University of Toronto

Centre for Comparative Literature

spring 2008 TRANSVERSE issue 8: theatre

issue 8: theatre

a comparative studies journal

TRANSVERSE

spring 2008

transverse: a comparative studies journal

copyright contributors 2008
centre for comparative literature
university of toronto

all rights reserved
the use of any part of this publication reproduced, transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without the prior written consent of the contributors, is an infringement of the copyright law

the national library of canada has catalogued this publication as follows:
transverse: a comparative studies journal

editor: andrés pérez-simón

editorial board: gina beltrán, myra bloom, ryan culpepper, jena habegger

copyeditor: rachel freedman

cover design: bao nguyen

to contact the editor, please send an email to
transversejournal@gmail.com

www.chass.utoronto.ca/complit/journal.htm

transverse: a comparative studies journal
issue 8, spring 2008

contours of modern theatre

editor's preface
andrés pérez-simón 7

a note on "a view from charles street"
ryan culpepper 9

why krausemeyer couldn't sleep, or, you had to be there:
a hypothetical exploration of the theatrical provenance of silent film slapstick
paul babiak 13

beyond the veil: *the pearl fishers* and other operatic revelations
myra bloom 24

spatial dynamics in lorca's *la casa de bernarda alba*: from the dramatic text
to the performance
gina beltrán 36

negotiating with the self: *fronteras americanas* as dialogic monologue
chiara sgro 46

the ontology of the post/modern self: from dante to claudel, beckett and ionesco
ioana isabella sion 56

new books

mouawad, wajdi. *scorched.*
dave degrow 72

stoppard, tom. *rock 'n' roll.*
adam grunzke 74

creative writing

first bird
movement
arlyce menzies 78

obligatory toronto poem (for the aspiring canadian poet)
hugh leonard 80

they gather like battery hens
keith nunes 81

gypsy
jan thorburn 82

remembering my mother's memories
lori a. noll 86

contributors 90

editor's preface

This is the eighth issue, or in other words the third issue of the second epoch, of *Transverse*. The literary journal went through a significant structural renovation two years ago. The two previous issues were on Image/Text (Spring 2006) and on Translation (Spring 2007). Issue 6 was a transitional one, since it combined a selection of the essays presented at our 2005 graduate colloquium with the new section of literary reviews. In the seventh issue, I established what I intended to constitute three permanent sections of the journal: Critical Writing, New Books, and Creative Writing, with the first two sections devoted to a unified theme.

The monographic topic of the present issue is "Contours of Modern Theatre," yet the first piece is not an essay on modern theatre; rather, it is a brief report on the activities of the reading group "A View from Charles Street." This report constitutes the perfect occasion for Ryan Culpepper, a PhD student in our centre, to reflect on some of the most important aspects of the theory and practice of Comparative Literature today—and, by extension, of contemporary literary studies. Following Culpepper's text is Paul Babiak's "Why Krausemeyer Couldn't Sleep, or, You Had to Be There," an insightful essay subtitled "A Hypothetical Exploration of the Theatrical Provenance of Silent Film Slapstick." Babiak, whose research deals with violence and humor in early film, provides an analysis of classical Hollywood slapstick in view of the precedent of nineteenth-century popular theatre. In her essay "Beyond the Veil: *The Pearl Fishers* and Other Operatic Revelations," Myra Bloom engages herself in a dialogue with postmodern critics—from Derrida to Lyotard, from Cixous to Said—while she renders a brilliant conceptualization of the "operatic veil" that discloses the fictional world of Bizet's opera. The fact that these two essays deal with film and opera, and only indirectly with theatre, is far from being accidental. I am hoping to challenge the reader's expectations by placing right up front those texts on "derived" artistic forms, instead of the essays dealing more directly on modern theatre.

The third essay in this issue of *Transverse* is Gina Beltrán's "Spatial Dynamics in Lorca's *La casa de Bernarda Alba*: From the Dramatic Text to the Performance." As indicated in the title, Beltrán offers a dual analysis of Lorca's classic work, one that consider the theatrical implications of the spaces and times that are evoked in Lorca's dramatic text. In "Negotiating with the Self: *Fronteras Americanas* as Dialogic Monologue," Chiara

Sgro revisits the implications of Bakhtin's polemic depiction of drama as a monological genre. She analyzes the dialogic implications of the presence of a split self in Guillermo Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas*, a play first performed in Toronto in 1993. The last essay, which can be read in combination with Sgro's text, is Ioana Sion's "The Ontology of the Post/Modern Self: From Dante to Claudel, Beckett and Ionesco." With Dante's *Divine Comedy* as main intertextual reference, Sion analyzes the archetypal patterns that structure the (post)modern works of three of the most important playwrights of the last century.

The New Books section contains reviews of two recent plays by Wajdi Mouawad and Tom Stoppard. Dave DeGrow examines Mouawad's *Scorched*, the second work of a tetralogy inspired in the author's own experiences in the Lebanese Civil War. This play was premiered in Montreal under the title of *Incendies* in 2003, and the English version about which DeGrow writes was recently acclaimed at Toronto's Tarragon Theatre. The second text in this section is Adam Grunzke's review of Stoppard's *Rock 'n' Roll*, the story of a generation of teenagers in the former country of Czechoslovakia who, after the 1968 invasion, find their only space of liberty in (mostly foreign) rock and roll music.

The Creative Writing section includes four poems and two short stories: the poems are Arlyce Menzies' "First Bird" and "Movement"; Hugh Leonard's "Obligatory Toronto Poem (for the Aspiring Canadian Poet)"; and finally Keith Nunes' "Moving Through a Crowd." The stories "Gypsy" and "Remembering My Mother's Memories" were written by Jan Thorburn and Lori A. Noll, respectively.

Before concluding my third—and last—preface as editor of *Transverse*, I want to express my gratitude to Roland LeHuenen, director of the Centre for the Centre for Comparative Literature. Two years ago I approached him with a proposal to renovate the structure and contents of this journal, and it was thanks to his enthusiastic support that the project was able to become a reality. I would also like to acknowledge the assistance of Bao Nguyen and Aphrodite Gardner, as well as the financial support of the Graduate Students' Union of the University of Toronto. In my role of editor, I have worked to present *Transverse* as a dynamic, attractive literary journal for graduate students all around the world. I am fully convinced that the next editorial board, still to be announced, will keep improving this journal.

Andrés Pérez-Simón

a note on "a view from charles street"

ryan culpepper

The running joke here in the Centre for Comparative Literature at University of Toronto is that comparative literature is the Canada of disciplines, and we usually mean this in two senses: 1) Comparative literature declines to define itself in positive terms, preferring instead to draft massive lists of what it's *not* (we are decidedly *not* English, *not* cultural studies or philosophy, in the same way Canada is *not* the U.S.); and 2) Comparative literature rejoices in bringing representatives of any and every imaginable group (ethnic, religious, sexual, etc.) into its fold but, once the representatives arrive, has few parameters for coherence and leaves them to mill about somewhat aimlessly without really engaging one another.

It's not that nothing has been said or written to address the question of what comparatists actually *do*—some of the discipline's finest scholars, including a few of Toronto's faculty, have attempted to explain in concrete terms both the theoretical underpinnings and the methodological rigors of comparative study. The problem is that many of the (I shudder to write) "canonical" treatises on the topic are rather old—though old doesn't have to mean untimely, as our colleagues in medieval studies never tire of reminding us—and those significant treatises that do exist are seldom read. The result is a great many graduate students in comparative studies who know they are not actually *comparing* things but with little sense of what they are doing as distinct from other disciplines and even less sense of what binds their work to that of other faculty and graduate students in comparative studies. Many see comparative studies as a "free space," where basically any compelling project in the humanities can be supported; others worry that as nearly every discipline shifts toward interdisciplinarity there is no niche left for comparative studies, prompting academics to sound the death knells they so love to sound (see Nietzsche on God, Barthes on the author, Fukiyama on history, Steiner on tragedy, et. al. *ad nauseam*).

A group of graduate students at the Centre for Comparative Literature, attempting to address this array of understandings and misunderstandings, of doubts and misgivings from within the discipline and accusations and caricatures from outside it, established A View from Charles Street, a reading group and blog dedicated to the oft-un-tackled task of describing in specific, positive terms the work of comparative literature. (The group's name refers to Lubomir Dolezel's well-known essay "A View

from Charles Bridge" and to the Centre's location on Charles Street in Toronto; in a much more incriminating way it also speaks to members' desire to converse at a roundtable and refer to themselves as "The View.") A View from Charles Street was organized around a series of readings compiled by this journal's editor-in-chief, Andrés Pérez-Simón, and artfully bound by Toronto's foremost 3-cent copy centre.

The group began with selections from Bassnett's *Comparative Literature: A Critical Introduction*, in which she links the development of comparative methodology in the early 19th century to the beginning-of-the-end of imperialism, the birth of the modern nation-state and the shift toward viewing mother-tongue and national identity as constitutive components of identity. There was a strong desire among European intellectuals to distinguish themselves and their notions of civility from those of emerging nations, which established themselves as national entities over the roughly 150-year "early period" of comparative literature. There was a need to demonstrate the existence of a transcultural and ahistorical current of aesthetic beauty, which could be identified and described by cataloguing its manifestations in the "great works" of more than one language or nation.

Thus, though it may appear that comparative study begins by assuming some degree of difference among the elements of study, in fact comparative literature started as an enterprise predicated on sameness, with studies all arriving at basically the same conclusion: "Despite all our (we English, French and German men's) differences, we really have the most important thing in common: we consistently achieve the highest level of aesthetic merit (as determined by ourselves), and you can see this by examining our greatest works of art." Studies like these became excellent ways to elevate European culture above non-European culture—"See? The markers of aesthetic merit, which we find over and over in one another's great works, we *don't* find in the works of *that* culture (if we bother to examine them at all)." In addition, the extreme degradation of translated works within comparative literature ensured that only those with elite advanced educations could be considered capable of seriously engaging and evaluating culture. It followed that the great comparatists before the 1960s were also the great philologists.

If we accept this history of comparativity as one inseparable from European hegemony and a bourgeois intellectualism that silences the sub-altern (one corroborated, obviously, by Spivak as well as others like Rey Chow, read at A View from Charles Street), we must ask: What becomes of comparative literature in the wake of the post-structural theory boom, as the very notions of language and text become highly

problematized and the idea of moving from culture to culture with political impunity becomes untenable? In other words, what is comparative literature if it is intellectually prohibitive to utter the words "comparative" and "literature"? Bassnett and Spivak (and, to some degree, guest speakers Emily Apter and Eric Cazdyn), depart from the study of form as a conceivable end, proposing to dump the notions of "literariness" and the search for aesthetic sameness by the wayside. More precisely, they argue that these ideas have already rightly been dumped by all but the stodgiest old structuralists, and that comparative literature clings to them at the risk of its own irrelevance.

Several members of A View from Charles Street accepted this challenge of a new comparative literature, one that may look much like Bassnett's model, in which comparative literature operates as a subsidiary of translation studies, or Spivak's hybrid of comparative literature and (a radically re-imagined) area studies, or, to quote one horrified reading-group member, "a slide into cultural studies." There seem to be bright prospects within such a model for a truly integrated and—finally—truly intercultural treatment of literature, which is to say, one predicated on difference rather than on an artificially constructed and politically nefarious sameness. This would mark a move away from the soaring rhetoric of World Literature, with its soft, specious promise of understanding and "coming-together" under the auspices of a common aesthetic.

There is, of course, the possibility of maintaining a bit more of the traditional character of the discipline, of moving toward new definitions of terms like literary, textual, aesthetic, canonistic and the rest, while acknowledging the blows delivered to literary studies by discourses of feminism, post-colonialism, deconstructionism, etc., blows that make any recourse to the old canon and the old philology indefensible. This direction also presents formidable challenges, in a sense demanding that comparatists develop an entirely new way of speaking about the aesthetic realm if they want to continue insisting on its (semi-, quasi-, pseudo-) autonomous existence. Mario J. Valdes, in his visit as a speaker to A View from Charles Street, encouraged an end to the obsession with re-problematizing already problematized problems (or, worse still, problematizing the problematization) and urged members to move toward a new logos of literary study, one that elucidates the subtle and crucial ways in which it is unique and irreducible to other "larger" studies, like the study of political economy or subject-formation, or even the study of language as such. This challenge was echoed by guest speakers Andrei Mihalescu, Peter Nessleroth and Linda Hutcheon: work boldly and proactively; refuse to abandon close and rigorous textual study.

Hutcheon also cautioned against a pendulum swing away from the European aesthetic and the promise of World Literature, citing the European Union as a model of a non-homoginizing space of commonality and mutual understanding. There are compelling reasons to question such a prescription, not least of which is its continued reliance on the modern nation-state as the irreducible unit of political identity and cultural study. One need only look to the non-E.U. fringes of Europe, such as the South Slavic nations, where the drive toward sameness has led to odious politics and cultural suppression, or Ukraine, where the policy of mono-linguistic cultural identity flounders endlessly in the capital and is ignored by the people, or the Caucasus nations, which can hardly keep track of their growing list of "breakaway" republics even as they present a united front to the E.U., to get a sense of the irresolvable intranational differences that are ignored by political and aesthetic foci on sameness and the nation (how can one speak of "Serbian" literature without reading Albanian? Or "Ukrainian" literature without reading Russian? Or "Georgian" literature without reading Svan?). Still, Hutcheon's larger point should not be lost: we as comparatists must reconcile ourselves to our discipline's legacy of positivism as well as its history of glossing over or exoticizing local (non-national, non-linguistic) differences, while continuing to insist that literature *can* be a source of real understanding, a legitimate way to approach another culture, and that it is not *mere* ironic word-play or *mere* political power-play, though it always *is* these things to some degree.

None of these directions seems to me indicative of a "free-space" discipline, or one idling its way into oblivion. While A View from Charles Street underscored how much there is to be debated and how much work there truly is to do, it also inculcated a spirit of optimism about the future of comparative studies. As all disciplines in the humanities continue nursing the wounds of post-structuralism and identity politics, they also, at last, feel somewhat empowered to rebuild themselves with new positive criteria for research. Comparative studies' potential is not only to stay afloat but to emerge as a home to the leading voices in the dialogue that must take place, one that will outline the contours of the new post-liberal and post-humanistic humanism. It is hoped that in its continuation A View from Charles Street will serve as one locus of such constructive dialogue, and we invite responses and contributions from other interested scholars either by visiting the group or through our blog at http://aviewfromcharles.blogspot.com.

why krausemeyer couldn't sleep, or, you had to be there:
a hypothetical exploration of the theatrical provenance of silent film slapstick

paul babiak

To many of us, "slapstick" means the work of Chaplin, Keaton, Lloyd, and a handful of others: and the academic discourse on it consists largely of reveling in a canon consisting of their greatest hits.[1] The consensus is that their work is great because it derived from the popular theatre – from music hall in Chaplin's case, from vaudeville in Keaton's, and so on. In the essay which follows, I propose first to problematize the assumption of a continuity between classical Hollywood slapstick and that of the nineteenth-century popular theatre, and then to claim for a derivation of one from the other by comparing an early slapstick film with the live sketch from which it derived. Here there will be no question of tracing a foregone conclusion regarding an assumed continuity in order to naturalize the spurious authenticity accruing to a star persona: both sketch and film are so obscure that even I have never seen them. What can I possibly hope to gain by comparing a vaudeville sketch and an early film, neither of which I've ever seen? Well, to establish a hypothesis – that cinema and theatre imply different ways of watching, which influence cinematic and theatrical slapstick staging differently – that, in fact, there is a fundamental difference in the optics of stage and screen which determines the way in which space is constructed, and in which physicality operates in each; and that that difference influences the development of slapstick style both before and during cinema's transitional period (1907–1913 on one account; 1915 and even 1917 on others) – that is, years before Sennett established Keystone, and before the great clowns ever came on the scene. My justification for this methodology is that, assuming there is such a difference, I'll have a much better chance of discovering it by getting by myself and examining the way my imagination constructs it – than with the actual texts distracting me.

