in the beginning of the first act:

Orion or no Orion, I want you to know that I am famous among one-note trumpeters. I imagine a whole musical development in silence and make my one note the conclusion. Can you think of a greater enhancement for a single note? ... The town's falling asleep, but my colleagues, I want to emphasize to you once again, are wildly jealous of me. I have heard that at the trumpet academies they are now training students exclusively in the technique of silent music such as mine.33

Did John Cage get his training at this academy? One is reminded again of those marvelously vital vignettes of eccentrics in Dickens.

In sum, then, Giraudoux's characters are sprightly and singular, in their own fashion, but also quietly alike, as if they were differently-colored squares in a quilt. Their differences and surprises make them dramatically arresting; their sameness in tone, in speech, and in conduct help us to regard them with a certain degree of disinterestedness.

In this connection, we should remark that, except perhaps

32Amphitryon 38, La Farge and Judd translation, pp. 129, 133.
33Ibid., p. 85.
for some of his young girls -- Genevieve, in particular -- there are no perfect heroes or heroines among Giraudoux's people, just as there are no melodramatic villains. If Hans in Ondine is rather more concerned at one point with some delicious ham than with his newly discovered passion for Ondine, it must also be admitted that the high-souled water-sprite herself is not above spiteful deception -- as when she torments Hans with the lie that she betrayed him with Bertram. Amphitryon is very virtuous indeed, but he is rather obtuse as well. Eva may be on what Giraudoux himself conceived of as the wrong side of the German temperament, but she seems every bit as dedicated and devoted to Siegfried as Genevieve is to Jacques.

This absence of strongly sympathetic or strongly antipathetic figures, when combined with the even tone and flow of the dialogue, and the fact that we regularly know more about all the characters than they do (Alcmena does not recognize Jupiter on his first visit, but we are not in any doubt, and we know Siegfried is Jacques long before he does, even before Genevieve does, for two examples), tend to put us at a quite considerable distance from these people. Marker makes a good deal of this point:

Everything which can surprise the characters, disguises of Jupiter or threats from the king of the ondines, the spectator is preserved from. . . . Giraudoux does not deign to enter into the fun of the dramatic conjurer. He, who has so often been accused of white magic and powder in the eyes, is the most respectful of the integrity of the spectator. The audience is invited into the stage box of God the Father for a glance at creation, which excludes neither pity nor amusement, but which establishes distance. Comic theater, where one is the accomplice of the author more than the heroes, . . . where it is the certitude which is dramatic, as in comic novels, where it is
the inaction which is novel-like. 34

The significance of this observation to our point of view is that this distancing enables us to view these people and their situations in a more detached frame of mind, in which state it will be easier to pay close attention to what they say.

Although his characters are uniformly genteel, and although Giraudoux removes us emotionally from them, we should not conclude that they are transparent or puppet-like. Far from it: they are, in fact, some of the most willful people ever to appear on a stage. Few of them seem to be confined within the limits of any authorial grand design. Most of them appear to be free to follow their own wishes and lead their own lives. Indeed, figures like the Countess's mad friends, the one-note trumpeter from Amphitryon 38, the gossiping sisters of Intermezzo, and the Madwoman's sewer-worker, act so independently and seem so palpably vital, that one can easily imagine them exiting outside the confines of the play. If Shakespeare's characters are so powerful that Shakespearian critics have to guard against speculations like, "How many children had Lady Macbeth?", Giraudoux scholars should prepare to do the same.

From the remarks already made about Giraudoux's characterization, it should be clear that, in spite of their distance and their unvarying manners and speech patterns, his people are not really in danger of becoming wooden, one-dimensional lecture-props. As a matter of fact, one might argue that, because they are not so definitely realized individually in the author's prose, these

---

characters offer more latitude to their actors; they might be said to invite the performers to invest them with flesh, voices, and individuality, as Giraudoux himself suggested concerning Jouvet's troupe. One might also maintain that these roles are suitable for a wider range of actors -- again because of the partial lack of physical and otherwise unchangeable specifications. A director trying to cast the main role in O'Neill's The Hairy Ape or the role of Lear has very definite requirements as to physique, voice, and manner. The director casting Amphitryon in Amphitryon 38, or the Supervisor in Intermezzo, need not, it would seem, be so particular.

When we suggested above that the distancing of the characters would increase the prominence of the dialogue, we were pointing to one of the most obvious ways in which Giraudoux's characters do fill the requirements of his literary drama. If his purpose is to draw the audience's attention to his eloquence, these evenly drawn figures will not get in the way; they will not interpose their personalities between the audience and the dialogue. Continuing in this vein, we can see how the smooth-flowing, well-mannered, well-spoken pattern Giraudoux's characters fit into encourages us to devote our primary attention to what they say rather than what they are like. At the same time, their charm and the attractive, often humorous or unusual ways in which they are gently individuated within the pattern seem to lend emphasis to the dialogue.

In particular, the universal eloquence of Giraudoux people, their conversational virtuosity, is obviously beneficial to the kind of literary drama Giraudoux wanted to produce. With all those
people insisting on talking at length, and talking so well, the audience attention is naturally drawn to the content and quality of the dialogue.

Similarly, the talent these characters display for discussing their emotions in emotionally restrained language also helps fulfill the requirements of a speculative, linguistic theater. The emphasis on the minute examination of feeling helps direct spectator's interests inward to the realm of sensitized perceptions and refined concepts. At the same time, the cool, polite language used to conduct these delicate examinations prevents the audience from becoming completely fascinated, in the fashion melodrama aims for, with the particular problems and particular people on stage. Therefore, his characters help Giraudoux attract notice for his perceptions about feelings, not for the feelings themselves.

The fact that these characters tend to be types, just as Shaw's were, also conforms to Giraudoux's conceptions of intellectual drama. We have heard Giraudoux proclaim that the transmission of ideas is the most important goal of all theater. He helps himself, then, when his characters become generalizations of a sort in themselves, when, for example, one superbly typical bureaucrat, like the Inspector in Intermezzo, gives rise to observations and speculations about all bureaucrats.

On the other hand, the strange independence and vitality of his people, the impression they give of being able to manage their own lives, contributes to the air of playfulness and unreality which Giraudoux sought for his work. His people are true
"fantasticks," with the talent for creating and living in their own worlds. This other-worldliness aids the cause of Giraudoux's intellectual drama in a negative way; it helps him avoid "activist," programmatic impressions and responses, and helps him stay within the realm of detached speculation. In addition, the characters' unusual personalities (which remain distinctive even when they are burdened with conventional attitudes) lend added theatrical vitality to the stylized, civilized lines they say:

As a matter of fact, sometimes they become so independent, so attractively unusual, that they can thwart Giraudoux's purposes, at least to some extent. One is often tempted to enjoy people like Jupiter of *Amphitryon 38*, or Ondine, or Genevieve of *Siegfried* as unique experiences, not as attractive vehicles of ideas. True, they never distract attention from what is being said, but their beguiling personalities occasionally accent the entertaining elements in the dialogue a bit more heavily than Giraudoux may have intended. Our conclusion, then, is that Giraudoux's characterization is generally well-suited to the development and enhancing of literary drama.

If Giraudoux's characters are designed to elevate the dialogue into the most prominent position, as his theories require, we should discover that the language in his plays is a disciplined, precise tool for shaping and expressing his ideas, and that it is fashioned to look well in the spotlight created for it. We shall attempt to show that, with some reservations, the dialogue does pass both of these tests.
There can be no argument about the beauty or the sheer brilliance of the talk. As we suggested before, no one in any of Giraudoux's plays speaks anything but the most correct, smooth-flowing French, and everyone has at his or her command a diction that is elevated, precise, and wide-ranging. The prose frequently takes on some of the intensity and sensitivity of poetry -- as in the passage where Siegfried is describing how much he feels the lack of a personal history within which he could rest his memory:

If only you could understand what it means to me, how it delights me to receive a little of that past which you carry around so lightly. It is always with you, layer upon layer: your childhood, your adolescence, your youth. Just by coming into this house, you have shown me something of all this. You are still garlanded with the songs your mother sang to you, with the first sonata you ever heard, with the first opera you attended. You are crowned with your first memories of the moon, the sea, the forests, and flowers. You would be terribly mistaken to give up these riches; if you take my place you will have to tell the night and the stars, 'Night and stars, I never saw you for the first time.' (He smiles.) I suppose you know them well after all these years?35

The power, the imaginative heightening of the language, are not confined to set speeches like the one above, either. It frequently glitters in exchanges of lines among characters. In the following passage, the Countess (the Madwoman of Chaillot) is talking of the past to young Pierre, whom she pretends is the man who deserted her, Adolph Bertaut:

Countess (Without opening her eyes): Is it you, Adolphe Bertaut?
Pierre: It's only Pierre.
Countess: Don't lie to me, Adolphe Bertaut. These are your hands. Why do you complicate things always? Say that it is you.

35*Siegfried*, La Farge and Judd translation, pp. 30-31.
Pierre: Yes. It is I.
Countess: Would it cost you so much to call me Aurelia?
Pierre: It's I, Aurelia.
Countess: Why did you leave me, Adolphe Bertaut? Was she so very lovely, this Georgette of yours?
Pierre: No. You are a thousand times lovelier.
Countess: But she was clever.
Pierre: She was stupid.
Countess: It was her soul, then, that drew you? When you looked into her eyes, you saw a vision of heaven, perhaps?
Pierre: I saw nothing.
Countess: That is how it is with men... Your hands are still the same, Adolphe Bertaut. Your touch is young, and firm. Because it's the only part of you that has stayed with me. The rest of you is pretty far gone, I'm afraid. I can see why you'd rather not come near me when my eyes are open. It's thoughtful of you.
Pierre: Yes, I've aged.36

The command of imagery, the gift for figures of speech, and the sure touch with feeling contribute, of course, to the establishment of that shimmering style for which Giraudoux is famous, and which was, as we have seen, one of the things he wanted to impress upon his audiences. And yet, these same skills also assist him in the attainment of the other half of his goal -- to make his ideas lucid and compelling. They endow his prose with a wider range and more precision, so that he can imprison any idea, no matter how complex or subtle or unusual, and get it exactly right. Alcmena's speeches in favor of humanity as opposed to the claims of divinity and immortality illustrate how clarifying Giraudoux's apparently only decorative talents can be; her point is that one must commit oneself with joy to the human condition with all of its limitations and hardships, even the ultimate one, death -- all of

36The Madwoman of Chaillot, Valency translation, pp. 61-62.
which sound rather banal and unrevealing when summarized in such abstract language. Giraudoux's style, abrim with the products of fancy and imagery, suffuses these old conclusions with meaning as well as charm:

I'm sure that these supreme beings don't hear my chatter above the beating of my heart -- it's such a simple, direct heart. And anyway, what would they have against me? I have no reason to be particularly grateful to Jupiter because he created four elements instead of the twenty we require. After all, creation is his profession; in contrast, my heart overflows with gratitude for my dear husband, Amphitryon, who found a way, between battles to create a system of pulleys for windows and invented a new method of grafting fruit trees. You changed the taste of cherries for me, and you've had your workmen build me a new pantry. You are my creator . . . I'm not afraid of death. It's the stake one puts up in order to play the game of life. Since that Jupiter of yours, rightly or wrongly, created death on earth, I shall be faithful to this planet of mine. In every fiber I am one with other men, animals, and plants, so much so that I must share their destiny. Don't speak to me of immortality until there is an immortal vegetable. It's treason for a human to become immortal. Besides, when I think of the rest death will afford from all our petty fatigues, our cheap annoyances, I'm grateful for its abundance, its plentitude. Think of being kept waiting for sixty years for badly dyed clothes and badly cooked meals. To come at last to the still pond of death is recompense out of all proportion.37

Frequently, however, the unrestrained exercise of these very gifts -- for imagery, figures, and feeling -- lead Giraudoux into an area not so obviously beneficial to all his theatrical aims -- the précieux world his critics have always been fascinated by, for good or ill. Though they use it constantly, the critics have never been able to arrive at a consensus definition that would confine this nebulous term to analyzable proportions. Consequently, we must confine ourselves to the following broad, general description of what seems to be their target; Giraudoux's style becomes

37Amphitryon 38, La Farge and Judd translation, pp. 110-111.
précieux when he lets his imagination soar off into figures of speech and exotic image patterns of the most high-flown daring and fancy. The language then screens out all harsh or jarring or painfully realistic images, so that the world is everywhere coated with a smooth, sparkling soft hue. Le Sage's remarks may clarify further:

(We have seen) how through hyperbole he endows persons and things with the perfection of archetypes, how through metaphor he frees life from causality and all natural laws. His technique recalls some of the very procedures of those refined spirits of the seventeenth century who looked at the harsh facts of life only through a delicate glass of verbal transfiguration. 38

To sustain such a fragile atmosphere from the assaults of blunt realities, a writer must strain the resources of his fancy and his pen, which leads, naturally enough, to extended linguistic tricks or excesses of far-fetched figures. Again, Le Sage describes the process aptly:

The précieux cultivates the excessive deliberately and often as not in a spirit of fun. One always feels that Giraudoux is having as good a time as his audiences when he spins his fantasies -- the definitions, epithets, or paraphrases that Voltaire or Benserade might have envied. . . . Paradox and antithesis are pushed so far as to become sheer comedy. . . . The précieux is a verbal magician who, impatient to dazzle the audience with something else, destroys almost immediately the lovely things he creates. 39

We can find examples of this kind of extravagance in every one of the plays, from Siegfried, his first and the most literary, to The Madwoman of Chaillot, which was produced posthumously and may be the most theatrical. Sometimes the précieux conceits and devices seem to suit a scene perfectly; in fact, they occasionally

draw out the essence of a dramatic encounter in a way no other
technique could. The précieux dialogue among Aurelia and the other
madwomen before the "trial" is such a scene:

Countess: Where do your voices come from? Still from your
sewing machine?
Gabrielle: Not at all. They've passed into my hot-water
bottle. And it's much nicer that way. They don't
chatter any more. They gurgle. But they haven't
been a bit nice to me lately. Last night they
kept telling me to let my canaries out. "Let them
out. Let them out. Let them out."
Constance: Did you?
Gabrielle: I opened the cage. They wouldn't go.
Countess: I don't call that voices. Objects talk -- everyone
knows that. It's the principle of the phonograph.
But to ask a hot-water bottle for advice is silly.
What does a hot-water bottle know?40

What other kind of dialogue could capture so precisely the magi-
cally perceptive and imaginative brand of madness informing these
ladies?

In other contexts, however, the précieux elements strike
the ear as dazzling but irrelevant interruptions in the play.
Giraudoux now and then appears to follow the course of his fantasy
haplessly, regardless of what it does to dramatic continuity, or
mood, or character delineation. In Ondine, for example, when the
stolid Hans is describing his fruitless wanderings in the forest
at the behest of the lady Bertha, we suddenly hear him pause to
discuss animal voices:

Hans: Ah, yes, that's true enough -- they speak to us, the
animals. And we understand them very well. . . . They
speak without speaking. What they say is important, of
course. The stag speaks to us of nobility. The uni-
corn, of chastity. The lion, of courage. It is stimu-
lating -- but you don't call that a conversation.

40 The Madwoman of Chaillot, Valency translation, p. 49.
Auguste: But the birds...?
Hans: To tell you the truth, Auguste, I'm a little disappointed in the birds. They chatter incessantly. But they're not good listeners. They're always preaching.41

This bit of foolery is charming, of course, but it allows Hans, whose problem throughout the play is that he is unimaginatively bourgeois, to display a sensibility inappropriately similar to that of Ondine herself.

Perhaps it is this kind of undisciplined exuberance which has prompted many critics to dismiss Giraudoux as a master of charm and pretty language and little else. Perhaps this is the reason why, more than twenty years after his death, as Alberes points out, friendly and unfriendly critics alike are still using the same words -- "délieux," "précieux," "amuseur inimitable," "jongleur d'images" -- that were applied to his works when he was alive.42

To the extent that his use -- or overuse -- of the précieux style does interfere with the pace of his plays, and to the extent that this use is responsible for critical reactions such as the one which met Amphitryon 38: "Although the majority of critics relished the humor and poetry of the play, few seemed to think the content of its pretty speeches worth meditation."43 -- to that extent his précieux tendencies do him no service.

41Ondine, Valency translation, p. 181.
43Le Sage, p. 200.
On the other hand, those critics who dismiss Giraudoux so easily and patronizingly with the words "amuseur" and "jongleur," are simply not sensitive to the advantages he wrings from the précieux side of his talent. At the most obvious level, these devices enhance the beauty of the style he labored so carefully over, and we have already seen that he believed that one of the dramatist's primary responsibilities was to offer his audiences prose in the highest style. How well he succeeded in discharging this responsibility is evident in the very volume of attention, flattering and unflattering, his critics have always devoted to his style.

Even more importantly, if somewhat paradoxically, these apparently extraneous and unbridled excrescences frequently aid him to reach and shape his key ideas. Alberes, one of Giraudoux's more perceptive critics, comments on this phenomenon significantly:

One should describe Giraudoux not as an amateur maker of arabesques, but as a comic poet, as a writer endowed with a sensibility which does not seek to be receptive only to the examination of the small number of questions which constitute the narrower human problems, but which attempts to put itself in harmony with the life of the universe. . . . The thousand unusual ties between man and things, such is the at once small and grand revelation brought to us in the poetic prose of Jean Giraudoux, which is conceived as if it were a gigantic canvas still compact and condensed on which he attempts to trace, not the limited problems of man, but the secret life of the universe.44

The point, then, is that Giraudoux's préciosité enables him to approach through fanciful figures and delicate imaginings areas of meaning and mystery he could not reach in more realistic, earthbound prose. The far-fetched comparisons and unexpected personi-

44 Alberes, p. 1.
fications often strike close to an inner reality beneath the surface one. The picture of all the world's stony-faced magnates and "pimps" descending forever into the tunnels beneath the Madwoman's house is a typically wistful précieux device -- but it does put in strongly visual terms some basic insights into the simplicity and universality of the drives sustaining our compulsive, complex society.

