The Theatre of the Real
The Theatre of the Real
Yeats, Beckett, and Sondheim

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THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY PRESS • COLUMBUS
To Daniel T. O'Hara
Teacher
Mentor
Friend
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Without the wisdom and support of so many people, this book would not have been possible. First, my mom, Frances Masucci MacKenzie, who taught me “do re mi” along with the alphabet and instilled in me her love for musical theatre. Without her, I wouldn’t be the woman I am. Anna Marie Pulaski let an awkward thirteen-year-old me on her stage at St. Hubert; thirteen years later, she trusted me to direct that theatre program. The young women and men of St. Hubert's drama program prove to me every day that theatre lives, so I thank them and our school. Vanessa and Alana Turchi remind me of the fearlessness that theatre requires.

I am forever indebted to my teachers at Temple University: Sheldon Brivic, Rachel Blau-DuPlessis, Gabrielle Bernard-Jackson, Joan Mellon, Miles Orvell, and especially Alan Singer, who guided me through graduate school. Professor Robert Storey shared with me his passion for theatre, challenged me to question my penchant for psychoanalysis, and became my good friend. Daniel T. O’Hara’s willingness to share with me his knowledge, time, and energy was and still is a constant inspiration. Donald E. Pease of Dartmouth College and Eric Savoy of the University of Montreal are wonderful mentors; our conversations and their insights were invaluable. It was a pleasure to work with Malcolm Litchfield, Maggie Diehl, and the other staff members of The Ohio State University Press, who made the process of a first book virtually stress-free. Thank you to my colleagues at CCP, who have shown me that theatre is always magical and certainly a place for madmen only, and our administration who eased the process of writing while teaching a 4/4 load.

Finally, for Richard, who kissed me backstage when we were seventeen, and is still backstage for every performance. I love you.
“Look at all the things you’ve done for me. / Let me give to you / something in return / I would be so pleased” (“Move On,” *Sunday in the Park with George*).
What Is the Theater of the Real?

A shriek from the stage pierces the consciousness of a quiet Broadway audience. It is visceral, tangible almost, and absolutely terrifying, yet it is also an echo. This scream belongs to Giorgio and is uttered near the end of Sondheim’s *Passion*, his brilliant exploration of the Real experience of love. The play, Sondheim’s most recent work for the Broadway stage, is the perfect example of the theatre of the Real. Theatre of the Real, the concept to which this book is devoted to developing, is a new way of examining works of Modern drama whose presentations exemplify the Lacanian concept of the Real, or the psychic position of complete break with both one’s ties to Symbolic convention, and Imaginary phantasy. The experience is simultaneously liberating and crippling, and can only be achieved under very unique circumstances, as *Passion* demonstrates.

The plot of the play, recounted in mostly epistolary fashion,1 begins as Giorgio, a dashing soldier, is transferred away from his beautiful mistress, Clara. At his new post, he meets Fosca, the colonel’s hideous and hysterical cousin. She falls in love with him, and after some resistance, he grows to feel passionately about her. Their affair is inexplicable in conventional

1. The epistolary structure is obvious in the play’s staging, but credit for this terminology must be given to Raymond Knapp in *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity*. 
terms. He is almost a caricature, a soldier/lover equally skilled in war and romance, a symbol of society’s ultimate man, both hard and sensitive. She is nightmarish, sallow, and moribund, breaking all expectations of usual feminine beauty. Her demeanor is eerie and certainly antisocial. Their relationship is conventionally inexplicable. After their love affair is consummated, she dies, ostensibly of the physical exertion of their love making; he is forced to fight a duel with the colonel for her honor. During the duel, Giorgio suffers a breakdown, embodied by the scream.

This is not, however, the first time Passion’s audience has heard that scream. It is the same one that Fosca sounds early in the play, while reading alone in her room on the first night of Giorgio’s new assignment. That scream acts as Giorgio’s introduction to the concept of Fosca, but at that point, he does not actually meet her. The scream is an evocation of the vocative drive, which gives expression to the process of abjection, or expulsion of Symbolic convention that must occur before these two characters can create a partnership in the Real and help Sondheim’s work exemplify the theatre of the Real, as defined by this text.

Giorgio makes love to Fosca, but not until he screams, experiencing a pain and longing similar to what she has known, is their partnership Real. This instance in Sondheim’s work perfectly parallels Lacanian theory. Fosca screams first to rid herself of the pain of the Symbolic order, or society’s refuse that has been dumped on her as a woman, because she is a woman and thus already on the fringe of society’s rules. At the beginning of the play, Giorgio is so fully enmeshed in society’s rules that he must undergo a longer journey to the Real, and he can do so only with Fosca’s help. Her scream, however, can never be his, and thus, they must experience similar conditions but must reach those points isolated from each other. Their partnership can only exist in the Real and must not be condoned or accepted by the Symbolic.

The scream is much more than a blood-curdling awakening for the audience. It is the mark of the theatre of the Real. The scream is a sinthome, or the material embodiment of a relationship which has had the experience of jouissance. Very few couples in Modern theatre experience such a relationship, but Giorgio and Fosca do, making Sondheim’s most recent Broadway venture the most Real example of Western theatre to date.

This scream is not independent of theatre tradition. It can be linked in spirit to Yeats’s dancer figures, such as the Woman of the Well in At the Hawk’s Well, who screams to announce the coming of the warrior women of the Sidhe. The Woman of the Well does not achieve her own Real because she does not scream for herself, but for an Other. Beckett’s tragic-comedic
couples are so mired in their abject wastelands that they cannot scream. Instead, they mutter endless repetitions of words that keep their drives enabled but do not allow them the sheer freedom of the cry.

Sondheim’s *Passion* also links more broadly to several schools of Modern theatrical practice, needed to achieve theatre of the Real. The play contains elements of Expressionism, which links to the Real’s explosivity, as it heightens and highlights the slightest human emotion, making the play almost painful for the audience to endure. Symbolist experimentation, which helps a play achieve its presentations of the unconscious mind, is used, especially in Fosca’s character, and helps to create a surreal atmosphere and tone.

Distinctive displays of pastoral convention are also characteristic of theatre of the Real, and they are certainly present in *Passion*. The main settings of the play—the barracks and the ruined castle—are degenerated symbols of masculinity. The barracks should be a place of über-manhood, but no actions of war reach this post. Its potential is wasted. The ruined castle, where Giorgio and Fosca first kindle their relationship, is a crumbling mess of what used to symbolize power and strength. Both places fail to fulfill their expectations of phallic power, allowing Fosca, who already fails feminine expectations, to enter. The failure of the pastoral spaces opens the possibility for these characters to create their own space, in which something new can occur. The new space they create is the physical merging of their bodies during their love making; that new space can be built exclusively upon a foundation of ruins. Such construction is also characteristic of theatre of the Real.

Sondheim’s rare work of art exemplifies each of the theories that are important to theatre of the Real: convergence with the tenets of Lacanian psychoanalysis, employment of Modern theatrical experimentation, and deployment of pastoral convention. Although few works are so fully Real as *Passion*, much of the work of Yeats, Beckett, and Sondheim explores the founding concepts of theatre of the Real.

**OPENING THE CURTAIN**

*Types of Modern Theatre*

A play is a living entity that exists on the pastoral stage of the theatre, which it creates and refashions as each performance develops. Drama begins with a text, or written word, that on the surface functions parallel
to other literary prose, but theatre does not end with its text. As Antonin Artaud claims, the language of the theatrical text is always exceeded by the language of the mise-en-scène (Quigley 23). Artaud uses different terms of language to point out the difference between the static literary text and the living theatrical one. He writes, “Dialogue—a thing written and spoken—does not belong specifically to the stage, it belongs to books . . . concrete language, intended for the senses and independent of speech, had first to satisfy the senses . . . the concrete physical language to which I refer is truly theatrical only to the degree that the thoughts it expresses are beyond the reach of the spoken language” (Artaud 37).

At the beginning of a performance, the audience feels that the characters of the play are using the same language, and living on the same terms that the audience lives. Very quickly, the audience realizes that the terms of art are totally different from the terms of life. This puts the audience in the position of the child, ready to engage in an Oedipal struggle with the parent performance. Instead of this Oedipal struggle ending in the audience’s assimilation into the world of the drama, the audience can extend the performative dimension of the play according to the dictates of the Real, a Lacanian concept that will be explained shortly. The transgressive power of Modern theatre poses a threat to the Oedipal order. Fear of disrupting the socially acceptable nature and function of theatre and a too-strict focus on mimesis help to explain the lack of attention in theatre theory to its transgressive nature.

Modernism’s commitment to experimentation with form did lead to a number of variations on the theme of traditional theatre. A variety of theatre styles, including Realism, Symbolism, Naturalism, Expressionism, Theatre of Cruelty, Epic Theatre, and Poor Theatre, were developed and enjoyed differing levels of artistic and commercial success. To understand the uniqueness of the theatre practitioners discussed in this book, it is important to understand how these major Modern theatre movements both accepted and rejected conventional concepts of the well-made play and relate to Lacan’s Real.

The well-made play, codified most notably by Edmund Scribe, is now an artifact of nineteenth-century melodrama. It is based on Aristotle’s demand for perepetia. The well-made play consists of five parts: introduction, rising action, climax, falling action, and conclusion. The climax comes very near the end of the play and allows for a neat ending, in which all component parts are drawn together and solved. The plot is based on a cause-and-effect structure and is philosophically linked to Nietzsche’s definition of
Apollonian theatre, which, he says, is governed by order and reserve. The well-made play was the major, and most popular, form of theatre in the Victorian era, but as theatre began to embrace Modernism, it sought many forms of reaction against this unnatural and often unintentionally comedic form. In Lacanian terminology, the well-made play is the quintessential version of the Symbolic, because it adheres to strict guidelines and upholds society’s norms. Such strictness and conservativism of form was bound to be overthrown by the experimental nature of Modernist artists. Although each Modern theatre school advances the progress away from the Symbolic nature of the well-made play, none adequately articulates a theatre of the Real, even as each form tries to achieve it.

Realism is the first, and most easily accessible, Modern reaction against the well-made play. Popularized by playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov, Realism aims at verisimilitude of daily life. There is an emphasis on domestic situations, staged with accuracy of set, lighting, and costume detail. Realism wants to replicate daily life; it is based on Aristotle’s concept of mimesis. Mimesis, though, takes into account the contingency and ambiguity of real life that the well-made play eschews. There do not have to be happy endings or satisfying conclusions in Realistic theatre. For example, neither Nora nor Torvald is happy at the end of *A Doll’s House*. Nora leaves her husband and children to begin her new life, but she does so knowing the life she faces will be much more difficult, and potentially less fulfilling, than her current situation. In a well-made play, Nora would have either stayed with her family and her forgiving husband or would have forged her new life, confident that it would be better than her old one. Realistic theatre places characters in outcomes which deviate from the expectations of conventional society, but the simulacrum of real life still links the characters to the Symbolic.