Ben Brewster and Lea Jacobs point out, in the course of showing how film absorbs spectatorial attention in a way that theatre does not:

> Christian Metz has argued that theatre is exhibitionist – the actors on the stage know they are being watched by the audience, and the audience know that the actors know. In the cinema, on the contrary, the actor is absent; only his image is present, and the spectator is correspondingly in the position

> of a voyeur [. . .] Metz notes that theatre and cinema share 'the distance instituted by the look – which transforms the object into a *picture* (a *"tableau vivant"*), but insists that the presence of the actors implies their consent and hence an acknowledgement of the spectator that the cinema lacks. (12–13)

However, not all theatre is absorptive, even in this qualified way. Much, possibly even most, theatre requires the performers' constantly (or at the very least, frequently) meeting and even returning the spectator's gaze –variety is an outstanding example. Such theatre might therefore be called something like 'reflective.' Arguably, most theatre before the nineteenth century relied on a reflective, rather than an absorptive gaze – the prevailing assumption (though it has not gone unchallenged) is that pre-Romantic theatre was overwhelmingly frontal, or at least outwardly directed, as in the case of three-sided stages like Shakespeare's. While in cinema the gaze is unidirectional, it may be argued that in theatre it is essentially ambidirectional – even if only implicitly or potentially so in fourth-wall naturalistic drama. It therefore makes a difference whether your cinematic slapstick is derived from theatre, or is reinvented in cinematic form. On the received account, the earliest slapstick films were of acts which originally appeared on variety bills together with their live counterparts, and gradually evolved into the prototype for the cinematic genre. However, substantial documentation of this crossover is either missing, or extremely difficult to discover. According to the American Film Institute Catalog for the years 1893–1910, of the 17,000 films listed there, only approximately ten per cent survive. Many of the citations in the AFI Catalog include summaries of the films by either their producers or distributors from which it is possible to judge of their content; but those which seem most likely to have been based on stage sketches tend both to suppress performer credits (as the studios suppressed the identities of their own companies of players into the early 1910s), and often to shift their settings to real locales. In any case, we cannot assume, on the basis of a crossover of industry personnel, a crossover of artistic content or form: on the contrary, it seems probable that in the encounter with early film, vaudevillians adapted their performance techniques to their adopted circumstances.

A competing account of the origins of cinematic slapstick may be demonstrated to follow from the school of thought which treats early film as a "cinema of attractions." In such articles as "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy" and "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and

the Origins of American Film Comedy," Donald Crafton and Tom Gunning imply the possibility of a separate evolution of American slapstick which, while it draws on a vaudevillian aesthetic, is quintessentially cinematic in its reliance on specifically filmic properties such as editing, which made possible both the "trick" film and the chase. We can see more clearly how the priority of one or the other may affect the evolution of slapstick style. Was an essentially theatrical paradigm gradually modified by the accretion of specifically cinematic features; or was there a separate evolution of an essentially cinematic form, which absorbed theatrical influences? Kristine B. Karnick and Henry Jenkins imply a middle view in their discussion of early film's presentational aesthetic:

> The roots of this aesthetic have been traced to vaudeville. Cinema's economic dependence on vaudeville as an institutional base for its early exhibition and distribution, as Kristin Thompson notes, helped to determine the genres and formal norms of its primitive period, the years between 1895 and 1909 [. . .]. When the cinema of attractions became displaced by a more narratively centered cinema, it did not disappear completely. Rather, it survived within certain genres, most notably the avant-garde, the musical, animation and comedy [. . .]. (64-65)

Karnick's and Jenkins' approach would suggest that attractions based on cinematic novelties like editing, close-ups, inserts, and masks, may have taken refuge within pre-existing comedy genres. While the dime novel, the legitimate theatre, and the comic strip may be regarded as supplying the inspiration for some of these, film historians like Eileen Bowser seem to support the view that a principal source was the stage slapstick sketch:

> Nearly all the gags of slapstick had already appeared in the years before 1908: pie-throwing, explosions, acrobatic leaps and falls, undercranking and overcranking of the camera to speed or slow the action, and such specific gags as the newly-painted park bench that leaves stripes on the actor's clothes. These gags were the heritage of generations of clowns in the music halls, cafés, vaudeville, circus and fairgrounds, clowns who now performed for the camera. (*Slapstick* 13)

Bowser is indicating a vital cinematic tradition with clear roots, courtesy of its stock narrative situations as well as of its *dramatis personae*, in the popular theatre. In describing its

decline after 1908, her section on slapstick in *The Transformation of Cinema, 1907–1915* even cites Ben Turpin recalling a superseded style of slapstick with nostalgia in 1909, as well as an anonymous exhibitor's regret for "the old Essanay slap-stick variety [of drama]" (Bowser *Transformation* 179). It would seem that, even before the nickelodeon boom ushered in the transitional era, a hybrid form had evolved, with its own formal/stylistic distinguishing marks, combining elements of both theatrical and cinematic provenance. There should, therefore, be a corpus of films dating from about 1902-1907, prototypical of the slapstick genre, combining elements of chase, trick, or "prank" films with elements deriving from a live theatrical inheritance. It should (in theory) be possible to trace those films to the theatre pieces on which they were based, reconstruct these latter, and then compare the theatrical originals with their cinematic counterparts. In the AFI Catalog, for example, there is a synopsis for a short Lubin film from the period in question, which seems likely based on some sort of stage original. *The Farmer's Troubles in a Hotel* (1902) is a piece of physical comedy which seems to overlay one or two specifically cinematic "attractions" onto a scenario bearing the traces of a reliance on dialogue which elaborates a time-honoured comedy situation:

> Lubin summary: A farmer comes to town and enters the office of a large, well-known hotel. After having a heated argument with the room clerk, he is conducted to a room where he hides his pocket book under the pillow before going farther. After partially disrobing, he blows out the light and retires. He is annoyed by "the occupants" of the bed and arises to do battle with them. As he lights the gas, he notices a number of moving objects crawling up the wall. Seizing a lighted candle he holds it under each one of the "crawlers" when they immediately explode. He pulls the bed clothes to the floor and tries to obtain some rest in that manner, but to no purpose. A huge mosquito alights on his face, and scares him out of his wits. He endeavours in numerous ways to obtain rest. Failing to do so, he creates so much commotion that the porter of the hotel is sent to enquire the cause. Failing to give a satisfactory reason he is thrown bodily from the room. This is a funny picture all the way through, and will create roars of laughter. (AFI 334)

On the one hand, this film displays exactly the features of the pre-transitional slapstick film we have been looking for: a rudimentary story with a main action restricted to a single

location, onto which some specifically cinematic elements have evidently been grafted – the display of the "well-known hotel," and the spiders exploding, much, I assume, like the Selenites in Méliès' *A Trip to the Moon* from the same year. The film thus apparently looks both back – toward the sketch format of the variety theatres of the previous century – and forward – towards later films like Chaplin's *One A.M.* (Mutual Studios 1916). If the film can be linked to a determinate source on the vaudeville stage, it would furnish the perfect test case for the type of comparison I've proposed. Fortunately, at the conclusion of the AFI entry is a cross-reference: "Note: See similar Lubin picture *Why Krausemeyer Couldn't Sleep*. Alt. *Why Krausemeyer Can't Sleep*" (AFI 34). *The Farmer's Troubles* is evidently a remake. *Why Krausemeyer Couldn't Sleep* (Lubin Studios 1899) points us clearly towards a specific provenance in the variety theatre. The "Krausemeyer" synopsis runs as follows:

> Lubin summary: One of the funniest life-motion (sic) pictures ever seen is this one showing the trouble Hans Krausemeyer met with when he engaged a room in a country hotel. Krausemeyer is first seen entering the room, led by the porter, who charges him for the room and also for his services. Hans places his roll of bank notes under the pillow, but is seen doing so by the porter, who extracts it while Krausemeyer disrobes. He then leaves the room and our Teuton friend divests himself of all his clothing and tumbles into bed, cuddling up for a good snooze. The famous Jersey mosquitoes now get in their work, assisted by a number of residents usually found in the beds of a country inn. The occupant of the bed twists and squirms until, utterly disgusted, he leaps to the floor and grasping a towel proceeds to kill a few of the "skeeters" on the wall. He finally pulls the bedding out of the floor and tries to sleep again, but the mosquitoes seem to know a good thing when they bite it, and they will not let him rest. Hans puts his boots on to protect his feet, but an unusually large "skeeter" attacks his face. After driving him away he settles down and thinks himself safe, when a rat deliberately runs across the floor and steals his sheet, the only covering he has. Exasperated beyond endurance, Krausemeyer arises and throws the chairs about the room in his anger and awakens the porter, who fires him from the room, caressing him occasionally with his boot by way of emphasis. This film is not only funny but very interesting and full of life and action. (AFI 1187)

In Hans Krausemeyer we have a character name which is demonstrably associated with a well-known stock character from the vaudeville theatre – the “Dutch” (i.e., German) comic; we have a single scene; substantial story information relying on either dialogue or noise; we even have a local reference to the “famous Jersey mosquitoes.” *Why Krausemeyer Couldn’t Sleep* gives us strong reason to suspect that it is drawn from a stage original; one which played on circuits in or near New Jersey.

Unfortunately, if there was such a sketch, it was not advertised in the pages of the *New York Times* or the *Brooklyn Eagle* under that title. Krausemeyer was indeed a popular stock ethnic character surname: “Krausemeyer’s Alley,” according to a *New York Times* article from Jan. 9, 1929, was a burlesque favorite – a specialty of William B. Watson (known onstage as “Original Billy Watson” to distinguish him from “Sliding Billy” Watson, who often also played Krausemeyer). “Original Billy” (born Isaac Levy, on New York’s Lower East Side) was in fact a burlesque comedian, and “Krausmeyer’s Alley” a burlesque sketch. According to Watson’s obituary in the *New York Times* for Jan. 15, 1945:

> Among Watson’s big successes was *Krausemeyer’s Alley*, in which he played Phillip Krausemeyer, a German clarinetist, and his partner, Billy Spencer, played Mike Grogan, an Irish sausagemaker [. . .]. In 1931, when Anne Nichols, author of *Abie’s Irish Rose* sued Universal Pictures for plagiarism for producing the film, *The Cohens and the Kellys*, the defendant won the case by contending the theme belonged in our folklore and was common property, and offering a script of *Krausemeyer’s Alley* in proof thereof. (“Obituary” 19)

It’s not inconceivable that further resources on *Why Krausemeyer Couldn’t Sleep* could be turned up in papers appertaining to either William Watson. But the citation demonstrates the variety-theatre folkloric milieu from which Hans Krausemeyer likely derives, and suggests we might seek the origins of the Klausemeyer sketch in burlesque. Let us assume for the purposes of this discussion that in the archives at the New York Public Library or the Museum of Modern Art, we find a promptbook, cue sheet, and music cues – enough documentation to enable us to conjecturally reconstruct a burlesque sketch entitled “A Good Night’s Sleep,” on the basis of a frequently-repeated line in the dialogue. From the promptbook we learn the opening dialogue, in which Krausemeyer reveals that it is late, that he is a stranger to the area, that he is desperate for “A Good Night’s Sleep,”

and that he has a particular aversion to insects, on which account the Porter reassures him – there is an explicit reference to "Jersey skeeters" – with much mute facial play behind on the Porter's part behind Krausemeyer's back. The Porter's line on his first exit is an aside to the audience to the effect that he counts on the mosquitoes to drive Krausemeyer out before he discovers the theft of his wallet. We also learn that Krausemeyer mutters to himself in Dutch comic dialect throughout the sketch: in fact, many of his lines are cues to the violinist for *portamenti* on the A-string evocative of the buzz of mosquitoes; small blurts from a muted trumpet likewise evoke the bites of the bedbugs. As Krausemeyer's attempts to rid himself of the pests become ever more violent, they become progressively noisier; several times guests in neighbouring rooms bang on the walls and shout, particularly after Krausemeyer screams as the mouse-on-a-string pulls his bedsheet into the wings. The sketch builds to a crescendo on Krausemeyer's last and loudest repetition of the line, "ALLLL I VANT ISS A GOOD NIGHT'S SLEEEEP!!!!" whereupon the Porter reappears to engage Krausemeyer in some brisk knockabout before ejecting him through the door (loud crashing noises on symbol and bass drum) with a final wink to the audience (and possibly the business of flourishing Krausemeyer's money) on his exit.

This, then, is the sketch with which we might compare *The Farmer's Troubles in a Hotel*. Let us assume we are able to screen the latter on a subsequent visit to the MoMA. Stylistically, the film is simple: it consists of between two and four set-ups, the second one a long take, with, possibly, a couple of inserts of the spiders, perhaps in close-ups motivated by the Farmer's use of a looking-glass, and perhaps one of the huge mosquito perched on his nose. It is no chore to enumerate the various differences between them.

The most salient difference is of course the presence of sound in the stage sketch, and its absence from the film: the bodies in the film are somehow lighter, less corporeal; those onstage heavier – sometimes too heavy. There are other, perhaps more significant, differences: the stigmatization of Krausemeyer as the butt of the play's comedy, is based on an ethnic ostracism, while that of the Farmer in the film is based on a more broadly intracultural urban-versus-rural schism. But in the context of the sort of comparison proposed here, such differences are adventitious.

The essence of the stage sketch's address, and hence its comedy, is established by the complicity which exists between the audience and the Porter (as well as the mosquitoes and bedbugs who are effectively the Porter's – and hence the audience's – envoys) to derive a few minutes' fun by tormenting Krausemeyer. (Let us imagine that

my research has confirmed this guess by discovering a review by a more than usually percipient critic.) This is established largely by the ambidirectional eye contact passing between the Porter and the audience; it is also established, of course, by the buzzing of the mosquitoes, which articulates the audience's wish that Krausemeyer should be tormented. This same optic is repeated throughout whenever Krausemeyer faces front (as he frequently does) and complains to the house (without making eye contact with anyone) that all he wants is "a good night's sleep." The ambidirectionality of the theatrical gaze is the basis for the negotiation of the humour which arises between Krausemeyer and his unknown tormentors – us. It is through participating in this gaze that we "feel" his emotional and physical pain. In order to find it – indeed, to make it – funny, we literally have to be there.

The film of *The Farmer's Troubles in a Hotel*, already represents a second degree of the adaption of *A Good Night's Sleep* to the exigencies of the medium of film. Narrative point of view is from the beginning explicitly limited to center on the farmer, and the audience's cognition of the experience is aligned with the Farmer's throughout. His naïve astonishment at the splendor of the "office of a large, well-known hotel" is an exaggeration of our own; his solicitude over his pocket-book caricatures our own; his revulsion at the infestation of the room is explicable in terms of our own; and our satisfaction at the spectacular explosions of the "crawlers," mirrors his. Instead of an intensification of noise, the film is structured around an accumulation of incident which culminates, rather than climaxes, in the surprise twist which supplies the slapstick, which is apparently somewhat reduced from the earlier film. Here, until the film's end, the overall impression is one not of sadism, but of sympathy: although the character is somewhat distanced by the exaggerated conventionality of his "rube" makeup, the alienating effect of this is more than offset by the viewer's optical alignment with him.