The précieux style is even sharply effective in many passages of the somber Tiger at the Gates (La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu); the nonsensical games war-makers play are thrown into harsh relief by the discussion the Trojan elders have about the insults the soldiers must use:

Mathematician: Before they hurl their spears the Greek fighting-men hurl insults. You third cousin of a toad, they yell! You son of a sow! -- They insult each other like that! And they have a good reason for it. They know that the body is more vulnerable when self-respect has fled. Soldiers famous for their composure lose it immediately when they're treated as warts or maggots. We Trojans suffer from a grave shortage of insults.

Demokos: The Mathematician is quite right. We are the only race in the world which doesn't insult its enemies before it kills them. ④5

To elucidate a third major advantage Giraudoux gleans from preciosity, we will have to expand an almost chance remark by Le Sage; discussing the dexterity of Giraudoux's word play, he observes: "By such pirouettes the précieux regains his balance, avoids slipping into emotion."④6 The observation is obviously...

④6Le Sage, p. 196.
accurate -- the *precieux* must avoid the stronger emotions if he is to avoid puncturing the fragile visions he spins -- and we can recognize from it that these elements in Giraudoux's style function in the same way that his remote, restrained characters do to remove us emotionally somewhat from the action on stage, so that we can hear what is being said with more attention. Preciosity then becomes one more method Giraudoux employs in his constant effort to discuss serious, emotion-laden problems, such as large-scale greed (*The Madwoman of Chaillot*) or the sluggishness of the human heart (*Ondine*), in a manner which will provoke only calm, analytic consideration.

We can pass now to another characteristic of Giraudoux's prose: its ever-present tinge of irony. At times this irony is merely gentle and amusing, as it is in this passage where Genevieve is describing her mythical Canadian background to Siegfried:

Genevieve: What town? You know people don't pay much attention to names in Canada. It's a large country, but everybody feels near to everyone else. We used to call our lake "The Lake," and our town "The Town." No one remembers the name of the river -- I'm sure you're going to ask me about the immense river which crosses Canada -- it's just "The River"! . . .

Siegfried: What did you do on the farm?
Genevieve: What everyone does in Canada: look after the snow. 47

At other times it can be very shrewd and perceptive, unerringly laying bare the falsities at the root of human behavior or society; witness the Ragpicker's "defense" of the economic giants of our time at their "trial":

47* Siegfried*, La Farge and Judd translation, p. 28.
Me (The Ragpicker is pretending he is one of the exploiters), hold on to money? What slander! What injustice! What a thing to say to me in the presence of this honorable, august and elegant Court! I spend all my time trying to spend my money. If I have tan shoes, I buy black ones. If I have a bicycle, I buy a motor car. If I have a wife, I buy... I dispatch a plane to Java for a bouquet of flowers. I send a steamer to Egypt for a basket of figs. I send a special representative to New York to fetch me an ice-cream cone. And if it's not exactly right, back it goes. But no matter what I do, I can't get rid of my money! If I play a hundred-to-one shot, the horse comes in by twenty lengths. If I throw a diamond in the Seine, it turns up in the trout they serve me for lunch. Ten diamonds -- ten trout. Well, now, do you suppose I can get rid of forty million by giving a sou to a deaf-mute? Is it even worth the effort? 48

Economists can produce statistics and theses about economic structures which inevitably accumulate capital in the hands of those who need it the least, but could they make their point any clearer than it is in Giraudoux's whimsical irony?

At still other times, Giraudoux, the master of the light touch, the playwright famous for producing delighted smiles, unleashes a stroke of genteel but rather strongly bitter or dark irony. The difficulty is that the charm and glow of his style often make his melancholy insights glitter as brightly as his happier fancies. Amphitryon 38, which is frequently lauded too simplistically as a happy domestic comedy, is a case in point. Mercier-Campiche, for example, comes up with this short-sighted evaluation:

He (Giraudoux) does not hesitate to submit Alcmena... to an enormous test: the object of the amorous solicitations of Jupiter, master of the gods and of men, how can she remain faithful to her husband? Giraudoux responds to our anxiety with a smile. When love cements a couple together, heaven

48The Madwoman of Chaillot, Valency translation, p. 57.
itself cannot manage to achieve anything important against them.49

The smile is present, true enough, but is it not a sad one? Alcmena and Amphitryon are happy at the end of the play, because she has persuaded Jupiter to accept her friendship rather than the public surrender of her body, but we know that their rejoicing is based upon ignorance -- of the fact that both of them have been unknowingly unfaithful, Alcmena with Jupiter, and Amphitryon with Leda. The generalization to be drawn from this ending would then seem to be that the bravest, most insistent, most artful human attempts to evade an inflexible destiny are doomed to fail, even when we think they have been successful.

It is easier to detect this harsh irony in Ondine, the darkest comedy Giraudoux ever wrote. At the end of that play, after Hans has paid with his life for his unintended, hapless entanglement with a being whose life must always be lived at the highest pitch of idealism and passion, Ondine, who has loved him, killed him, and then, albeit unwillingly, forgotten him, sees him as if for the first time and remarks, "What a pity! How I should have loved him!"50

Of course, this dark irony is even more prominent in the prose of Giraudoux's tragedies, such as Tiger at the Gates and Judith. In Fry's translation of the former play, for example, Hector says:

49Mercier-Campiche, p. 83.

50Ondine, Valency translation, p. 255.
Do you hear this, Cassandra? Listen to this solid wall of negation which says Yes! They have all given in to me. Paris has given into me, Priam has given in to me, Helen has given in to me, and yet I can't help feeling that in each of these apparent victories I have been defeated. You set out thinking you are going to have to wrestle with giants; you brace yourself to conquer them, and you find yourself wrestling with something inflexible reflected in a woman's eye. You have said yes beautifully, Helen, and you're brimful of a stubborn determination to defy me!  

Judith has the same wry outlook:

Yes, for the first time I woke at dawn beside another human being. Everything was already in the past, it was all yesterday. A whole uncertain, jealous future prepared its assault against a marvelous memory. To me, already sure of my eternal death, he inspired a great pity, so poorly protected by his ephemeral death of sleep against the threat of the coming day. How can those who wake like this each morning near to one they love let them escape and return to life?

The function of Giraudoux's irony, in relation to his dramatic theory, is, primarily to underline or intensify the impact of his ideas — as irony does for the ideas in any kind of literature. Or to put it another way, the ironic statements and situations in this literary drama lend even more emphasis to the concept and images being expressed on the stage.

The irony is also an economizing device. It enables him to encompass several themes, observations and attitudes in as few words as possible. If, for instance, Giraudoux seems to have been both amused and saddened by gallant bourgeois like Alcmena, his ironic treatment of her conveys both reactions at once.

The last salient feature of Giraudoux's language we shall

51 Jean Giraudoux - Plays, Volume One, Translated by Fry, (New York, 1963), p. 100.

52 Ibid., p. 52.
mention -- his unusually pronounced reliance on the devices of rhetoric, as remarkable as the same tendency in Shaw -- may be disposed of rather quickly, because it has already been examined in great detail by almost all of Giraudoux's critics. Gabriel Genet makes the typical observation succinctly enough: "a thousand examples to illustrate a practical manual of rhetoric." Le Sage adds the few details needed to complete a capsule analysis of this point:

In presenting a problem or developing a theme such as that of national psychology, of political philosophy, of human nature, Giraudoux automatically establishes a polarity, and proceeds by series of parallels, antitheses, and paradoxes. ... Rhetorical polarity ... is everywhere in Giraudoux's work and may be considered its fundamental structural factor, since it lends form and symmetry to writing that would otherwise be chaotic.

One can find confirmation of such affirmations on almost any page of any play. This short speech by Siegfried in defense of Germany will serve the purpose for the present:

Did he (Jacques) tell you how young their two-thousand year-old empire is, how vigorous their art is, despite its preciousness? Did he tell you how conscientious and upright the Germans are despite their reputation for hypocrisy? Did he describe the spiritual and artistic discoveries they have made despite their lack of taste?

The importance of such heavily patterned prose to our analysis, aside from the fact that it illustrates how unconcerned Giraudoux is with theatrical naturalism in speech, lies in the way it demonstrates Giraudoux's willingness to draw attention to his language. We have already seen how he accentuates imagery and figures to this end; we now see this intention at work in the

53 Gabriel Genet, Jean Giraudoux, p. 46.
54 Le Sage, pp. 172-173. 55 Siegfried, p. 32.
structures of his phrases and sentences.

Before we turn to a discussion of plot structures, let us recapitulate very briefly what we have said about Giraudoux's language. We have tried to show how the poetic intensity in imagery, figures, and feeling, the préciosité, the irony, and the prevalence of rhetoric in Giraudoux's prose all do their part to draw attention to his language and the meanings embedded in the language. And we have indicated that these tendencies are in keeping with his theories about the primacy of word and message in drama.

As we begin that discussion of Giraudoux's plots and their relation to his conceptions of theater, we should first declare again that we will restrict the term plot to the working out of the narrative element in his plays.

Next, we will have to deal with the problem of Jean-Paul Sartre, whose awesome presence has haunted this area of Giraudoux criticism ever since the publication of his Key Article, "M. Jean Giraudoux Et La Philosophie D'Aristote," in Situations I for March, 1940. His insights were so profound, and at least some of them were so obviously correct, that nearly every critic since, whether it be Marker, Le Sage, Alberes, or Valency, not only betrays Sartre's influence, but follows his lead as well. As we shall see, this tendency has been both helpful and harmful.

In view of the importance of this article, let us attempt to summarize and quote its major conclusions briefly. His first assertion, and in our view, the most accurate, is that Giraudoux is uninterested in describing or creating individuals. He is in-
instead concerned with finding the essence or archetype of a species in one of its members. Giraudoux's intention, Sartre maintains, is to delineate those elements which the ideal member of some well-defined grouping will have.56

This does not mean that Giraudoux lives in a world of plato nic forms: "It would be a mistake, however, to regard M. Giraudoux as a Platonist. His forms are not in the heaven of ideas, but among us, inseparable from the matter whose movements they govern. They are stamped on our skin like seals in glass."57

It does, however, again according to Sartre, indicate that in Giraudoux's world there can be no events, no "irruptions of a new phenomenon whose very novelty exceeds all expectation and upsets the conceptual order."58 Indeed the only important movement in this world can be the action of form on matter, or in human terms, the effort of a person to realize his potency or the requirements of his ideal essence.59

The Universal order, in Sartre's interpretation of Giraudoux's world view, can only be achieved if each created thing fulfills his ideal nature and thus completes the pattern of balance in creation. Giraudoux's ethic, the, depends on this actualizing process:

This fragile and intermittent freedom (to fulfill one's essence) is enough to confer a duty on us. . . . Man must freely realize

---


57Ibid., p. 44. 58Ibid., p. 45. 59Ibid., pp. 45, 52.
his finite essence, and in so doing, freely harmonize with the rest of the world. Every man is responsible for the universal harmony and should submit of his own free will to the necessity of the archetypes. When this harmony, this balance between our deepest tendencies, between mind and nature, emerges ... M. Giraudoux's creature then receives his reward: Happiness.60

Because one can see at a glance that Sartre's analysis offers a plausible explanation for many factors in Giraudoux's work, including his penchant for generalizations and for personified abstractions, most critics have readily agreed, and even used his conclusions as a basis for their own speculations. Le Sage works from Sartre's base when he expounds his theory on the nature of the dramatic crises in Giraudoux's works;

It is therefore by being most simply man that man achieves happiness and virtue. Everyone and everything in place is for Giraudoux the perfect world. ... In Giraudoux's Edenic world of archetypes, as happiness is harmony, so virtue too is harmony. ... In Giraudoux's plays, the dramatic crisis is characteristically brought about by a person who would surpass the boundaries of his finite nature. Before settling down in life, they have slipped away to satisfy a natural human hankering after golden fruits that do not grow in Bellac. Giraudoux, who advocates a moderate indulgence in Streben and Schwarmerei to keep the French soul supple gives them his blessing. ... When they return, they are all the more enriched for their holiday away from the land of measure, practicality, and common sense.61

Le Sage also grounds himself in Sartre when he expands his analysis of Giraudoux's rhetoric into an evaluation of his plot-structures, which he (Le Sage) conceives of as extensions or out-growths of Giraudoux's fondness for repetition, antithesis and paradox. In Le Sage's view, the plots of these plays proceed by the techniques of rhetoric, through balanced characters and antithetical scenes.62 If there is a Genevieve in Siegfried, there must also be

60Ibid., p. 53. 61Le Sage, pp. 160, 161, 162.
62Le Sage, pp. 172-175.
an Eva; If Alcmena is unwilling to accept Jupiter's advances, then Leda must be ready. A scene constituting a brief for one side of the German temperament, again in Siegfried, will be followed by a scene advocating the other; the Supervisor puts forward the case for bourgeois life in Intermezzo, and then the ghost advances the claims of the heroic life and grand passions.

Marker also gives assent, disagreeing with Sartre only in his assessment of the value of such a mythically perfect world:

We are grateful to the author who shows us a character who fills up his mold, who coincides step-by-step with his eternal double. . . . Without believing all at once, we are able to encourage in a corner of our minds the idea that we too have some part of our ideal form and our original impression which we shall recover at the end of an adventure now perfectly clear, from the hands of a destiny which corresponds itself absolutely with our liberty -- a shadow which mingles itself completely with us, providing something that takes away the difficulty of maintaining above our head a sun fixed once for all at noon, the same sun of eternity.63

Even Valency, who does not refer directly to Sartre, and disagrees totally with his conception of Giraudoux's worth as a writer, discusses the plays as dialectical or antithetical structures, in which the two essences of man -- spiritual and material -- interact. Listen, for example, to his description of the young girl:

The chief nexus, however, between the world of matter and the realm of the spirit is the young girl, a form of existence which perfectly combines these antithetical elements and which is, for this reason, perhaps, completely absorbing to Giraudoux. It is at this point of junction between the two worlds that he ordinarily sets his stage, and from this viewpoint he unfolds a wonderful, if somewhat unsettling, perspective of the universe.64

Although we hesitate to disagree with the most distinguished French philosopher-critic-novelist-playwright of our time, and with

63Marker, pp. 15-16.  64Valency, p. xiii.
the capable men who seem to be in accord with him, and although we have already acknowledged that some of what he says is quite valid, we must maintain that, in our view, analyses of Giraudoux's plots based on Sartre's article are generally mistaken -- or perhaps we should say they generally stop short of a full description of what takes place in the typical Giraudoux plot.

First of all, the usefulness of the Sartre article is rather sharply limited because it focuses particularly on Choix des Elues, one of Giraudoux's novels. Nevertheless, many critics unhesitatingly apply these conclusions to the plays -- forgetting, it would seem, the vast differences between the two forms, and the consequent necessity of reevaluating such conclusions when applying them to works not only unmentioned in the article, but written in a different genre.

Next, we should acknowledge that Giraudoux's emphasis on language, on rhetoric, and on uniformity of tone do tend to polarize his characters and scenes into antithetical groups. We should also grant that his insistence on civilized restraint and the absence of violent action in his plays sometimes creates the impression that the plays are rather static after all.

Despite all this, however, the Sartrean view that the action in a Giraudoux play is confined to various objects seeking the perfection of their essences, and the elaboration of Sartre's view, held by Le Sage and others, in which the action in the plays revolves around the dialectical interactions of various archetypal characters attempting to fulfill their natures and maintain the
universal harmony, both fail, it seems to me, to look closely enough at what happens to archetypes in Giraudoux's plays.

To be sure, there are archetypal or ideal characters and situations, and they do interact, but in almost every case, the final outcomes of the plays depict a failure to achieve or preserve the essence or type in its pristine form. Very frequently, the characters will attempt to fulfill a pure, uncompromised image or role, only to find it impossible to do so. Indeed, the philosophical insight one should draw from the action in the typical Giraudoux play would seem to be that human beings are not able to live up to unalloyed essences or ideals that compromise and unsettled mixtures of attitudes, strengths, and weaknesses are the inevitable human lot.

**Amphitryon 38**, that seemingly happy and triumphant domestic comedy, is perhaps the prime example. We have already seen how Alcmena has committed herself totally to the human condition, how she is determined to fulfill all the bourgeois human virtues, especially marital fidelity, and how she rejects all involvement with divinity or grand destiny. When Jupiter tells her that she is the first truly human person he has ever met, she responds confidently:

That's my particular specialty. You don't know how right you are. Of every one I know I am the only one to accept and love my fate. There is not a twist or a turn of human life which I don't accept from birth to death. I even accept family dinners. My appetites are moderate and controlled. I'm sure that I'm the only human being who sees fruits or spiders as they really are and finds in every joy its true taste without exaggeration. It's the same way with my sensibility. I lack that gaming, erring spirit which, when affected by wine, love, or a beautiful landscape, longs for eternity.\(^{65}\)

\(^{65}\)Amphitryon 38, La Farge and Judd translation, p. 111.
The same confidence brings her triumph over Jupiter at the end of the play when she cajoles him to accept platonic friendship instead of physical love, but we know that her honor and her husband's have already been violated, and that she has already conceived Ulysses, Jupiter's son. Alcmena has thus failed to preserve her fidelity and failed to avoid entanglement with the gods and their non-human, immortal problems. The melancholy point of the play would seem to be that one cannot be perfectly, archetypally human, no matter how committed or well-adjusted he is, because destiny will always intrude.

Intermezzo follows the same pattern. At the end of that play, Isabel rejects the lures of a superhuman life in pursuit of human renewal and perfection, with the ghost, in favor of a comfortable bourgeois life with the Supervisor. But in so doing, she has not chosen to fulfill one archetype or ideal essence rather than another. The perfect, quintessential type in opposition to the ghost is not the Supervisor, but the Inspector, with his total commitment to narrow order, cheerlessness, and rational dreams. The Supervisor's sketch of his life is, instead, a portrait of another uneasy but very familiar compromise, of a dull, restricted life uplifted with imagined romance.

Although the treatment is more subtle, Ondine presents a variation of the same theme. Hans' misfortune springs from his attempt (although one can argue that Ondine almost commanded their involvement) to live on the rarefied, ideal plane of total love with Ondine, in other words from his attempt to get beyond the
human compromise we all live to a "pure" state. And nowhere is the contrast between unmodified essence and imperfect humanity clearer than in the scene at court: the people there carry out their half-breed mixture of solemnity and silliness with aplomb; everyone is stately and dignified, and everyone pretends not to notice the wart on the king's nose. Ondine will have none of it; she must remain honest, true to the ideal requirements of her kind.