Naturalism is an extreme form of Realism that seeks to recount the minutiae of daily life with hyperaccuracy. In Naturalism, there is intense attention to design and detail. The language and situations are intentionally unpoeitic and can evoke from the audience a sincere dislike for the leading players. Such is the case in August Strindberg’s *Miss Julie*. It is very difficult for the audience to have sympathy for either Jean, the social-climbing, viral butler, or Julie, the pathetic, malcontented mistress of the estate on which Jean works. Just as in Realism, the causal nature of human action is questioned. The title character of *Miss Julie* commits suicide at the end, not of her own volition, but because her lower-class lover commands her to do so. Her decision-making skills, so necessary for causal relationships, are
lacking. Common to Symbolist theatre is a controlling, patriarchal figure or force reminiscent of the law-giving Big Other of the Symbolic order, thus limiting the genre’s potential for truly radical invention.

Progressing from the same impulse as Naturalism is Expressionism, which distorts reality for evocative response from the audience. Expressionist theatre seeks immediacy of response through the warping or heightening of a situation presented on stage. O’Neill’s theatre provides excellent examples of Expressionism. The inexplicable decisions made by Abbie and Eben at the end of *Desire under the Elms* exemplify Expressionism. Abbie’s thoughtless murder of her baby and Eben’s willingness to claim himself as an accomplice, followed by their disturbing proclamation of passion for each other as they are led to jail, typifies Expressionism. The form explodes the melodrama of the well-made play to stage something akin to the chaotic passion of Nietzsche’s Dionysian theatre. Expressionism is limited in approach only to the Lacanian Real, when the hyperemotional content is misunderstood by director or audience as farce.

Theatre of Cruelty advocates a violent shattering of the false attempts at reality made first by the well-made play and then by Realism itself. Theatre of Cruelty mounts an assault on audience expectations. It relies heavily on spectacle, an element of little importance to Aristotle or Scribe, to connect with the primal impulses of artistic presentation. Artaud seeks naked honesty through the purging of conventional Realistic tendencies, in favor of primitive expressions of raw emotion and physicality. It is only the carnivalesque potential of the Theatre of Cruelty that risks engaging the Imaginary instead of the Real register.

Jerzy Grotowski’s Poor Theatre reverses Theatre of Cruelty. It returns to Aristotle’s notion that spectacle is the least important theatrical quality. Poor Theatre removes spectacle, so that the presentation focuses on the relationship between audience and actor. While the well-made play makes the audience the ultimate voyeur peeking through the fourth wall, Poor Theatre, following Theatre of Cruelty, tears down the fourth wall completely, so that actor and audience have total interaction. It is only because such collaboration is often unexpected and feared that Poor Theatre is not Real.

Bertolt Brecht’s Epic Theatre also seeks a new form of interaction between actor and audience. By using the alienation effect, made possible through gestic acting, Brecht wants to eliminate all of the emotional components of theatre. Instead, Brecht wants theatre to incite intellectual evaluation, resulting in individual changes for the audience members. Reliance on logic, an agent of the Symbolic order, severely limits the Real possibilities of
Epic Theatre, even as it is monumentally different from the well-made play.

It is very difficult to relate Symbolist theatre to any other Modern theatre experiment. Underlying the movement is the notion that absolute truth can transcend reality and can be accessed through a dreamlike state. The staging of Symbolist theatre frequently involved spectacular visual effects, using gas lights and scrims. The actors were frequently instructed to change their speech patterns, slowing down the monologues to sound as if they were somnambulists. This very disconcerting theatrical style did not survive for long, but it was used by a variety of authors, from Stringberg, in *Dream Play*, to W. B. Yeats in his dancer plays. The technique survives in modified versions such as the dream sequences of *Death of a Salesman* or the psychological pacing of O’Neill’s *Strange Interlude*. As it approaches the interior workings of the psyche, it offers great Real potential, to be demonstrated in the next chapter.

Compared to pure Symbolist theatre, Theater of the Absurd seems tame. The movement includes many of contemporary theatre’s greatest writers: Beckett, Pirandello, Ionesco, Albee, Pinter, and even Stoppard. Theater of the Absurd modifies the dreamlike presentations of Symbolist theatre to present scenes or characters whose logic is similar to that of a dream or nightmare. The movement advocates the fluidity and contingency of life. Like Realism, it eschews logical causality, but its tone is radically different from Realism. Theatre of the Absurd is most often comedic in tone, using a variety of comedic strategies from slapstick to farce. It forces the audience to question its place in the world, and whether or not that place, or even that question, is relevant to contemporary life. Through ironic and irrational questioning of the Symbolic, Theatre of the Absurd is also a gateway to the Real, as illustrated in chapter 3.

### REHEARSING THE POETICS

*Theories of Modern Theatre*

Each of Modern theatre’s experiments constitutes a revolt. Revolt, although looking to overthrow a particular political or cultural movement, does not intend to disrupt the notion of society as the primary organization of human existence. Some excellent work has been done exploring the relationship between revolt and modern drama. Robert Brustein’s classic *The Theatre of Revolt* explores three different types of Modern theatrical revolt:
Messianic revolt occurs when the dramatist rebels against God and tries to take His place—the priest examines his image in the mirror. Social revolt occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conventions, morals, and values of the social organism—the priest turns the mirror on the audience. Existential revolt occurs when the dramatist rebels against the conditions of his existence—the priest turns the mirror on the void. (16)

Despite the use of psychoanalytic language in the defining terms, Brustein points out that each of these revolts takes place within the play’s content, not necessarily in the relationship between the playwright and his text. A play’s protagonist enters into a battle with conventional notions of religion, culture, or self. Brustein finds examples of his theory by tweaking traditional interpretations of modern classics and does not regard a play’s experimental style as a prerequisite for a certain type of revolt. Instead of viewing Strindberg as simply a Naturalist, interested in exposing society’s underbelly, Brustein categorizes Strindberg as a messianic revolutionary. Although Brustein does not offer an in-depth analysis of Miss Julie in these terms, it seems feasible to name both Julie and Jean as would-be god figures warring on an eroding Mount Olympus. They revolt against a conventional god to take his place, but that revolt leads only to misery for both. As Brustein does point out, “... even in Miss Julie, where the male triumphs, Jean becomes a sniveling coward at the end, shivering at the sound of the Count’s bell” (103).

It would be easy to classify Bertolt Brecht as a social revolutionary whose work draws extensively on Marxist theory, but Brustein sees beyond that surface. By linking Brecht, via the German Neo-Romantic movement to Buchner, Brustein is able to posit Brecht as a metaphysical writer with existential leanings (236). Brustein writes, “And his [Brecht’s] concentration on the more insuperable human limitations, the source of his quarrel with existence, leads him to attack not only the God of the Christians, but the God of the Romantics as well” (241). The conflict between the desire for transcendence and the backward pull of convention makes Brecht a writer who uses the social realm to rage against an inherently problematic existence.

Brustein’s actual assessment of social revolt is fairly standard. He cites authors such as Ibsen and Odets. Ibsen’s social Realism is well known, as are Ibsen’s own statements of wanting to use his drama to advocate for human rights. Odets uses non-Realistic, episodic structures, combined with exploitation of crowd dynamics, to achieve his social revolt. There are, however, other great modern writers about whom Brustein does not write.
Female writers, especially Elizabeth Robbins, Ibsen’s great British champion, and Hella Wuolijoki of Finland, respectively wrote *Votes for Women* and *Hulda Juurakko*, both plays about women in the political sphere. *Votes for Women* extols the women’s suffrage movement in Great Britain. *Hulda Juurakko* explores the ability of a woman to run for public office. The subject matter of these works, combined with their female authorship, makes them terrific examples of Brustein’s social revolt. Not only do they challenge the norms in their textual confines, but also their authors enact a revolt against the male-dominated world of authorship. Although most social revolutionary drama is based in Realistic theatrical performance, it is also possible for Realism to merge with other modes, such as Symbolism in Arthur Miller’s *Death of a Salesman*, to achieve a potent call for social awareness.

Brustein is careful to remind his readers, “Still the theatre of revolt is only partially subjective; the rebel dramatist continues to observe the requirements of his form” (13). Although Brustein recognizes the Modern theatrical revolt, he does not assess modern theatre’s transgressive tendencies. For him, revolt is only the beginning of the power of modern theatre. This opens up a void, to use Brustein’s and Lacan’s term, which we can plumb to explore Modern theatre’s drive.

Benjamin Bennett’s recent *All Theater Is Revolutionary Theater* pushes Brustein’s ideas to their logical conclusions and argues that theatre, as a representation of genre, always purposefully fails, and thus it ironically accomplishes a more complete revolt than society could ever produce. According to Bennett, genre is an attempt to place a limit on a form; such a limit would turn a form into a mere representation. For Bennett, a representation is an attempt to practice the predetermined rules and expectations of a genre. Genuine form, for Bennett, is an ironic term that gives structure to freedom and escapes from the expectation of any aesthetic categorization.

For Bennett, because drama is the merger of two genres, theater and literature, it is already uncategorizable, and having achieved a status beyond conventional confines in its conception, it is already revolutionary and has the ability to embody revolt. Bennett argues that even Aristotle did not intend theatre to be an imitation of manner, or genre, but only to be an imitation of medium, something akin to style. Bennett claims, “The whole category of ‘manner of imitation is invented for the sole purpose of defining or separating dramatic form’” (15). If this statement is true, then form should not be imitated; it is related to genre, or an attempt to categorize the uncategorizable. Such an attempt would always fail because theatrical form must
arise from the play’s content, not from some conventional notion of what the play should look like. Although Brustein’s and Bennett’s works begin a dialogue about the nature of Modern theatre, they do not provide definite explanations of Modern theatre’s radical nature. This is because they, like nearly all dramatic theory, continue to separate the textual aspects of a play from its performative function.