In *The Farmer's Troubles in a Hotel*, it is a unidirectional gaze which operates; to some extent this simplifies the mode of the film's reception. Here the spectator is genuinely a voyeur: (s)he is looking through a magic mirror into a space which (s)he does not personally occupy: at a person over whom (s)he has almost absolute power. The cinematic image is both there and not there in an entirely different sense from that of the live performer; it is in a sense created by the act of looking at it. But the power of the unidirectional gaze is reversible in a way that the theatrical one is not: to the extent to which he requires active construction by the audience, the Farmer solicits a mirroring gaze which tacitly promotes spectatorial absorption, and a mimetic physical

response. Though the Farmer looks directly into the camera on a couple of occasions, he never can make eye contact with the spectator, and the spectator knows it, views him indulgently, and drops the guard which (s)he never relinquishes in the presence of Krausmeyer, who must continually negotiate with the audience for his laughs. The very impersonality of the film sets the spectator at liberty to empathize freely with a complete stranger, and then to turn around and revel in the mimetic echoes of that stranger's abjection as he is kicked downstairs. The spectator's discontents are thus booted out of frame along with their diegetic avatar as the audience are returned to themselves. Here, slapstick permits a discharge of spectatorial sadism by means of a unidirectional optic, onto an insensible object who absorbs projections, but never reflects them back.

That's the hypothesis, anyway. The human mind, under normal circumstances, naturally resists feeling, remembering, or imagining – in a word, intuiting – pain. *A Good Night's Sleep* exploits the ambidirectional theatrical gaze as a means of circumventing this resistance through the alternating exchange of signs of cruelty and empathy. The theatrical space through which this gaze passes is a communal, continuous, fluid one. The space of *The Farmer's Troubles in a Hotel*, on the other hand, is a separate, discontinuous, and inert one. The gaze which penetrates into it becomes absorbed within it. The inertia of this space is the last vestige of the image's solidity, the last material code to cue the absorbed spectator's mimetic response. For this reason, perhaps, slapstick film's style remains conservative, even recidivistic, throughout the silent period. Whereas other genres, notably melodrama under Griffith, were the sites of rapid stylistic complexification towards a more fluid rendering of cinematic space throughout the transitional and into the classical period, Griffith's most eminent disciple, Sennett, established from the outset an unsophisticated, even 'primitive' construction of diegetic space as the hallmark of the Keystone style. Possibly *Why Krausemeyer Couldn't Sleep* suggests its connection to a theatrical mode of staging inimical to the gaze on which film depends – a space where, to find its violence funny, you simply had to be there.

notes

[1] I would like most gratefully to acknowledge Len Ferstman of the Innis College Library for his invaluable assistance with the research on which this paper is based.

works cited

AFI. The American Film Institute Catalog: Film Beginnings 1893-1910. Comp. Elias Savada. Metuchen, J.J. & London: The Scarecrow Press Inc., 1995.

Bowser, Eileen. *The Transformation of Cinema 1907-1915*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

---, ed. *The Slapstick Symposium*. Brussels: Fedération Internationale des Archives du Film, 1988. Brewster, Ben and Lea Jacobs. *Theatre to Cinema*. Oxford and New York: Oxford UP, 1997.

Crafton, Donald. "Pie and Chase: Gag, Spectacle and Narrative in Slapstick Comedy." Karnick and Jenkins 106-119.

Gunning, Tom. "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy." Karnick and Jenkins 87-105.

Karnick, Kristina Brunovska and Henry Jenkins, eds. *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1995.

"Obituary." *The New York Times* 15 Jan. 1945.

beyond the veil: *the pearl fishers* and other operatic revelations

myra bloom

> *"For you must know right now: to touch 'that' which one calls 'veil' is to touch everything. You'll leave nothing intact, safe and sound, neither in your culture, nor in your memory, nor in your language, as soon as you take on the word 'veil'."* (Derrida, "A Silkworm of one's own, 24)

As usual, Derrida speaks to us in riddles. The veil is an appropriate emblem for the deconstructive endeavour itself, a praxis which uncovers that which has been occluded and, in the same gesture, clothes it again in the folds of esoteric language. The word 'esoteric', in effect, comes from the Greek εσωτερικός, "inside," and refers to the curtain that separated the initiates of Pythagoras' school from the uninitiated 'exoterics' in the 6th century BC. Arguably, to encounter texts written in the postmodern deconstructive style can feel much like standing outside among the exoterics. In this paper, however, I will attempt to peek behind that veil, using some of the insights of the deconstructive tradition to penetrate that other great veil, the stage curtain. In addition to a general discussion of operatic veiling, I will focus more specifically on George Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* (1863), an opera which is rich with veils of all kinds.

As Derrida intuits, to discuss 'the veil' as such is difficult given the different spheres and discourses in which it figures. There is no one transcendental signified to which any discussion of the veil can be traced back, but only a multiplicity of manifestations in a number of discourses such as aesthetics, religion, and politics, to name but a few. It is impossible, since the rise of postcolonial theory in the late twentieth century, to mention the veil without invoking the name of Edward Said, the pertinence of whose *Orientalism* resonates today in ongoing discussions about the Muslim *hijab* and what is regarded as its problematic presence in schools and other public spaces. In this context, the veil is the symbol par excellence of a larger debate regarding questions of fundamental human rights, the stakes of which are immeasurable. Veiling is also an important article of other faiths such as Judaism, where the sanctity of the Ark of the Covenant is guaranteed by the veil that conceals it and the prayer-shawl, or *tallith*, is worn by men when they pray. Veiling is present in works of visual art, dance, in ceremonies

such as marriages and funerals, in religious rituals, in everyday dress; this is to highlight but a small number of its appearances. The question of veiling in opera, then, spans a number of traditions and discourses, and as such must be approached from a somewhat open-minded perspective. Given the nebulousness of the topic at hand, it is important to try as much as possible not to foreclose avenues of exploration by attempting to narrowly define the veil in question. This paper will not therefore look at any one veil in particular, qua artefact, but rather at the more diffuse theme of 'operatic veiling'.

Because I am not a music scholar, I will be focussing on the libretto and performances of *The Pearl Fishers*, which will undoubtedly limit my reading in certain ways. In privileging word over music I am as it happens emulating the praxis of feminist opera critic Catherine Clément, who bolsters her "sacrilege of listening to the words" (12) with an elaborate theoretical apparatus.[1] My strategy for approaching the works admittedly occurs out of sheer necessity, though I would nevertheless maintain that the limitation is fortuitous in that it opens up a different way of seeing. By downplaying the musical aspect of opera and emphasizing the textual and performative, I am compelled to conceptualize in a very visual fashion, one which I think particularly fitting given the nature of the task at hand; the veil, in effect, turns our attention to the gaze itself, to visuality and to what it means to see. To begin, then, at the beginning. At the beginning of the opera, at the moment right before the curtain draws aside to reveal… what? The veil can always be found in close connection with the event: the magician pulls the cloth triumphantly away from his hat to reveal the rabbit underneath; the bride draws aside her veil to symbolize the passage from innocence to experience; the birthday guests spring from their hiding places to inaugurate the surprise party. In the split second which marks the transition from concealing to revealing there is inevitably a moment of deep uncertainty. Will it really happen? Opera, "the work," the event par excellence, begins with this tension, which is much akin to what Lyotard identifies as 'the sublime':

> Here, then, is an account of the sublime feeling: a very big, powerful object threatens to deprive the soul of any 'it happens', strikes it with 'astonishment' (at lower intensities the soul is seized with admiration, veneration, respect). The soul is thus immobilized, dumb, as good as dead. Art, by distancing this menace, procures a pleasure of relief, of delight. Thanks to art, the soul is returned to the agitated zone between life and death, and this agitation is its health and its life. (251)

There is a lot at stake at the beginning of an operatic performance. It is no secret that a great deal of effort and money has gone into its realization, and symbols of this expenditure are everywhere. Diamond earrings and fancy dresses abound, the photos in the programme reveal a lavish set which must, one reflects, have cost millions, the donors of the Platinum Circle have contributed those millions, the tickets were pricey, the seats are plush... In short, the performance has a lot to justify. As the night's patrons fidget with anticipation in their seats, the majestic curtain, the great veil, stands firmly in its place, a symbol of the fourth wall soon to be established at the play's opening. When the curtain opens, what will be behind it? The spectator anticipates that which will become revealed on the stage, wondering perhaps whether the curtain will open and behind it there will be nothing at all. The feeling of the sublime, Lyotard posits, is non-discursive; the relief that comes when the curtain is drawn aside to reveal an actual, furnished stage, is simply felt. Although it is possible to discuss the production in rational terms before and after the show, there is something entirely irrational in the initial moment of unveiling.

Not only is this moment experienced irrationally, it also holds a deep irony, in that the unveiling of the central curtain marks the passage into the world of illusion, of veiling. The stage is unveiled in order to inaugurate the advent of artifice. The raising of the curtain is necessarily an ironic one, in that it signifies exactly its opposite, that what lies beneath it is in fact the world of illusion. This is the initial reversal that marks the performance as an artistic event. Whereas the drawing aside of the veil (as in the marriage veil or the veil which covers the Ark) is normally revelatory or symbolic of something of a higher order of truth, the raising of the curtain in performance marks the passage into a lesser order of truth. This initial irony establishes the parameters of the world which is revealed behind the curtain, where all who enter are complicit in the perpetuation of artifice.

Let us now focus in on one such world, that of *The Pearl Fishers*, and the characters by which it is inhabited. This opera was first produced in Paris at the Théâtre Lyrique in 1863, with music by then-fledgling composer Bizet and libretto by Michel Carré and Eugene Cormon. Counter-intuitively, the story has very little to do with fishing at all and lacks, it is widely-acknowledged, a certain coherence. Here is the substance of the plot, in truncated form: the opera takes place in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where a group of fishers is scouring the seas for pearls. In order to assure the favour of the seas they enlist a veiled priestess, Leila, to intercede with the divinities on their behalf. Leila has to remain veiled at all times and promise not to engage in any romantic dealings with the menfolk. She is

at first intent on keeping her vow, but is inevitably compelled to transgress it when Nadir, a man she has met many years previously, makes his love known to her. Nadir's friend Zurga, the chief, is also in love with Leila, and therefore when the illicit love is discovered Leila is doubly condemned for breaking her vow and loving the wrong man. Nadir almost has the lovers killed, but ultimately allows them to escape. Feeling remorseful for having initially condemned his best friend and, as he realizes from a symbolic necklace, the woman (Leila) who a long time ago gave him shelter, Nadir sacrifices himself for their sake.

At the opera's opening, the curtain rises on a strangely familiar setting, common to countless other nineteenth-century fictions. We can imagine a bright artificial sun beaming down on the "wild and arid beach of the Island of Ceylon," landscape peppered with "bamboo huts and palm-trees" and "the ruins of an ancient Hindu pagoda." The audience hears "the sound of Hindu instruments" (Carré and Cormon 31). I will discuss the significance of the geographic setting in a moment, but wish to focus initially on this last, sonic detail, which appears in the libretto. As Peter Stein pointed out in a seminar at the University of Toronto in November 2007, the decision whether or not to put the players of instruments mentioned in the stage directions on the stage itself (as opposed to the orchestra pit) is reached in discussion between the various directors. His personal preference, he mentioned, was to display on stage as many instruments as possible. The presence of instruments on the operatic stage, however, is certainly not the norm. More often, the music that accompanies the performance issues from the mysterious depths of the orchestra pit.[2] The source of the music is deliberately veiled, because neither the characters nor the spectators are meant to regard the music as originating in the 'real' world. From the perspective of the characters on the stage, according to Carolyn Abbate, music is "the ambient fluid of their music-drowned world" (119). Not only do they not see the place from which the music issues, but they do not hear it at all; to see the musicians would be, for them, akin to seeing the very figure of a creator-god. We spectators, voyeurs peering in to the world of the characters on stage, are able to hear the music, but we are nevertheless not supposed to focus our attention on the musicians. The music we hear is divorced from the means by which it is produced, the instruments and instrumentalists themselves, and thus, while still retaining its musical quality, becomes something more than music, what Abbate calls "secret commentaries for our ears alone" (119). From our strange vantage atop the balcony, we *watch* the music unfolding on stage in the world of the characters. From the point of view of the characters, it is unacknowledged "ambient fluid";

from that of the spectator, “secret commentary.” In either case, the music distinctly does not register as the product of individual human beings unable even to see the action from their position at the bottom of that gaping pit. To push this analysis further, it is possible to argue that the best musicians are the most self-effacing; good musicians will present the music so *faithfully* that the composer will simply shine through unobstructed. Musicians are beholden to very conservative values of transmission, akin to the now outdated idea that the ideal translator serves the ancillary function of carrying information over the barrier of language, veiling his presence as much as possible in the process. In the case of the musicians, it is the score which must be carried over that great distance and transformed it into something “for our ears alone.” The veiling of the orchestra was for the nineteenth century, as it continues to be today, an important convention of the operatic performance.