Siegfried does seem to follow the Sartrean, Le Sage, Marker pattern, at least on the surface: there is a rather dialectical struggle between the dangerous German temperament (Eva) and the French ideal (Genevieve). We should remember, however, that France and Germany meet in Siegfried-Jacques, and that at the very end of the play, he is determined to live up to both of his heritages: "there are no elements so diverse that they cannot be joined in the heart of a man."66

The Madwoman of Chaillot presents a special problem, in that there is again an almost ritualistic struggle between two simple, diametrically opposed forces -- the soulless "pimps" and the good, poor people, and the poor people triumph completely at the end. Still, we should remember that the conflict is resolved, not by one of the protagonists, but by the Countess, who, far from being a perfect, contented human like Alcmena, is a sensible and foolish lady who knows how to deal with the financial barons of the world, but cannot deal effectively or confidently with the problem

66Siegfried, Jean Giraudoux, translated by La Farge and Judd, p. 69.
of the lost Adolphe Bertaut.

To sum up, then, the typical Giraudoux plot does not really involve human beings slowly realizing their essences in a harmonious universe, but focuses instead on human beings who try to preserve harmony in the universe by maintaining the uneasy balance of conflicting "ideal" claims.

We can continue our analysis of Giraudoux's plots by making a few more general observations: first, all of his plots deal with philosophical themes or problems, as well as with the basic philosophical questions of essences. It may be the question of national identity (Siegfried), or the conflict between humanity and divine destiny (Amphitryon 38), or the problem of individuals versus a personality-less, monolithic social structure (The Madwoman). In any case, each play explores this widely applicable, often abstract theme in great detail, and, in fact, each play's plot depends on this investigation. If, for instance, Siegfried were not concerned about the problem of national identity, there would be no play. Giraudoux does not turn his plays into syllogism, though. Rather than work through problems in an obvious manner, he prefers simply to examine them from various angles.

Second, in every play except Siegfried (and that play has some fantastic coincidences), the plot employs fantasy. There are ghosts (Intermezzo), gods (Amphitryon 38), water sprites and magical conjurers who can manipulate the future at will (Orphee), and bottomless, convenient caves (The Madwoman), and, in every case, the fantasy is not incidental; it is a key link in the movement of
the plot. In short, Giraudoux displays no reverence for everyday, surface realism, or for average probabilities.

Third, for a man in love with language, Giraudoux plays depend to a surprising extent on visual, physical devices and movements; from the bizarre sprites and collapsing armor of Ondine to the procession of capitalists to the cellar in The Madwoman, the plays are full of visible, concrete objects and changes. The plot, again, frequently turns around these movements. The point is that all of the plays give evidence of the author's skill at constructing conventionally "theatrical" and effective motion for his stage.

Relating all these observations on Giraudoux's plot construction to his theories of drama, we find: that, although the typical, basic structure of a Giraudoux plot is not as static as Sartre would have it, it does reproduce the subtle, intricate interplays of the human compromise, . . . and as such suits the intentions of a man who sought to be subtly instructive, never simplistically moralistic. After all, would it be in keeping for a writer who believed that "The true stroke of the theater is . . . the ironic nuance, the imperfect subjunctive, or the litotes that underlies a phrase of the hero or the heroine," (see page 99) to reduce the structures of his plays to enactments of rather abstract Aristotelian commonplaces? A man with Giraudoux's refined conceptions of what drama ought to attempt should, and did, build his plots around the melancholy complexities and less-than-perfect accommodations of real life.

Again, we can say that the specific philosophical problems
at the structural roots of each play give every facet of Giraudoux drama an intellectual cast. Consequently, the audience is induced to give special attention to the dialogue -- all of which suits the intentions of an advocate of literary drama.

The use of fantasy is intended, first of all, to prevent audiences from reacting to the characters as "real" people, or from becoming involved in a "slice of life." In other words, unreal episodes like the Madwoman's magic cellar preserve the rarified, removed-from-the-ordinary aura with which Giraudoux likes to surround his disquisitions. Also, the fantasy seems designed to achieve a Brechtian sense of the theatricality of the experience (again permitting the audience to consider and analyze what they see and hear).

Finally, the number of visual effects and movements seems to provide an attention-getting, mind-relieving concretization of the points being made in the language. (For instance, Isabel's return and commitment to bourgeois life is symbolized concretely by her awakening from a trance). We recall that Giraudoux said that the task of his actors was to vivify his language. Giraudoux remembers that stage life must be visible, must be sensory, and helps them along. Our conclusion: Giraudoux's plot structures are also well-shaped to fulfill the requirements of his kind of theater.

We have now shown, hopefully, that characterization, language, and plot all serve the purposes of Giraudoux's intellectual, literary conceptions of the theatre's nature and requirements.

At last we come to the relationship between the author's
dramatic intentions with regard to the audience and his techniques. We can state the problem in question form: Granted that Giraudoux's dramatic conversations are intended to help his audiences become more sensitive to all kinds of stimuli, and more skilled in the art of dreaming constructively, how does he further design his plays to achieve this didactic impact?

Certainly, he thinks this goal is important: as we noted in chapter one, he believes that Frenchmen able to feel and to imagine will also be able to remake France and to maintain its historic status as the useful irritant in an overly adjusted world.

Accordingly, he defends the importance of theatricality, of "unreality" in Drama: "Its (the public's) chair at the theatre has the extra-territoriality of an embassy into an antique or heroic realm, into the domain of illogic and fantasy, and they intend to maintain this solemn character."67 In Giraudoux's view sensitivity and imaginative dreams are not idle amusements; they are instruments of human exploration and discovery -- especially useful in the labyrinth of human relations, emotions, and moral problems. Therefore, Drama, which kindles sensitivity and sharpens the imagination, has an important social role: "There is one (a machinery for telling the truth to the people). Or rather, there was one. And incomparable . . . the theatre."68

The first thing we notice is that the distance Giraudoux labors so skillfully to establish between the people and situations

67*Littérature*, p. 239.

on stage and the audience tends to leave the individual spectator rather detached. He is interested in what he sees, but not totally, emotionally involved, and he is therefore free to speculate a bit as he watches, as well as after the play is finished. There are few melodramatic or empathetic moorings preventing him from following immediately any train of thought the play suggests.

And as a matter of fact, the highly imaginative, highly-wrought language often seems to invite the most soaring dreams and the vicarious enjoyment of the most subtle emotions; in Amphitryon 38, Sosie's declaration on peace is an impressionistic listing that calls out for more details supplied by the imagination:

Sleep on Thebans! How good it is to sleep in a country where trenches do not gut, where the laws are not in jeopardy, among birds, dogs, cats, and rats that do not know the taste of human flesh. It is good to wear the face of the nation, not as if it were a mask to frighten those of a different race, but as if it were perfectly suited to smiles and laughter. It is good to forsake your assault ladder and scale one's days on the rungs of breakfast, lunch, and dinner, with nothing more than the cares of private life to worry you. Sleep on!69

Similarly, it is easy to become caught up in this remarkable example of Isabel's sensitivity in Intermezzo:

My sorcery is very simple. For a long time, I wondered what would be most likely to attract the dead. I decided it wouldn't be their friends or their books or anything of that sort -- it would be something quite modest and homely. Perhaps a little pattern of light and shade -- the glitter of a doorknob, the flash of a white petal, the pink nose of a cat -- a little mosaic of living things.70

Third, we note again that the subject-matter of Giraudoux's plays looks inward; a Giraudoux play is never really caught up in

69 Amphitryon 38, La Farge and Judd translation, pp. 86-87.
70 Intermezzo, Valency translation, pp. 148-149.
headlined problems; where very contemporary issues do intrude (as in The Madwoman of Chaillot), they are examined for their effects on the interior lives of the characters. In short, whether the specific matter at hand is the precise nature of friendship (Amphitryon 38 -- the last act), or the sacrifices and tortures of love (Ondine), or regret for golden hopes long ago faded (Act II of Madwoman), emotion, the basis for most dreams, is the vital stuff of Giraudoux's drama.

In this connection, we recall that many of Giraudoux's works have dream-like movement and incidents. The fantasy we discussed earlier, precisely because it departs so easily from the "real" patterns we are used to, often effects the imitation of dream life. For example, there are the scenes from the future staged by the illusionist in Ondine, in which time appears to be a tool to be manipulated in any desirable way (as it often does in daydreams). We can also point to the dream-like procession of all the "gimps" in The Madwoman, as they pass into the tunnel and out of our lives. The speech of the doctor near the close of Act II in Intermezzo -- "To fuse the precise with the vague, the ridiculous with the sublime -- that is my function,"71 -- and his subsequent disappearance, afford us one more example. In addition to providing more aesthetic distance through almost Brechtian theatricality, such deliberately artificial incidents fit in well with the emotional subject-matter mentioned above.

The point of these observations is that if Giraudoux trains

---

71Intermezzo, Valéncy translation, pp. 125-126.
the floodlights so insistently on this kind of material, it is at
least reasonable to describe this tendency as an attempt to train
the audience to search into their own interior lives.

Third, and finally, let us observe that almost all of Gir-
audoux's works are markedly "open-ended" -- to use the fashionable
term. A specific problem or conflict may have been resolved, but
the audience is left wondering how certain people and situations
will work out. These questions, in turn, may provoke more general
speculations. The most obvious instance, perhaps, is in Giraudoux's
first play, Siegfried. At the close of the last act, Siegfried-
Jacques resolves to unite his two worlds, France and Germany, in
his own life, and Genevieve, who has insisted throughout on Jacques'
essential "Frenchness," confesses significantly, "Siegfried, I love
you."72 Every audience must wonder how these reconciliation efforts
will proceed, and if they will, or could, succeed.

Amphitryon 38 seems more "finished," but even in this play
we wonder if Amphitryon and Alcmena will ever learn the truth
about their innocent adulteries, and how the "friendship" between
Alcmena and Jupiter will develop. Can individual human interests
and the purposes of destiny, whether divine or otherwise, ever be
reconciled? Intermezzo's ending leaves us curious as to whether
Isabel will find the imagined romance in bourgeois life described
by the Supervisor.

Ondine is complete at its finish, but when we recall that
the tragic end of Hans is a speeded-up version of destiny staged

72Siegfried, La Farge and Judd translation, p. 77.
by the illusionist for the court audience before it was scheduled to happen, we are moved to question the nature of destiny. Is it absolutely inflexible? Could it be changed if one were forewarned? Where does choice begin and end? And the theme forces us to ask, "Is human love that limited? How can we deal with the claims of the ideal?"

The obvious question at the end of The Madwoman of Chaillot is, "Now that the real people have the world to themselves again, how will they make use of it? In what ways will it be better?"

The not-so-obvious question this play should stir in many minds is, "We know that mechanical people and inhuman, mechanical organizations cannot be banished with whimsical magic, but how can they be eliminated?"

In every case then, Giraudoux's plays seem to be shaped so as to prompt speculation rather than provide dogmatic answers. The unfinished elements in their structures tend to invite the audience to fill them out with their own imaginings, their own feelings, their own dreams.

Thus, we can see how aesthetic distance, soaring language, emotional subject-matter, dream-like structures, and "open-ended" conclusions are all fashioned to help Giraudoux accomplish his theatrical ambition -- to make people feel and dream more intensively.

And in this chapter, we have also shown that Giraudoux's characters, language, and plot, at least in most respects, serve the requirements of his theatre of language. We can conclude, then,
that he is as serious, as didactic a playwright as Shaw, even though he has different purposes and different methods. And when we expand the comparison, we note that the chief thematic difference between Shaw and Giraudoux is that Giraudoux turns his attention away from large-scale problems and social questions to more personal dilemmas and problems. The enigmatic Beckett, whom we will consider next, brings the trend to completion.
CHAPTER IV

Any attempt to categorize and analyze Samuel Beckett's dramatic theories immediately encounters two key difficulties. The first is that he has not explained his views in much detail. Unlike Shaw and Giraudoux, and unlike many of his fellow absurdists (Ionesco, for instance), Beckett has shown little inclination to explain his premises -- or his works either, for that matter.

Moreover, unlike Edward Albee, who seems to enjoy fencing opaquely with questioners about his enigmatic works, Beckett has a pronounced aversion to being interviewed. As a result, he doesn't offer a broad basis of support for the potential critic of his theories. We have to make do with just a few pages of random, frequently unconnected remarks called from his brief critical studies of the writers he admires. In addition, many of the comments in this small corpus refer to Art in general, and illuminate his concepts of drama only by extension or application.

The second difficulty springs from Beckett's aversion to conventional explanations. This should not surprise us: the man who declared that "clarity" was "an intrusion into the creative act"¹ can hardly be expected to furnish precise definitions. In any case, Beckett's critical observations are frequently cryptic and not very revealing. When, for example, Beckett declares that

opera is an unsuccessful art form because it encumbers pure music with words, and when he therefore concludes that, "From this point of view opera is less complete than vaudeville, which at least inaugurates the comedy of an exhaustive enumeration," the reader is left with an armful of questions: Why did he pick vaudeville for his comparison? What phase of vaudeville is he discussing? What exactly does he mean by enumeration? Why does enumeration make vaudeville different from opera? And so on. The provoking remark above is typical in several ways. As always, Beckett's phrases are fascinating, but not quite fathomable. As always, his suggestions are challenging, but not fully developed.

The difficulties produce a significant danger. Because Beckett's criticism is so slender and so inscrutable, the potential analyst is tempted to read too much into those spare sentences, to fill out the opaque suggestions with his own projections.

In the following examination of Beckett's theories, I have tried to avoid substituting myself for Beckett. The reader will find interpretations of Beckett's ideas and extensions of his remarks, but I have sought to make them obvious and logical. The readers, however, must judge for themselves if these efforts have been successful. Those who feel that the analysis is actually interpolation are then free to discount it and the rest of this chapter to whatever degree they feel necessary.

With caveats completed, let us begin by asserting that the first and most important premise in the Beckett canon is that form

---

and content should be united. Unlike his fellow-Irishman, Shaw, Beckett does not presume that there is any inevitable distinction between what an author has to say and the way he says it. Indeed, he is clearly opposed to the notion of separability. For instance, he observes approvingly of Proust: "Indeed he makes no attempt to dissociate form from content. The one is a concretion of the other, the revelation of a world." He makes the same observation about his early mentor and model, James Joyce:

Here form is content, content is form. You complain that this stuff is not written in English. It is not written at all. It is not to be read -- or rather it is not only to be read. It is to be looked at and listened to. He (Joyce) is not writing about something: he is writing something. When the sense is asleep, the words go to sleep. . . . When the sense is dancing, the words dance.4

Of course, Beckett recognizes the natural tension between subject-matter and form. In an interview with Tom Driver, he affirms that form, the principle of order and control in art, has always resisted the influx of the world's chaos, which he calls "the mess." But now, he continues, the pressures and presence of the mess are so all-pervasive that they cannot be denied:

What I am saying . . . only means that there will be new form, and that this form will be of such a type that it admits the chaos and does not try to say that the chaos is really something else. The form and the chaos remain separate. The latter is not reduced to the former. . . . To find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now.5

---

3Proust, p. 67.
On the surface, Beckett here seems to be contradicting his earlier statements about the inseparability of form and content. However, I think the difference is only in emphasis. He is in-weighing against the tendency of classical art to impose order on chaos, to reduce mess to system. In line with his earlier ideas, he wants form to admit chaos into itself, to accommodate itself to the subject-matter. That accommodation, it seems to me, involves close interaction, even union.

This interaction implies that any device or artifice an artist employs should be intended to embody or admit his sense of the universal chaos. Beckett says as much quite explicitly:

The Promstian world is expressed metaphorically by the artisan because it is apprehended metaphorically by the artist: the indirect and comparative expression of indirect and comparative perception.6

Thus, for Beckett, the materials, symbols, and effects in any work of art should be palpable and formative, not transparently didactic: "He (Proust) admires the frescoes of the Paduan Arena because their symbolism is handled as a reality, special, literal, and concrete, and is not merely the pictorial transmission of a notion."7

Applying these remarks to Beckett's views of his own work, we can conclude that he forbids us to make any distinction between Beckett the philosopher and Beckett the artist. His plays and novels are simply intended as immediate concretions of his metaphysical anguish.

6Ibid., pp. 67-68. 7Ibid., p. 60.
From this basic premise, Beckett's artistic vision commences with an epistemological curiosity, and even reverence, before ordinary objects and phenomena -- as they are experienced directly and uniquely by the individual knowers. In Proust, for example, he declares:

In the brightness of art alone can be deciphered the baffled ecstasy he had known before the inscrutable superficies of a cloud, a triangle, a spire, a flower, a pebble, when the mystery . . . imprisoned in matter, had solicited the bounty of a subject passing by. 8

In like manner, he calls attention to "the primacy of instinctive perceptions" and "intuition" in Proust's work. 9 For Beckett, then, art should start with basic appreciation of the appearances of objects and phenomena.

However, he does not feel that art should remain awed and inert on the surfaces of things. Instead, the artist should primarily be an excavator, a prober, one who penetrates for the meaning beneath those fascinating surfaces: "The only fertile research is excavatory, immersive, a contraction of the spirit, a descent. The artist is active, but negatively, shrinking from the nullity of extra-circumstantial phenomena, drawn into the core of the eddy."10 Consequently, Beckett disbelieves in panoramic art, art that looks to far horizons. He wants art to narrow the focus of the viewer's attention, to turn his gaze inward. As he says: "The only possible spiritual development is in the sense of depth. The artistic tendency is not expansive, but a contraction."11

---

8Ibid., p. 57. 9Ibid., pp. 63-64.
10Ibid., p. 48. 11Ibid., pp. 46-47.
One result of this "digging" aspect of Beckett's theory is that it places him in opposition to representational art. He sees no value whatsoever in mimicking surface appearances, in reproducing phenomena for the sake of being able to do so. True, he thinks these surface appearances are fascinating, but only because of the hidden, inner realities which they suggest. Beckett offers nothing but contempt for "the realists and naturalists worshipping the offal of experience, prostrate before the epidermis and the swift epilepsy, and content to transcribe the surface, the facade, behind which the Idea is prisoner."12

The "Idea" imprisoned in matter — this is Beckett's object. Although he would deny the Aristotelian terminology and framework, Beckett was as interested in essences as Giraudoux was, except that he sees living spiritual realities screened by physical appearances, not philosophical principles activating inert matter. The goal of the artist, he says, is "the spiritual assimilation of the immaterial . . . as extracted by him from life."13 The immaterial reality suggested above, then, the "core of the eddy," must be the focus of any work of art; art should not be concerned with expressing anything else with any intensity.