Bertolt Brecht’s theatre is another example of performance conception and practice that demands radical separation. Brecht’s Epic Theatre calls for a dissolution of all former dramatic forms and acting styles. He longs to replace old cathartic desires with the impetus to action that defines his concept of Epic Theatre. Very early in his career, Brecht states about this theatre practice, “I don’t let my feelings intrude in my dramatic work. I’d give a false view of the world. I aim at an extremely classical, cold, highly intellectual style of performance. I’m not writing for the scum who want to have their hearts warmed” (Willet 14). For Brecht, emotion is a façade that society uses to keep itself in check. Brecht wants his actors to alienate themselves from the audience; he wants barriers erected that make the audience all too aware of the pretense of typical theatre. To achieve such awareness, Brecht, in “The Modern Theatre Is the Epic Theatre,” calls for “separation of the elements” (Willett 37), which means that his theatre will call attention to the vast disconnects between music, lyric, plot, and spectacle, pulling away from Wagner’s notion of the “integrated work of art.” When “words, music and setting [must] become independent” (Willett 38), then the play exposes its suture marks. It is at the suture marks, or the weak links that hold society in harmony, that Epic Theatre can begin to break down the idea of the society, or the individual audience members, as a harmonious unity. Instead, the radical disconnects of art forms and artists are highlighted. Awareness of pretense, combined with the nearly didactic political content of his plays, is designed to spur the audience into action.

Brecht’s theatrical goal is to produce a play that encourages its audience to go out and change society, because “radical transformation of the theatre can’t be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation of the mentality of our time” (Willett 23). Brecht does not simply want his audience to act within conventional society and political structures; he wants his audiences to change, from within, the very nature of the world in which they live. Such complete upheaval is not simple revolution, but a total disavowal of all that is familiar, to enact a structure whose motto is not to feel, but to act. No longer are audience
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members simply reacting, or procreating, but, in being spurred to action, they are forced to create something new.

Epic Theatre creates distance between the audience and the actor through its dramaturgical advances. Instead of employing a Stansislovskian approach of emotional reality, the Brechtian actor makes himself as unlikable and unreachable as possible. As Brecht explains in “The Question of Criteria for Judging Acting,” the performance should affect the audience by “concentrating on the principal nodal points of the action and cutting it so as to bring out the gesels in a very abbreviated way” (Willett 55). No audience can feel pity for characters whose positions they believe they could never assume. Instead, the audience moves away from the characters, anxiously aware of them. Instead of emotive reactions, the Brechtian audience is spurred into physical action.

Although “All Theater Is Epic Theatre” outlines a Modern, Marxist revisioning of theatre presentation, it does not exhaust the limits of experimentation, as it sacrifices the emotive and psychic realms of theatre in favor of a nearly myopic focus on the drama’s intellectual components. It seems Brecht wants to cure the Modern mood through intellectualized action, in a way that modifies Artaud’s nearly Futurist Theatre of Cruelty.

Other classic theatre texts, such as Peter Brook’s *The Empty Space*, explore the need for radical performance but do not take the text, content, or message of the play into account. In this seminal work, Brook envisions the theatre as being a null plane on which the action of theatre can occur. To put this vision into psychoanalytic terms, the theatre, both stage and house combined, is the site of the original lack. The performance can enact its Symbolic repertoire, while simultaneously exposing the failure of the Symbolic, so that the lack can be regained. Brook identifies four types of theatre that are active in the Modern and contemporary theatre scenes. “Deadly Theatre” is frequently linked to commercial theatre and occurs when all passion and pleasure are gone from performance. It is a theatre obsessed with the slick, or simplistic, replication of meaning. Deadly Theatre fails because it relies too much on the text without the variation and creative modifications of a good director. Theatre frequently becomes deadly when practiced by those afraid to take risks. It is common in community theatres and high school productions, during which blocking and stage direction is taken verbatim from the script.

“Holy Theatre” is the positive link between performance and ritual which focuses on illumination of the invisible, or the coming to light of the lack itself. In historical terms, it is related to the mystery plays of the
Middle Ages. Such ritualistic performance can also be heard in contemporary conceptions, such as *Stomp*, whose theme and variation of pounding rhythms highlights percussive potential, while constantly reminding the audience of the variety of omitted instruments.

“Rough Theatre” is the noisy, dirty, obscene theatre that “saves the day” because it allows for disclosure in its willingness to display abject materials. This theatre is one that abandons convention and expectation. Street performance and fringe festivals, popular across the United States, are means for emerging or nontraditional artists to showcase their works. In fringe festivals, atypical theatre spaces are used for theatrical endeavors with a total run of one or two performances each. Another, more readily accessible example of Rough Theatre is *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Despite its commercial success, combined with merchandising opportunities and cult status, *Rocky Horror* is Rough Theatre because it is the quintessential obscene performance piece. The play focuses on debauchery and raw sexuality combined with the “conversion” of two virgins from their asexual lives to a night of limitless passion and exploration. While the play’s moralistic underpinnings, found in the Frankenstein’s monster plot, threaten to temper its obscenity, Richard O’Brien’s willingness to explore power and sexuality through unappealing and frightful characters makes the play a great example of the depiction of the abject required for Rough Theatre.

Finally, Brook settles on “Immediate Theatre,” which emphasizes the fantastic inability for theatre to replicate itself. For Brook, the value of Immediate Theatre is its ability to impart to the audience a kernel or trace of impact. As we will learn, immediacy may not always be enough to make theatre Real. Yeats’s drawing-room theatre, with its spontaneous choreography, is immediate, but it does not allow total access to the Real.

Although each of these divisions or types is extremely useful for analyzing performance, there is little mention of specific texts that lend themselves, either positively or negatively, to each category. Brook is able to give dramatic theory a necessary emphasis on the primacy of performance, but he sacrifices attention to the drama itself. An even more effective theory of modern theatre must incorporate both the traditional aspects of dramatic criticism and a new outlook on the significance of the play enacted.

Scott McMillan’s delightful last work, *The Musical as Drama*, achieves, at least of the dramatic subset of the musical, a theory that incorporates both the traditional and the nontraditional, which he terms “the legitimate” (drama) and “the illegitimate” (musical theatre) (79). Naming musical theatre as illegitimate marks it as perverse, which we will soon see is a quality beneficial for achieving the experience of the Real. McMillan uses the term
“difference” to explain the merger of structure and content in musical theatre that makes it unique from other theatrical works: “Difference can be felt between the book and the numbers, between the songs and dances, between the dance and spoken dialogue—and these are the elements that integration is supposed to have unified” (2). The integration that McMillan references is the common term in musical theatre applied to shows whose musical numbers arise from the plot and do not stop the progression of action in the play. Integrated musicals are supposedly higher forms of musical theatre than revues, which have little plot, or operetta, which relies on arias as psychological commentary and show of virtuosity. McMillan rightly argues that integration is not a primary asset in musical theatre, as the best musicals are cognizant of their differences and use those rifts to their advantages.

To explain how difference operates, McMillan names “Two Orders of Time” (6). He writes, “The musical’s complexity comes in part from the tension between two orders of time, one for the book and one for the numbers. The book represents the plot or action . . . This is progressive time” (McMillan 6). Drama operates with this basic principle, even when it employs episodic or surreal time lines. It does not have the second order, which McMillan calls lyric time. The musical alone has lyric time, as “the song inserts a lyrical moment into the cause-and-effect progress of the plot, a moment that suspends the book time in favor of lyric time, time organized not by cause and effect (which is how book time works), but by principles of repetition (which is how numbers work)” (McMillan 9). Lyrical time, especially as it relates to repetition, does not have to be limited to musical theatre but can be applied to any play that strives to break away from causality. That break can lead a play out of the realm of desire and into the circulation of the drive. McMillan’s work stays mostly within the confines of close reading and musicology but does not attempt to use literary theory, which I believe is necessary to create a fuller understanding of the art and its power to affect its audiences.

Dramatic theory also lacks a significant understanding of Modern drama’s transgressive nature because the field is frequently too focused on theatre as representation or imitation. Despite Bennett’s claims about Aristotle and imitation, a vast majority of critics write drama theory that, beginning with Aristotle’s “On Poetics,” is focused on dramatic performance as a representation of some aspect of human existence. Although drama practice and theory certainly do not limit themselves to realistic representations, they do center on the concept that what is presented on stage is mimicry. We read this again in Michael Goldman’s *The Actor’s Freedom*, in which
the author’s theory of drama’s power relies on the ability of the actor to achieve psychological imitation of humanity. Most of the time, the mimicry involved is that of the playwright’s text enlivened by the actors, with the goal of presenting an imitative truth about a social, psychic, or existential reality. Even when mimesis is re-envisioned with a focus on evolutionary biology, as in Robert Storey’s *Mimesis and the Human Animal*, the textual bent is still moving toward a theory of theatre as representation. Storey’s explanation of mimesis can, however, act as a useful bridge between Aristotelian theatre and theatre of the Real.

Mimesis, for Storey, is the voice of the species, making imitation a communal effort. The literature produced by mimetic activity does not provide solutions or didactic instruction, but offers possibilities. Mimesis is an attempt to replicate the process, not product, of mental activity, a theory that Storey claims is rooted in Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty.

Antonin Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty is a spectacular example of a theatrical endeavor that tries to overcome the Aristotelian drive for mimetic theatre. In *The Theater and Its Double*, Artaud explains that the “double” to which he refers is an uncanny, or spectral, image of life itself, not an imitation of life:

> Perhaps it is already understood that the genre of theater to which I refer had nothing to do with the kind of realistic, social theater which changes with each historical period and in which the ideas that animated the theater at its origin can no longer be discerned except as caricatures of gestures, unrecognizable because their intention has changed so greatly. Like words themselves, archetypal, primitive theatre have in time ceased to generate an image, and instead of being a means of expression are only an impasse, a mausoleum of the mind. (Artaud 50)

In the Theatre of Cruelty, the audience is directly implicated in, and involved with, the production. There should be a direct assault on the audience, creating an uncomfortable experience for the audience that nonetheless makes the audience participate in the artistic creation. Not all Modern theatre needs to implement Artaud’s puppetry and circuslike spectacle to achieve a similar aesthetic inclusively aimed at making the audience participate in the production.

Theatre of Cruelty is designed so that the audience’s participation acts like a doppelganger, or example of the uncanny, for the audience itself. The audience, even in the midst of acting outside of its norms, retains some
aspect of its “normal” judgment and uses that judgment to indict the participating self. Engagement of the audience in Modern theatre adds a new level to theatre’s mimetic expression by allowing each audience member to replicate herself. This confrontation with the self is not, however, a pleasant experience, but one that dislodges the audience member from the security of her seat. In his new book, *Theatricality as Medium*, Samuel Weber recalls Artaud’s ideal audience as one “whose blood will have been traversed by violent scenes” (279). “Such a spectator,” Weber comments, “will have been transformed by what he witnessed” (279). This is the key to the development of theatre of the Real; theatre, with Artaud, makes the audience actualize the traumatic effect of the scenes it witnesses as pathways through the self. The ability of the theatre to cut through one’s self-image is a new form of mimesis, in which the audience confronts its own dark side. It is important to note that what the audience sees in Theatre of Cruelty is imitation of the otherwise obscured or unknown self, since Artaud did not consider himself anti-Aristotelian (Weber 279).