The characters have a similar relationship to the set, which they inhabit seamlessly, as if it were a genuine world. They do not see that their world is a set, of course; the artifice is, to iterate Abbate’s rhetoric, “for our eyes alone.” As regards both the music and the set, the audience members necessarily have a gaze which is more encompassing than that of the characters. This may seem a banal observation, but my point in stressing this fact is to emphasize the lengths to which the audience member must go to ‘suspend her disbelief,’ as it were. Another way of discussing the suspension of disbelief is in the Marxian terms of “fetishism.” When an object is divorced from the means by which it was brought into being, as is the case of the music and the images presented on stage, it becomes fetishized, or commodified. Marx writes that fetishization occurs when “the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life” (4.27). It is only possible to immerse oneself in the action occurring on stage if one can ignore the means by which it was brought to fruition, willing oneself to forget about the stage managers, the set designers, the directors, the choreographers, and all the technical apparatus underlying the performance as seen. Disbelief is not simply suspended, it is willed into submission. This kind of fetishism is crucial in order for the art to mark itself out as distinct from the sphere of quotidian activity.[3]

To return to that landscape of swaying palm trees and cozy pagodas, it now becomes clear in what way the operatic stage presents a particularly fertile soil for the playing out of fantasies already inscribed in cultural consciousness. Opera works to perpetuate fictions, among them the artifices I have just described. So far, I have limited my examination to questions of form, but the same fetishism is clear in the content of

operatic works. Operas, to be sure, are not renowned for the profundity of their content, and rely heavily on certain unquestioned tropes. This is especially the case in the operas of the late nineteenth century, the period which Said locates as the progenitor of Orientalist discourse. Fantasies about the orient abounded among western Europeans, and *The Pearl Fishers* offers a typically orientalist depiction of Ceylon as "a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences" (Said 1). What is striking, however, is that the rhetoric of strangeness and exoticism is so deeply entrenched that it continues to hold sway even in this postcolonial era. The promotional material for the 2002 production in New Zealand unabashedly enthuses,

> Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* conjures up some of the most sensuous and alluring images in opera: the lush and mysterious Ceylonese landscape, a ruined temple at sunset, pearl divers and an enigmatic veiled beauty. With its mystical setting, glorious music and sumptuous imagery, *The Pearl Fishers* melds passion and exoticism into a spellbinding story. ("The Pearl Fishers")

It is tempting to argue that *The Pearl Fishers* in fact owes much of its continued success today to the ever-fetishized oriental landscape, as the story is full of gaping holes and the music, for the most part, uncelebrated. It is nearly impossible to find a review of any production that does not laud first and foremost the lushness of the staging, before going on to mention the virtue or incompetence of the specific performers.[4]

At the centre of this oriental landscape is, of course, the figure of the veiled priestess. There are several ways of understanding Leila's character, and I would like to begin with what I consider a 'conventional feminist' reading which, though not totally off-base, is at the very least reductionist. I am presenting it because I think it worth mentioning but in need of supplementation. Clément does not discuss *The Pearl Fishers* in particular, but offers a series of similar readings of other texts which bolster her hypothesis that opera is a patriarchal form and that "on the opera stage women perpetually sing their eternal undoing" (5). It is possible to regard Leila as yet another woman done wrong by a patriarchal order; according to this view, the veiled priestess is the ultimate, fetishized, other. In a society as homosocial as the nineteenth-century European, Leila qua woman already has strangeness encoded in her gender. When this "dark continent," as Freud will describe female consciousness in the early twentieth century, inhabits the literal dark

continent (here, Ceylon), she becomes the site for the playing out of a certain kind of fantasy. The veiled priestess is the archetypal image of the oriental woman as conceptualized by so-called "Western" culture, with her exoticism, her power, and her tantalizingly strange appearance (Grace 43). She is forced to wear a veil by a patriarchal order intent on using her for its own ends and therefore needing to keep her independence at bay.[5] The figure of Leila embodies the ambivalence of an era that was extremely suspicious of women but required them for the perpetuation of life, in the domestic as well as the biological sense. When Zurga, the High Priest, asks Leila, "promets-tu de garder la voile qui te cache?" ["do you promise to keep wearing the veil that hides you?"] he is arguably rehearsing the masculine need to ensure the woman's complicity in her social subordination.

Although this reading rightly points out certain nineteenth-century tropes regarding the oriental woman, it falls prey to a fallacy which continues to appear in contemporary writing on the topic of the veil, namely that the sole function of veiling is to obliterate the identity of its wearer and to prevent her from acceding to a position of social agency. Daphne Grace, who has written extensively about the role of the veil in contemporary and historical writing, argues that veils play complex roles which have different significations to different women. She points out that "[t]hrough veiling women may gain access to an area of inner experience that is a psychological life force of women, a prerequisite for gaining rather than losing self-identity" (Grace 25). Rather than viewing the veil as that which allows masculine subjects to 'scopophilically' ogle the passive woman's body (Freud 251), the veil carves out a space in which the woman can exist without the fear of being followed by the gaze of others. As Cixous writes, "not-to-see-oneself-seen is virginity strength independence" (12). In support of this interpretation we might add the fact of Leila's role as intercessor with the divine. Ultimately, it is Leila who holds the fate of the pearl fishers in her hands, and who possesses the connection to the spiritual world denied to the men.[6] In the end, she does in fact assert herself when she chooses to forsake her vow and run away with Nadir. Therefore, although it is tempting and in some measure justified to regard Leila as the symbol of a distinctly masculine nineteenth-century fetish, it is also important to point out the nuances in her character which seem to suggest her individual agency.

As a final point, I would like to argue that Leila's promise to remain veiled recalls the artistic pact itself, entered into at the raising of the curtain. In Grace's analysis of another opera, Strauss' *Salome*, she argues that "[t]he veil represents Art: it is artifice, the play of surface, the 'illusion' of truth and beauty" (49). Zurga's question, "promets-

tu de garder la voile qui te cache?" is the question that necessarily underlies all artistic performances, the one which is asked of the audience and by the audience. For the duration of the show, the audience must promise to suspend its disbelief, agreeing to be shrouded in darkness as the show unfolds on the illuminated stage. In return, the actors must promise to maintain the integrity of the fourth wall, sustaining the world of artifice so as not to betray the trust of the audience. Leila's supernatural power is dependent upon her veiling herself in the same way that the actors on stage must wear their costumes in order to become characters in the service of Art. The veiled priestess is an image of Art itself, with its tensions between concealment and revelation, reality and illusion, corporeality and transcendence. There is something amazingly complex about opera, and the fact that it speaks to us so profoundly in spite of its many objectionable elements has much to do with our delight in beholding the great spectacle. Perhaps, then, it is not such a limitation after all to talk about opera from the point of view of its visual components, for, as Cixous writes, "[t]o hear you have to see clearly" (12).

Does *The Pearl Fishers* thus stand revealed?

Unlikely.

But at least we stood outside the curtain and peeked in.

notes

[1] Clément aligns discoursing on music with a masculine tradition, one she attempts to subvert by focussing instead on the words to orchestrate “a penetration, as if the music were violated, pricked right through its virgin hymen” (13). This argument, to my mind, does more to entrench the trope of music(ology) as a masculine praxis than it does to overturn it.

[2] A notable exception is a performance of *The Pearl Fishers* staged as an experiment at a Festival Vancouver production in 2004, where the musicians were in full view throughout the performance.

[3] Given the fidelity of the operatic form to this kind of seamless relationship between the characters and their world, it is easy to see by way of contrast in what consisted the revolutionary nature of Brecht’s Verfremdungseffekt or ‘alienation effect’. In the late 1930s, Brecht developed a technique which involved laying open the conventions of the stage for all to see, in order to prevent the spectator from being able to assume a position of superiority over the characters. In his plays, the characters are aware that they are characters in a play, and the gaze is reversed: “The audience can no longer have the illusion of being the unseen spectator at an event which is really taking place” (Brecht 95). While calling into question the integrity of the so-called ‘fourth wall’, Brecht sought to radically defetishize theatre by reinscribing it within the sphere of actual life. His art consisted in unveiling the artifice of theatre within the context of the performance itself, in order to prevent the normal relationships between the watcher and the watched to play themselves out. Epic theatre, we might argue, is opera’s antithesis.

[4] A Google search reveals the following examples, in the order they appear: the 2005 San Francisco Opera performance: <http://www.straight.com/article/the-pearl-fishers>; the 2001 Opera Queensland production: <http://reviews.media-culture.org.au/events/pearlfishers-c.html>; the 2005 New York staging of the San Diego Production: <http://www.nytimes.com/2005/04/12/arts/music/12perl.html>, to mention only several examples.

[5] This is the same logic espoused by many western theorists, writing about the coverings of middle-eastern women such as the burqa or the hijab, which are regarded as constraints placed on the

woman by a heavily patriarchal society (Grace 1).

[6] It is worth pointing out that the name “Leila” is the Arabic word for “night,” and that the night is associated throughout with the imagery of veiling: “La nuit ouvre ses voiles,” “Le nuit etend ses voiles,” etc. The connection between Leila and the extra-human world is emphasised by this imagery.

works cited

Abbate, Carolyn. “Mahler’s Deafness: Opera and the Scene of Narration in Todenfeier.” *Unsung Voices : Opera and the Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1991. 119-123.

Brecht, Bertolt. “Alienation Effects in Chinese Acting.” *The Routledge Reader in Politics and Performance*. Ed. Lizbeth Goodman. New York: Routledge, 2000. 94-96.

Carré, Michel and Eugène Cormon. “Les Pêcheurs de perles (libretto).” Paris : EMI France, 1954.

Cixous, Hélène. “Savoir.” *Veils*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Stanford : Stanford UP, 2001. 1-16.

Clément, Catherine. *Opera, or the Undoing of Women*. Trans. Betsey Wing. New York: I. B. Tauris, 1997.

Derrida, Jacques. “A Silkworm of One’s Own.” *Veils*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington. Stanford: Stanford UP, 2001. 17-92.

Freud, Sigmund. *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality*. Trans. James Strachey. London: Penguin Books, 1991.

Grace, Daphne. *The Woman in the Muslin Mask*. Sterling: Pluto Press, 2004.

Lyotard, Jean-François. “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde.” *Postmodernism: A Reader*. Ed. Thomas Docherty. New York: Columbia University Press, 1993. 244-256.

Marx, Karl. “The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof.” *The Capital*. 22 May 2008

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1867-c1/ch01.htm#S4>.
"*The Pearl Fishers*." The NBR New Zealand Opera. 2002. 22 May 2008.
<http://www.nzopera.com/productions/2002/pearlfishers.cfm>.
Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. Toronto: Random House, 1994.

spatial dynamics in lorca's *la casa de bernarda alba*: from the dramatic text to the performance

gina beltrán

It is a well-known anecdote that Federico García Lorca interrupted a reading of *La casa de Bernarda Alba* with the repeated exclamation: "¡Ni una gota de poesía! ¡Realidad! ¡Realismo!" ("Not a single drop of poetry! Realism! Realism!").[1] This intrusion of the author into his own work led many critics to discuss and interpret the play either in favor of or against Lorca's statement: some arguing that the play is a realist portrayal of the lives of Andalucian women, others defending the play as a poetic masterpiece. Within this ongoing dispute *La casa de Bernarda Alba* is continuously read as realist narrative or as poetry, but not often is it read as what it is: a dramatic text. My intent in this essay is to discuss *La casa de Bernarda Alba* as a dramatic text focusing particularly in the structural element of space. From this perspective I wish to comment on the generic problem of drama—a genre that constantly swings between literature and theatre—by taking Lorca's dramatic text strictly as literature and examining to what extent, from a spatial point of view, can Lorca's dramatic text predetermine its theatrical performance.[2]

The title of Lorca's text denotes the space in which the play develops. The interior of the house is a closed space that entraps the five daughters of Bernarda, not because of its thick walls but because of the asphyxiating presence of the matriarch. Bernarda imposes eight years of mourning in which not even the wind from the street will enter the house (129). Clearly, Bernarda's despotism is linked to the control and delimitation of space within the play. All too concerned about her daughters' honor, Bernarda abhors the outside and takes everything exterior or foreign as something immoral that threatens the reputation of her house. Her rejection of the exterior is a manifestation of her preoccupation with social expectations, as Magdalena puts it: "nos pudrimos por el qué dirán" ("we rot away inside over what people will say"; 137). This social preoccupation results in the exclusive reaffirmation of the interior space, enabling Bernarda to establish through her tyranny the limits of space: only the interior of her house, and not the exterior world, is allowed to her daughters. This private space in opposition to the public space is construed based on a semantic antagonism, for which space becomes charged with semantic significance. The opposition between interior and exterior space semantically corresponds to the central

thematic of the play: the battle between the principle of authority and the desire for freedom. Since the semantic antagonism of space relates to the thematic structure of the play, space, then, comes to perform what J. M. Lotman designates a “model-forming role” (Pfister 257).

The “model-forming role” of space is important to the dramatic text as well as the potential performance of the text. Bernarda’s tyranny establishes not only the limits of space for her daughters, but also the limits of space for the reader and for the spectator. The three acts of the play take place inside the house, and the reader and the spectator can only learn of the events that happen elsewhere by reading or by listening to the dialogue of the secluded women. All the action to which the reader and the spectator have access to occurs inside the house, indicating that in a performance the stage would most likely present the interior space. In this sense, we note how the spatial structure of the dramatic text can predetermine the theatrical space of the performance (Veltruský “Dramatic” 98).

Pfister argues that in dramas consisting of a single-locale there is always tension between what is presented onstage and offstage (258). This is precisely the case of *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. The reader and the spectator are limited to the interior space, but virtually nothing happens within Bernarda’s house: this is a play in which almost everything happens elsewhere. The three acts of the play share the same structure: they begin with a calm conversation between the women, the conversation then becomes conflictive and the tension inevitably culminates in violence. The acts of violence and of heightened emotion always occur outside the house—Paca la Roseta’s escapades, the beating of Librada’s daughter, Adela and Pepe’s romance, and Adela’s suicide—and they only enter the play through the dialogue of the secluded women. Therefore, the tension between the interior space of the house, as the visible space of presentation, and the space of hidden action, results in the dominance of the evoked space over the visible one, since the most important events take place offstage and they come to control the conversations of the women in the house.

The dominance of the alluded space over the visible space can be understood through Karel Brušák’s conceptualization of the *imaginary* space. Brušák explains that when a past event in the imaginary space is narrated in the dramatic space, only the signified is provided, enabling the signifiers to have free play. The signifier, then, becomes polysemic and is free to be interpreted differently by other characters—who at this point become spectators—and by the spectators themselves (155). Brušák’s argument illuminates our understanding of the final set of events in Lorca’s play. Towards the end of the play, after Martirio has informed Bernarda about Adela and Pepe’s romance, Bernarda

takes a gun and rushes out the door to kill Pepe, who has just been heard whistling in the corral. The reader is left inside the house with the daughters and can only ponder what happens outside by means of Lorca's indication: "*Suena un disparo*" ("*A shot is heard*"; 198). This noise constitutes a signified with no fixed signifier. Since the action occurs in the imaginary space there is no certainty about the outcome of the event, a fact which enables the characters and the reader to attribute multiple meanings to the noise: Did Bernarda kill Pepe? Did Bernarda kill herself? Did she kill the stallion? Martirio, who has been outside and knows what happened, enters the house and exclaims: "Se acabó Pepe el Romano" ("That's the end of Pepe el Romano"; 198). Martirio's words can either be believed or discredited by the listener. Adela believes Martirio's words and exits the visible space to lock herself in her room, which also constitutes part of the imaginary space. Immediately the reader learns that Martirio's statement was a lie, and simultaneously realizes that Adela has erroneously taken Martirio's words as a truthful statement. At that precise moment Lorca surprises the reader with a second reference to the imaginary space: "*Suena un golpe*" ("*A thud is heard*"; 198). The same process of ambiguity unravels, as this thud constitutes another signified with no corresponding signifier. The characters and the reader are led to ponder the many possible interpretations; they resolve only after Bernarda tears down the door and La Poncia, having entered the imaginary space and returned to the dramatic space, communicates that Adela has killed herself.

The dramatic effect of these final events is intrinsically linked to the tension between imaginary and dramatic space. By keeping the events outside of the characters' and readers' gaze, Lorca creates instances of ambiguity that provoke the polysemic interpretation of outside signifiers. Such ambiguous instances occur on two different levels: within the dramatic text, regarding characters, and outside of the dramatic text, regarding readers. On the one hand, the characters become spectators onstage in the process of interpreting the signs of the imaginary space. Adela becomes a spectator when listening to Martirio's lie. The wrongful information leads Adela to misinterpret the imaginary space and consequently to take away her life. On the other hand, the reader, who stays within the dramatic space at all times, is also led confronted with ambiguous, multiple interpretations of the imaginary space. The reader regards the situation in the dramatic space, but is simultaneously preoccupied by what happens in the imaginary space. Assuming that a performance respects the spatial dynamic created by Lorca, the spectator is conditioned by the dramatic text to confront the same instances of ambiguity and suspense as

the reader and the characters. Thus, the imaginary space ceases to correspond to what is spatially offstage, and instead takes over the entire theatre and conquers the spectator's consciousness as another space where the drama unfolds (Mukařovský 215).