A consequence of this concern for spiritual entities and corresponding disinterest and distrust for fleeting material phenomena is Beckett's ambiguous position with regard to Time and Death — the forces which rule our barren, insubstantial world. On one side, Beckett the realist knows that everything — material,

spiritual, even aesthetic -- must ultimately be subject to Time, and therefore to Death: "There is no escape from yesterday, because yesterday has deformed us, or been deformed by us." And yet he continues to cherish those cruelly brief moments in which the power of art, by probing for and isolating the inner reality beneath the inert surfaces, breaks free from the prison to achieve the "negation of Time and Death, the negation of Death because of the negation of Time. Death is dead because Time is dead." 

Here, then, are the two diametrically opposed elements in the artist's approach to Time. On the one hand, he must look clearly at man's condition and express truthfully what he sees. It follows, naturally, that every true artist must shape visions in which everything, without exception, is ground into seconds, days, and years. On the other hand, the closer the artist probes to the inner meaning of these transitory things, the closer he comes to isolating and fixing those spiritual cores at one point in time, removing them, if only briefly and imaginatively, from its motion. As usual, Beckett sums up the paradox neatly and impenetrably:

"In Time creative and destructive Proust (or Beckett or any artist) discovers himself as an artist." 

As Beckett excavates our world, as he probes deeper toward the core of reality, what does he find? Almost invariably, he discovers emptiness, nothingness:

Beatrice and Faust and the 'azur du ciel immense et ronde' and the seagirt cities -- all the absolute beauty of a magic world (seem) as vulgar and unworthy in their reality, and (as) pale

---

14Ibid., p. 2. 15Ibid., p. 56. 16Ibid., p. 59.
and weary and cruel and inconstant and joyless as Shelley's moon.  

It is one of the unexplained but typical ironies of Beckett's theory that the artist's search, the aesthetic examination of reality, which must be carried on so insistently, with such a sense of high mission and even desperation, should culminate in the revelation of a void. Nevertheless, that is his belief and, in fact, his self-evaluation of his own efforts: "At the end of my work there's nothing but dust." Such is his final vision of the vital center of our universe.

However, the absolute validity of even this empty revelation is called into question. On several occasions, Beckett suggests that the explanation for the world's seeming hollowness may be epistemological. Perhaps we cannot find anything solid as we stumble about because we don't have any reliable mechanism for reaching outside of ourselves, for experiencing anything beyond our own consciousness:

Nor is any direct and purely experimental contact possible between subject and object, because they are automatically separated by the subject's consciousness of perception, and the object loses its purity and becomes a mere intellectual pretext or motive.

He goes on to suggest that, in the creation of art especially, this mixed experience becomes at least temporarily significant, but the doubt and the uncertainty always return. Indeed, he maintains that art should attempt to explore this realm of doubt:

17Ibid., p. 50.
I'm working with impotence, ignorance. I don't think impotence has been exploited in the past. There seems to be a kind of esthetic axiom that expression is an achievement. . . . My little exploration is that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something un reusable -- as something by definition incompatible with art. . . . I think anyone nowadays, who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er (somebody who cannot). The other type of artist -- the Appollonian -- is absolutely foreign to me.20

Therefore, if the artist's task is to go in quest of inner, lasting realities, he is bound to be a failure, at least in Beckett's view: It is likely that he will find nothing, and he is never sure that his search has any hope of success in the first place.

Nevertheless, Beckett feels that the artist's foredoomed efforts are still worthwhile, still necessary. Even though he must despair, even though he is a conscious "non-knower," "non-can-er," the artist-creator should push on relentlessly, because "'this fidelity to failure . . . makes an expressive act even if only of itself, of its impossibility, of its obligation.'"21

Beckett is also intensely interested in the manner in which these hopeless aesthetic searches are to be conducted. For example, he has strong feelings about the way a work of art should impress itself on its readers or viewers. It should not soothe, or please, or tantalize, or even insinuate itself gracefully into their consciousness; art must shake, must disturb, must strike like a

---

20Shenker, p. 3.
detonation:

To avoid the expansion of the commonplace is not enough; the highest art reduces significance in order to obtain that inexplicable bombshell perfection. Before supreme manifestation of Beauty do we proceed comfortably up a staircase of sensation, and sit down mildly on the topmost stair to digest our gratification: such is the pleasure of Prettiness. We are taken up bodily and pitched breathless on the peak of a sheer craig: which is the pain of Beauty.22

In other contexts, he speaks of art being "cast in the teeth" of an audience, and of art functioning as an "interrogation" -- of reality and its audience.23 In sum: art should be rude, rough, and unsettling.

Obviously, then, the literary conventions, because they offer reassuringly familiar patterns and comforting distortions, become mere obstacles to the true artist. In fact, Beckett generally sounds faintly irritated when he is discussing such forms:

He (Proust) is aware of the many concessions required of the literary artist by the shortcomings of literary convention. As a writer he is not altogether at liberty to detach effect from cause. It will be necessary, for example, to interrupt (disfigure) the luminous projection of subject desire with the comic relief of features. It will be impossible to prepare the hundreds of masks that rightly belong to the objects of even his most disinterested scrutiny. He accepts regretfully the sacred ruler and compass of literary geometry.24

For Beckett, it is clear, established forms, techniques, and genres are only excess baggage, made necessary by human weakness, but still acting primarily as impediments to the artist's freedom of movement and expression.

As might be expected, moral values and judgments are similarly unwanted and unwelcome in Beckett's approach to aesthetics. This amorality -- or perhaps unconsciousness of morality would be the more revealing term -- pleased him in Proust: "Here, as always, Proust is completely detached from moral considerations. There is no right and wrong in Proust nor in his world."25 Such indifference is actually a logical extension from his view of the proper preoccupations of art. If art is supposed to search for the inscrutable and elusive core of reality, it should not be confined within any predetermined set of standards. Beckett is certainly not an advocate of immorality, nor does he explicitly reject the idea of applying moral values to conduct in other contexts. He simply regards such things as foreign and irrelevant in the realm of art.

We can proceed now from a review of Beckett's overall perspectives with regard to art to some precepts more directly applicable to drama, especially within our three categories, plot, language, and characterization.

First, Beckett clearly does not hold plot principles or requirements in great esteem. The puzzles and tricks of narrative construction do not interest Beckett at all, and, in fact, they seem to him to be exercises in imposing false molds on reality; as he explains in Proust:

The classical artist assumes omniscience and omnipotence. He raises himself artificially out of Time in order to give relief to his chronology and causality to his development. Proust's chronology is extremely difficult to follow, the succession of

25 Ibid., p. 49.
events spasmodic, and his characters and themes, although they seem to obey an almost insane inward necessity, are presented and developed with a fine Dostoevskian contempt for the vulgarity of a plausible concatenation.  

Again, this concept flows naturally from Beckett's first premises: he is interested in isolating immutable essences -- even if they turn out to be illusory and disappointing -- and therefore he must seek to escape, as far as possible, from the on-moving influences of the two key elements of plot-making -- Time and causality. To Beckett, then, narrative intricacies offer only traps for the artist content to stay on the surface of reality.

Another way of explaining and extending this antipathy to plot-mechanisms is to note that Beckett has described the function of art as the interrogation of reality: "Art has always been this -- pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric."  

This, of course, is simply a reworking of the point we have discussed before: that Beckett feels art must probe into the core of everything around it. However, when the concept is phrased as it is here, when it is called interrogation, we see the gulf between Beckett and the "realistic" or representationalist school of aesthetics more clearly. To put the difference in imagistic terms: those who think art should represent or imitate nature believe that the artist should make a model, a miniature version, of everyday life and then let us watch the model operate. If art is viewed in this fashion, sequences of actions -- therefore plot -- become quite

26Ibid., p. 62.

crucial to the whole effect. Beckett, in contrast, isn't interested in watching imitations work; he wants to bring reality, as he sees it, into court for questioning. He wants things to stop running so that they can be carefully examined. For him, then, sequences and plots are obviously more hindrance than help.

When we turn to Beckett's theories on language, we find that his fundamental concern is the revitalization and resensualization (if we may be pardoned such a barbarous neologism) of words. For example, Beckett regarded Joyce's work in this area of prime importance:

Mr. Joyce has desophisticated language. And it is worthwhile remarking that no language is so sophisticated as English. It is abstracted to death. Take the word 'doubt': it gives us hardly any sensuous suggestion of hesitancy, of the necessity for choice, of static irresolution. Whereas the German Zweifel does, and, in lesser degree, the Italian dubitare. . . . This writing (Joyce's) that you find so obscure is a quintessential extraction of language and painting and gesture, with all the inevitable clarity of the old articulation. . . . Here words are not the polite contortions of twentieth-century printer's ink. They are alive.28

Naturally, Beckett believes that words and phrases employed in poetry and drama should be especially tactile and concrete—because, the more palpable they are, the more penetrating such words will be when they encounter the outer crusts of reality.29

Beckett emphasizes this point when he affirms that poets who make their language as sensual as possible are conforming to the most ancient traditions of the form:


29Beckett customarily makes no distinction between the language of poetry and the language of drama.
Poetry . . . was born of curiosity, daughter of ignorance. The first men had to create matter by the force of their imagination and 'poet' means 'creator.' Poetry was the first operation of the human mind, and without it thought could not exist. Barbarians, incapable of analysis and abstraction, must use fantasy to explain what their reason cannot comprehend. Before articulation comes song; before abstract terms, metaphors.  

For Beckett, then, phrases charged with sensual suggestion and tension return to the wellsprings of poetry; they become the basic stuff with which the poet must deal.

Such language, divorced as it is from purely intellectual abstraction, becomes a natural carrier for emotion, for naked feelings and reactions. Beckett stresses this point when he compares poetry to Metaphysics:

Poetry is essentially the antithesis of Metaphysics: Metaphysics purge the mind of the senses and cultivate the disembodiment of the spiritual; Poetry is all passion and feeling and animates the inanimate; Metaphysics are most perfect when most concerned with universals; Poetry, when most concerned with particulars. Poets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity.

In sum, then, Beckett believes that the language of the artist should be designed to change the way we habitually react to words. Too often, we want language to be transparent, a non-obtrusive transmitter for the ideas or impressions it is supposed to convey. Beckett thinks the artist working with language should draw our attention to words themselves, especially to their physical realities as sounds. When they are so regarded, he maintains, words can actually communicate more deeply and effectively.


31 Ibid.
can note parenthetically that this concept is quite similar to what Shaw meant by "word music." We should also note, however, that the attitude of the two men concerning the importance of this phenomenon was quite different. As we pointed out, Shaw was extremely sensitive to word music, and fascinated by its techniques and successful execution, but he firmly relegated it to second or third place in his scale of dramatic values; ideas always came first. Beckett turns the scale around: to him words and their shapes and sounds come first: "For Proust (and for Beckett, we might add), the quality of language is more important than any system of ethics or aesthetics."^{32}

To be true to our analysis of Beckett's first theoretical premise, we must begin any review of his precepts on characterization by remarking that he believes the characters in any work should reflect the author's vision of the condition of man. If, as Beckett holds, formal elements cannot be separated from an artist's fundamental philosophical outlook, characters should certainly offer, in their actions and speeches, concretions of that outlook. Beckett's own view of his characters confirms this: "The Kafka hero has a coherence of purpose. He's lost but he's not spiritually precarious, he's not falling to bits. My people seem to be falling to bits."^{33} As he sees them, then, Beckett's people remain true to his gloomy, barren estimation of man and his universe. We have already heard him speak of everyone these days being a "non-know-er" and a "non-can-er," and of exploring the region of "impotence"

^{32}Proust, p. 67. ^{33}Shenker, pp. 1-3.
around him. His disintegrating stage figures thus simply extend
the basic insight.

Indeed, in praising the way Proust's characters grow out of
their creator's approach to life, Beckett speaks out indirectly but
unmistakably against characters who obey the demands of stage me-
chanics or traditions instead of the author's vision: "But he will
refuse to extend his submission (before literary conventions) to
spatial scale, he will refuse to measure the length and weight of
man in terms of his body instead of in terms of his years."34

Further, as the conclusion of the above remarks indicate,
Beckett regards men and their character-surrogates as victims in
the thrall of the force he himself is fascinated by as an artist --
Time. Once again, his analysis of Proust betrays his own views:

Proust's creatures, then, are the victims of this predominating
condition and circumstance -- Time; victims as lower organisms,
conscious only of two dimensions and suddenly confronted with
the mystery of height, are victims: victims and prisoners."35

When he describes his characters as victims and prisoners,
Beckett is simply conforming, in one way, to an old tradition of
tragedy. The great Greek and Elizabethan tragedies, for example,
invariably look upon their doomed heroes as victims and prisoners
of impersonal, inexorable Fates -- prisoner-victims who are even
forced to atone bloodily for their feeble attempts to break free.
Further, both Beckett's and the classic dramatists' people come to
feel their tragic condition only as they become dimly aware of the
dimensions of their prisons.

And yet, in another sense, Beckett's characters are much different. Their dilemmas, their tortures have nothing to do with grand passions and defiant gestures. Beckett makes the point this way:

Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of an expiation, but not the miserable expiation of a codified breach of a local arrangement, organised by the knaves for the fools. The tragic figure represents the expiation of original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his 'soci malorum,' the sin of having been born.  

Finally, we should observe that Beckett's theories of characterization display a peculiarly modern consciousness of man's confining, clownishly impotent, absurd position. Tragic poets from every era have called man's state cruel and impossible. A few -- witness Shakespeare's "Out, out, brief candle," speech -- have even stressed its illusory and inconsequential nature. But the specifically modern, twentieth-century insight -- expressed by artists as disparate as T. S. Eliot and Michael Antonioni -- seems to be that all men, not just visionaries and fallen heroes, but "ordinary" and little men also, are becoming aware of the pathetic tragi-comic foolishness, the nonsensical hopelessness, built into the human situation. They do not look upon themselves as the oppressed slaves of God, the gods, or the Fates. These now quaint forces, with their almost reassuringly intelligent benevolence and malevolence, have either tumbled from their thrones or receded into remoteness. The old systems and schemes -- whether philosophical, political, religious, economic, or technological -- no longer

36Ibid., p. 49.
explain anything. The very elements of man's everyday world, sometimes even the parts of himself, deprived of their purposes and moorings, seem ready to fly off into space. In the face of this disintegration, men can only wander and stumble. There is no place to turn, nothing they can do. They must simply suffer blindly, hopelessly, ridiculously.

When we hear Beckett speak of his characters as falling to bits, when he speaks approvingly of characters that are like insects and amoebas reacting in dumb surprise to the mystery of height, we can conclude that he believes the characters in any literary work should feel and express this modern anguish.

Having completed a brief survey of Beckett's theories about art, and dramatic art in particular, we should pause to summarize his main precepts before we proceed to study his techniques. Therefore, we see that his first premise was that there should be an effective union between form and content, thus implying that any artist's devices and techniques should grow immediately out of his philosophical approach to the world, and that his style should vitally shape what the artist has to say, not simply transmit his message. Secondly, Beckett wants art to immerse itself initially and freshly in the ordinary phenomena reported by the senses: familiar sights, sounds, smells, tastes, etc. Third, he holds that paintings or novels or plays should then attempt to probe beneath these surface appearances to find their spiritual cores or essences, thus directing the audience's attention away from broad vistas and down to small areas suitable for microscopic attention. Fourth,
Beckett is consequently opposed to representational art of any kind, which he feels, rests content on the outer shells of experience.

**Fifth**, Beckett's approach to the relationship between art and Time-with-Death is ambiguous; on the one hand, he thinks art should reveal the devastating effects of these two forces; on the other, his excavatory theory of art presupposes attempts to isolate the immutable essences of things, removing them, temporarily, from the control of Time and Death. **Sixth**, the scalpel of art, Beckett believes, will lay bare an emptiness at the heart of everything, but the searches are still worthwhile. **Seventh**, one reason why art discovers nothing may be that, in Beckett's view, we cannot absolutely rely on the evidence of our senses; he thus suggests that art's main function is the exploration of the realm of impotence and doubt.

**Eighth**, he contends that art should strike the audience's consciousness roughly and radically. **Ninth**, Beckett regards literary and dramatic conventions as dangerous conveniences that should be catered to as little as possible. **Tenth**, he asserts that moral judgments have no place in art.

Turning to his comments on the three categories of dramatic techniques we are concerned with, we found that, with regard to **Plot**, Beckett has little interest in plot sequences and mechanisms because they attempt to put reality into false patterns and because they involve too much dependence on Time -- the force he'd like to escape; he also feels that plots are for the representa-
tional artists who want to watch models of reality operate -- real artists should seek to arrest the movement of things in time so that they can be interrogated and examined.

On Language: Beckett holds that artists whose medium is language should attempt to revitalize and resensualize words, making them as concrete and palpable as possible. Such solid language is in keeping with the ancient, sensuous, anti-abstract traditions of the word, and is also more effective for exploring reality and conveying emotion.

On characterization: according to Beckett, characters should first of all express their author's philosophic viewpoint; in Beckett's case, this means that they should be as vacuous, powerless, and disintegrated as his conception of the universe. Further, he wants characters to be represented as the tragic victims of Time and Death. These characters, however, should be tragic in the modern sense: dimly conscious, not of great falls and intelligent tyrants, but of man's hopeless, pathetic, absurd condition.

Let us now examine Beckett's techniques and dramatic practices in his plays, to see if they are well-adapted to these theories, and let us, for variety and other reasons, reverse the order we used until now by beginning with characterization.