One of the few contemporary theatre theoreticians who tries to envision a new way to assemble theatre out of its limits is Austin Quigley. In his book, *The Modern Stage and Other Worlds*, Quigley uses the term “world” to designate a location or space that is delineated for a certain activity. The two worlds most obvious, in theatre, are the stage and the house. Quigley finds that the exclusion of each world from the other compromises theatre’s potential. To uphold separation is to maintain the homogeneity of each world, which limits growth and change. Instead, Quigley advocates Zola’s idea for the “remaking of the stage until it is continuous with the auditorium” (5). Artaud’s desire for “outbursts over the entire mass of spectators” (Quigley 5) also implies that the audience should be showered with the *merde* of the play itself. Both Artaud and Zola inspire Quigley to want to find a method for theatre in which the worlds of stage and audience can maintain their own special characteristics while meeting and breaking down the barriers that inhibit contact between those two worlds. Quigley claims that in the Modern theatre, the “world motif changes from a measure of largeness to one of limits” (9). This statement is incomplete. Although Modern theatre does attend to limits, it does not do so to maintain them, but to expose and examine borders so as to highlight those locations as meeting grounds, to establish a new vision of community composed of intensely heterogeneous individuals. Again though, radical assertions of self will meet the antagonism of mimetic tradition, if the concept of mimesis is not reworked.
Robert Storey's discussion of comedy in *Mimesis and the Human Animal* helps to redefine mimesis through the concept of the uncanny. Although Storey consistently argues against psychoanalytic theory as a useful method of interpretation, it is still possible to use his theories with psychoanalytic principles. Both Storey and psychoanalysis agree that comedy is antilogical. It moves beyond the realm of the expected to elicit laughter, a physiological response that can carry with it an element of discomfort. According to Freud in “Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious,” the discomfort arises because the joke and its subsequent laughter have exposed repressed material. In Storey’s cognitive theory, laughter disrupts normal social behavior. He points out that according to primatologists, the smile “is doubtless, the ‘bare-teethed display,’ . . . and is a reaction to ‘some threat or strong aversive stimulation’” (Storey 159). Both theories point to the conclusion that comedy hides something a little sinister behind its immediate jocularity.

Such a menacing character can be found in Storey’s description of the rogue figure: “The rogue is, in the terminology of the evolutionist, a ‘cheat’ at the banquet of life” (171). The rogue is appealing because he “holds out a certain attraction to the spectator, as one who can turn the social scene to his or her wanton advantage. Having silenced that voice that tells us how far we can go without incurring intolerable risks . . . the rogue slips by both shame and guilt to savor the fruits of audacity” (Storey 171). While the audience laughs with the rogue figure, it also smirks with moral superiority. When the rogue falls to disadvantage, the typical audience longs to retain moral superiority as a security blanket.

The duality of laughing with and at the rogue figure allows the audience to make into the uncanny what it does not want to admit is a part of the self. Each audience member has a bit of the rogue figure in her but does not want to acknowledge it, so the audience member projects the simultaneous feelings of shame and awe onto the rogue figure on the stage, who becomes a specular image of the self. We laugh at the rogue figure so that we can maintain our place in society and not jar ourselves out of conventional life. This is expected and seemingly “normal,” but the more appropriate response in theatre of the Real is the former one of laughing with the rogue. The greater the rogue’s ability to manipulate convention to her advantage, the greater the rogue’s possibility of attaining her desires. The rogue acts as a figure on the brink of the Lacanian Real because she is able to ignore social norms. The audience uses the rogue as a projected figure of the uncanny who reveals underlying possibilities. Laughter with the rogue figure is a minor attempt by the audience to identify with her
success. Laughter at the rogue figure becomes a concession prize, or a way to placate ourselves with moral superiority when the rogue’s attempts fail, and we must return to convention.

❯ SETTING THE SCENE

Pastoral Conventions

Regardless of genre or mode, convention is one of the driving forces behind the assembly and maintenance of literary categorization. Conventions are especially important to the long and complex history of the pastoral mode, which, as we will learn, is a key component in the theater of the Real. The conventionality of the pastoral genre provides the Symbolic backdrop against which the writers and characters working within it can rebel. Such rebellion involves the abjecting or elimination of expected purity and cleanliness to reveal the darker, more Real aspects of the natural world.

We often consider the pastoral tradition beginning with Theocritus’ *Idylls*, written in Greece in the third century B.C.E. The term *pastoral* itself derives from the Greek “pastor,” meaning shepherd. The concept of the shepherd is connotatively necessary to introduce the figures of the master and his wayward flock. Seemingly, the shepherd is able to control his animals, keep them safe, and lead them to pasture. He is the master of the Symbolic landscape. Frequently, though, we see shepherds, or those in positions of control in the pastoral world, who are far more lax in their duties than they should be. By relaxing the position of authority, pastoral writing opens up the reader to the possibility of the failure of the leader and shows the potential for those who are part of the flock to wander into the brush. The inherent conflict of the pastoral derives from the friction between the façade of peace and tranquility offered by the natural world and the outside forces that threaten to destroy its innocence and generative capabilities. Such is the biblical story of Adam and Eve, often offered as the quintessential pastoral myth. This myth is also useful to expose the inherent flaw in pastoral definitions. The pastoral, especially as conceived in the Renaissance, uses a sanitized, orderly depiction of the natural world to explain and glorify the decorous manners of the court. Ben Jonson’s masques provide terrific examples of such pastoral façades merging with the beginnings of musical theatre. Later, we will see how Sondheim’s innovations rethink the pastoral for Broadway.
During the Renaissance, one of the only escapes from pastoral decorum was found in satiric eclogues that were used to expose the truth of the pastoral, that nature, whether human or vegetative, is inherently wild and dangerous. Such exposure is built into the Genesis myth, which highlights the intrinsic curiosity and rebellion of human nature. Edenic space, in the Genesis myth, is doomed at its very conception because of the human ability to choose. In light of the Genesis myth, the pastoral is the place already lost, which makes it a space of nostalgia only, one that does not exist in the world but is present only in our minds, or repressed materials. This longing for purity, which can never be regained, is the basis of Laurence Lerner’s classic pastoral theory.

Lerner uses a loose interpretation of Freud’s dream theory to claim that Renaissance pastoral conventions are wish fulfillments that provide relief from society. This theory is complicated for our purposes, though, since the conventions themselves, in Lacanian terminology, are part of society’s Symbolic order. It seems that the wishes fulfilled by the pastoral conventions are wishes of manipulation. The reader can escape into an Imaginary state in which she can envision peace that the pressures of society’s Symbolic order cannot grant. In Lerner’s theory, the pastoral wish adheres to some sort of order that is advanced through the laws of genre, combined with some mode of transgression of those laws. The pastoral wish is for a merging of opposites, which Lerner finds in the Forest of Arden, a typical pastoral setting that is “out of time and space” (23), making the pastoral both transgressive and transcendent.

For theatrical purposes, Lerner’s pastoral divisions are also useful. He separates the courtly pastoral from the provincial pastoral, linking the courtly pastoral to tragedy and the provincial pastoral to the ballad (Lerner 20). The ballad, or song, easily links to comedy, or more precisely musical comedy, even as originated in the antimasque sections of courtly dramas. The comedic elements of antimasque always resolve into the stately virtue of the masque. From such virtue, it is easy to make the step to marriage as the only suitable outlet for sexual expression. Comedy ending in marriage is generative (Lerner 70). If comedy is generative, then tragedy must be its opposite—isolating, alienating, and mortal. Lerner’s theory can then usefully be applied to the theater of the Real, which uses a form of tragi-comedy as the outlet through which the socially created self dies, to allow the newly created, fiercely individualistic Real self to emerge. This Real self, perhaps only viable for an instant, fits Lerner’s definition of pastoral poetry itself. According to Lerner, “poetry of Arcadia is above all a poetry of moments” (104), which connects the pastoral, the Real self, and Modern...
theatre as forms which all employ episodic structural organizations.

In theatre of the Real, the nostalgic aspects of the pastoral remind the audience of all that society claims is possible but cannot be found in the world. Nostalgia infuses theatre of the Real with the sense that convention is an impossible lie. Scholars of the pastoral, especially Empson and Lerner, also point out the ironic use of nostalgia in pastoral poetry, since the space envisioned is “always already” a space of the past, in Freudian terms, the place of repression or the land of the dream. In most pastoral poetry and theory, nostalgic longing exists because the poet, or his character, seeks what is imagined, often falsely, to be a place of serenity and pleasure.

Such a space is found in the original, and now buried, forms of the pastoral—or as Empson identifies in his classic Some Versions of Pastoral, the meeting of the heroic and pastoral conventions in Renaissance literature, put to use with ironic intent to become the “mock pastoral,” or the space that exposes the shortcomings of convention while it offers a pastoral vision more honest and dangerous than usually portrayed. To use Benjamin Bennett's concept of genre with Lacan's terminology, the pastoral is the site of the Real because the genre of the pastoral displays the greatest disconnect between form and representation as representatives themselves of desire and drive. As a genre, the pastoral wants to be pure, innocent, and nostalgic, but even within its tradition, the pastoral, as a self-conscious genre, knows that it does not possess those qualities.

Though I disagree with much of her argument in Culture and the Real, Catherine Belsey's comments on Marvell's “To His Coy Mistress” are quite apt to a discussion of defining the pastoral genre. She characterizes the poem's argument as such: “Give me your virginity . . . or give it to the worms’ . . . That worms devour corpses is widely acknowledged, even if it remains an unlikely thought in a love poem. That worms might wiggle their way into the vagina, however, offers a distinctively repulsive version of this familiar truth” (42). The poem begins with the rather expected convention of the lover begging his beloved for her virginity, but as Belsey proves, the way in which that request is made merges what Freud characterizes as the two drives, or what Lacan would later consider desires: sex and death. This seems conventional enough, but as Belsey points out as the poem continues, “The awareness of their eventual absence from the signifying chain alters the meaning of sex, moves it out of the realm of romantic and uneventful contemplation towards urgent action” (43). The narrator of the poem recognizes that the pastoral conventions of time eternal and purity are false: “Marvell's lovers, who cannot make the sun stand still, will make him run, the poem defiantly affirms” (Belsey 46). They push nature
itself into the circulation of the drive, making it what George Bataille, centuries later, would term the “solar anus,” or the repository of an expository realm of all sexual transgression. Such a reading of this classic argument is as essential as it is disturbing, and it proves Empson’s claim that the pastoral is aware of itself and its conventions. To be the site of the Real, the pastoral must recognize its conventions as Symbolic remnants necessary to be classified as a genre. The Real pastoral, pushing up through its dirty lines, is the breakdown of convention. Instead of lush meadows and bubbling streams, it is wild brush and roaring tidal waves.