Space is indeed the dominant structural element of the dramatic text, but the structure in its entirety should presently be discussed. Veltruský argues that the dramatic plot is self-contained since it has unity: beginning, middle, end (*Drama* 79). This argument echoes Aristotle's description of tragedy in the *Poetics*: "Tragedy is an imitation of an action that is complete, and whole [. . .] a whole is that which has beginning, a middle, and an end" (14). *La casa de Bernarda Alba* follows Aristotle's argument in its unity of plot. The play is divided into three acts, just like the classic tragedies, and these acts correspond to the beginning, middle, and end of the plot. Moreover, as we have seen, the play also follows the unity of space, as did the Greek tragedies. [3] Based on these structural elements we could call Lorca's play a tragedy, as some critics have maintained, but the play does not posses the fundamental quality of a tragedy: a metabasis, which is the hero's change of fortune from good to bad, or conversely, from bad to good (23). I have digressed into this discussion of whether *La casa de Bernarda Alba* is a tragedy or not merely to return to Veltruský's argument that the dramatic plot is self-contained. Lorca's play is not a tragedy precisely because its plot is self-contained; the play is instead a drama.[4] In the play there is not a metabasis because nothing changes for better or for worse; instead, the closed structural construction of the play ensures that the play ends at the same point where it started. The first act begins with the ringing of the bells announcing Bernarda's husband's death, but soon Bernarda enters the scene with her despotic order: "¡Silencio!" ("Silence!"; 123). Bernarda imposes an almost a decade-long mourning in which she orders their daughters not to cry: "Magdalena, no llores; si quieres llorar te metes debajo de la cama" ("Magdalena, don't cry! If you want to cry, crawl under the bed"; 124). Similarly, the play ends with Adela's death. Bernarda repeats her actions by imposing an undefined mourning and denying the daughters the relief of crying: "¡Las lágrimas cuando estés solas! Nos hundiremos todas en un mar de luto!" ("Be quiet! Tears when you're alone. We will all drown in an ocean of grief"; 199). The ringing of the bells is announced for the next morning and Bernarda ends the play with the same word she first exclaimed: "¡Silencio!". Such circularity shows the closed structure in the dramatic plot in Lorca's play, or, in Veltruský,'s terms, the self-containment of the dramatic plot.

It is interesting, however, that Lorca engages with the conventions of the

Greek tragedy, and this brings us back to the dynamics between the imaginary and the dramatic space. Lorca's play functions like the classic tragedies by keeping violent actions in the imaginary space, outside of the gaze of the readers and the spectators. In spatial terms Adela's suicide is not different from Oedipus's action of ripping out his eyes or from Clytemnestra's assassination of Agamemnon, to name but a few examples. Nonetheless, it must be noted that in *La casa de Bernarda Alba* the dramatic space corresponds to the private space, while in Greek tragedy it constituted the public space. This indicates that Lorca's play is not a political happening, like Greek tragedy, but instead a domestic drama. Despite the difference between public and private space, Lorca's play has a dramatic unity of space that pushes all violent events into the imaginary space. In this sense, Lorca's play returns to the classical hierarchy of privileging speech over action: the action is narrated, not performed (Honzl "Hierarchy" 118). In this sense, Lorca subverts the hierarchy of modern drama, which regards action as its dominant element. Lorca explores what Honzl labels "the changeability of the theatrical sign," since in the play the word, as a theatrical sign acquires the potential of becoming action ("Dynamics" 274). A good example is la Poncia's recounting of the beating of la Librada's daughter:

> La hija de la Librada, la soltera, tuvo un hijo no se sabe con quién. [. . .] Y para ocultar su vergüenza lo mató y lo metió debajo de unas piedras, pero unos perros con más corazón que muchas criaturas lo sacaron, y como llevados por la mano de Dios lo han puesto en el tranco de su puerta. Ahora la quieren matar. La traen arrastrando por la calle abajo, y por las trochas y los terrenos del olivar vienen los hombres corriendo, dando voces que estremecen los campos. (175)

> Librada's daughter, the one who's not married, just had a baby and no one knows by who. [. . .] And to hide her shame, she killed it and put it under some rocks. But some dogs, with more feelings than many creatures, pulled it out, and as if led by the hand of God, they put it on her doorstep. Now they want to kill her. They're dragging her through the street below, and the men are running down the paths and out of the olive groves, shouting so loud the fields are trembling.

La Poncia begins her speech using the past tense, indicating the action that has already taken place. However, her speech changes tense with the words: "Ahora

la quieren matar". At this moment, la Poncia's speech becomes the replacement of the action that is happening in the street. In this ersatz role la Poncia's speech as a theatrical sign takes on the function of the theatrical sign of acting, and consequently, the hierarchy of action and speech is inverted. Therefore, when a theatrical sign acquires the function of another theatrical sign, the hierarchy of theatrical signs within the drama is challenged (Honzl "Dynamics" 278). In this sense, we can argue that in *La casa de Bernarda Alba* the spatial structure of the dramatic text already determines the hierarchy of the theatrical signs in the performance: speech must be placed over action.

The hierarchical subversion of speech and action is accompanied in the play by the hierarchical subversion of the aural over the visual. We have already seen how in the final set of events of the play, through Bernarda's erring shot and Adela's suicide, the imaginary space enters the dramatic space through the element of sound. This constitutes a non-spatial denotation of space, where sound comes to represent the imaginary space. Throughout the play we have other similar cases: in Act I the bells refer to the church, in Act II the voices of the singing men refer to the open fields, and in Act III the thuds of the stallion denote the erotic imaginary space of the corral. In all these cases the aural element inserts the imaginary space into the dramatic space, and as a result, the theatrical sign of sound takes the function of the theatrical sign of scenery. This flexibility of the theatrical sign to assume another function can be complemented by Brušák's interpretation of the imaginary space. As we have seen, Brušák argues that the imaginary space is present in the dramatic space as a signified with no fixed signifier. Honzl argues instead that the imaginary space is present in the dramatic space in that a theatrical sign of the dramatic space that has taken the function of a theatrical sign in the imaginary space. Concretely, in Brušák's terms Bernarda's gunshot constitutes a signified that enables multiple signifiers, in Honzl's terms it constitutes the sign of sound taking over the visual function. Therefore, for Brušák the theatrical sign is polysemic and for Honzl it is polyfunctional.

The polysemic and the polyfunctional nature of the theatrical sign function differently within Lorca's play. The infiltration of the imaginary space through the aural element into the dramatic space always constitutes a polyfunctional sign, since the imaginary space is always denoted aurally in the play. Nonetheless, these aural signs are not always polysemic. The ringing of the bells denotes the invisible space of the church but there is no ambiguity as to what these sound connote; the reader is well-aware that they correspond to the funeral of Bernarda's husband. Interestingly, the polysemic aural

sign only appears in the play in moments of dramatic tension when uncertainty about the imaginary space is at its highest point. In this sense, the polysemic is tied to the construction of suspense in the play, and suspense is limited to the final set of events during the play.

In this essay I have focused on the structural element of space, taking Lorca's play exclusively as a literary text and not taking into account any of the multiple famous performances of the play. My intent to remain within the literary boundaries of the text was an attempt to examine closely the spatial dynamics that arise strictly from the dialogue. The structural element of space constitutes a central point of contact between the dramatic text and the performance. The dominance of the imaginary space over the dramatic space, the dominance of speech over action, and the dual potential of the theatrical sign—both as polysemic and as polyfunctional—are three fundamental aspects in the process of reading and in the action of staging Lorca's text. They become three essential axes in the text-performance paradox because as intrinsic elements of the dialogue they cannot be ignored either in the text or in the performance. Lorca's dramatic text becomes eternal and identical (Ubersfeld 3): its spatial dynamics become indefinitely reproducible and renewable from one performance to the other, but, at the same time, remain unchanged by the nature of the dialogue. Thus, *La casa de Bernarda Alba*, far from being a realist narrative or an allegorical poem, is a dramatic text conscious of its own performative potential.

notes

[1] I am quoting from Josephs and Caballero (69), who take these words from an article by Adolfo Salazar published in the Cuban magazine *Carteles* in April 10, 1938. All the English translations in this essay are mine.

[2] Veltruský, in "Dramatic Text as a Component of Theatre," argues that the performance of a play is exclusively determined by the dramatic text. See also Veltruský's *Drama as Literature*.

[3] Two important issues should be pointed out here. The first one is regarding Aristotle and the three

unities of tragedy. The assumption that Aristotle prescribed the three unities of tragedy: action, place and action, pertains to a posterior interpretation of his work done during the Renaissance. In the *Poetics* Aristotle discusses the unity of action, but the unity of place and the unity of time are not prescribed but instead derived from the initial structural unity of action. Aware of this issue, I nonetheless wish to incorporate into my argument the discussion the unity of place and time, continuing the tradition of how Aristotle has come to be interpreted. The second issue is precisely the lack of unity of time in Lorca's play. In *La casa de Bernarda Alba* a non-represented time passes between each act, in which the characters develop their feelings. For example, Adela's and Maritirio's desire for Pepe. Furthermore, every act begins with the word "ya," making an explicit reference to the time that has gone by between the acts. The fact that the play does not have the classic unity of time is not a strong argument to qualify or not Lorca's play as a tragedy, since for centuries tragedies had been violating the so-called Aristotle prescriptive unities.

[4] Lorca himself continuously referred to the play as a drama, denying that it was the tragedy that completed his trilogy of tragedies along with *Yerma* and *Bodas de Sangre*. Although, since he was killed before he finished his trilogy, and since *La casa de Bernarda Alba* was his last play, many have come to consider the latter as the final tragedy that completed his trilogy (Josephs and Caballero 45).

works cited

Aristotle. *Poetics*. Trans. S. H. Butcher. New York: Dover, 1997.

Brušák, Karel. "Imaginary Action Space in Drama." *Drama und Theater*. Ed. Herta Schmidt and Hedwig Král. München: Otto Sagner, 1991. 144-92.

Galán, Eduardo. *Claves de 'La casa de Bernarda Alba'*. México: Editorial Diana, 1991.

García Lorca, Federico. *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. Ed. Allen Josephs y Juan Caballero. México: Red Editorial Iberoamericana, 1991.

Greenfield, Summer M. "Poetry and Stagecraft in *La casa de Bernarda Alba*." *Hispania* 38.4 (1995): 456-461.

Honzl, Jindřich. "Dynamics of Sign in the Theatre." Matejka and Titunik 75-94.

---. "The Hierarchy of Dramatic Deviced." Matejka and Titunik 118-127.

Josephs, Allen, and Juan Caballero, "Las Tres Constantes del Teatro Lorquiano." *La casa de Bernarda Alba*. Ed. Allen Josephs and Juan Caballero. México: Red Editorial Iberoamericana, 1991. 11-20.

Matejka, Ladislav and Irwin R. Titunik. *Semiotics of Art*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976.

Mukařovský, Jan. "On the Current State of the Theory of Theatre." *The Prague School Selected Writings, 1929-1946*. Ed. Peter Steiner. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1982.

Pfister, Manfred. *The Theory and Analysis of Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1991.

Ubersfeld, Anne. *Reading Theatre*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999.

Veltruský, Jiří. *Drama as Literature*. Lisse: The Peter de Ridder, 1977.

---. “Dramatic Text as a Component of Theatre.” Matejka and Titunik 94-117.

negotiating with the self: *fronteras americanas* as dialogic monologue

chiara sgro

At first reading, Guillermo Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas* may appear as a dialogue on cultural stereotypes between two characters, Verdecchia and Wideload McKennah. The fact that these two characters are performed by the same actor and that *Fronteras* was first staged at Tarragon Theatre Extra Space in January 1993 by a playwright and actor called Guillermo Verdecchia is significant and calls into question the definition of *Fronteras* as "dialogue." The aim of my paper is to demonstrate that *Fronteras Americanas* actually is a dialogic monologue, that is, a kind of monologue with a dialogic function and significance.

The label "dialogic monologue" seems to be, at first sight, a contradiction in terms. The *Oxford Concise English Dictionary* defines "monologue" as a long speech by one actor in a play or film and "dialogue" as a conversation between two or more people as a feature of a book, play, or film. According to these definitions, *Fronteras Americanas* can surely be considered to be a monologue; indeed, it was written to be performed by one actor only, though the voices in the play are more than one. Leaving apart for a moment the function and actual meaning of these different voices, if dialogue involves "two or more people" it must be explained how a theatrical monologue, such as *Fronteras*, can be "dialogic" as well. The contradiction in terms can be avoided by considering "dialogue" or "dialogism"—as Bakhtin did—to be a function of language, rather than a mere conversation between two different people or characters. In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, discussing Dostoevsky's "polyphonic novel," Bakhtin says: "A dialogic text consists of a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices" (6). Actually, according to Bakhtin, dialogism is alien to "pure drama" because dramatic dialogue "is determined by a collision between individuals who exist within the limits of a single unitary language" that "is individualised merely through dramatic personae who speak it" (*Dialogic* 405). On the contrary, in *Fronteras Americanas* the dramatic personae incarnate different aspects of a fractured individuality and each persona has her own voice within the monologue. As I will explain later, Verdecchia and Wideload can be considered as two faces of the same subjectivity and this subjectivity can be identified, to a certain extent, with that of the author himself. Remaining in the field of literary theory, it is necessary to give a proper definition—or at least a satisfying

explanation —of what a dialogic monologue is, in order to demonstrate that *Fronteras Americanas* belongs to this class of theatrical monologue. Paul Castagno has extensively explored the dialogic nature of some theatrical monologues, trying to give an account of the techniques used to dialogize a monologue in contemporary drama. In his article "Varieties of Monologic Strategy," he recognises in dialogic theatrical monologue three "dematrixing" techniques that involve the actor/character: "The actor/character can be de-matrixed if they fracture the mould of a specific character, directly acknowledge or address the presence of the audience, and foreground the presence of the actor over character (137).

In *Fronteras Americanas* all three techniques Castagno mentions are used extensively throughout the text. The first technique requires the presence of a specific character, but a fractured one, throughout the monologue; the presence of a fractured character and, subsequently, of the different perspectives and voices refracted by that character satisfies both Bakhtin's idea of dialogism and the basic definition of monologue. The actor/character performs his speech through the use of different voices that can belong to different stage personae. In the case of *Fronteras Americanas*, two stage personae alternate throughout the text/performance: Guillermo Verdecchia and Wideload McKennah. The fact that one of these two personae shares his first and last name with the playwright—and with the performer as well—is both problematic and significant in that it introduces into the play an autobiographical dimension that cannot be ignored as we analyse the relationship between Verdecchia and Wideload. Leaving apart the problems raised by the relation between text and performance and sticking to the published text, Verdecchia and Wideload seem to be two different characters with two different backgrounds and, above all, languages. Verdecchia speaks a perfect English, with a perfect accent, and uses Spanish language only when the context or the significance of the text requires it; on the contrary, Wideload speaks English with a heavy South American accent and uses Spanish—often and without translation—to make fun of "Saxonian" people, to stereotype them and incarnate the stereotype of the "Latin" macho at the same time. As Verdecchia himself underlines in *Fronteras*, the use of the term Latin can be misleading when used to refer to Spanish-speaking cultures. Terms like 'Hispanic' or 'South American' are problematic and misleading as well. I will henceforth use the term Latin because it is one of the most used and does not refer to any regional cultural context.