First, a generalization applicable to all of Beckett's characters seems appropriate: all of these strange, enigmatic figures -- Vladimir, Estragon, Hamm, Clov, Krapp, Winnie and Willie (of Happy Days), etc. -- seem able to breathe only in Beckett's plays. One has difficulty picturing them existing apart from the
dramatic worlds he creates for them. Can anyone, for example, imagine Hamm living the way he does, with the strange power and impotence he displays, in any modern welfare state? Outside of Happy Days, wouldn't Winnie be spotted from a helicopter and rescued by cranes or something? Perhaps more importantly, in order for us to imagine someone like Krepp living beyond his play, wouldn't we need to know much more about him than we actually do -- such things as where he lives, how he lives, with whom or what he comes in contact?

In short, there seems to be very little danger that these very serviceable creations will ever get in the way or achieve independence, as a Falstaff, or a Candida, or a Giraudoux sewer-worker might. Beckett's people have been stripped of so much -- complexity of mood, history, variety in thought, action, motivation -- that they sometimes seem skeletal. As such, one can almost see them obeying the strings in Beckett's hands. They draw attention to the proper images and themes, but are not at liberty to do much else.

Indeed, it appears that Beckett has accomplished in his characterizations what Brecht set out to do and never quite reached. It is difficult to remain objective about characters like Mother Courage and Shen Te of The Good Woman of Setzuan, but we can view Beckett's characters from the outside. They are so isolated and so obviously special that we can easily evaluate them and their actions with relative detachment.

It is true, of course, that these skeletal creatures are
often humanly affecting and moving. The tramps in Godot have provided genuine emotional experiences for thousands of audiences by now. Again, few people could remain unmoved by Winnie's plight and her courage. Still, it is also true that we are actually affected by the circumstances of such characters, their hopeless situations, which we recognize as somehow common -- not so much by their personalities. Thus these rather one-dimensional, malleable figures approach the status of twentieth-century everymen.

Along these same lines, it is no accident that several critics have come to regard Beckett's paired characters as single entities split in two: Pozzo and Lucky have been taken as symbols of the body-mind relationship, and Vladimir and Estragon as "two halves of a single personality, the conscious and the sub-conscious mind." 37 Similarly, Hamm and Clov are said to represent the intellect (Clov) in the slavery of the passions and appetites (Hamm). Again, Winnie and Willie could be interpreted as the fixed and flexible elements of the human personality. Whether these interpretations are accurate or not, we have no way of knowing for sure. The point we can make from this suggestion, however, is that Beckett's characters lend themselves to such conceptions because they are functional rather than full-bodied.

And the conclusion we can draw from this point is that these characters are especially functional for an author who wants every aspect and detail of his work to be expressive of his fundamental philosophical vision -- and we saw that this was Beckett's

37Esslin, pp. 30-31.
goal. Characters who do not assume the independence of extra-literary life, and who do not obey the dictates of conventional characterization -- Beckett, remember, regarded such things as interruptions and obstacles -- are then free to accomplish whatever descriptive, expressive, or reflective goals the author sets for them. They are able to serve the needs of his philosophical viewpoint as completely and closely as he desires.

At the most obvious expressive level, for example, Beckett's characters are always outwardly, consciously concerned with the themes that occupy Beckett himself. In their perceptive study of Beckett's work, Josephine Jacobsen and William R. Mueller make the point that all of his individual efforts seem to be cut from the same cloth. Not only are key themes, comments, and images repeated again and again; occasionally, questions raised in one work are answered in another. In short, Beckett's work can be compared to one long length of rope being slowly uncoiled. For this reason, we can consider the themes of all the plays collectively.

Indeed, the main theme is probably the same in each: man's urge for oblivion is at war with his fundamental inertia. The characters in all the plays hate the situations they are bound up in; they want desperately to end the senseless routines, in suicide if necessary (Vladimir and Estragon, for instance, discuss hanging themselves, and Winnie fingers a revolver from time to time.) And yet they are strangely, unaccountably unable to break the patterns:

Estragon and Vladimir are weary of their wait for Godot, and still they wait; they say "let's go," and do not move; Clov wants to leave Hamm and his querulous commands, and yet, at the end of the play, he is still in the doorway, and we are uncertain as to whether he will go or stay.

This dual attitude toward reality -- despair and persistence -- reappears constantly throughout Beckett's critical and philosophical comments. Earlier we heard him speak in melancholy tones about the emptiness behind physical appearances, this world of "non-knowers," and the futility of the artistic search. And we also heard him insist on the necessity for exploring this zone of impotence and the importance of sensualized language, literature, and rough, questioning art. His characters simply echo his own ambiguous responses.

Jacobsen and Mueller put it this way: "All of Beckett's work can be divided ... between two forces: the lusting after nothingness and the voice, distant, unintelligible, pitiless, which prevents his sinking into the void so desperately desired." It is the clash of these two forces that creates the dramatic tension in his plays: audiences wonder throughout each performance if the characters will pull the trigger or use the rope, or wander off into the enveloping gloom.

Of course, there are a number of subsidiary themes. The most important, probably, is the tyranny of time. We have already seen that Beckett regards Time and its effects as major problems.

39 Ibid., pp. 7-8.
for the artist. His characters are correspondingly preoccupied. For them, Time is a two-edged instrument of torture: on the one hand, it freezes identities and situations into a stultifying sameness; on the other, it destroys identities and situations, even erases them from memory, so that each action becomes a deed done in isolation, without preparation or consequence.

This paradox is most noticeable in Godot. Vladimir and Estragon are suffocated with Time; they tell jokes, struggle to maintain desultory conversations, and even insult each other to make time’s passage more bearable. They are frustrated because their situation always remains the same. And yet, they cannot remember, at the beginning of the second act, what day it is, or what yesterday was like exactly, and Estragon has even forgotten who Pozzo and Lucky are. The frustrating nature of Time prompts this outburst from Pozzo in response to a "When" question from Vladimir:

Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! ... When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf. One day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you?40

The Time theme is less noticeable in Endgame, because of a difference in focus in the two plays. Waiting for Godot concentrates on the agony of waiting and the passing of time, while Endgame depicts the approaching end of everything -- the light is dimming, the supplies are running out, and so, it seems, is Time itself. Still, the theme is there. Hamm is continually asking if it

40Waiting for Godot, p. 57.
is time for his pain-killer, and Clov continues to say no. Again, when Hamm says, "Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!"
Clov replies violently: "That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day." 41

Or, in Happy Days, we find that Winnie's "days" are a succession of devices tried again and again to make the endless hours pass until the "bell for sleep." The little rituals -- her toothbrushing, bag-emptying, and talking -- are the only barriers between her and the numbing fear of Time:

Ah yes, so little to say, so little to do, and the fear so great, certain days, of finding oneself ... left, with hours still to run, before the bell for sleep, and nothing more to say, nothing more to do, that the days go by, certain days go by, quite by, the bell goes, and little or nothing said, little or nothing done. 42

Of course, Krapp's Last Tape is totally concerned with Time: the tapes are actually various times or stages or moments in the life of Krapp, and the play is simply a critical review by Krapp of these moments and a comparison of past with present.

If we had the space, we could continue the list -- pointing out more of Beckett's favorite themes echoed by his characters. We could stress, for example, that Vladimir and Estragon, when they say, "Let's go," and then, "We can't, we're waiting for Godot," 43 and Winnie, when she says, "I am weary holding it up (her parasol), and I cannot put it down. (Pause.) I am worse off with it down, and I cannot put it down. (Pause.) Reason says, Put it down,

43 Waiting for Godot, p. 31.
Winnie . . . I cannot move," are actually duplicating Beckett's concern with the realm of impotence and with "non-knowers" and "non-earners." However, let us simply say the point has been made: Beckett's characters directly express his concerns and viewpoint.

We move next to a physical aspect of Beckett's characters -- their rather advanced age. Unlike Giraudoux, who was fascinated by young girls, and unlike Shaw, who gave nearly equal time to vigorous young people and vigorous old people, Beckett is invariably partial to middle-agers -- and shabby ones at that. The tramps of Godot are obviously bedraggled and worn by life, as are Pozzo and Lucky. The shepherd boy's contrasting youthfulness merely emphasizes their worn, used-up appearances, their shabbiness of dress and manner. In Endgame, neither Hamm nor Clov is young, and Nell and Nagg are so decrepit that they are already consigned to trash cans. In this play, the young boy is only mentioned; he never appears.

Krapp, of Krapp's Last Tape, is very ancient, and is old even in several of the tapes he plays. In All That Fall, the principals are an old couple with all the physical complaints of age. Winnie and Willie of Happy Days are described as "middle-aged," and spend much of their time reliving the past. Even the strange characters in Play, besides being dead, are certainly not dewy or naive in their afterlife.

Obviously, this emphasis on age, on decrepitude, fulfills Beckett's self-evaluation: "My people seem to be falling to bits" --
they are already in visible decay. They also conform to Beckett's view of the world; he sees it as a fading, hollow realm where doubt and inability reign. And, just as he says they should, his characters reflect this vision in their very appearance. As they move and talk, they bring Beckett's pessimism to life.

Also in the realm of physical characteristics, we can note that many of his people are in prisons of some sort. Lucky is tethered on a rope in *Godot*; Nell and Nagg emerge from the garbage cans in *Endgame*, and Winnie, of *Happy Days*, is embedded up to her waist and then up to her neck in the earth. The trend continues with the people in urns from *Play*. What are we to make of this favorite metaphor?

Actually, it should seem obvious to us why Beckett should want to show people trapped and caught in narrow confines. After all, we saw earlier in the section on his theory that he regards human beings as prisoners of time and a tragically shallow existence. Beckett perpetually sees men as limited and restrained: he compares them to insects crawling within two dimensions who can only be dazed by a third; he says they are guilty of and bound from birth to make reparation for the sin of being born. He then expresses these limitations, these tight existential bonds or chains, by putting his characters in unyielding containers -- whether jars or the earth itself.

Next, we should mention the fascination of Beckett characters with ordinary objects. Vladimir and Estragon are concerned with everything from carrots to Estragon's boots to everyone's hats.
(which they exchange rapidly in a vaudeville comic routine). In *Endgame*, the embittered, dying people occupy themselves intensely with the sand in Nagg's and Nell's dustbins, with the exact location of Hamm's wheelchair in the room, with Hamm's toy dog (*Hamm*: Is he gazing at me?; *Clov*: Yes; *Hamm*: (proudly) As if he were asking me to take him for a walk?), and with the flea discovered by Clov, among other things. Krapp contemplates and manipulates his spools of recording tape and his bananas with complete and comic absorption.

The significance, the purpose of this unusual emphasis on objects becomes clear when we recall that Beckett feels the process of art should begin with careful examination of and reverence for ordinary phenomena reported by the senses. Beckett wants us to pay close attention to the surfaces of things -- the first step in a careful probing of these surfaces -- and his characters obligingly force us to regard ordinary things most minutely. Because they spend so much time turning these things over and asking basic questions about them, we are compelled to abandon our habitual, inattentive acceptance for a fresher, more aware response.

Also, the object-play is a factor in the pathetic clownishness and obvious theatricality with which Beckett's characters are dressed. As we see his people puzzling and straining over boots, or fooling with hats, or trying to get a broken toy dog to stand erect, or polishing a magnifying glass, we are inevitably reminded of the staples of sawdust ring entertainment. Just as clowns are

---

45 *Endgame*, p. 48.
almost epistemologically awed and frustrated in their confrontations with ordinary realities, so are Beckett's people. Just as such clown-struggles and clown-puzzlements are at once pathetic and funny, so are similar "bits of business" in Beckett's plays. We are reminded again of Beckett's modern despair over the human condition: he sees it as hopeless and desperate, but also amusing in a melancholy way. Beckett's clowns truly belong to the twentieth century with their dim awareness and comic bafflement.

The clown-like routines bring to mind another trait these characters share: their self-conscious theatricality. Beckett's figures frequently step out of their illusory stage lives to express awareness of their status as characters, as actors on a stage in a play. Ruby Cohn comments on this trait succinctly as it manifests itself in *Godot*:

Estragon directs Vladimir to an unnamed Men's Room, "End of corridor, on the left," and Vladimir requests, "Keep my seat." There are of course neither seats nor corridors on stage. Vladimir cries to Estragon when he seeks to escape backstage, "Imbecile! There's no way out there." . . . Estragon calls Vladimir, "Critic!"46

Kenner takes up the same point: "The tramps have plainly not learned parts; they repeatedly discuss what to do next ('What about hanging ourselves?') and observe from time to time that tedium is accumulating."47 We can observe the phenomenon again in *Endgame*, when Hamm complains, in the course of a tedious conversation, "This is slow work." or "This is not much fun," and "What's happening, What's happening?"48

---

Upon reflection, we can postulate that the effect of this technique is to both jar and involve the audience. Beckett, we saw, thinks art should startle the audience and explode in their senses; it should amount to a rough interrogation. The self-consciousness of Beckett's characters, their violations of the "make-believe" matrix in the plays, seem to help Beckett achieve this goal. Their "out-of-character" questions and asides tend to break down the barriers between the audience and the play; they help to destroy the feeling among the members of the audience that they are detached observers of people and events that will not involve them. When the characters step out of their theatrical conventions, they automatically step closer to the spectators.

Next, we should point out that Beckett's characters are never wholly articulate or wholly "in-the-know." In contrast to the works of both Shaw and Giraudoux, there are no raisonneur figures in Beckett plays — no people privileged with a "correct" or all-encompassing view of the world, no one who is even privy to the views and attitudes of Beckett himself. They all suffer at least partially in the dark. For example, witness the following exchange in Endgame:

Hamm: (anguished) Clov!
Clov: Yes.
Hamm: What's Happening?
Clov: Something is taking its course.
(Pause)
Hamm: Clov!
Clov: (impatiently) What is it?
Hamm: We're not beginning to ... to ... mean something?
Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something!
(Brief laugh)\(^4^9\)

\(^4^9\)Ibid., pp. 32-33.
To buttress the point we can add that the tramps of Godot are never sure what day it is, much less why they are waiting for Godot; or that Mr. Rooney, of All That Fall, is blind and unsure of practically everything, while his wife, who still has her sight, is not much better off.

On one level this universal uncertainty mirrors Beckett's conception of modern man. He thinks men are only half aware of their situation: they are conscious of the pain and comic degradation, but they cannot fathom all the causes. Like the characters in Godot, Happy Days, and the rest, they are condemned to wonder and to doubt. On a somewhat deeper level, their hesitations and questioning conform to Beckett's profound skepticism about the reliability of the learning and knowing processes. If Beckett is not certain that there can be "any direct and purely experimental contact . . . between subject and object," in art or anywhere else, it is only fitting that his characters should be equally dubious.

This lack of knowledge, this inability to make meaningful contact extends to the characters' relations with each other.

There are all kinds of human relationships depicted in Beckett's plays: parents and children (Nagg, Nell, and Hamm); husband and wife (Mr. and Mrs. Rooney of All That Fall); friend-and-friend (Vladimir and Estragon), etc. In each case, the relationship seems to be binding but flawed. The parties are not really happy with their partners, but are unwilling -- or unable -- to end the ties completely. Vladimir and Estragon, for instance, are openly reluctant and grudging friends:
Vladimir: You're a hard man to get on with, Gogo.
Estragon: It'd be better if we parted.
Vladimir: You always say that and you always come crawling back.50

There is not only a lack of communication among Beckett characters; there is a nearly absolute lack of ability to communicate. And the absence of understanding naturally reduces the participants to self-enclosed bodies clashing in the dark. The requirements of the relationship become intolerable, unfathomable burdens:

Winnie: (after asking Willie to look at her and being turned down) Oh I can well imagine what is passing through your mind, it is not enough to have to listen to the woman, now I must look at her as well. (Pause.) Well it is very understandable. (Pause.) One does not appear to be asking a great deal, indeed at times it would hardly seem possible (voice breaks, falls to a murmur) -- to ask less -- of a fellow-creature -- to put it mildly -- whereas actually -- when you think about it -- look into your heart -- see the other -- what he needs -- to be left in peace -- then perhaps the moon -- all the time -- asking for the moon.51

We are left with see-saw patterns, a series of halting attempts at communication followed by quick, confused withdrawals. Jean-Jacque Mayoux describes the effect this way:

These (human) relationships are much more complex than in Strindberg's work, for they are tinged with conflicting impulses which include a need of tenderness and protection. Perhaps it is in these alternations of feeling that we pass from parody to the naked truth of man. Each motion of one human being towards another is followed by a retraction on the one part, and a rejection on the other. Vladimir and Estragon embrace, but Estragon draws back at once: 'You stink of garlic!'52

50 Waiting for Godot, p. 40. 51 Happy Days, p. 29.
Again, this trait is a suitable expression of Beckett's theory that there cannot really be a satisfactory "knowing" relationship between any subject and an object. After all, the difficulty is compounded in the case of human interaction: there are two subjects confronting one another.

Finally, we must suggest at least one way in which Beckett's characters may not serve his theoretical ends as well as he might wish. If, as we suggested earlier, there is supposed to be a continual tension between the impulse for oblivion or suicide and the force of inertia in Beckett's characters, and if, as Darko Suvin declares: "Beckett's basic formal device is a hesitating balance, without any clear leaning to either side," then the performance of these people should aim to create the final impression or impact of tension and balance.53

As a matter of fact, however, people like Didi and Gogo, who "keep their appointment" so persistently, and Winnie, who keeps doggedly referring to her blessings and warding off compelling despair, tend to emphasize the persistence and durability of mankind to a balance-disturbing degree. Of course, we stressed above that Beckett's characters remain quite unhappy, spare, and strange enough to escape the stigma of melodramatically sympathetic, triumphant-over-all-obstacles heroes. Still, they are so unvaryingly persistent -- so surely comic in the Langer "man-as-endurer" mold, just as Shaw's people are -- that their final impact can be some-

how strangely "uplifting" or inspiring instead of wearying and puzzling. So much so that critics often produce evaluations like this one from Anders: "What Beckett presents is not nihilism, but the inability of man to be a nihilist even in a situation of utter hopelessness."54 One would guess that this reaction, which is not atypical, goes beyond Beckett's intentions.