Many examples of pastoral work expose such useful decay. In choral music, the “All We Like Sheep” chorus from Handel’s Messiah is an example of the ways in which conventional forms are used to expose the pastoral’s rebellious nature. In this chorus, Handel uses word painting, combined with counterpoint, to let the choral voices and orchestral arrangement gradually take the sheep, which they represent, out of the flock, to “go astray” or fend for themselves. The growing discord of the music and rising dynamic intensity convey not the shepherd’s anxiety, but that of the sheep, over being away from each other. They fear the pastoral alone, without the protection of the group. Handel allows the musicians and the audience to revel in the virtuosity of the performance, until the music reaches a fever-pitch. At that point, Handel, as composer-god, harnesses the musical lines. In that music, just as the oratorio’s plot, God sends his son to “redeem the iniquity of us all.” Handel allows audience and performer to explore the pastoral’s wild side, but he does not want either to remain there. The image of placid pastoral peace must be restored. The Baroque pastoral decadently flirts with escape from the norms of society but ultimately resolves itself into tradition.

By the time we reach the Romantic age, especially with Samuel Coleridge’s work, we see that there is no need to maintain pastoral complacency or simplicity. The pleasure dome of ice in “Kubla Khan” makes an ironic statement about the place of passion or jouissance in the old pastoral tradition. The pleasure dome represents any field or grove that formerly hid lovers and nymphs playing innocently at kissing games. The pastoral decorum that prevented overt sexuality has finally frozen such passion, and, in Coleridge’s work, is depicted by the freezing of the pastoral realm. In a world that tries too hard to sterilize nature, retaliation is nature’s only choice. To freeze the pleasure dome is to halt all former and false enjoyment. While doing so, constantly in the background of the poem, Kubla Khan and the reader hear the sounds of encroaching troops. The advancing forces will shatter the dome of ice and leave, in its wake, something more
than the dream of the “damsel with a dulcimer.” Since Coleridge did not finish the poem, we do not know exactly what would have remained; we can imagine, however, that the new valley would not resemble a conventional image of lush and engendering safety; the landscape would be far more Real.

Modern playwrights recognize the nostalgic aspect of the pastoral as well, but they aim to find the true nature of the nostalgia. For the modern playwright, the longed-for and long-repressed material for which the contemporary figure yearns is not the coziness of wooly sheep and the lilt of the lyre. Modern theatre longs for the rawness of nature—the shorn, exposed sheep skin, the bleating of the injured lamb—as forms of repressed material coming to life. Transgression becomes the new nostalgia in Modern drama as the transgressive moves away from conventional exterior areas to interior spaces that house repressed material. The primarily repressed material that underscores the human psyche is able, when brought into contact with a traumatic experience, to awaken that person to the possibility of a Real experience.

The traditional eclogue form of the pastoral, codified by Virgil, is also relevant to theatre of the Real. As Stephen Guy-Bray points out in his recent book *Homoerotic Space*, the origin of the word “eclogue” is related to “eglio,” which, according to the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, means either “to pull out, extract (weeds etc.)” or “to select, choose, pick out (persons or things)” (37). Guy-Bray uses the combination of these definitions to show that what is frequently chosen and weeded out is the choice of love object (38). I would like to expand this idea. It is not simply a selection of others, but a selection of traits of oneself, to be kept and privileged, or discarded. If the eclogue is an extraction, then the pastoral space in which it occurs is a space which needs to be tilled. Something important is hidden under its surface. Guy-Bray argues that the hidden nature of the eclogue is its homoerotic content; I would like to expand that notion further. As Freud’s work attests, most sexual expression, unless genitally based, is seen as perverse and must be hidden. The Modern theatre realizes that for true freedom to exist, polymorphous perversity must be brought to the surface, or extracted, so that each person can use sexual preferences of all kinds as part of her unique, self-nominated identity. The eclogue is the form through which the pastoral is able to cultivate the circumstances for the Real. Such a pastoral space can occur on stage.

To see the eclogue as a mistake also explains a unique aspect of the theatre of the Real. If the eclogue is a mistake, it is a Symbolic mistake that relies on representation, instead of inventing a new form. When the-
atre is treated as a representative or mimetic art form, its radical potential is limited. Modern theatre aims at radical structures or forms, which do not merely represent the difference between actor and audience, or the classic competition between artwork and observer. Instead, Modern theatre wants to expose the mistake by creating a new theatrical form which binds, implicates, and includes all people present. Luigi Pirandello’s great work, *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, embodies such inclusivity. The “actors” in *Six Characters* are mired in the divide between stage and “real” life, actor and role; the “characters” know there is no difference. They are hyperfigures who have no distance between their plotline and their presentation. Eclogue occurs in two ways in Pirandello’s work. The first eclogue formation is the competition that develops between the “actors” and the “characters”; the second is the competition raging in each “actor” between herself and the expectations the director and the “characters” have when she plays a particular role. The characters have no such internal eclogue because, for them, there is no difference between actor and role, or art and life. Pirandello’s “actors” exemplify my definition of theatre of the Real. They have moved beyond the eclogue, which involves competing or disparate elements, into a type of radical unity through which they define themselves, regardless of the sometimes limited and futile perspective such definition provides.

## THE LACANIAN MISE-EN-SCÈNE

* A Theory of the Real

Theater, especially as exemplified in the Modern dramas of W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, and Stephen Sondheim, is a theatre of the Lacanian Real. The Real is the third psychic position that Lacan defines. It is a position of radical disconnection from society and culture that allows a subject to experience her *jouissance*, or moment of frozen anxiety that holds the subject in an experience of the most intense and simultaneous pleasure and pain. The Real is the lack, or hole, that constitutes the center of human subjectivity. Modern theatre seeks to create a pathway to the Real by inventing forms, not representations, that will traumatically open the hole or establish transgressive pastoral space in which the audience, along with the actors, finds a place that welcomes and encourages the radical transformation of the self, by the self. Such theatre of the Real would be an experience during which both actors and audience members would simultaneously,
but without each other’s cooperation or even volition, begin the process of abjection, or ridding oneself of the refuse of conventional life, through either an experience of catharsis (for Yeats and Sondheim) or comedy (for Beckett) that will then leave the theatre participants empty, nameless, and ripe for self-nomination. I do not wish to claim that Yeats, Beckett, or Sondheim actively tried to craft a theatre of the Real, but that their works lend themselves to this new type of analysis and staging.

Exposure to the entrails of conventional life is a very Real activity, in the Lacanian lexicon. The Real is the last of the three psychic phases Lacan posits as possible formal shapes for human subjectivity. The first two phases, the Imaginary and the Symbolic, are phases through which we all pass. The Imaginary phase is clearly defined in the *Ecrits* as the phase during which the infant recognizes her reflection in the mirror, first joyfully as she believes she is standing alone, and then aggressively, as she realizes that she is supported by a parental figure. During the first portion of the Imaginary phase, there is

the jubilant assumption of his [the infant's] specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the *infans* stage thus seems to be to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the *I* is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialects of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject. (*Ecrits* 4)

Appreciation of the specular image, before parental support is detected, introduces the infant to the concept of the *imago*, or Lacan’s version of Freud’s uncanny. The haunting vision of parental support soon replaces the apparition of self-generation. According to Lacan, “[T]his moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates, through identification with the imago of one’s semblance and the drama of primordial jealousy, . . . the dialectic that will henceforth link the *I* to socially elaborated situations” (*Ecrits* 7). This battle with authority, akin to Freud’s definitions of the Oedipal Complex, ends in the initiation into the Symbolic order. Notice that Lacan uses the phrase “drama of primordial jealousy” to describe this situation. For Lacan, the movement from the Imaginary to the Symbolic is essential to human subjectivity. That transition plays out on the stage of the psyche.

Lacan’s Symbolic begins not only with the collapsed fantasy of original autonomy, but with one’s initiation into language, or the constantly
mismatched signifying chain. Despite its overwhelming méconnaissance, the subject, now laden with the weight of the chain, accepts the patriarchal law-giving figures first apprehended as support. When a subject is part of the Symbolic order, she does not experience the effects of her autonomous drives, but is prey to the capricious desire of the Other. The Other occupies the primary position for the subject, and the subject feels indebted to it for validation. The subject believes the Other desires it, and appropriates that desire in a minor fashion by longing for erotic attachments to *objets petits a*, miniaturized, but incomplete, versions of the Other that can momentarily satisfy the desiring subject. Just as language is a never-ending chain of misunderstanding, so desire is an endless and futile repetition of foreplay, orgasm, and afterglow, sublimated as dramatic structure into rising action, climax, and denouement that is forced to replicate itself because it can never fully satisfy.

The subject’s relationship to language is situated in her position in the Lacanian grid of the four discourses. Lacan’s discourses—the master’s discourse, the analyst’s discourse, the university discourse, and the hysteric’s discourse—constitute the various ways in which the subject can position herself in relationship to her desire. Desire is always a social relationship, which governs not just the way in which a subject relates to a particular object choice, but also the way she relates to the world as the space housing that object. Lacan writes in typically frustrated fashion, “I can say until I’m blue in the face that the notion of discourse should be taken as a social link (*lien social*), founded on language” (*On Feminine Sexuality* 17).

The master’s discourse is based on the false confidence that knowledge and truth are interlinked. Lacan uses Hegel’s master/slave dialectic to explain this relationship. The master has knowledge or Symbolic power but is totally reliant on the slave for truth; that truth is based on the actual circumstance that the master can do nothing without the slave, for as the master has allowed the slave to take care of him, he has lost all of his actual potency. Lacan explains that “the slave knows many things, but what he knows even better still is what the master wants, even if the master does not know it himself, which is the usual case, for otherwise he would not be a master” (*Other Side* 32). The heart of the master’s discourse is the agreed-upon lie that the person in power is the person who should be in power.

In the university or in academic discourse, power shifts from one person or master to an institution, in this case made up of the former slaves of the master. The students, or in more Lacanian terms, the S2 or slave, is in the position of knowledge. As Lacan points out in *Seminar 20*, this position is doomed to impotence precisely because, as Lacan stated in *The Other
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*Side of Psychoanalysis,* “[t]he university has an extremely precise function, in effect, one that at every moment is related to the state we are in with respect to the master’s discourse,—namely its elucidation” (148). The university discourse assumes that knowledge can be transferred by the formerly subservient position. This assumption, of course, is more accurate, since the slave always knows more than the master.