According to Bakhtin, "each word tastes of the context in which it has lived its socially charged life" (*Dialogic* 293); for this reason the playwright's use of code-

switching in the first part of the play can be seen almost as a border between two cultures represented by the perfectly integrated Verdecchia and the Latin-pride supporter Wideload. Verdecchia himself underlines that he is a sort of “fake Latin”: “I should state now that I am something of an impostor. A fake. What I mean is: I sometimes confuses my tenses in Spanish. I couldn’t dance a tango to save my life” (*Fronteras* 51).

Despite their initial contraposition as if they were almost two different characters, Verdecchia and Wideload progressively begin to overlap one another until they speak “together” at the very end of the play. Actually, throughout the text there are hints of this progressive juxtaposition that are central to the discourse about displacement and identity that is the main topic of the play. Avoiding the most obvious similarity, that is the Latin origins, the code-switching from English to Spanish and vice versa is one of the main features of this juxtaposition. Code-switching sharply distinguishes Wideload from Verdecchia in the first part of the play but, while Wideload’s Latin accent disappears as the play progresses, Verdecchia’s use of Spanish becomes more frequent and significant. In the second part of the play, Verdecchia begins to quote from Spanish poems and songs to enrich his speech; the use of quotations increases until Verdecchia himself speaks Spanish—without translating into English as Wideload does in the first part—before he goes to meet El Brujo and heal his border wound:

> Porque los recién llegados me sospechan,
> Porque I speak mejor Inglish que eSpanish,
> Porque mis padres no me creen,
> Porque no como tripa no como lengua,
> porque hasta mis dreams are subtitled. (70)
>
> It’s because the newcomers suspect of me, because I speak English better than Español, because my parents do not trust me, because I am neither fish nor flesh, because even my dreams are subtitled. (my translation)

The use of “Inglish” and “eSpanish” echoes Wideload’s English as well as the code switching in the end of the sentence does. Moreover, in these lines Verdecchia—who has expressed his feelings, up to this point, through personal tales and experiences—finally cries out in his mother tongue the same feeling of displacement Wideload expresses

explicitly throughout the text. The differences disappear and the overlap, in both language and content, reaches its ultimate point when Wideload and Verdecchia speak together in the section called “Consider,” at the end of the play, just before Verdecchia’s conclusion. It is significant that in this section of the play Wideload/Verdecchia asks the public to “consider,” that is, to apply to a certain extent what has been said so far to themselves, their own families, and the people outside the theatre: Wideload/Verdecchia’s story has become an *exemplum* and can be shared with all people. In “The Politics and Business of Playwriting,” the published transcription of a panel discussion that took place during the Celebrating Canadian Plays and Playwrights Conference and Festival in 2002, Guillermo Verdecchia—the playwright—says, in a way that echoes the collective address to the audience in “Consider”: “The theatre doesn’t exist in a vacuum; it’s connected to all kinds of other theatres, theatres from around the world, art from around the world and larger economy and larger political picture. The problems we face in the theatre are being faced across the country on every level” (“Politics” 77).

Another element that highlights the relationship between Verdecchia and Wideload is the fact that they both change their names. Facundo Morales Segundo changes his name to Wideload McKennah and Guillermo changes his own to Willie in order to facilitate their pronunciation in an English-speaking context. Only at the end of the play is the relation between these two episodes revealed. “Did you change your name somewhere along the way?” (77) asks Verdecchia in the last section called “Going forward.” The fact that Verdecchia and Wideload share such an episode identifies both of them as displaced persons in search of an identity and a place to call home. Another thing they share is their job: they both work in theatre. Indeed, in a speech devoted to the audience of the performance—the speech is significantly called “El Teatro,” that is “The Theatre”—Wideload says: “And me, I left home to escape poverty and I ended up working in the theatre? Weird” (53).

Throughout the play, there are no clues regarding Wideload’s private life and personal experience. Wideload expresses his displacement questioning the significance of stereotypes, the meaning of theatre and its audience, and even the sexual and dancing abilities of the Latin people. On the other hand, Verdecchia expresses the same displacement by narrating his personal history, from primary school to his first trip to his mother country, Argentina. Wideload’s mention of his job establishes a close connection between the two voices and introduces another fundamental connection, that one which occurs between Verdecchia/Wideload and the playwright/actor. Indeed,

it is significant that Wideload, while speaking of the theatre and the audience, is doing so to the audience in the actual theatre and during the actual performance. The direct addressing to the audience is what Castagno recognises as the second dematrixing technique in the dialogic theatrical monologue. In *Fronteras Americanas*, Verdecchia/ Wideload addresses the audience throughout the performance, taking people into the play and the play into reality. The whole play starts with one of these addresses: “Here we are. All together. At long last. Very exciting. I’m excited. Very excited. Here we are” (19).

The use of the plural—“here we are”—in my opinion has a double meaning: first of all, it is a clear reference to the presence and importance of the audience, and to the fact that the play cannot be detached from its actual performance in a specific place and at a specific time. Second, the use of the plural can be seen as another hint of the juxtaposition between Wideload, Verdecchia, and the actor/playwright. The actor is performing a plurality of voices, different voices of the same fractured subjectivity, the subjectivity of the playwright, Guillermo Verdecchia. Anne Nothof underlines that “*Fronteras Americanas* is a one-man show—but the man is subdivided into two personalities” (3). Establishing a close connection between a text and its author’s personal life can be misleading, unless the text is explicitly autobiographical. Notwithstanding the impossibility of merely reading life through the text and vice versa, dialogic theatrical monologues are, to a certain extent, the exceptions to the rule. Jennifer Harvie and Richard Paul Knowles argue that most of dialogic monologues in contemporary Canadian theatre, such as Guillermo Verdecchia’s *Fronteras Americanas* and Monique Mojica’s *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, belong to “a particular kind of monologue [. . .] in which a single character engages in a dialogical accounting for a “life” that is in some sense represented autobiographically” (139). This is true for *Fronteras Americanas*, in which the author/perfomer is the subjectivity behind the voices of Verdecchia and Wideload. There is evidence in the text of the relationship between the stage persona Verdecchia and the playwright Verdecchia—and, subsequently, between the playwright and Wideload. It is the flesh-and-blood Verdecchia who reveals the autobiographical content in the Preface to the print version of the play: “*Fronteras Americanas* began as a long letter to a close friend that I wrote during a trip to Argentina in 1989. Re-reading it—I made a copy of it for some mysterious reason—I found that hidden beneath the travelogue were some intensely personal questions [...]. In an attempt to understand those questions, I began to read, reflect, and write” (13).

The fact that the play was born as a private letter, that one of the two stage

personae shares the playwright's name, and that most of the episodes narrated in the play are very likely taken from the playwright's own life, might not be sufficient to define properly *Fronteras Americanas* as an autobiography but are surely enough to affirm that the play is an autobiographical monologue on displacement and the need to find a home. The fractured self of the playwright and, in this case, of the actor as well—divided between his Latin origins and his Canadian citizenship, between two cultures and two countries—finds its expression in his two stage personae, Wideload and Verdecchia. As Bakhtin argues in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, "no human events are developed or resolved within the bounds of a single consciousness" (288). Wideload and Verdecchia can be seen as the stage consciousnesses of the author; for this reason they cannot be considered as two different characters. These two consciousnesses develop and juxtapose throughout the play until they are reunited in Verdecchia's voice when he claims his home to be on the border. In his work on Bakhtin's dialogism, Michael Holquist makes a clear distinction between character and persona: the former is "monologic, completed, generalised, and determined" as opposed to the latter that is "dialogic, in process, unique, unpredictable, and constructed" (*Problems* 283). This is also true of the two stage personae in *Fronteras Americanas*, two consciousnesses in process. To a certain extent, this process is both the personae's process and the author's process towards the healing of border wounds. In *Fronteras Americanas*—and it might be interesting to see if it is the same for other dialogic monologues—it is impossible, at the end of the play, to distinguish Wideload from Verdecchia, Verdecchia from the actor and this one from the author: the different voices mingle in a polyphonic dialogic mode. The author is both the representing and the represented subject. Again, Bakhtin is useful to clarify this concept; indeed, in *The Dialogic Imagination*, he states: "[T]he underlying, original formal author appears in a new relationship with the represented world [. . .] "depicting" authorial language now lies on the same plane as the "depicted" language [. . .] and may enter into dialogic relations and hybrid combinations with it" (27-28).

The audience, and above all, the readers, are perfectly aware of the relationship and coincidence between the playwright and the actor before the beginning of the performance or the reading, and become aware of the close connection between playwright/actor and the two stage personae as the play progresses. This relationship satisfies fully the third technique Castagno mentions in his study of dialogic monologue. *Fronteras Americanas* foregrounds the presence of the actor/playwright

over the character and thus fulfils all Castagno's requirements for dialogic monologue.

Another element central to the discourse of dialogism in *Fronteras Americanas* is the concept of border. The whole play concerns the border phenomenon, a personal border story that becomes, to a certain extent, an account of the phenomenon of the border and its history. The border can be considered either as closed, that is a border that separates—languages, cultures, people—or open, that is a border that welcomes meeting and negotiation—of languages, cultures and people. I use the term "negotiation" instead of "integration," because integration is generally used in multiculturalist discourses to identify the integration of a minor culture within a major one. According to Verdecchia, there are no minor or major cultures but only different cultural perspectives and practices that meet and negotiate with each other in the free space between them, the border. The displaced subject can live in this free space without choosing which culture is the major and predominant one. "I am not at the crossroads/to choose/is to go wrong," a line from a poem by Octavio Paz is, significantly, one of the last slides shown during the performance; while being shown in English this line is uttered by Verdecchia in Spanish to underline the fact that there is no need for the displaced subject to choose because displacement itself can be transformed in a dialogic space in which to negotiate a "border" identity. Displacement and border themselves become the place to call home. In *Fronteras Americanas* Verdecchia/Wideload learns to live on the border, an open border between his two cultures, the Argentinian and the Canadian. Julie Byczynski, in her study of minority languages in Canadian contemporary drama, identifies the border in *Fronteras Americanas* "not simply a boundary or a bridge between languages or between cultures; the linguistic border zone is a dialogical space wherein languages, cultures, and individuals come together" (64). The definition given by Byczynski for the linguistic border zone can be applied to the abstract concept of border as expressed by the playwright throughout the play. At the very end of the play Verdecchia says: "I am learning to live on the border. I have called off the Border Patrol. I am an hyphenated person but I am not falling apart, I am putting together. I am building a house on the border" (77).

The whole play shows the dialogic process of two cultures and two consciousnesses that come to meet on the border. In claiming that he will build a house on the border Verdecchia echoes Bakhtin, once again, who says that "a cultural domain has no inner territory. It is located entirely upon boundaries" (*Art* 274). So too are the cultural domains to which Verdecchia/Wideload's

experience belong: they are located on the border and negotiate with one another. It can be said that *Fronteras Americanas* is dialogical on various levels. It is a dialogic monologue insofar as it is a monologue in which two stage personae sharing the same subjectivity communicate in a dialogic way. But it is also dialogic in that it represents the border phenomenon as a dialogue, and the border zone as a dialogic zone in which different consciousnesses, cultures, and languages come together.

works cited

Bakhtin, Mikhail M. *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov. Trans Vadim Liapunov. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990.

---. *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981.

---. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Ed. and trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Byczynski, Julie. "'A world in a foreign language': On Not Translating in the Theatre." *Canadian Theatre Review* 102 (Spring 2000): 33-37.

---. "Minority Languages as Resistance in Marco Micone's Addolorata, Betty Quan's Mother Tongue, and Guillermo Verdecchia's *Fronteras Americanas* (American Borders)." Diss. University of Guelph, 1999.

Castagno, Paul C. "Varieties of Monologic Strategy: The Dramaturgy of Len Jenkin and Mac Wellman." *New Theatre Quarterly* 9.34 (1993): 134-146.

Harvie, Jennifer and Richard Paul Knowles. "Dialogic monologue: a dialogue." *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches Théâtrales au Canada* 15.2 (1994): 136-163.

Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*. London: Routledge, 1990.

Nothof, Anne F. "The Construction and Deconstruction of Border Zones in *Fronteras Americanas* by

Guillermo Verdecchia and *Amigo's Blue Guitar* by Joan MacLeod." *Theatre Research in Canada/Recherches Théâtrales au Canada* 20.1 (1999): 3-15.

Verdecchia, Guillermo. *Fronteras Americanas: American Borders*. Toronto, Coach House Press, 1993.

Lill, Wendy, Yvette Nolan, Jason Sherman, and Guillermo Verdecchia. "The Politics and Business of Playwriting." *Canadian Theatre Review* 115 (Summer 2003): 43-46.

the ontology of the post/modern self: from dante to claudel, beckett and ionesco

ioana isabella sion

1. Postmodern continuity.

The creative process, according to Jung, “consists in the unconscious activation of an archetypal image, and in elaborating and shaping this image into the finished work. By giving it shape, the artist translates it into the language of the present, and so makes it possible for us to find our way back to the deepest springs of life” (15). The necessity of uttering your self through artistic creations articulates the need of perpetuating life and being. Voicing the archetypal particles of the self prevents us from experiencing nothingness and non-being, and shows the way to our primordial essence. Fundamental archetypes underlie the entire history of art and literature. New literary creations appear at first to be very different from the previous ones, but later the many similarities with the “classics” disclose their archetypal identity. Thus, it comes as no surprise the fact that a medieval writer like Dante is so present in the twentieth century and that authors like Claudel, Ionesco and Beckett work in the “tradition” of the *Commedia*. Or in Ionesco’s words:

> Ce qui ressort donc des œuvres nouvelles, c’est la constatation, tout d’abord, qu’elles se différencient nettement des œuvres précédentes (s’il y a eu recherche de la part des auteurs, évidemment, et non pas imitation, stagnation). Plus tard, les différences s’atténueront, et alors, ce seront les ressemblances avec les œuvres anciennes, la constatation d’une certaine identité et d’une identité certaine qui pourront prévaloir, tout le monde s’y reconnaîtra et tout finira par s’intégrer dans… l’histoire de l’art et de la littérature. (326)

Continuity remains essential to modernism and postmodernism, although they are originally conceived as reactions to the tradition. The Dante-Beckett relationship was considered by Neal Oxenhandler, for instance, as a “paradigm for postmodern continuity” (216), the most visible case of intertextual continuity. Dante’s poem is powerfully visual: he travels through the Afterworld as spectator of the fate of others, and repeatedly vouches for the truth of his

discourse about the things seen. There is no epistemological hesitancy in the *Commedia*, Dante sees the world in one comprehensive gaze. Like the *Commedia*, modernist works are dominated by the goals of reaching knowledge, beauty and truth. Modernism differs from this “classical” aesthetic in its degree of experimentation and its focus on such principles as indeterminacy, incoherence, epistemological skepticism. Postmodernism introduces self-referentiality, metafiction, circularity, a new ontological use of narrative perspectivism, multiplication of beginnings, endings and narrated actions, equal treatment of truth and fiction, myth and reality, copy and original (Calinescu 303-304), and intertextual parodic double coding. According to Brian McHale (58-60), modernism can be associated with an “epistemological dominant” (knowledge related), and postmodernism with an “ontological dominant” (existential mode of the world, of a text). When pushed to an extreme, epistemological questioning can “tip over” into postmodern ontological questioning, the progression being reversible and circular. “The crossover from Modernist to Postmodernist poetics is not irreversible, not a gate that swings one way only [. . .]. It is possible to ‘retreat’ from Postmodernism to Modernism, or indeed to vacillate between the two” (McHale 74).