We can summarize our conclusions concerning Beckett's characterizations briefly as follows: we remarked first that these characters seem to be designed exclusively for their plays, not for independent life. Along the same lines, we said they were transparent and symbolically functional as Brecht. As such, they are completely in the service of the philosophical vision Beckett wanted to project - which Beckett maintains is the chief function of all art. Second, we saw that Beckett's characters are overtly concerned with Beckett's favorite themes, like Time and Death, just as he thinks they ought to be. Third, the predominance of shabby, middle-aged people in the plays supports Beckett's view that art should offer a realistic picture of a dying world and its faded, bedraggled inhabitants. Fourth, we suggested that Beckett's penchant for confining his characters in unyielding containers is a natural outgrowth of his conception of Time and Death.

Fifth, the artist's belief that art should begin with close and fresh attention to physical phenomena, as well as his insight

---

into the clown-like, half-ignorant, half-aware, status of twentieth century man, are realized dramatically in his characters' fascination with ordinary objects - from boots to toothbrushes. Sixth, we saw earlier in the chapter that Beckett wants art to shock audiences into closer involvement; the self-conscious awareness and "out-of-character" asides of his characters help him move toward this goal. Seventh, Beckett's conviction that modern man is only half-aware of his status, and his skepticism about the validity of the learning and knowing process underlie his characters' painful semi-ignorance.

Eighth, the uneasy, firm-but-strained relationships between the characters in the plays also exemplify his skepticism about the possibility of fruitful encounters between two subjects. Finally, we proposed that the often puzzled but stubborn endurance of the Beckett characters may give rise to more optimism than Beckett would prefer.

When we consider Beckett's dialogue, we should note an important difference between Beckett on one side and Shaw and Giraudoux on the other. A primary goal of dialogue for the latter two men was the stimulation of spiritual and/or intellectual activity: Shaw's speeches deal with the interchange of ideas and generalized perceptions; Giraudoux's linguistic pyrotechnics encourage the most refined and gossamer speculations. Beckett does not ignore this capacity of language, but he stresses instead the physical and emotional impact words can have. Remember, for instance, the contrast he sketches between poetry and metaphysics:
"Poetry is all passion and feeling and animates the inanimate; Metaphysics are most perfect when most concerned with universals; Poetry, when most concerned with particulars. Poets are the sense, philosophers the intelligence of humanity." (p. 159) In sum, then, the thrust of Beckett's intentions is toward molding language into a distinct, sensuous force.

And in his practice, the desired impact does often take precedence over lucidity and logical coherence. In fact, one level of language frequently employed in the plays might be called non-sensical or disconnected chatter. The most obvious example, of course, is Lucky's long speech in Act I of Godot. As many critics have observed, his wild remarks are not actually as disconnected as they seem. Ruby Cohn, for instance, affirms that the diatribe is:

a labyrinth of repetitive passages that summarize or parody several of the play's themes: the erosive effect of time, the relativity of facts, the futility of human activity, faith in God, proof through reason.55

Nevertheless, whatever the meanings one can extract upon reflection, the passage first strikes the ear as babble:

summer winter winter tennis of all kinds hockey of all sorts penicilline and succeedances in a word I resume flying gliding golf over nine and eighteen holes tennis of all sorts in a word for reasons unknown in Peckham, Peckham, Fulham, Clap- ham . . . 56

No other character from Beckett speaks such obvious and stylized nonsense, but many of them break into cryptic monologues at least reminiscent of Lucky's. Henry, of Embers, says at one

55Cohn, p. 217. 56Waiting for Godot, p. 29.
Hooves! (Pause. Louder.) Hooves! (Pause.) Christ! (Long pause.) Left soon afterwards, passed you on the road, didn't see her, looking out to . . . (Pause.) Can't have been looking out to sea. (Pause.) Unless you had gone round the other side.57

Krapp deliberately reduces his recorded remarks to nonsense by switching off the recorder in mid-sentence and switching it on again at a different place on the tape.58

What these and other samples of illogical chatter accomplish most obviously is the parodying of solid, traditional, sensible sentences -- the ones in which the grammar, punctuation, and transitions are in good order. McLuhan has made us aware of how the arbitrary, "straight-line" sequences of speech and written prose impose artificial structure on the realities they are supposed to transmit. Long before he popularized this idea, however, Beckett (under Joyce's influence) was reacting to it -- in his theorizing and in his creative, non-sensical dialogue. His nonsense speeches mock the forms of "clear" speech, and at the same time demonstrate how unnecessary they are by achieving impact and even meaning without them.

He also maintains, as we saw, that abstracted, formalistic language is alien to man -- especially in that area where he actually feels and knows. His characters' chattering parodies of speech call our attention to this strangeness. As Mayoux says: "Like Lucky, like us all, Beckett is obsessed by the foreign sound of that voice which we hear when we speak, which is ours and

57Embres, pp. 118-119. 58Krapp's Last Tape, p. 21.
not us, but by means of which something passes through us."

Finally, the nonsense speeches, which demonstrate the falsability of attempts to communicate concepts, emphasize once more Beckett's doubts about the whole rational process.

We said earlier, however, that Beckett does not really neglect the traditional resources of language. As evidence, we can point to another level of language in his dialogues, a level at the opposite end of the scale from his nonsense speeches. We refer to those occasions when Beckett's semi-coherent characters suddenly offer us sharply turned epigrams -- some of which are as elegantly-phrased and pithy as any produced by Shaw or Giraudoux.

In Godot, for example, Pozzo says of the human race, "They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more." Or, in Endgame, we hear Hamm describe the desolation awaiting Clov (and everyone else): "Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn't fill it, and there you'll be like a little bit of grit in the middle of the steppe." Mr. Rooney, of All That Fall, asks, "Did you ever wish to kill a child?" (Pause.) Nip some young doom in the bud.

Why does Beckett rely on epigrams -- a device more appropriate for a Giraudoux than for a founder of the Absurdist movement? Don't the generalizations at the heart of such statements violate Beckett's standard skepticism about what men can know?

59 Mayoux, p. 149. 60 Waiting for Godot, p. 57. 61 Endgame, p. 36. 62 All That Fall, p. 74.
In a way, they do. Still, we should note that Beckett's aphorisms are based, not on concepts, but on concrete images and bold figures, as we have just seen; they thus avoid Beckett's disdain for abstractions, even come close to being something as opposed to being words about something. Also, every one of them is simply a distillation of Beckett's dark, hopeless vision. We are not treated to urbane gems of practical, constructive wisdom offered from a serene distance. Beckett's aphorisms are the anguished perceptions of men trapped in the mire of existence.

Moving to passages more properly called dialogue, we notice two distinctive patterns which create a third level of language. The first one owes much to the patter of music-hall comedians: two or more characters will toss short phrases at one another in rapid, stichomythic succession, frequently with comic effect. For example, listen to Vladimir and Estragon in Godot:

Vladimir: (turning simultaneously) Do you . . .
Estragon: Oh pardon!
Vladimir: Carry on.
Estragon: No, no, after you.
Vladimir: No, no, you first.
Estragon: I interrupted you.
Vladimir: On the contrary.
Estragon: (They glare at each other angrily.)
Vladimir: Ceremonious ape!
Estragon: Punctilious pig.63

Hamm and Clov often go at each other in the same way:

Clov: I've looked. (Out the window.)
Hamm: With the glass?
Clov: No need of the glass.
Hamm: Look at it with the glass.
Clov: I'll go and get the glass. (Exit Clov.)
Hamm: No need of the glass.64

63 Waiting for Godot, p. 48. 64 Endgame, p. 28.
Of course, one obvious purpose of this patter is to call to mind the hopeless desperation weighing down upon these people, who must fill their lives with such vacuous trivia. We are also reminded, by the feeble comedy of such dialogue, of Beckett's characteristic, twentieth-century reaction to the desperation -- weary, hopeless laughter.

With regard to their possible effect on audiences, we can speculate that these routines may be intended to prompt "useful" impatience. Let us recall that Beckett thought art should strike its audiences roughly, and then let us listen to Hugh Kenner on the way the tramps of *Godot* use up time with their vaudeville tricks and silly little dialogues:

The realities stated with such insistence are disquietingly provisional. The tree is plainly a sham, and the two tramps are simply filling up time until a proper dramatic entertainment can get under way. . . . Beckett, it is clear, has cunningly doubled his play with that absence of a play which every confirmed theatergoer has at some time or other experienced, the advertised cynosure having missed a train or overslept or indulged in temperament.65

It seems plausible to argue, then, that the inconsequential dialogues, however comic they may be on occasion, are ultimately supposed to be an irritant. They may well be designed to prod us out of customary, comfortable expectations from an evening in the theater; the accumulating impatience, then, should start us questioning and wondering in an unsettled mood -- precisely the frame of mind Beckett is seeking.

Again, this patter is frequently firmed or elevated to

65Kenner, p. 135.
the point where it takes on the characteristics of a chorus-like chant. The pointless questions and silly remarks are suddenly stylized and charged with meaning, forming the second of the two patterns we discussed earlier. Witness this famous sample from Godot:

Estragon: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly, since we are incapable of keeping silent.
Vladimir: You're right, we're inexhaustible.
Estragon: It's so we won't think.
Vladimir: We have that excuse.
Estragon: It's so we won't hear.
Vladimir: We have our reasons.
Estragon: All the dead voices.
Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.
Estragon: Like leaves.
Vladimir: Like sand.
Estragon: Like leaves.

Or, consider the following litany from All That Fall:

Mr. Rooney: (narrative tone) On the other hand, I said, there are the horrors of home life, the dusting, sweeping, airing, scrubbing, waxing, waning, washing, mangle, drying, mowing, clipping, raking, rolling, scuffling, shovelling, grinding, tearing, pounding, banging, and slamming.

On these occasions, Beckett's strange, alien characters seem the most representative and universal. When they become a chorus, as they do above, they articulate the weariness and despair of everyone. The stylized chanting thus momentarily transforms bizarre oddities into crystallizations of Beckett's vision of the human condition.

We can also affirm that such passages have a purposely hypnotic impact on audiences. The insistent rhythms and striking images and sounds of these dialogues and catalogues compel audi-

66 Waiting for Godot, p. 40. 67 All That Fall, pp. 78-79.
ence-attention -- often in the imperious manner Beckett believes proper for art.

The repetitions upon which these "choruses" depend bring to mind the by-now familiar judgment that what Beckett ultimately creates through these various levels of language is a kind of poetry; Jacobsen and Mueller make the point emphatically: "Since Beckett is primarily a poet, there is no aspect of his work which is not poetically relevant."68 Mayoux is similarly positive: "However little he has written in verse, Beckett is above all a lyric poet in his two languages."69 Although these and other critics buttress their assertions with comments about Beckett's intense imagination and rhythmic patterns, they do not ever really define what they mean by the terms "poet" or "poetry." Let us presume, then, that what they (and we) are talking about is the compressed power of his strongly patterned language and the intensity of the emotions evinced in that language. Thus loosely defined, Beckett's lean prose can be called poetic in much the same sense that Giraudoux's and Shaw's speeches are sometimes called poetic. The common denominator would seem to be a heightening or emphasis of the language beyond the standards or ordinary prose.

When we attempt to analyze the origins of this heightening, we can first cite a factor already mentioned: his penchant for repetition. The repeated phrases and sentences involved in the music-hall dialogues and chant sections tend to emphasize the

68Jacobsen and Mueller, p. 35. 69Mayoux, p. 154.
language, to call attention to its sounds.

Also, the effects of the repetitions bring us to a related factor -- the pronounced musical or rhythmic impact of Beckett's speeches; as we have indicated, the regular beats in passages like Mr. Rooney's catalogue and the tramps' "like sand, like leaves," dialogue create a noticeable rhythm by themselves. Other speeches, such as this one by Mrs. Rooney: "what's wrong with me, what's wrong with me, never tranquil, seething out of my dirty old pelt, out of my skull, oh to be in atoms, in atoms!"70 are so carefully orchestrated with punctuation, alliteration, and assonance that the musical undertone is even more discernible. The whole effect is strangely compelling -- for sound values alone.

Besides contributing to the "poetry" of Beckett's dialogue, his repetitious and rhythmic passages fulfill some of his dicta about language. He wanted language to be as dense, as concretely sensual as possible; accordingly, his dialogues appeal strikingly and insistently to the sense of hearing. Their strongly musical aspects will not permit his words to become abstract or transparent in the manner he disliked.

Another source of poetry in Beckett's speeches might be called the power of unusually close observation. When Beckett focuses his characters' and our own attention completely and urgently on one small object or area, the results can be emotionally intense. As Jacobsen and Mueller put it:

There is the poetry in which the observation is of such passionate fidelity as to involve empathy -- and this is Beckett's

70All That Fall, p. 43.
closest approach to the poetry of joy. Any intense vision celebrates the nature of the thing observed, be that nature what it may. Even if the object of his scrutiny is somber or revolting, Beckett has succeeded in escaping the cage of self, in his celebration of seeing.71

I can agree with Jacobsen and Mueller that Beckett's close observation amounts to a celebration of "the nature of the thing observed," and that such scrutinies are poetically intense, but I think it inaccurate to call the whole effect a close approach to "the poetry of joy." Actually, these passages, although they initially magnify the surface appearances of things, seem basically designed to fulfill Beckett's theory about art acting as a scalpel, laying bare the core of reality. And what the minute scrutinies uncover most often is the emptiness Beckett both feared and insisted upon.

Let us examine this passage, for example, from Happy Days:

What would you say, Willie, speaking of your hair, them or it? . . . The hair on your head, Willie, what would you say speaking of the hair on your head, them or it? . . . (After a long pause, Willie answers, "It.") (Turning back front, joyful.) Oh you are going to talk to me today, this is going to be a happy day! (Pause, Joy off.) . . . Ah well, where was I, my hair, yes, later on, I shall be thankful for it later on. . . . (Pause. She raises hand, frees a strand of hair from under hat, draws it towards eye, squints at it, lets it go, hand down.) Golden you called it, that day, when the last guest was gone -- (hand up in gesture of raising a glass) -- to your golden . . . may it never . . . (Voice breaks.) . . . may it never . . . (Hand down. Head down. Pause. Low.) That day . . . Words fail, there are times when even they fail. . . . What is one to do then, until they come again? Brush and comb the hair, if it has not been done, or if there is some doubt, trim the nails if they are in need of trimming, these things tide one over.72

71Jacobsen and Mueller, p. 35.

As one hears or reads this speech, he feels that in examining her hair so closely with Winnie, he is looking through it, again with her, into a numbing void. The same could be said for Pozzo's sudden little dissertation on the sky in Godot:

What is there so extraordinary about it? Qua sky. It is pale and luminous like any sky at this hour of the day. (Pause.) In these latitudes. (Pause.) When the weather is fine.73

Coming as they do in the middle of a vaguely desperate but desultory conversation, Pozzo's descriptive efforts make the sky seem like just another thin veil stretched over the emptiness surrounding the four of them on that lonely road. Ultimately, then, Beckett's passages of close observation, although they are sometimes briefly lyrical and often poetically intense, help him break through surface realism to find the existential despair beneath.

Still another source of "poetry" in Beckett's language is his habitual irony. One need not hold that irony is the most important distinguishing mark of poetry, in order to recognize that the compressed double-impact irony gives language achieves at least part of that power for which all poetry aims. And one certainly cannot deny that irony is Beckett's most natural mode. His dialogues abound with contrasts between what is said and what would normally be expected, and with descriptions of ironic situations. In Endgame, for instance, Clov says, "They said to me, what skilled attention they get, all these dying of their wounds."74 Mrs. Rooney declares at one point: "Don't mind me. Don't take any

73Waiting for Godot, p. 25. 74Endgame, p. 80.
notice of me. I do not exist. The fact is well-known."75 Or, in *Krapp's Last Tape*, we hear Krapp's voice, on tape, reporting: "The new light above my table is a great improvement. With all this darkness round me I feel less alone."76

We can note here a significant difference between Beckett's irony and Giraudoux's irony. Giraudoux's ironic comments tend to be clever, rather detached observations, and, even when the character delivering them is agitated, they invariably seem civilized, urbane. Beckett's ironies, as we have seen, often take the form of rather gloomy jokes -- effective enough, but hardly urbane. As a matter of fact, such remarks are the direct out-croppings of Beckett's dark vision of the human condition. They don't deal with interesting side issues or peripheral observations; they stick to the main themes. For confirmation, the reader can refer again to the examples just cited: Mrs. Rooney's exasperated little witticism recalls the key issues of communication and existential doubt; Clov invokes human misery; and Krapp's "darkness" is the darkness Beckett sees around every man.

Before leaving the "poetic" aspects of Beckett's language, we should mention a final way in which he heightens his dialogue to poetic status. I refer to his ability to impart special emotional impact to certain repeated phrases, so that they become refrains. Of course, the most famous example is the haunting response, "We're waiting for Godot." The first time we hear it, the phrase seems to be simply a part of the disjointed conversa-

75 *All That Fall*, pp. 48-49. 76 *Krapp's Last Tape*, pp. 14-15.
tion. As we hear it again and again, however, it gradually comes to be charged with all the symbolic meanings we draw out of these people and their plight. At the end of the play, when we listen to the desultory questions and answers:

Estragon: Oh yes, let's go far away from here.
Vladimir: We can't.
Estragon: Why not?
Vladimir: We have to come back tomorrow.
Estragon: What for?
Vladimir: To wait for Godot.77

we must regard them in the context of what has gone before, what we now know about the hopeless state of Didi and Gogo, their ignorance, their joyless endurance. Within that context, the "waiting for Godot" refrain symbolizes the whole vision and reality of the play.

Much the same process can be observed in other plays -- Happy Days, for instance. The first time Winnie offers thanks for the blessings of "another happy day," the remark seems either incomprehensible or foolishly, unconsciously ironic. But when we have heard her make this her trademark-phrase, in the midst of the severest sufferings and wonderings, her insistence becomes an emblem of her desperate self-control, her constantly defended serenity. Operating this way, these and similar phrases in other plays perform the same function that refrains frequently perform in poetry; they cast in capsule form the dominant theme or mood of the whole work.

The refrains also fulfill Beckett's theoretical precepts

77Waiting for Godot, p. 59.
in several ways. First, their strong, cumulative emotional impact helps Beckett strike his auditors roughly through his plays, as he says all artists should. Beckett himself once described *Endgame* as: "Rather difficult and elliptic, mostly depending on the power of the text to claw." The refrains of *Endgame* (such as "something is taking its course"), contribute much of that power -- and the refrains of the other plays do the same.