In the analyst’s discourse, the analyst is in the position of the master, but that position has undergone a total upheaval. The analyst’s discourse is used to expose the falsity of knowledge in the master’s discourse. Lacan writes that it is “distinguished by the fact that it raises the question of what the use is of this form of knowledge which rejects and excludes the dynamics of truth” (*Other Side* 91). The analyst’s discourse is the conduit to the hysteric’s discourse, as it eliminates the power of knowledge and introduces the potential revelation of truth.

The hysteric, in her discourse, is the only subject, in the position of the master, who has access to the truth. The hysteric has the desire for knowledge, not because she believes it, but because she longs for the position of power associated with it. As Lacan explains, “[w]hat hysterics ultimately want one to know is that language runs off the rails concerning the magnitude of what she as woman is capable of revealing concerning jouissance” (*Other Side* 34). The hysteric’s discourse seeks to find the limits of knowledge that she can then manipulate into a new way to define herself. From the limit, the hysteric can form her sinthome, as she is radically dissatisfied with knowledge as presented to her by the master.

The inability to satisfy is a challenge to the Symbolic. For those not ready to explore another register, desire is constantly, yet futilely, pursued. For others who are ready to explore an alternate psychic experience, the denial of satisfaction leads to the new register of ultimate tension, the Real.

The Real is perhaps so intriguing because it is the last of Lacan’s phases to be explained in his writing, and thus the one least clearly explicated. To enmesh all of Lacan’s hints about the Real throughout his career, the Real is the moment of jouissance, or the exquisite mixture of pleasure and pain that locks a subject into eternal tension. Such tension is directly related to the endless circulation of the drive, without the interrupting thrust of desire, making the Real, or its remnant, a scaring force for those who have experienced it.

The Real begins when the subject no longer wishes to pursue false representations, and thus is no longer willing to be defined by the sexual chase of her object choice. The Real also occurs when the name of the father, or the patriarchal order, is recognized as a lack that leaves the subject without
support. At the point of recognition, the subject has also exhausted the limits of logic and Cartesian reason. As Lacan explains in the “The Subversion of the Subject and the Dialectic of Desire,” the cogito exhausts the question it asks until the subject reaches the point that addresses the unthinkable within, or the position of God that Descartes originally theorizes in his Discourse on Method. Lacan continues this point in The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis when he writes that “the cogito lurches toward a Real” (36), like Yeats’s creation “slouching toward Bethlehem.”

Here, the cogito is not only a philosophical concept, but also a term used to remind the reader of the inherent split in the subject. For Descartes, the split is between mind and body; for Lacan, that split is more complicated and occurs between the concept of self as autonomous and the concept of self as subject to the Other. The recognition of the split is the liminal point, or the lintel that supports the Real. The doorway, though, is cluttered and needs to be cleared of Symbolic trash. While Lacan does not offer much insight as to how this ridding process occurs, we can find a good template in Julia Kristeva’s work. In Powers of Horror, Kristeva describes the process of abjection as a literal voiding of the body of all waste materials from tears to feces and sexual fluids (Powers of Horror 3–5). The power of generation is halted; the subject is no longer interested in reproducing biologically, but in re-producing herself anew. Such re-production of oneself is a terrifically painful process which involves the rejection of all society’s conventions, entrapments, and enjoyments. It is a total abandonment of the representative world, which, when completed, ends in self-nomination or the creation of the sinthome, allowing the newly formed subject a form beyond traditional representation.

In The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis, Lacan gives some details which help define the Real, especially in terms of Freud’s dream theory. To gloss The Interpretation of Dreams briefly, the dream is the fulfillment of a wish that originates in childhood, is repressed, and is then brought back via the day’s residue, or a trigger in present life that acts as the impetus for the dream. The dream’s capacity to fulfill its every wish is limited by the nodal point, or navel, of the dream, which is the barrier to an analyst’s understanding of the wish and a barrier to total fulfillment itself. Lacan takes that nodal point as the entrance to the Real when he explains that the subject uses the dream to “rediscover where it was” (Four Fundamental Concepts 45). The act of rediscovery, in Real terms, is the act of turning inward to face pre-Oedipal psychic life, or the phantasy struc-
tures that cover the Real. We need to revisit those places, because, Lacan points out, the Real always returns to the same place, making the Real echo the circularity of the drive, instead of the thrust of desire. In this way, the Real is “the obstacle to the pleasure principle” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 167). Such a definition leads the reader to connect the Real with *jouissance*, or the moment of the most extreme and simultaneous pleasure and pain a subject can undergo. Because the Real is not part of the structure of desire, it is able to incorporate previously excluded elements, which “by the fact of its economy, later, admits something new, which is precisely the impossible” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 167).

For the Real to operate, both the subject in and the subjects out of the Real deem the situation impossible. It is nearly unmanageable for the subject approaching the Real to refuse domination by any remnant of the unconscious, which belongs to the Symbolic order. Because the subject’s prior immersion in the cogito has placed logic and language at the top of society’s knowledge hierarchy, it is impossible for the Real subject to understand herself. In his most recent work, *The Parallax View*, Slavoj Žižek comments that “the *cogito* is not a substantial entity but a pure structural function, an empty place” (8). As such, the lie of knowledge must exist to hold up a space that can act as a container for the Real when it emerges. The contents of that container can never seep into the “knowing,” or Symbolic, register.

As Lacan states in *Feminine Sexuality*, “The real . . . is the mystery of the speaking body, the mystery of the unconscious” (131). Here Lacan is using the term *mystery* with its connotative Christian meaning, as that which must be accepted as a matter of faith. The unconscious can never know the Real, because “in its [ex]istence outside of the imaginary and the symbolic, it knocks up against them, its play is something precisely in the order of limitation; the two others, from the moment when it is tied into a Borromean knot with them, offer resistance. In other words, the real only has ex-sistence—in rather an astonishing formulation of mine—in its encounter with the limits of the symbolic and the imaginary” (*Le Sinthome* 14). It defies all structures and representations known to the unconscious, and thus cannot be articulated in language. The Real can be present only in material, which Lacan says, in *Television*, is “understood as a grimace of the real” (6). This statement gives readers a clue to Lacan’s final position on the Real. If reality is a grimace of the Real, then from the point of view of the Real, reality must be an unsatisfactory psychic position, as it is only a smirk, a joke, a glimpse at the full truth below the surface.
Chapter One

The Real needs to expel all the refuse of reality, which makes it turn up the corners of its mouth. The fact that the Real engages in what appear to be bodily activities makes the Real akin to an organism, a categorization that carries with it the precariousness of life itself. In Seminar 11, Lacan states that fantasy, or the Imaginary, is a screen that protects the Real. If we image the screen as a scrim, or a flimsy white curtain often used as a translucent barrier in theatrical set design, the screen is that which is able to diffuse the blinding light of the Real trying to emerge from the subject.

Lacan was quite interested in depicting such structures and frequently used topological figures from mathematics as diagrams of the interrelationships between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real. In both Lacan's Seminar on Anxiety and How James Joyce Made His Name, Roberto Harari reproduces and analyzes these figures with special focus on their relationships to anxiety and sinthome formation. As Harari points out, anxiety, for Lacan, is the trigger point, or the Symbolic affect, that cannot be assimilated into the order. Anxiety is the meeting place for Lacan’s three psychic registers. The “object” of anxiety is not a physical manifestation, but a goal. That goal is to generate constant motion, but the constant motion itself has no object or limit. Anxiety does not put a subject in touch with her desire but acts as a gateway to the Real by stimulating the drive. As Harari writes, anxiety is “a hinge between jouissance and desire” (Anxiety 99). Depending on the subject’s psychic readiness, the hinge swings either outward to invite back the trappings of the Symbolic, or inward, opening the floodgate of unending drive. This is the point at which Žižek theorizes one can find the parallax. It is the oxymoronic opening that one finds between the Symbolic and the Real:

the parallax of the Real (the Lacanian Real has no positive-substantial consistency, it is just the gap between multiple perspectives on it); the parallax nature of the gap between desire and drive (let us imagine an individual trying to perform some simple manual task, say grab an object which repeatedly eludes him; the moment he changes his attitude, starting to feel pleasure in just repeating the failed task, squeezing the object which again, and again, eludes him, he shifts from desire to drive. (Parallax View 7)

Žižek shows us that the Real is the brass ring on the carousel of the drive. We, in the Imaginary or Symbolic, will never grasp it, as we circle around, riding the horses of our drives, but we will revel in the process of trying. Before we can enjoy the endless repetition of that process, though, we must embrace the drive.
For us to be able to embrace our drives, anxiety must act as the catalyst for abjection, which results in the creation of *le sinthome*, or the material letter, out of a mound of Symbolic trash.

In *Le Sinthome 1975–1976*, otherwise known as “The Joyce Seminar,” Lacan develops the concept of the *sinthome* in response to Joyce’s writing. Lacan claims Joyce’s writing is the artistic form of the material letter divested of all Symbolic meaning, and now intelligible exclusively to the subject creating it. The concept of the *sinthome* is what makes up for the original lack of the phallus, as it takes the place of the parental naming process. The infant recognizes that she has no phallic authority, and her subjectivity is built around this lack, as she is forced to accept the name by which she is called by her parents. As Harari explains, instead of a subject accepting the name she is given, when trying to escape the Symbolic the subject begins a process of self-nomination, during which she is able to embrace her lack as the thing upon which her subjectivity is based. The creation of the *sinthome* is this process of individual self-generation. The *sinthome* allows a subject to have autonomy over herself. When a subject enjoys freedom, she can never be satisfied because satisfaction relies on an Other; she actively chooses to abandon her desire and throw herself into the widening gyre of her drive. Because the Real and the *sinthome* are transgressive, individualistic creations, no template can be given for how to achieve the Real. But Lacan feels he must offer James Joyce as an example of someone who used writing, the usual tool of the Symbolic, against itself to create a *sinthome* powerful enough for the world to ponder.