Matei Calinescu (87) has pointed out that “modern” is no longer synonymous with “contemporary” in the arts, whereas postmodern can still relate to the present. Claudel is indisputably a modernist, whereas Beckett and Ionesco are positioned at the intersection[1] between the two periods, or able to switch freely between the two, although most critics label them as postmodernists, especially in regard to their later works. According to Calinescu, the insistent use of a rhetoric of palinode or retraction (explicit withdrawal of a statement) is inherent to postmodern writing. What was just said is immediately contradicted and then stated again, with ceaseless revisions (Ficth 92). This stylistic device defines the Beckettian and Ionescan technique of creating ontological puzzles. Modernism never wholly breaks with the classic-traditional aesthetic, as postmodernism never wholly parts from modernism, even though it starts off as a reaction against the classical-modern canons. Postmodernism is not a trend defined in terms of its temporal positioning, but is rather a way of operating (Eco 16). The link with the past works of the tradition is never fully broken, although the coherent vision of medieval metaphysics, for instance, blatantly opposes the disjunction of the (post)modern period with its valuation of the part against the whole, fragmentariness against cohesion.

In *La Condition postmoderne* (1979) and *Le Postmoderne expliqué aux enfants* (1986), Jean-François Lyotard specifies that there are two kinds of

metanarratives (métarécits), one mythical-traditional and the other projective-modern, the former legitimizing knowledge in terms of the past, and the latter in terms of the future. Christianity is therefore inherently modern and the major stories of modernity can be perceived as "secularized variations on the Christian paradigm" (Calinescu 274). *The Divine Comedy* is a symbolic account of the way to individuation, just as Claudel's, Ionesco's and Beckett's dramas reflect secular ontologies of the self.

The difference between Dante's "noumenal" realism and Beckett's ontological "phenomenalism" lies in the degree of faith in the apprehension of the noumenal world,[2] as well as perception of the phenomenal world,and in the reliability of knowledge. Dante is the exponent of absolute faith, which gives him the key to both noumenal and phenomenal understanding. Although he writes an allegory, he is a realist: his perception involves a sine-qua-non framework of belief. Perceiving and believing, the phenomenal and the noumenal, re-enforce each other and ultimately coincide with each other in Dante's *Comedy*, whereas in Beckett and Ionesco they are dissociated and illusive. The noumenal is unreachable and the phenomenal is unreliable. Beckett has little faith in perception and knowledge: he constantly tests the limits of rationality and rejects intuition. He develops, according to Oxenhandler (222), a kind of suspended formalist phenomenalism, an immanent style of writing, which dematerializes the world and turns it into a gnostic fantasy (Hassan 196). The subject and object are locked together in Dante's Thomism, where we find a unified concept of the self-as-subject and self-as-object. Beckett and Ionesco's characters suffer from a split-self disorder and have abolished neither object nor subject, despite the acute dematerialization of the terrestrial sphere and the weakening of the self-world connection. From Descartes comes the notion of the splitting of self from the world, of the mind from the body, the dilution of the self-concept. The perceived self becomes guilty of being, while self-perception and self-voicing signify an act of self-division. The *Commedia* mediates a hierarchical view of reality guaranteed by its own internal cohesion. Dante's poetic world is related to Being both as metaphor and metonymy, his characters belong to the experiential order. Beckett and Ionesco have an inner focus on the ontological and non-verbal, although Beckett tends toward a lessening and Ionesco toward a proliferation of the verbal. "Monter et descendre, dans les mots mêmes, c'est la vie du poète. Monter trop haut, descendre trop bas, est permis au poète qui joint le terrestre avec l'aérien. Seul le philosophe sera-t-il condamné à vivre toujours au rez-de-chaussée?" (Bachelard 139). Ionesco, the mystic, effects a constant descent and ascent in words, while Beckett, the philosopher,[3] after several

ascents and descents finds his place on the ground floor, the zero degree of being and language, where all movement ceases and stillness is reached. Proliferation of paradoxical words creates a humdrum, a constant buzzing of words and sounds in Ionesco's plays. Beckett works towards paring down—"de-collecting," to quote Walter Asmus[4] quoting Beckett—towards no words at all, complete silence. "The dramatic effectiveness of his plays results from his poetic sense of economy (not Ionesco's strong point), harmony and structure, rhythm and cadence, composed as much of silence as of words" (Duckworth 52).

According to the Polish poet Cyprian Norwid (1821-1883), the structural function of silence is that of a part of speech. Silences are an undercurrent of every dramatic situation, and they sometimes become a pattern of visible gaps inside meaning. In the later plays, like *Common c'est* for instance, Beckett makes a purposeful attempt to reconstruct the pre-linguistic order of experience. *Not I* faces the audience with an unintelligible outpouring of words from the Mouth. Ionesco's agglomeration of words also points toward the annihilation of language, towards the nonverbal. In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault drastically concludes:

> the only thing that we know at the moment, in all certainty, is that in Western culture the being of man and the being of language have never, at any time, been able to coexist and to articulate themselves one upon the other. Their incompatibility has been one of the fundamental features of our thought. (339)

Although a recurrent difficulty of coexistence is certainly present and our writers constantly struggle to go beyond words, I would also argue that the "being of man" can mostly be shaped by the "being of language" and that there is a compulsive, structuring connection between the two. Maurice Blanchot writes: "To speak is to bind oneself, without ties, to the unknown" (*Infinite* 300). It is "a relation in which the unknown would be affirmed, made manifest, even exhibited: disclosed" (*L'Entretien* 442, my translation). The unknown and the self can only be made manifest through language, even though, paradoxically, this language is based on the refusal of language.

The self is the ultimate revelation experienced through linguistic journeys and artistic creation. According to Heidegger, "Language is the primal dimension within which man's essence is first able to correspond at all to Being and its claim, and, in corresponding, to belong to Being. This primal corresponding, expressly carried out, is thinking" (7). The

search for identity and the attempt at self-definition through thought, language and outside language reveals the need for a witness to existence that the other provides. The author recaptures a fragment of the sacred in the permanence of his characters. Claudel's emperor, Dante's pilgrim, Beckett's tramps, Ionesco's man with bags, are all objectified aspects of the author's creative Self, reliable witnesses to their creator's immanent essence. Pirandello, in his preface to *Sei personaggi in cerca d'autore* vividly underlines the permanence of literary characters, their endless coming alive with every reader revisiting the text:

> So it is that we open the book, we find Francesca alive and confessing her gentle sin to Dante; and if we go back and read that passage a hundred thousand times, Francesca will speak her lines a hundred thousand times in a row, never with mechanical repetition, but saying them every time as though it were the first time, and with such vivid and spontaneous passion, that once again, as for the first time, Dante will faint away. (22)

Dante and Claudel put themselves in the service of the mysterious forces in the universe that can communicate with the living only through poets. Claudel thus confirms Jung's theory, according to which "the artist is not a person endowed with free will who seeks his own ends, but one who allows art to realize its purposes through him" (101). Jung calls "autonomous complex" that which "appears and disappears in accordance with its own inherent tendencies, independently of the conscious will" (78).

Ionesco and Beckett are deliberately governed by conscious free will; they do not channel divinity, but try to reach the sacred which is an independent entity, detached from life, outside their conscious self. Beckett's heroes flee from identity in order to seek the prenatal unconsciousness of the unborn. Ionesco's protagonists are on a quest for identity which ends up in self-annihilation, the "paradisal unknowing" to use D. H. Lawrence's phrase. Their heroes travel in geometric or labyrinthine circles back to where they started, they retreat into the inner recesses of the mind where death and birth are one. Dante and Claudel's circles are perfectly displayed in a spiral "on this earth that is Purgatory", to quote Beckett, leading to the perfect circling of the heavenly spheres. Disorder in the world and in the psyche opposes order in God. Beckett, whose first name Samuel means the inner light of God, was far from realizing the integration of the self within the cosmos, and like Ionesco, experienced autonomy and exclusion. Mystics like Dante wanted to communicate their

experience of God through their writing, Beckett needed to show his revolt at the absence of God. Art and self are detached from God for Ionesco and Beckett, nevertheless, in the case of Dante and Claudel, art channels and intensifies faith. The recognizability of the miracle, of the sacred essence, in the case of the latter two poets, opposes confinement to profane in the first instance. Post/modern literature attempts to express the unnamable, the unsayable, "l'indisible," the displacement of the sacred, and, most importantly, it tries to reach an untouchable core of truthfulness. Our writers are relentlessly pursuing the search for honesty in writing, taking up the challenge of "trying to squeeze the last few honest drops out of my skull," as Beckett confessed to Lawrence Held[5] in the mid-1980s.

2. Individuation in between sacred and profane.

Having discussed the three 20th-century authors in relation to Dante and the post/modern, as well as such core concepts as ontology and epistemology, descent and ascent, self and God, language and silence, I will proceed with a further evaluation of relevant symbols and concepts such as trinity and quaternity, circle and centre, heaven and earth, extricable versus inextricable labyrinths, movement and time, absolutism and relativism, bilingualism and duplicity.

Ionesco speaks of the absence of the sacred in modern languages and literatures. The trinity is formulated in an altered configuration, the quaternity not entirely viable and the perfect marriage of heaven and earth, man and God, seems like an insult to rational thought. The centre which is attained in Dante and Claudel is perpetually avoided by the de-centred Beckett and Ionesco. There is no finality and no culmination, as opposed to the writings of Dante and Claudel, in which the final destination is known in advance. The vertical progression in the latter case is counterbalanced by the horizontal labyrinth of Ionesco, and the geometric meandering of Beckett, the static to-and-fro movement between self and unself, or self and the other. The ideology of the Roman Catholic church, which is in full swing in the case of the two unwavering believers, is totally missing in the latter case where the general impasse lies in the lack of transcendence and disintegrated belief. For Dante and Claudel, the church mediates between the earthly and celestial cities, transforming violence into peace and giving a coherent vision of both universal and personal history. Truth can be known through

Christian love and the centre of the celestial rose is reachable. Beckett and Ionesco have no direct association with the church and have lost faith in its ability to lead individuals towards the fullness of being and the *coincidentia oppositorum*. Truth is unknowable in the world of contingency and the eluding centre of the self remains inaccessible.

The negative teleology of the post/modern subject opposes the canonic theology of the medieval pilgrim and turn-of-the-century emperor. Dante believes in the epistemological possibilities of a realized eschatology, and the view from the end is necessary to complete any hermeneutical interpretation, in order to recognize and interpret the signs along the way and make possible the journey to heaven. In modern times, apotheotic culmination and apokatastatic salvation[6] are rejected by the "flatness" and "nihilism" of Ionesco and Beckett's "absurd" protagonists, stuck in horizontality and failed transcendence. Design and purpose are absent in the disenchanted modern world. The unicursal, extricable labyrinth of Ionesco's *Homme aux valises* pairs with the multicursal, debatably inextricable one of *Voyages chez les morts*. Here I would argue that inextricability refers only to the individual's quest; nevertheless, the labyrinthine journey becomes extricable through the loss of individuality. A disillusioned man without qualities and personality, the post/modern subject suffers from a bombed-out consciousness and a deep-seated lack of identity. Both Ionescan plays give a paradoxical feeling of a disintegrating finale. They both work their way towards a survival in a different form. *Waiting for Godot* emphasizes survival on earth by all means, that is, through ceaseless circling, the repetitive to-and-fro movement desperately re-affirming life and offering the self its final residence in the movement: "I can't go on, I'll go on" (*The Unnamable* 414). Ionesco and Beckett are caught in a spiritual ritual of waxing and waning, indefinitely vacillating between consciousness and the unconscious. Similarly, movement carries on after the Dantesque poema sacra finishes, in this instance emphasizing psychic integrity and uniform integration within the celestial harmony: "ma già volgeva il mio disio e 'l velle, / sì come rota ch'igualmente è mossa, / l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle" (33.143-5).

The systematic absolutism of the ardent believers conflicts with the (post) subjectivism, relativism and individualism of Ionesco and Beckett, which in fact are their only potential saving grace—"ce qui peut nous sauver c'est l'individualisme," stated Ionesco in several interviews. Time, ordered as a historic or sacred system in the first case, becomes personal, subjective, unsystematic, diachronic versus synchronic, pre- versus post-subjective temporality. The extreme precision of the systematic

hierarchy of the first two, challenges the chaotic quest and non-traditional language of the latter's katabasis. “La quête de l'absolu” is known and describable, almost palpable in the first case, and undisclosed, faceless and intangible in the second case.

Although it is not always obvious, Beckett is an artist in full control of his canvas, to use Rick Cluchey's words.[7] His subconscious is seemingly mastered, exposed and put to work. Ionesco's control is eroded by a whirlwind of words that do not come from God but from the depth of his unconscious and which seem to take over his consciousness and the written page in a Babel-like performance. The bilingualism and duplicity (if not multiplicity) of the Beckettian and Ionescan dual selves counteract the unique use of the medieval Italian vernacular in the *Commedia* and of modern French in the Claudelian drama, and contrast Dante and Claudel's accomplished singular selves. For Dante, the Babel episode marked the culmination of man's fall from grace and the loss of the original language of Adam. In *De Vulgari Eloquentia*, Dante deplores at length the weakening of the vernacular after Babel and imagines the “vulgare illustre”, an ideal Italian language which transcends regionalism and can be understood by everyone. “In a sense, the *Commedia* portrays the quest for the initial word of which God is the embodiment: the pilgrim's voyage becomes the poet's” (O'Neill 17). Dante's goal is to recapture the first “EL” uttered by Adam, expression of joy and name of God, while Beckett seems to be searching for the primordial Sanskrit sound[8] “OM”. As Beckett confesses: “My work is a matter of fundamental sounds (no joke intended) made as fully as possible, and I accept responsibility for nothing else” (*Disjecta* 109). In both cases, the interminable voyage toward an ever elusive word, name of divinity and answer to all questions, combines their linguistic, ontological, and epistemological quests.

3. The soul's voyage of exile.

Our modern writers generally reject “the real” as a model; they are inward wayfarers whose linguistic and ontological quests are pushed in circular or labyrinthine movements beyond the limits of the possible. Traditionally, the voyage has served as a metaphor for acquiring of wisdom and reaching individuation. The journey is the pattern most suited to the voyager through words, the inner voyage parallels the literary one in the form of a regression and progression. Dante's encyclopedic journey toward the Word of God is a movement of descent and ascent reflecting a spiritual progress and covering every inch

of the material and numinous worlds. Beckett and Ionesco's trajectories, heading toward the fundamental sounds and pre-linguistic chaos, are marked by ontological impasse and linguistic paradox. They are concerned with putting an end to speech and at the same time are compelled to perpetuate being through words. An ineffable language of the unknown and unknowable self struggles to detect and exhibit unnamable bits of humanity in no way close to individuation, but rather to the effacement of the subject. Perpetual movement in words has the effect of reversing the stillness of death and is a means of avoiding dying while, at the same time, preparing for it. A paralyzing impotence grows with the journey, while Dante's pilgrim gains access to the supreme love and will. In Dante and Claudel's case, the voyage ends with a fulfillment, a quintessential accomplishment; for the other two the open end reflects a debilitating lack, a fundamental ontological deficiency.