Second, these phrases, because they are repeated regularly, because they have symbolic overtones, and because they trigger emotional responses, finally amount to the kind of sensual welding of sound and meaning Beckett sought. They become another way of escaping the bonds of our "abstracted to death" English language.

If Beckett's "poetry" heightens and intensifies his language, other aspects of his dialogues embody more directly his conception of a tottering race reeling in the dark. We have heard Beckett proclaim that art should portray hopeless man, conscious only of his pain and misery, trapped in an empty prison of existence. In response, several features of his linguistic patterns might be grouped together under the title, "The Language of Uncertainty."

We notice first of all that many conversational leads are left unfinished and unclear. The dialogue will go off in a certain direction for awhile, and then fizzle out quickly and proceed elsewhere. In *Godot*, the tramps start to discuss the dangers of

---

thinking, and Vladimir says:

Vladimir: What is terrible is to have thought.
Estragon: But did that ever happen to us?
Vladimir: Where are all these corpses from?
Estragon: These skeletons.
Vladimir: Tell me that.\(^78\)

And from that point on, the discussion of corpses is abruptly ended. Similarly, in *Endgame*, Hamm and Clov suddenly switch the theme of their lethargic discussion to a "Mother Pegg":

Clov: But naturally she's extinguished! (Pause.) What's the matter with you today?
Hamm: I'm taking my course. (Pause.) Is she buried?
Clov: Buried! Who would have buried her?
Hamm: You.
Clov: Me! Haven't I enough to do without burying people?
Hamm: But you'll bury me.
Clov: No I won't bury you. (Pause.)
Hamm: She was bonny once, like a flower of the field. (With reminiscent leer.) And a great one for the men!
Clov: We too were bonny -- once. It's a rare thing not to have been bonny -- once. (Pause.)
Hamm: Go and get the gaff.\(^80\)

And that is the end of Mother Pegg. We pass on without ever finding out who she was or what her relationship was to the principals. What this technique amounts to is a refusal to supply essential transitions, sequences, and background. The product is a kind of elliptical speech that conceals as much as it reveals, that creates as much doubt as interest. Naturally, Beckett is not the only dramatist who works this way. In fact, Richard Schechner writes very perceptively about the technique in an article on Pinter:

The form is standard English, but the conversation doesn't get anywhere. . . . Pinter's goal (and Beckett's, we might add) . . . is to mystify us. He does it through a special brand of dramatic irony in which character and audience are

\(^{79}\) *Waiting for Godot*, p. 41. \(^{80}\) *Endgame*, pp. 41-42.
unable to solve basic riddles. . . . Not that information is not exchanged. But the information passing between Pinter's characters moves by way of subtext. . . . Subtextual information is never cognitive; it always carries with it -- even when seemingly clear -- a heavy baggage of implication, confusion, nuance. . . . Since Ibsen we have been accustomed to knowing all, sooner or later. . . . Pinter intentionally disappoints this expectation and leaves his audience anxiously confused.81

Beckett does the same, because a major part of his "message" is anxious doubt. In contrast to Shaw, who wants to spell everything out clearly, Beckett seeks to make people unsure -- the better to suit them for their dubious universe.

Next under "The Language of Uncertainty" we can cite Beckett's reliance on the terminology of doubt. His plays abound with the groping phrases of people who can't remember, aren't sure, or don't understand:

Miss Fitt: Ah yes, I am distract, very distract, even on week-days. . . . I suppose the truth is I am not there, Mrs. Rooney, just not really there at all. . . . So if you think I cut you just now, Mrs. Rooney, You do me an injustice. All I saw was a big pale blur, just another big pale blur.82

Henry: I can't remember if he met you.
Ada: You know he met me.
Henry: No, Ada, I don't know, I'm sorry. I have forgotten almost everything connected with you.83


82All That Fall, pp. 55-56. 83Embers, p. 116.
84Happy Days, pp. 50-51.
The point is that, even in terms of phraseology and characteristic vocabulary, the dialogue is as uncertain as Beckett’s state of mind.

Finally, we might observe that the sparseness of Beckett’s prose serves him very well. It has often been pointed out that Beckett’s favorite stage direction is the pause, and that everyone in the plays seems to be cryptically sparing with words. Didi, Gogo, Hamm and Clov are frequently almost monosyllabic, even long-distance monologuists like Henry of Embers and Winnie of Happy Days are scarcely fluent or didactically clear. This means that Beckett’s stage is, in fact, often completely silent. And we can speculate that the silences help Beckett convey something of the emptiness he sees at the core of our existence. Further, if he wants to emphasize the decay and uselessness of rationality, and of attempts to "communicate," what better way is there to do so than by minimizing speech as far as possible.

Summing up our consideration of Beckett’s dialogue, we found: that the three levels of language in Beckett drama, nonsense chatter, polished aphorisms, music-hall dialogue and chorus-like chanting, all help him parody traditional reasoning, express his vision of our existential void, and give language the body and sensual quality he wants it to have; that the heightening of language called Beckett’s poetry, achieved by repetition, rhythm, close attention to physical phenomena, irony, and refrain-like phrases, also produces affecting, sensual language that can probe through appearances to the core of existence; that Beckett’s
Language of Uncertainty mirrors his conception of man lost and uncertain in a dark universe; and that the silences on Beckett's stage reflect his distrust of language and the processes of human knowledge.

Our first observation concerning Beckett's plots and structures is already an easy commonplace: they are extremely sparse. The popular reaction to any Beckett play -- "But nothing really happens" -- is very nearly correct. For confirmation, compare the action in Waiting for Godot or Happy Days to the action in Saint Joan or Intermezzo. The auditor or student finds movement, incidents and process in the latter plays, stasis and repetition in the former.

Of course, there is some development in Beckett plays: when we see them in the second act of Godot, Pozzo has become blind and Lucky, dumb; Mrs. Rooney makes her way painfully to the train station, finds her husband, and then starts on the road back in All That Fall: Winnie sinks deeper into the earth during the course of Happy Days. Still, no problems are solved; nobody's condition or status is decisively settled; nothing is irrevocably lost or permanently retrieved. Godot never comes and the tramps still wait; Krapp's tape "runs on in silence," and we are not even sure, at the finish of Endgame, whether Clov has left or not.

Just in itself, this lack of action fits in perfectly with Beckett's prejudices against the unproductive tyranny of plot mechanisms and devices. His own plays, in short, are developed according to his prescriptions -- "with a fine Dostoievsian
contempt for the vulgarity of a plausible concatenation." (See page 156, this chapter.)

The effect of stasis is also appropriate in view of the limited, closed dramatic arenas or worlds in which the action takes place. The strange, enigmatic nature of Beckett's characters and situations does seem to isolate them within a distinctive atmosphere. Perhaps because we know so little initially about the people or the spare backgrounds in Play, Happy Days, and the rest, and because they continue to function and exist according to unexplained rules, the critics are quite justified when they refer to a decrepit "beckettian world" or universe, sealed off from the one we inhabit every day.

In any case the conceit has become a staple of Beckett criticism. Ruby Cohn's version sounds like this, "On Samuel Beckett's planet, matter is minimal, physiography and physiology barely support life. The air is exceedingly thin, and the light exceedingly dim." Darko Suvin is at once more specific and more technical as he makes the same point:

Beckett's world is, first of all, a closed one, of the cosmological family to which a ptolemaic world also belongs, yet differing from that world by being dolorously and morbidly conscious of the theoretical possibility (and perhaps need) for a transcendent vertical opening.

Although this "world" of Beckett drama is self-contained, it still relies on and refers to our own universe. We have already noted Ruby Cohn's assertion that, "all the cluttered complexity of our own planet is required to educate the taste that

---

can savor the unique comic flavor of Beckett's creation." Similarly, Suvin maintains that "his (Beckett's) work is a radically foreshortened recapitulation of a certain cognitive and artistic tradition, almost a boiling down of a segment of intellectual history." Later, he identifies this segment as the long stretch of centuries during which Individualism, the money economy, and the impetus toward desensualization and reification of everything came to dominate our perceptions and social structures.

The connections between these spare, allusive worlds and Beckett's dramatic theories are both obvious and subtle. Obviously, the blasted worlds in Beckett's plays -- the barren countryside of Godot, the skull-like room of Endgame, the desolate urns of Play -- are mimetic of our own actually barren world, as Beckett sees it. The subtle connection is tactical: by setting up his own miniature universe, Beckett calls our attention to his cosmic concerns, to the fact that his disintegrating characters and their condition are intended to express a vision of universal emptiness. The closed, distinct atmosphere helps him indicate that he is portraying, not some minor aspect of our world, but all the world.

As we saw earlier, a key feature of Beckett's world and worldview is the dual nature of Time the destroyer and stultifier. Correspondingly, Time is a key element in the structures of the plays. Usually, in fact, the plots hinge entirely on time factors. It is not hard to establish, for example, that Waiting for Godot

87 Cohn, p. 1. 88 Suvin, p. 27. 89 Ibid., pp. 28-33.
turns upon waiting, or passing the time, and that Winnie of Happy Days is occupied with that problem too. The big question in All That Fall is, "Why was the train late?" The object of Krapp's Last Tape is to probe the past of its one character.

Frequently, the circular nature of the action emphasizes the way time freezes everything into stagnation: Krapp returns again and again on the tape to his ancient love affair, and demonstrates the same foibles with bananas and drink that he reproached himself for decades earlier. Mrs. Rooney travels to the station and back, and the play suggests that she does so every day. The characters in Play stare out at us from fixed eternity.

At the opposite extreme, Beckett also uses his plays to show Time destroying and eliminating. Kenner mentions this factor in commenting upon All That Fall:

All these movements in space are translated by the aural medium into time, where sounds expend themselves and die. Things that always occur in time, meanwhile: transmogrifications, failings, vanishings; these are presented to us at every instant of the dialogue, so that the play is steeped in transience. 90

In the same vein, Endgame begins at the point where Time has already outlasted and eliminated practically everything: human life, youth, happiness, even pain-killer. And Time is especially destructive in Happy Days. By the second act, her endless waiting seems to have deprived Winnie of even the memory of her arms and breasts.

We can observe, finally, that Beckett manipulates Time just as easily as Shaw does in the sweeping chronicle of Back to Me-

90 Kenner, p. 169.
Thus, or as Giraudoux does in the magical maneuvers of *Ondine*. Indeed, the medium of drama offers unique opportunities for the exploration and control of time that we should expect Beckett to grasp. As Kenner puts it: "Drama is distinguished from all other forms of art by its control over the time spent by the spectator in the presence of its significant elements." This factor should make the stage particularly appealing to a man who wanted art to probe and contest time. (See pp. 151-152.)

Closely related to the timelessness of the plays is the sense of balance that pervades them. The tension that springs from contrasting or opposing forces maintained in uneasy equilibrium makes itself felt frequently. *Godot* stresses the need of and disgust with each other felt by Vladimir and Estragon, and that duo is also contrasted with Pozzo and Lucky. *Endgame* traces Hamm's mastery over and dependence upon Clov. *Happy Days* amounts to a duel between Winnie's determined busy-ness and the heaviness of the waiting she must endure. These tensions parallel the various balances in Beckett's theoretical approaches: for instance, between the impulse toward suicide and the compulsion for continuance, between the impotence of art and its necessity.

Next, we should note Rosette Lamont's observation that "the intellectual concerns" of Beckett's theater are "couched in the rough and tumble language of the most primitive type of comedy. . . . The new genre . . . is the metaphysical farce."  

---

91 Kenner, p. 134.

92 Rosette C. Lamont, "The Metaphysical Farce: Beckett and
In support of this assertion, we can cite Ruby Cohn's description of *Godot* as, "a music-hall sketch of Cartesian man performed by Chaplinesque clowns," and her reminder that "vaudeville comedians rather than dramatic actors played the leads in both the Paris and New York productions." Kenner chimes in with, "And indeed Beckett's fictions are at bottom rather like scholarly jokes... For Beckett is the first great academic clown since Sterne."94

The justice of these comments is immediately apparent if we define farce in its broadest sense as low, physical comedy, and then recall the prevalence of physical, slapstick humor in the plays. There are the quickly exchanged hats and falling trousers of *Waiting for Godot*, the ludicrous entrances and exits from trash cans in *Endgame*, the "banana-business" in *Krapp's Last Tape*, and we could expand the list considerably.

The fun often emerges from cruelty. The pathetic Lucky dances and rants at the end of a rope, but we still laugh. The witticisms and wild conceits of *All That Fall* end in the announcement that a child has been killed by the train. The reason for the strange mixture of mirth and pain seems to be that these characters and their problems are so bound up in illusion and senseless routine that they become unreal, desensitized -- incapable of creating urgent impact. How can we feel empathy for Nagg and Nell of *Endgame*, for example, despite their cruel plight, when we know so little about them, and when we see them move and talk

---

93Cohn, p. 211. 94Kenner, pp. 203-204.
so spiritlessly -- like automatic toys. Ruby Cohn analyzes this phenomenon well; after describing Beckett's humor as intellectual laughter, she continues:

Intellectual laughter, aroused by deviation from truth, may be compared to Bergsonian laughter, aroused by mechanical rigidity imposed upon the free flow of life, which is a kind of truth. Beckett's early works exhibit the twists of plot, distortions of character, and tricks of language, much as Bergson analyzed them.95

We might add that his later works intensify this trait. Beckett's feeble bums are so dehumanized, and their situations so hopeless, that our only appropriate response is despairing laughter. This, you recall, was the response Beckett sought. He wanted art to show man trapped in a numbing void. His characters thrash about in farcical patterns that convey the image and provoke the desired reaction very effectively.

Another method by which Beckett constructs his vision of the void involves his penchant for employing rituals and games. The opening scene of Endgame, for instance, is decidedly ritualistic. Dust-covers, even one on Hamm's face, are removed carefully, according to pattern. Winnie is very conscientious in her attention to the rituals -- brushing her teeth, combing her hair, praying -- that make up her whole life. Krapp's self-analysis of his strengths and weaknesses on tape is obviously an annual ritual. These and other rituals, all of which might be described as stylized and prescribed sequences of action, seem to fill up the plays, making up for the lack of conventional, "forward" movement.

95Cohn, p. 288.
A variation of this technique is evident in the prevalence of games in Beckett plays. The characters often seem to pass the heavy-hanging time by acting out strange games. Vladimir and Estragon make games out of everything from Estragon's boots to exchanges of insults. Frequently, the characters play at literature; Hamm, Henry of Embers, and Winnie of Happy Days attempt to busy themselves by spinning long, rambling, incomplete "stories." Winnie, for instance, begins this way:

There is my story of course, when all else fails. (Pause.) A life. (Smile.) A long life. (Smile off.) Beginning in the womb, where life used to begin, Mildred has memories, she will have memories, of the womb, before she dies, the mother's womb. (Pause.) She is now four or five already and has recently been given a big waxen dolly. 96

The "play" factor is so pronounced that some critics see the plays themselves, with all their separate, varied rituals, as the author's games. Kenner describes Endgame as a deadly chess match:

It is a game of steady attrition; by the time we reach the endgame the board is nearly bare, as bare as Hamm's world where there are no more bicycle wheels, sugarplums, pain killers, or coffins, let alone people... The king is hobbled by the rule which allows him to move in any direction but only one square at a time; Hamm's circuit of the stage and return to center perhaps exhibits him patrolling the inner boundaries of the little nine-square territory he commands... His knight shuttles to and fro, his pawns are pinned. 97

It is not difficult to determine the purpose of the games and rituals. As suvin says:

Beckett's savage wit -- at times Swiftian -- leads to playing existential games, emulating and parodying empirical reality and trying arbitrarily to establish some structure in the near-

96Happy Days, pp. 54-55. 97Kenner, pp. 157-158.
vacuum of his world. In other words, the games become a vehicle for Beckett's commentary on the world; their obvious futility and inutility draw attention to the void they seek to fill. In addition, they function as mocking parodies of human and natural institutions, as Lucky's speech is a parody of thought.

In keeping with the spirit of parody, Beckett deliberately stresses the illusory nature of the plays as they unfold. The reader will remember that Beckett's characters often court greater audience involvement by stepping out of their roles to remind everyone that they are actors playing parts in a theatrical performance. We can now add that the automatic rituals, the exaggerated farce, and the dumbly submissive performers reinforce the impression of self-conscious theatricality. Describing Hamm, Kenner says:

He animates everything, ordering the coming and going of Clov and the capping and uncapping of the cans. When Clov asks, 'What is there to keep me here?' he answers sharply, 'The dialogue.' . . . No one understands better than Beckett, nor exploits more boldly, the kind of fatalistic attention an audience trained on films is accustomed to place at the dramatist's disposal. . . . Hence the vast leisure in which the minimal business of Godot and Endgame is transacted; hence . . . the occasional lingering over points of technique, secure in the knowledge that the clock-bound patience of a twentieth-century audience will expect no inner urgency.

Jean-Jacques Mayoux suggests that such theatricality attracted Beckett to the drama as a medium; it offered him a make-believe, illusory reality in its very nature -- just the thing he needed to criticize the illusory quality of life. He could thus

take up the stance of Epictetus the Stoic and Shakespeare, among others, who maintain that life is a drama in which we are just impotent actors moving at the direction of someone or something else. In pursuit of this stance, "Beckett's theater turns in upon itself, seeks to coincide with itself in a pure theatrical reality."100

In my view, the advantages of this technique are mixed. On the one hand, it does permit Beckett to move his art closer to his audience, to make the plays more startlingly powerful, as we've said. In the same vein, the theatricality contains his comment on our chimerical world, as we also pointed out. However, the tricks and virtuosity that create this awareness can become too dazzling, too hypnotic in themselves (just as Shaw's rhetoric and Giraudoux's preciosity wax too obtrusive). This is why the plays sometimes appear to be self-enclosed theatre-pieces, masterful in their exploitation of technique, but rather minimally expressive of our world. Kenner hints as much when he describes the conclusion of Endgame: "Beckett transforms Hama's last soliloquy into a performance, his desolation into something prepared by the dramatic machine."101 Considered from this angle, Beckett's deliberate theatricality entrances much more effectively than it conveys visions. It seizes our attention, but does not, perhaps, always direct that attention into the intended channels.