Owing to the intensely complex and mysterious nature of the concept of the Real, many contemporary Lacanian critics who work with the concept reveal misunderstandings of its nature. Two of the more recent and misdirected Lacanian critics are François Roustang and Catherine Belsey. Roustang, in *The Lacanian Delusion*, makes the valid point that Lacan’s work is deeply hypocritical. Even as Lacan wants to discredit the master’s discourse, or the speaking position at the top of the Symbolic order, Lacan himself tries to attain that position, making himself into the Cartesian god figure that he ironically criticizes in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*. Roustang also provides a description of Lacan’s writing style that makes it sound suspiciously like Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomatic structure. While such variation may be good in literature, Roustang rightly attacks Lacan’s oeuvre for being intentionally elusive. Roustang’s usefulness in providing a critique of Lacan’s work is limited by his gross misreading of the Real. Roustang claims that the Real is “mathematical order” (46) and discusses Boolean logic, but he does not consider the latter and more
important topographical models of the Real Lacan uses to defy such logic. When Roustang claims, “The Real is what is situated outside us, it is the substrate of phenomena; it lies behind appearances and is independent of our consciousness; the Real is being which underlies seeming” (61), he is correct. It seems that Roustang understands that the Real, in being beyond consciousness, might also be beyond the unconscious and thus not subject to human thought in any recognizable form. His assessment fails when he claims that “it [the Real] is rational, which is why it is calculable and amenable to logic” (61). As Lacan states, the Real is impossible; the impossible is what defies logic and logic lies in the conscious, so the Real must not be reasonable at all. If the Real was within the realm of reason, then it would pose no threat to the human psyche and would be readily accepted. Perhaps Roustang wishes to disarm the Real’s power, but by disusing its potency, Roustang denies the transgressive power of humanity and its artistic creations.

Both Roustang and Belsey also classify Lacan’s Real as an anti-Idealist position. Belsey goes on to draw a distinction between Lacan’s Real, as anti-Idealist, and Slavoj Žižek’s analysis of Lacan’s Real, which is Idealist. She explains, “For him [Žižek], the Real constitutes a structured absence, the void, finally empty. In Lacan, by contrast, the Real is represented as emptiness at the level of the signifier, but it is not denied; indeed, there is nothing missing in the real itself” (54). This assessment is absolutely correct. The Real is missing nothing because it is the moment of the subject’s instantiation of her newly defined self, whose definition is not based on desire. The new self always lacks, but it relies on drive, which is ironically fulfilled by the lack of the lack. The problem with Belsey’s anti-Idealist positions comes from her equation of that which is outside of the self with the objective. Belsey risks making the Real into something universal and not fiercely individualistic and dependent on the subject. The concept of the Real is anti-Idealist because, even theoretically, it does not rely on a person, but is only interlaced with other concepts of psychic registers that operate as metastructures of the mind. Once the Real is brought down to the subjective level, it is intensely personal and dependent. If the Real was not radically different for each person, then it could be accessed and understood by the unconscious or conscious mind and would lose its transgressive power.

Modern theatre has the drive to get beyond drama’s former conception as a purely representative art. Theatre, because of its innate structure, can never be reproduced. In the Modern theatre, the audience does not watch actors engage in self-nomination, but in a together-but-separate space, all
participants expose themselves to scenarios of the Real that could trigger their own movements into such a space.

Weber comes close to describing Real theatre when he writes that theatre is “the medium of a displacement or dislocation that opens other ways not bound to arrive at a final destination—or at least not too soon” (29). Theatre of the Real allows the audience to forestall repose. To rest is to limit one’s capacity for jouissance. While perpetual jouissance is nearly impossible, as it is linked to psychosis, some expanded experience of jouissance is psychologically beneficial. Real theatre gives the audience an alternative to conventional life, which broadens the audience’s own, even previously discovered, pathways and possibilities. It does so by staging what Peggy Farfan, in *Women, Modernism, and Theater* calls the ob/scene. Her term specifically refers to the staging of lesbian possibilities and homoerotic materials, especially in reference to women. The ob/scene, in Real theatre, is the performance of any action that may exemplify a character’s Real, or lead an audience to its own internal glimmers of the Real.

I do not want to advocate such theatre of the Real as the only true, or even most desirable, form of theatrical experience. Theatre of the Real is not an event for which every theatre-goer is prepared. First, an audience member must have significant exposure to both conventional and avant-garde theatre performances. Second, an audience member must be psychologically prepared to enter into the Real, meaning that she is already willing to begin, or has begun, the process of abjection and seeks an experience of jouissance, knowing it will include equal amounts of pleasure and pain. This is not to say that an unprepared audience member at a performance geared toward theatre of the Real will be psychologically damaged. In the best-case scenario, an unprepared audience member will be led to new explorations of her psyche and will perhaps see the value of release from convention. At worst, the unprepared audience member will be so disturbed, disappointed, or confused that she will not venture into the nonconventional theatre world again.

**LEARNING THE LINES**

*New Theatrical Jargon*

Not all theatre of the Real achieves the same level of jouissance or approaches that experience in the same way. To explain the variety of ways in which theatre can approach the Real, I will use the terms *the Missed, the Missing,*
and *the Manifest*. The Missed theatre of the Real exposes the lack, or void, at the center of the subject most likely to experience a Real moment. That subject has knowledge that the Symbolic is a façade, but does not have a new self-determined truth. Knowledge without truth positions the subject in the analyst’s discourse. The subject of Missed theatre of the Real uses repetition as the unary trait or *sinthome*, but it is too frequently interrupted by an Other to allow itself to spin out of control. This interference leads to a *jouissance* of the Other, which is a compromised form of *jouissance*, related to phallic pleasure instead of to polymorphous perversity. The *sinthome* is not able to manifest itself fully because the energy cathexis of the subject is too pointed or sharply focused on the Other. To use Freud’s terminology, transference without countertransference occurs. In pastoral terms, this type of theatre of the Real, made evident in Yeats’s plays for dancers, is an *eglio*, or mistake.

Beckett’s tragic-comedy displays a second *eglio* of the theatre of the Real. His work, even in its excessive use of language, stages what I call the Missing moment. Beckett revels in the repetition of words or phrases, the only grounding forces which his characters can experience. Such dependence on and trust in language, even when it fails, links to Lacan’s description of the master’s discourse. The repetition of word, thought, or movement is a formalization of the drive, but frequently is not internalized enough to become an unconscious force. The subject who ponders her repetitiveness and tries to give those repeated words or actions meaning is too mired in the Cartesian split to have a fully Real experience. There is too little energy expended to destroy the conscious thoughts governing the actions, even if and when logical thought is abandoned. There are too many parapraxes, or mistakes, in the repetitive actions, too many variations on a theme to make that action into a *sinthome*. The subject’s energy is so excessive, trying to get the repetition right, that it disperses the focus, or materiality, of the potential *sinthome*. The only *jouissance* experienced is phallic, as it is centered on one particular thing or action.

Only when the *sinthome* is allowed to be present on the stage can theatre of the Real be fully Manifest. The manifestation of the *sinthome*, or the dangerous moment that displays the Real on stage, corrects the mistakes made by other characters trying to achieve their own Reals. Manifest theatre of the Real creates a careful, pivotal balance or flux of excess and lack. It makes the void at the center of the subject into a mass of energy that drives the subject. It is related to the hysteric’s discourse, which Lacan explains tries to master the master by co-opting his *jouissance* and making it into an experience of surplus *jouissance*, which breaks apart the expecta-
tions of Symbolic sexual economy. The *sinthome* is present on the stage for both characters and audience to see or hear, but not to understand. Sondheim’s theatre, especially Fosca’s ending shriek in *Passion*, stages the Manifest theatre of the Real.

> **Prelude**

*Yeats, Beckett, and Sondheim*

W. B. Yeats, Samuel Beckett, and Stephen Sondheim are three Modern theatre practitioners who stage the ob/scene. W. B. Yeats uses the formal innovation of Symbolist drama, especially in his plays for dancers, most of which were designed, even if not first performed, as drawing-room dramas, to embody the concept of the theatre of the Real. Yeats conceptualizes his own theatrical productions as attempts to erase the boundaries of individual characters and plot in an attempt to transcend traditional dramatic confines and achieve a structure new enough to disrupt his audience. The characters in many of his plays for dancers, especially *Purgatory* and *Resurrection*, are nameless, as is the Hawk-woman in *At the Hawk’s Well*. The lack of a name underscores the notion that these characters have already broken away from traditional society and expelled the refuse that society heaps upon them. In *At the Hawk’s Well*, the nameless dancer figure never speaks, but simply moves, and her movements become the basis for the other characters to encounter their own Real. The first musician describes the scene as the Hawk-woman dances: “The madness has laid hold upon him now, / he grows pale and staggers to his feet” (*Hawk’s Well* In. 216–18). To be a Real encounter, the madness young Cuchulain experiences must not be a direct result of the dance, but it is the psychic consequence of the dance’s ability to awaken in him a repressed traumatic experience that can lead him to the Real. He is viewed as mad because his stance is beyond conventional expectations. The Old Man in the play does not understand this process. He believes the dancer figure should be able to induce the Real, when he exclaims, “She has but led you from the fountain. Look! / Though the stones and leaves are dark where it has flowed, / There’s not a drop to drink” (*Hawk’s Well* In. 237–39). To lead him away from the well means, for the Old Man, to have been robbed of a chance at the Real. His mistake highlights the mistake in theatrical expectation that Yeats wants to avoid. Yeats is eager to point out that the experiences in his play’s contexts are individual. He
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does not want his audience to copy them, but to retain and use their spir- 

tual power. Yeats’s use of the occult or supernatural is another formal 

element employed in his work to differentiate his theatre from that of 

his predecessors and to give substance to the very idea of the Real. The 

supernatural most commonly appears as dancer figures. They act as Real 

structures that cannot be touched and cannot stop the motion they have 

begun.

Dance in Yeats’s drama is not the highly stylized ballet choreography of 

most dance contemporary with his work. It is, instead, movement designed 

to be free-flowing and expressive. Dance is the trance-like element within 

the play that embodies the pull of the drive itself. The other characters in 

the play, who witness the dance, do not want to imitate its movements, but 
do admire its ability to transform the dancer. When they do want to imi- 

tate the dancer, the outcome is negative. Lazarus does this in Calvary, when 

he says to Christ, “You took my death, give me your death instead” (ln. 53). 

Lazarus is forced back into society, denied by those who represent the pos- 
sibility of the Real. If the audience is sufficiently inspired by the dance, it 

will choreograph its own path to the Real.

The paths to the Real, which the dancer figures take, are grounded in 

the pastoral tradition. The setting of most of the dancer plays is the nat- 

ural world and usually operates in mythic time, of either Gallic or bib-

lical origin. Yeats does not, however, employ Realist spectacle to achieve 

his theatrical goals. Instead of painted backdrops and lifelike set pieces, 

he frequently uses only pieces of cloth to suggest a setting and its mood. 

By staging some of the plays in a drawing room, Yeats allows the audi-

ence and the actors to have intimate contact with each other, thus impli- 
cating the audience in the action and chipping away at the notion that 

the pastoral is something distant and untouchable. For Yeat’s theatre, 
the pastoral setting is the result, or natural encounter, of actor and audi-

ence during a play.