We should conclude our examination of Beckett's structures with another rather negative factor: the emphasis on interpersonal relations. In some ways, Beckett's plays are intermittent

100Mayoux, p. 142. 101Kenner, p. 162.
but insistent struggles toward communication. Vladimir and Estragon battle throughout the play to accommodate themselves to their uneasy relationship. Krapp returns again and again to the account of his aborted attempt to unite himself sexually and spiritually to his mistress. At the climax of Happy Days, Willie tries to crawl up the mound toward Winnie, and does manage to utter her name, "Win." The movement in Beckett drama, in short, is frequently a halting progress toward the spiritual union of individuals.

To be sure, the fitful, unsuccessful attempts at communication underline the impossibility of real knowing, a theme Beckett wants art to demonstrate. Still, the persistence of the characters, the continuing motion, may be interpreted as a hopeful sign. The fact that Willie does manage to get as far as he does and say as much as he does, argues for the possibility of communication. Kenner sums up the point; Beckett apparently hints, he maintains, that one should "Bring ... persons into juxtaposition, and perhaps by some miracle the locked selves will flower."102 What we have, then, is an unintended chink in Beckett's determinedly pessimistic facade.

We can now summarize our conclusions concerning Beckett's plots: first, we saw that the sparseness of the action is indicative of Beckett's dislike of conventionally engineered plots. Second, we concluded that the closed, decaying worlds he creates for the plays point to his cosmic vision of our empty world.

102 Kenner, p. 185.
Third, the prevalence and importance of time factors in the plays were shown to mirror Beckett's preoccupation with the destructive and preservative aspects of time. Fourth, I maintained that Beckett's balanced or conflicting views about the importance of art and other matters are reflected in the structural balances of the plays. Fifth, Beckett's belief that the only proper response to mankind's vulnerable, semi-aware status is bitter laughter is translated into the rough farce of *Endgame*, *Godot*, and the rest. Sixth, we saw that when Beckett's characters attempt to fill their lives with feeble rituals and games, they are actually drawing attention to Beckett's vision of the void. Seventh, the deliberate theatricality of all Beckett's plays may constitute an arresting mimesis of our illusory world, but it also draws too much attention to his virtuosity. Eighth, we suggested that Beckett violates his views about the impossibility of human knowing by building his plays around abortive, but persistent and moving attempts to communicate.

To conclude this chapter: we see here the culmination of the trend toward interiorization that has occupied our attention as we moved from Shaw to Giraudoux to Beckett. The contrast is now quite marked; whereas Shaw uses formal, lecture-like techniques to sketch the world-environment as it is and as it could be for everyone, Beckett employs very personalized, transparently theatrical techniques to fashion the world of his own despairing metaphysics. Shaw's comedy creates public theatrical lessons; Beckett's comedy gives shape to his private, existential nightmares.
At the close of this study, we can draw three kinds of conclusions, at least tentatively. The first set has to do with what such investigations can add to the critical process involved in approaching the works of these or any other playwrights.

It's easy to see, for example, how this kind of study advances our understanding of the plays and their themes. Once we know theories and presuppositions within which an author works, the rationale for the techniques employed -- and the ideas they are supposed to embody -- becomes much clearer. When we understand, for example, that Giraudoux believed the goal of drama is to enshrine polished, carefully wrought language, we can see why logically developed action has a lower priority than witty commentary in his plays. And once we know where our attention ought to be directed, we pay closer attention to those elegant aphorisms -- to discover what the play means, whether the subject is human fate or human love.

Second, and still within our first set of conclusions, a comparative analysis of an author's dramatic goals and his dramatic practices provides another basis for establishing the quality of his work. One way of evaluating a dramatist's skill should logically be how well or how poorly he follows his own theoretical prescriptions. If we know that George Bernard Shaw thought a play should be based on antithetical clashes of ideas, it is certainly
plausible to look for such structures in *Major Barbara*, *Caesar and Cleopatra*, and *Saint Joan*; this way we can measure his talent on the scale he set up himself.

Of course, this kind of criticism can serve only as a supplement to other methods of evaluation. In assessing a play's ultimate qualitative position among the ranks of current and classic works, most critics will want to employ more independent standards. Few students of drama would admit that the uncertainties of the field demand such a complete surrender to the author's subjective notions.

The reluctance is well founded, but theatrical modes and critical standards are sufficiently various, debatable, and complex to require a more precise knowledge of what effect an author is seeking. A sound judgment must at least take into account which one of many acceptable styles or conventions he has elected as his own. Francis Fergusson describes the problem well:

The language the writer has to work with is, of course, so old, tough and complex that even the greatest masters cannot hope to control it completely. . . . And the novelist or playwright uses not only words, but common 'languages' of many other kinds: traditional symbolic systems; scientific or philosophical vocabularies; theatrical conventions. He may use the artificial limitations of genres for his special purposes; he may try for further accuracy through the subtleties of style and implicit attitude. In our time a writer like Joyce or Mann is aware of the unmanageably vast resources of literature.¹

Thus, we may decide that the playwright's artistic vision itself is his key problem; that his defects result from fidelity

to a cripplingly narrow or intimidatingly ambitious understanding of what drama could accomplish. Conversely, we might maintain that he succeeds because of his superior understanding of the possibilities and his abilities. In any case, as we attempt to understand, and before we evaluate, we should know what the author wanted to do, and how he attempted to do it.

The second set of conclusions deals with what we can deduce from this study about these three artists and the state of modern drama. We have seen, first of all, that Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett have, with some exceptions in each case, successfully adapted their techniques to suit their dramatic theories and intentions. Shaw wanted to create a drama of clashing ideas in debate fashion, and he succeeded impressively, except when he allowed his loquacity and his convictions to run away with his plays. He hoped his plays would be effective propaganda for his brands of Marxism and Creative Evolution, and they are, even if the world has not yet put his theories into practice. The strong characters and witty, surprise-dotted discussions keep us laughing -- and thinking; it is, in fact hard to find another insistent propagandist whose works have such durable appeal.

Giraudoux sought to create a theater of shimmering language that would inspire audiences to respond more sensitively to their individual worlds and to dream more expansively. Even though his characters are occasionally more sprightly and independent than befits artistic unity, and even though his gift for preciosity sometimes obscures his themes, his plays offer more
than enough fey charm and intellectual dexterity to rivet our attention to the dialogue.

Similarly, Beckett searched for the closest possible approximation in dramatic form of his vision of a blind human race trapped in an existential void. His plays -- static, enigmatic worlds in which strange characters talk gropingly in an almost tactile language -- nearly fulfill that ideal -- being flawed only by some self-conscious theatricality and overly-enduring characters who struggle a bit too determinedly to communicate.

Further, these successful integrations of theory and technique can offer insights into the development of Modern Drama. Examining the works of the three authors in chronological order, we see the same carefully distanced comic approach and many of the same techniques (slapstick or exaggerated physical comedy, irony, witty aphorisms, heightened language, and comic distortion of reality, etc.) adapted to increasingly personal visions and conceptions of drama. As we moved from Shaw to Giraudoux to Beckett, we watched the center of thematic and dramatic interest shift from social reform and witty public debate to the world of imagination and linguistic fancy, to the despairing union of dark existentialism and involuted theatrical artistry.

This shift parallels one strong trend is modern theatrical history. In many respects, avant-garde theater has, in this century moved steadily from an initial commitment to social involvement and advocacy, as evidenced in the works of Shaw and such successors as O'Casey, Odets, and Miller, to a preoccupation
with increasingly introspective, often fundamentally metaphysical or epistemological problems, as seen in Giraudoux, Beckett, Ionesco, Pinter, Albee, and many others.

The parallel becomes especially noticeable in the changing attitudes toward language: Shaw's dialogue is prominent and extremely logical; he clearly believes that language is the proper vehicle for the rational process, and that the process is crucially important. Giraudoux is equally interested in language, but he exploits its fanciful, imaginatively fertile elements, and seems less reliant on and impressed by its rationality. Beckett shows language and rationality in decay; he is fascinated by words, but in his hands they have become confusing, incomprehensible mechanisms. We see in miniature here the growth of the modern skepticism about logic and language, a philosophical doubt that shows up in everything from McLuhan's "non-books" to Pinter's plays.

In view of all this, our basic conclusion is that "high" comedy has accommodated the trend toward interiorization of drama, that comic approaches and techniques have obviously proved suitable for a broad spectrum of styles, themes, and intentions.

Along with this thematic shift, which has encompassed a considerable number of modern dramatists, there has also been something of a technical revolution, which has become more nearly universal in scope. I refer to the declining acceptance of "realistic" theater -- plays in which "real life" is copied as convincingly as possible -- and the increasing commitment to what
might be called "theatricalism," which includes reliance on obvious and elaborate symbolism, abandonment of logical transitions and background, free-wheeling treatment of time and space, emphasis on theatrically effective visual devices, and deliberate attempts to shatter the "dramatic illusion," to involve the audience actively with what transpires on the stage.

We see evidence of this trend everywhere; in Wilder's deliberate manipulations of time, characters, and audience in Our Town and The Skin of Our Teeth, in Tennessee Williams' screen and lighting tricks for The Glass Menagerie, in the heavy allegory and symbolism of Albee's American Dream and Tiny Alice, in the widespread vogue for Harold Pinter's deliberate enigmas, and in Peter Shaffer's Brechtian, ritualistic The Royal Hunt of the Sun. So strong is this thrust toward overt stylization that traditional, naturalistic plays like Gilroy's The Subject Was Rosee and Miller's The Price seem like ossified museum pieces. However modern the themes and characterizations of these plays, their discussion style -- when set against the backdrop of our gradual acclimation to Ionesco, Pinter, Brecht and the rest -- marks them as outdated and out of step.

As a matter of fact, perceptive critics are beginning to expect deliberate theatricality and a lack of logic in competent modern works. In an article on Weiss' Marat/ Sade, Susan Sontag says:

Another ready-made idea: drama consists of the revelation of character, built on the conflict of realistically credible motives. But the most interesting modern theater is a theater which goes beyond psychology. . . . The concern with insanity
in art today usually reflects the desire to go beyond psychology. By representing characters with deranged behavior or styles of speech, such dramatists as Pirandello, Genet, Beckett, and Ionesco make it unnecessary for their characters to embody in their acts or voice in their speech sequential and credible accounts of their motives. Freed from the limitations of what Artaud calls "psychological and dialogue painting of the individual," the dramatic representation is open to levels of experience which are more heroic, more rich in fantasy, more philosophical. The point applies, of course, not only to the drama. The choice of "insane" behavior as the subject of art is, by now, the virtually classic strategy of modern artists who wish to transcend traditional "realism," that is, psychology.²

Surveying Modern Drama throughout Europe and the United States, John Gassner observes:

But the antinaturalistic style has continued to challenge the conventional theatre. It has exploded in a variety of exotic movements such as futurism and surrealism. . . . As for stagecraft, efforts to introduce expressive theatricalism continued to be made with singular success long after expressionism ceased to be a force in the theatre, and it is unlikely that imaginative artists will ever allow themselves to be suppressed by considerations of caution -- or of money. The theatre of the twentieth century, facing the crossfire of political struggles and war of unprecedented magnitude and destructiveness, continued, and is likely to continue, to serve the spirit of poetry and imaginative truth.³

In examining the techniques of Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett, we have watched the trend gather force. Shaw's earlier plays, like Mrs. Warren's Profession, display the strong influence of the realistic melodrama tradition. The emphasis is on drawing-room conversation and surprise revelations. Shaw's later plays, however, are much less concerned with verisimilitude; Back to


Methuselah and The Millionaireess drift toward symbolism and fantasy, with their mysterious Eastern doctors and births from eggs. Giraudoux adopts fantasy wholeheartedly, evincing little interest in such things as credibility and logical sequences. Ondine, The Madwoman of Chaillot, etc. obviously owe much more to whimsy and the spirit of improvisation than they do to Scribe and Ibsen. The magically collapsing armor of Ondine and the procession of "pimps" into the cellar in The Madwoman of Chaillot demonstrate Giraudoux's commitment to stage spectacle and imaginative truth. As for Beckett, we saw that he abandons realism entirely, and turns instead to an array of strongly stylized devices: static, circular plot-structures, clown-style visual humor, stylized, rhythmical speech, and characters who occasionally step out of their roles, etc. In short, modern drama is moving steadily into the realm of theatricalism, of self-conscious theater. Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett exemplify the progression.

Our third set of conclusions comprises a series of questions, prompted by our considerations of Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett, about the resources and limitations of dramatic comedy when it is employed for serious educative or investigatory purposes. The reader should understand, of course, that these proposed resources and limits are simply tentative suggestions or questions that need further investigation. I do not offer them as conclusions demonstrated by this restricted study; they can perhaps best be described as putative conclusions, awaiting more research and confirmation.
With this perspective, then, students and critics might well inquire if the following are not the most obvious and important advantages of high comedy: (1) It can teach, criticize, and entertain from a variety of attitudes -- from lighthearted satire to existential gloom; (2) Its proper subject-matter embraces practically any phase of reality: society or dreams or science or metaphysics; (3) Comedy is very effective as a didactic device because it places us at a considerable distance, emotionally and intellectually, from the characters and the action, enabling us to view them whole, unencumbered by intense attachments; (4) Didactic comedy can serve as a positive advocate (as it does for Creative Evolution in *Back to Methuselah*), or a destructive weapon (Recall what Lucky's speech does to reason in *Waiting for Godot*); (5) It can operate in any kind of setting, with all kinds of characters, functioning equally well in an upper-class English drawing room (*Major Barbara*), or on a blasted planet with only two survivors (*Happy Days*); (6) Comedy seems especially adaptable for playwrights intent upon manipulating time. Melodrama and Tragedy are apparently more dependent upon continuous narratives to sustain the intense emotional reactions they seek to elicit. But comedy can switch, reverse, extend, or skip over time with relative abandon. *Ondine*, *Back to Methuselah*, and *Krapp's Last Tape* are good examples of this capacity.

On the other hand, our study raises the following questions about directions in which high comedy cannot proceed too far: is it reasonable to claim that such comedies cannot afford
to be too obviously or heavily propagandistic? If they err this way, do they not rapidly lose the purely theatrical value so essential to audience interest -- as the long-winded sections of Major Barbara testify? In short, can we say that, in comedy, theory must always be subordinated to lively characterization and theatrically viable incidents?

Second, how much can high comedy rely on fantasy and whimsy? We saw that whenever Giraudoux follows his fancy unrestrainedly, his themes suffer; the world of his imagination becomes too special, fragile, and elegant to permit the entry of merely human considerations. The whole effect is that of a sealed off reservation for precieux speculation. Now we wonder if high comedy should not always be firmly anchored in some way to our world; if comedy cannot really function effectively as satire or as lesson -- if it cannot even be really funny -- unless it takes its origin in some phase of human life, and keeps that phase in focus as a point of reference or contrast?

Third, can comedy serve adequately as a vehicle for total pessimism? We saw that Beckett's attitude was thoroughly despairing (at least as far as we could determine), but that his tragi-comedies vitiate the mood by relying on persistent characters who never really cease trying to communicate. The paradox prompts us to ask: is comedy inescapably tied to such characters, to such irrational, mute optimism? We know that comic plays can be ironic, even sadly or bitterly ironic; Amphitryon 38 and Waiting for Godot are prominent examples. And yet, even in these works, the despair
is not complete. There is no Pollyannish optimism, but neither is there surrender to death or the void. Perhaps the cause is only stubborn habit and inertia, but the people in these and other comedies always continue to exist, to move, to endure. Does this mean that Langer is right, that the stress in comedy is always on survival? The point bears much research.

We might now draw a final, tentative conclusion from these three proposed limitations. It would seem that the structure of "high" comedy must be compounded of carefully coordinated elements. There should not be an overstress on any one element, on any one attitude. Theodore W. Hatlen makes the point this way:

The audience of comedy cannot be pushed too hard in any direction. Excessive sentimentality, bitterness, depravity, exaggeration -- any conspicuous straining for effect, any flat dullness or heavy-footed plodding -- upsets the niceness of balance which is so necessary for comedy and which makes comedy the most difficult of all the forms of drama to perform.4

One final word. Perhaps the reader will not agree with our specific conclusions about Shaw, Giraudoux, and Beckett, or with the analysis of suggested strengths and limitations of comedy. But I hope that most readers will agree that the process we have pursued -- a detailed search for correlations between actual techniques and the artist's theories -- is meaningful and potentially very fruitful. If this point has been adequately demonstrated, I will rest content that the study is a success.

Shaw's Plays


Shaw's Theoretical Works. (The following list is my working bibliography, not a complete catalogue of all Shaw's works in this field.)


Secondary Sources on Shaw


Giraudoux's Plays


Includes Siegfried, Amphitryon 38, and Electra.


Includes Judith, Tiger at the Gates (La Guerre de Troie n’aura pas lieu), and Duel of Angels (Pour Lucrece).


Includes all the plays in French and some variants.

Giraudoux's Theoretical Works. (Again, this is a partial list.)


Siegfried et le Limousin. (Contre Romanesque, I.) Paris: Grasset, 1941.


Secondary Sources on Giraudoux


Beckett's Plays


*Krapp's Last Tape and Other Dramatic Pieces.* New York: Grove Press, 1958. Includes *All That Fall, Embers, Act Without Words, I,* and *Act Without Words, II.*


Beckett's Theoretical Works -- A Partial List.


"Assumption." transition, 16-17 (June, 1929), 268-271.

"Dante ... Bruno. Vico ... Joyce." transition, 16-17 (June, 1929), 242-253.


Secondary Sources on Beckett


Miscellaneous Works


SUPPLEMENTAL BIBLIOGRAPHY

Works that are helpful in consideration of these authors, but which are not actually referred to in the dissertation.

On Shaw


On Giraudoux


On Beckett


Also, the December, 1966 Issue of *Modern Drama* is devoted entirely to articles on Beckett.
The dissertation submitted by John Michael McInerney has been read and approved by members of the Department of English.

The final copies have been examined by the director of the dissertation and the signature which appears below verifies the fact that any necessary changes have been incorporated and that the dissertation is now given final approval with reference to content and form.

The dissertation is therefore accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

August 1, 1968
Date

Signature of Adviser