Such contact itself results in a form of eclogue that derives from the 

content of the play. Within the dancer plays, the figures of the Real battle 

with the figures who want to co-opt their power. This is the situation that 
occurs between the Hawk-woman and the Young Man in At the Hawk’s 
Well. If the Young Man could achieve his goal and drink from the foun-

tain, he would not achieve the same eternal life as the Hawk-woman. Only 

the Hawk-woman can have such power because the well is her Real. If the 

Young Man took water from the well, he would make a mockery of his 

own quest for the Real by simply enacting a Symbolic mimicry, but he is 

unaware of that consequence.
The audience, however, is set up, through years of theatrical conditioning, to wish that the protagonist gets his wish; at the beginning of the play, we, as an audience, want the Young Man to succeed by drinking from the well. As the play moves forward, the audience’s sympathy for the Hawk-woman grows, and the struggle between audience and actor begins. As we turn against the notion of rooting for the hero, we are able to identify with the new iconoclast, one who works not only against law or institution, but against herself. We open ourselves to experiences of the Real and become outcasts from society and from our self-images, moving agitatedly in our seats.

In Samuel Beckett’s theatre, the characters on the stage are the outcasts, but their potential to reach the Real is compromised by their conviction in the power of repetitive words or actions. Beckett’s characters are mired in their drives, which should give them incredible access to jouissance, but they define the drive in terms of the Symbolic instead of the Imaginary. A drive, which begins with an Imaginary conception, would lead to self-nomination, as fantasies are used as fodder for creating a sinthome. Drives that are too mired in the Symbolic are dependent on words as the repetitive forces. Even as the words start to lose their potency for the audience, who hears them repeatedly but sees no accompanying action, the characters still have belief in the power of language.

In Krapp’s Last Tape, the title character listens to the same recorded story three times, because he falsely believes that somehow the words can manifest for him the situation, namely, sexual consummation that he could not manifest for himself at the time of the original action. Words fail Krapp, a failed writer, who should be able to recognize their insufficiency to bring him joy, but he does not, and foolishly clings to them via his tapes and his career.

Beckett uses the repeated phrase, “time she stops” in Rockabye, to a slightly different end. The last time that phrase is uttered, the protagonist of the piece does halt what had been, to that point, the ceaseless rocking of her chair. The protagonist, who has been listening, like Krapp, to painful memories on tape, knows that she cannot gain anything from her masochist repeated listening. She stops the flow of words, but also stops her motion. As she breaks the hold the Symbolic has over her, by casting out language, she also halts the motion of the drive, staged in her rocking, and misses her chance for jouissance.

Beckett engenders an ironically barren and desolate pastoral world. The break provided from the conventional pastoral or trite postindustrialist visions of the urban landscape is exciting for the audience, who can see a
new space of freedom. Beckett’s characters, however, do not see the liberty offered by, or beyond, their dead spaces. *Waiting for Godot*’s Vladimir and Estragon have the choice to leave their self-imposed waiting room or to hang themselves in it, but they do neither. They, unlike the title character of Joyce’s “Eveline,” choose to stay in a space which will not afford them any chance of *jouissance*, as they have no new material with which to create a *santhome*.

The spaces of Beckett’s drama are deadened, absurd wastelands, as displayed in *Waiting for Godot*, *Endgame*, and *Happy Days*. These three plays, his only performed evening-length works, stage, or directly reference, the outside decimated world. It seems too easy to assume that these landscapes are postnuclear representations. Instead they turn inside out the psyches of the characters who inhabit, or even engender, the spaces. Gogo and Didi, Hamm and Clov, Winnie and Willie, the couples of the three aforementioned texts, want to be out in the world. Gogo and Didi chose to wait for Godot in the forest instead of trying to find shelter; Clov longs to leave his shelter for the world, albeit a ruined one, outside. Winnie burns in the sun, but somehow claims to love it, as she is at least still able to process the fact that she is burning. These cruel, killing worlds display the internalized aggressions of the characters, as they wage a futile war with the Symbolic.

In Beckett’s short dramatic works, the landscape is the internal space of the psyche itself, as it struggles against its own Imaginary and its uncanny ghosts. Krapp is taunted by the outcome that he imagines could have occurred with his lover, had he been able to stay faithful to his drive. *Roc~abye’s* protagonist wants to expel her internalized mother figure, who has monopolized her daughter’s Imaginary creation of her self.

Beckett also presents internal wasted landscapes that show his innovation of a traditional genre, merging the exterior and interior spaces. Both interior and exterior spaces, for Beckett’s characters, are doomed to remain unproductive, as they do not allow for growth. Beckett’s plays have no set changes, representing the stilted states of his characters’ psyches. If they cannot move, either physically or emotionally, then they cannot embark on the endlessly repetitive journey of the drive. They know there is a Real moment, somewhere in the distance, but they cannot arrive at it, and so, instead of fighting against stasis, they fool themselves into believing that

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3. Much has been written about the friendship between Beckett and Joyce. Beckett most certainly read and was influenced by all of Joyce’s work. “Eveline,” found in the *Dubliners*, tells the story of a young woman so oppressed by the routine of her life that she refuses to choose to either leave with her lover or leave him behind.
they will move someday. The audience recognizes their foolishness and laughs at them, which helps to motivate its drive.

Sondheim’s musical theatre is also not a theatre that, in practice, expects its audience to enter into the Real. Only an ideal audience can do that, one as highly selected as Yeats’s drawing-room audience; instead, the public performances of Sondheim’s work aim to expose a wide range of people to new theatrical and psychic possibilities. It may take more than one Sondheim play to open a person to an experience with her own Real, but the appeal of his work allows for such gradual transformations to occur.

Sondheim’s theatre is able to get closer to the Real than Yeats’s or Beckett’s theatre because the merging of music and lyrics in musical theatre, which is serious in nature, without the use of cute chorus girls or contrived plots, accesses the auditory drive in a very Real way. Although he points out that the gaze is a worthy competitor of sound repetition, Lacan writes, “It is because the body has several orifices, the most important of which is the ear—because it has no stop-gap—that what I have called the voice has a response in the body” (Le Sinthome 4). Lacan goes on to describe that response as “a call [appel] to the real, not as linked to the body, but as difference. At a distance from the body, there is the possibility of something I termed last time resonance or consonance. And it is at the level of the real that this consonance is situated. In relation to its poles, the body and language is what harmonizes [fait accord]” (Le Sinthome 11).

Because, according to Lacan, the body cannot prevent material from entering the ear, the auditory drive is most vulnerable to assault. Sondheim combines music and lyrics in such an appealing way that the ear welcomes the material and is then assaulted by unexpected form and/or content, pushing the hearer closer to the Real. The material resonates throughout the body, which then harmonizes the new Real material with older Symbolic and Imaginary remains, which allows the hearer to come back from the experience of the Real without being too damaged.

Formally, Sondheim reinvents musical theatre by making it less commercially appealing and more politically outspoken than many of his Broadway contemporaries. Sondheim uses song and dance as means to advance the plot. Like Beckett, Sondheim chooses protagonists who are frequently unlikable, such as those in Sweeney Todd, Merrily We Roll Along, and Passion. The murderously psychotic, selfishly greedy, and disconcertingly ugly are not typical musical theatre heroes. Even Sondheim’s master teacher, Oscar Hammerstein, used a socially unacceptable protagonist in only one musical, Carousel. After Billy Bigelow, Hammerstein returned to convention with a singing nun in The Sound of Music.
Like the musicals of Rodgers and Hammerstein, Sondheim’s work clearly returns to the pastoral tradition by using pastoral settings in works such as *Sunday in the Park with George* and *Into the Woods*. In *Sunday*, the pastoral acts as the impetus for the work of art, which in turn traps its subjects in the artist’s aesthetic contemplation. In the musical, Seurat’s work on his masterpiece, *Sunday on the Isle of la Grande Jatte*, alienates him from his lover and keeps him locked in his own creation. The pastoral is exposed for being the scene of subjugation, although that subjugation is ironically desired. *Into the Woods* presents a pastoral setting of the Real, in which the characters are forced into a natural world, which assaults them with their deepest fears and longings, ultimately showing them the futility of wish fulfillment and favoring the constant drive of the wish itself as the form of the *jouissance* of the Real. The play’s last line, “I wish,” expresses Sondheim’s own drive to keep creating musicals, even when they fail, like the recent *Bounce*, which died in its pre-Broadway trials.

Sondheim’s music also employs one of the original notions of eclogue as a song competition. In his music, recitative is adapted into a competitive dialogue, in which several actors are forced to vie with each other for both rhetorical argument and audience attention. For examples, we can recall the witty repartees between Sweeney Todd and Mrs. Lovett, or the angry accusations hurled among Ben, Sally, Buddy, and Phyllis in *Follies*. The nearly unending solo recitative sections of his work, such as Dot’s opening of *Sunday in the Park with George*, force the singer to compete with the composition itself. Strings of seemingly endless rhyme, without breath marks, make the singer fight with herself for breath, literally creating tension in her body that is palpable to the audience, no matter how talented the performer. In many Sondheim works, such as *Sunday* and *Follies*, there are moments of climactic cacophony which compete with the harmonic structures that usually govern the work. This cacophony acts like a Brechtian assault on the audience to create a tension that should push the audience toward its Real. Repetition, especially the name “Bobby” in *Company*, also becomes a cacophonous structure, as it disrupts the normal story-telling goal, to reiterate one driving force, a person’s identity, which through its countless repetition is lost, thus leaving the character open to create a new one and setting the example for the audience to follow.

Many approaches to the Real in Sondheim rely on staging. In Philadelphia, the Arden Theatre Company brilliantly stages Real Sondheim performances. In its 2000 performance of *Into the Woods*, actors at the Arden carried puppets of their characters with them, as reminders to the audience that story telling is a means of manipulation that imitates the ways
What Is the Theatre of the Real?

in which society manipulates its participants. The exposure of the façade of the story-telling process in society is essential to making an audience realize that theatre is a way to get from only listening to stories to creating our own stories to tell only ourselves. The 2003 Arden production of *Pacific Overtures* made use of theatre-in-the-round to remind the audience that it, as representative of America, is part of the political climate and can be part of the political choices made. The 2005 staging of *Sweeney Todd* had the entire cast use the seating areas as playing spaces, with Sweeney charging audience members with his razor drawn. By making the audience part of the play, the audience was forced to act, in some cases literally forced to shield itself from assault, in an attempt to showcase that audience and actor should not be in different positions. All present in the theatre are part of a Real life-and-death experience. Sondheim’s plays alternate between the whirling intensity of Yeats’s dancers and the utterly silly stasis of Beckett’s protagonists, allowing them to manifest the theatre of the Real.


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