Exile is the defining existential constraint for the four writers: we need only recall Dante's political dislocation from Florence, Ionesco's from Romania, Claudel's from France, and Beckett's from Ireland. Dislocation is the very condition of Dante's text, and its most profound metaphor, as noted by Giuseppe Mazzotta. The circumstance of exile propels the traveler on his voyage and compels the writer to pursue indefatigably his linguistic quest. This truth inherent to writing and existence reflects the very compulsion to write in the hope of recovering from the temporary disintegration of the self which so often occurs in the pursuit of individuation. Naming and expressing the self calls it into being, reversing this absence, and can give it new life. Writing entails a stepping-out of self in order to recapture it through language and self-expression.

Claudel knew exile in his widespread travels as a diplomat to China, Europe, and the Americas. Ionesco was twice forced into exile from his country of origin because of social and political constraints, and Beckett auto-exiled himself early in his mature life from his country of birth. Dante's quest for home-coming was three-fold: to regain access to Florence in the physical world, and, spiritually, to reach God and individuation. And all this was possible through language, the poet's unique means of overcoming an ontological impasse by reversing the exilic condition.

The Beckettian or Ionescan journeys outline maps of the mental regions where the wandering hero can escape from the social fiasco and find his freedom. Mental space is like a sanctuary, it is "the dark of absolute freedom", where the self retracts after the banishment from the outside world, the exile from society (*Murphy* 113). The regression from light (a reflection of the outside world) to darkness (the mental region), from being

to non-being, in the case of Beckett and Ionesco, is contrasted by the progression from darkness into light in the case of Dante and Claudel. The plunge-within of the first two is counter-balanced by the reaching-out of the latter. Mesmerized by the down-there and loathing the up-there, being reduced to the condition of crawling in the primeval mud, Ionesco's "la vase", of being caught in between "no longer" and "not yet", of being a prisoner of the inner world, the down-there "where everything is red", the postmodern "hero", unlike Dante's and Claudel's, has no hope for any redemption up-there, in the Afterworld. The current degradation of the external world cannot be reconciled with any notion of redemption. The dark-light reversed symbolism after World War II indicates the yearning for a release from a hellish external reality and individual consciousness. In order to escape the burden of selfhood, one has to induce a deadening of the body and a retreat to the mind. The flight from self is mixed with an obsession with self. With Beckett and Ionesco we notice this omnipresent dilemma, whereby the lessening of consciousness paradoxically triggers the heightening of self-awareness. In *Voyages chez les morts*, Jean suffers from a severe loss of memory and identity, and his obliterated consciousness and disintegrating speech seemingly propel the protagonist toward an experience of ecstasy and fullness. The four characters of *Godot*, numbed by neutrality, not being born properly, are prevented from dying and from living, hence their limbo-like state, outside Hell proper. Separately, they cannot undertake self-creation, and only the four of them together can give birth to the self. Like Beckett's Molloy and Moran, our writers are compelled to write reports of their journeys, to long for death as a reversal of life. The womb-tomb symbolism outlines the trajectory of being in this world and the poet finds his peace only in this condensed in-out movement: "my peace is there in the receding mist / when I may cease from treading these long shifting thresholds / and live the space of a door / that opens and shuts" (Beckett "Four Poems: Dieppe" 337). Malone's concept of death as a "birth into death" (*Malone Dies* 283) is symptomatic for Beckett and Ionesco, as is the "birth into life" in the case of Dante and Claudel.

4. Final remarks.

In 1962 Martin Esslin remarked that the Theatre of the Absurd achieves the "alienation effect" postulated by Bertolt Brecht, very much better that Brecht ever managed to put into

practice, because "with such characters it is almost impossible to identify." Recent surveys of audience reaction indicate that such a view is no longer justified. In California, the prisoners in San Quentin identified with the *Godot* characters, and, as Rick Cluchey acknowledged in 1973, their lives were radically changed by Beckett's drama. In one sense, they were saved by Godot. Although the postmodern drama of the "unknowing" appears divided from God and the created world, and seems to have fallen out of grace and harmony with the universe, it can still provide clues through which the reader/spectator can be led back to unity with God. Like Dante's *Commedia* and all high art, it preserves a salvific quality.

The modern poetic universe no longer consciously imitates the created one, but whether intended or not, it still provides clues which can lead the reader/spectator back to divinity. Similar to Heraclitus' remark about sacred speech, modern drama also "neither exposes nor conceals, but gives a sign." The modern poetics of failure and unknowing embody a restless quest for the divine consciousness and the wholeness of being, a novel way of showing the way to God while negating his existence. And our modern heroes are Christ-like martyrs wandering at the edge of language, in between up-there and down-there, on the threshold of no-longer and not-yet.

God and the unconscious emerge as synonymous concepts. The search for divinity is perpetuated in the exploration of the unconscious, and the fundamental need of the absolute is fulfilled in the realization of the wholeness of self, whose most complete archetype can be found in the figure of Christ. The German mystic Thomas à Kempis reveals in his *Imitation of Christ* the spiritual way of life to be pursued by any Christian, and his method of achieving wholeness having Christ as the divine model was widely followed in subsequent centuries. His description of the mystic way of life is similar to the way Claudel, Beckett and Ionesco's characters operate in their pursuit of truth and intangible reality. Like proper shamans and mystics, they leave the phenomenal body behind and enter the world of the spirit, of the noumenal, of pure ideas and thought, in order to connect the invisible to the visible world, the essence to the appearance. Even though redemption may seem unreachable, new ways are yet to be discovered—the modern networks of labyrinths are yet to be made extricable. As companions in the afterworld, unreliable as they may be, or guides to salvation, as hypothetical as that may appear, spiritual guidance seems to be the essential role of our modern "mystic" writers, who, like Dante, relentlessly pursue the harrowing of Hell, while aiming for the stars.

notes

[1] Breon Mitchell labels Beckett as well as Joyce as modernists (118), and claims that Beckett's "quest for a minimal verbal consciousness [. . .] represents the culmination of Modernism itself" (117). See Mitchell, Breon. "Samuel Beckett and the Postmodernism Controversy." *Exploring Postmodernism*. Eds. Matei Calinescu and Douwe Fokkema. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1987. 109-21.

[2] Cf. Immanuel Kant. Noumenon (Ding an sich / The Thing-in-Itself) is distinguished from phenomenon (Erscheinung / Appearance). The noumenal is unknowable, whereas the laws of the phenomenal world can be apprehended.

[3] This does not exclude Beckett's mystical penchant. According to several commentators, for instance Lawrence Held, Beckett had all the hallmarks of an Eastern mystic.

[4] Walter Asmus is a distinguished theatre director and professor of drama (currently head of drama at the Hochschule für Musik und Drama in Hannover) who worked with Beckett as his assistant in the famous 1974-5 Schiller Theater production of *Waiting for Godot* in Berlin. The quotation given here was mentioned several times at recent conferences during the Beckett Centenary celebrations in Reading, UK, Dublin, Ireland and Sydney, Australia, 2006.

[5] Lawrence Held is a prominent actor who was directed by Beckett in several productions of Endgame and Waiting for Godot, and worked with Beckett on and off from the mid-1970s to 1988. Quoted by L. Held, "Myths Behind the Masks", *The Sydney Morning Herald* 21 Dec. 1996.

[6] The Apokatastasis is the theory of universal redemption, which is the final purpose and overall design of the created world. (Cf. Greek philosopher Origen). Even though nature and history go through cycles of waxing and waning, the world is implacably turning back to its creator.

[7] Rick Cluchey is the founder of the famous San Quentin Drama Workshop in 1957 while serving a life sentence in the Californian prison. The words I am referring to are quoted from a 1982 programme of the "Beckett Directs Beckett" Australian tour. Further details on the Beckett-Cluchey

collaboration can be found in: Knowlson, James. *Theatre Workbook I. Samuel Beckett: Krapp's Last Tape*. London: Brutus Books Limited, 1980. 120-146.

[8] Beckett's cryptic work can be read in an esoteric-mystical way, for instance, the insistent presence of the letters M and W (Molloy, Moran, Malone, Murphy, Mercier, Watt) recalls the Sanskrit OM.

works cited

Bachelard, Gaston. *La Poétique de l'espace*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1967.

Beckett, Samuel. *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*. Ed. Ruby Cohn. London: John Calder, 1983.

---. "Four Poems: Dieppe." *The New Oxford Book of Irish Verse*. Ed. and trans. Thomas Kinsela. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. 337-338.

---. *Murphy. Watt. Mercier and Camier*. Ed. Paul Auster. New York: Grove Press, 2006. Vol 1. of Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition. 4 vols.

---. *Molloy. Malone Dies. The Unnamable. How It Is*. Ed. Paul Auster. New York: Grove Press, 2006. Vol 2. of *Samuel Beckett: The Grove Centenary Edition*. 4 vols.

Blanchot, Maurice. *The Infinite Conversation*. Trans. Susan Hanson. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.

---. *L'Entretien infini*. Paris: Gallimard, 1969.

Calinescu, Matei. *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1987.

Duckworth, Colin. *Angels of Darkness*. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd, 1972.

Eco, Umberto. "Reflections on The Name of the Rose." *Encounter* 64 (1985): 7-19.

Fitch, Brian. *Dimensions, structures, textualité dans la trilogie de Beckett*. Paris: Minard, 1977.

Foucault, Michel. *The Order of Things*. New York: Vintage Books, 1973.

Hassan, Ihab. “Joyce, Beckett, and the Postmodern Imagination.” *TriQuaterly* 34 (1975): 179-200.

Heidegger, Martin. *On the Way to Language*. Trans. P. Hertz and J. Stambaugh. New York: Harper & Row, 1971.

Ionesco, Eugène. *Notes et Contre Notes*. Paris: Gallimard, 1966.

Jung, Carl Gustav. *Spirit in Man, Art, and Literature*. Ed. and trans. Gerhard Adler and R.F.C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969. Vol. 15 of *The Collected Works of Carl Jung*. 20 vols. 1953-79.

McHale, Brian. “Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing.” *Approaching Postmodernism*. Eds. Douwe W. Fokkema and Hans Bertens. Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1986.

O’Neill, Kevin Charles. *The Voyage from Dante to Beckett*. Diss. University of California at Berkeley, 1985.

Oxenhandler, Neil. “Seeing and Believing in Dante and Beckett.” *Dante Among the Moderns*. Ed. Stuart Y. McDouga. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1985.

Pirandello, Luigi. *Sei personaggi in cerca d’autore. Maschere nude 1*. Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1952.

new books

mouawad, wajdi. *scorched*. trans. linda gaboriau. toronto: playwrights canada press, 2005.

In his introduction, Wajdi Mouawad describes the way in which he and the members of Montreal's Theatre Quat'Sous created *Incendies*, the second work in a tetralogy begun with *Littoral* in 1997 (translated as *Tideline*), and continued with *Forêts* in 2006. According to Mouawad, his guiding concept in this creation process was the idea of the stage as a site of consolation, a place where it is possible to speak to the silence of the unspeakable. And this is what *Scorched* is able to do: to turn the stage into a sort of truth and reconciliation commission, where it is possible to hear from those persecuted by, and from those who persecute, civil war violence and human rights violations. But the stage in *Scorched* is able to do more. It is able to turn words into images and human relationships, so that those watching might be shown the true impact of war on people's lives.

Taking place in both present-day Canada, and in an unnamed Middle Eastern country in the 1950's to the 1980's (a country which bears resemblances to the Lebanon in which Mouawad was raised,) *Scorched* centers around Nawal and her twin children, Janine and Simon. The play begins shortly after Nawal's death, and five years after she ceased to speak entirely. At the reading of Nawal's will, the twins are each given a letter. Janine's is to be given to their father, whom they had believed long dead. Simon's is to be given to their brother, about whom they had never been told. To fulfill these tasks, the twins must travel to their mother's country and delve into her past. There, they discover several people who had known and known of Nawal, from whom they learn of their mother's search to find her first-born son. Both the twins' and Nawal's searches are played out in parallel storylines, with each piece of information the twins' discover being fleshed out shortly afterwards in a scene from Nawal's quest during her country's civil war. Their stories, however, do not exist as independent entities. Characters and elements from both the twins' and Nawal's storylines are often present in what is being performed onstage. One regularly occurring example is the presence, in several scenes from Nawal's past, of her daughter Janine as she listens to taped recordings of her mother's silence through the five years before her death. More jarringly, some scenes of past violence explode onto the stage and into the middle of a present-day reality. In one particularly powerful scene, a meeting takes place between the twins and Nawal's notary, Alphonse Lebel, on the lawn of Alphonse's

home, where he has a sprinkler running, and where construction is being done on the road nearby. Towards the end of the scene, as Alphonse tells Janine and Simon about a massacre of refugees on a bus that Nawal witnessed in her home country, the stage directions describe the sound of jackhammers essentially becoming the sound of machine guns, while the sprinklers begin to spray blood, at which point a 19-year old Nawal (Nawal appears at the ages of 14, 15, 19, 40, 45 and 60) enters screaming about the massacre, melting the present-day reality into the immediate aftermath of an event in the past. It is from this layering of presence and history in each scene that *Scorched* derives so much of its power. By putting onstage Nawal's experiences of civil war violence, while at the same time commenting upon this violence through the twins' present-day encounters, *Scorched* demonstrates how the chains of victimization and revenge that lead to crimes against humanity are forged. Though the culmination of both searches is tragic on an epic scale, the play is ultimately hopeful, particularly through the character of Nawal, who functions as an example of how those who have been wronged need not take revenge. One means of nonviolent resolution comes in the form of her involvement in the process of international justice, demonstrated through Nawal's testimony to a war crimes tribunal regarding her torture and rape in a war-time prison, which is put forward by the play as the most effective first step for victims to confront their persecutors. Another means is the shift in attitude typified by Nawal's vow to "never hate anyone," which is revealed as part of her attempt to keep her friend Sawda from seeking revenge against men she had witnessed committing a massacre. And finally, the words with which Nawal breaks the five year silence before her death: "now that we're together, everything feels better" (10), which reappear and resonate throughout the entire play, function as a recognition that hatred isolates everyone involved in these conflicts, making it nearly impossible to reconnect and heal.

Like much of Mouawad's work, *Scorched* deals with very serious and ugly subject matter in a very poetic and elegant manner, and is marked by characters who express themselves in Mouawad's trade-mark lengthy monologues. But what is particularly effective and challenging about this work is its lack of absolutes. Nawal only survives to witness the bus massacre by convincing the murderers to let her off that same bus because she was "one of them"(43), and not one of the refugees. Similarly, though she convinces Sawda not to take revenge, Nawal immediately puts her own plan of vengeance in motion, which leads her to assassinate a warlord. Just as in reality, there are no absolutes—no persecutor who has not been wronged, no victim who has not hurt others, and none who

do not feel themselves justified in their actions. It is therefore impossible to view any of the play's characters or their actions in terms of absolute right and wrong, good or bad. And it is in this way that Mouawad turns the stage into a place where consolation and reconciliation are possible, by contextualizing every character in the fullness of all their acts, and making them all in some way the same. This is also what makes *Scorched* such a valuable addition to the Canadian theatre repertoire. Not only does the play effect a remarkable transformation on the nature of the theatrical space, it is also a sign of how Canadian theatre is coming to reflect a new Canadian identity, one that is inevitably influenced by the violence that is an integral part of some immigrant histories. Perhaps works *Scorched* this will come to define Canada as a place where these demons can in some way be exorcized.

Dave DeGrow

stoppard, tom. *rock 'n' roll*. new york: grove press, 2006.

The latest production written by Tom Stoppard, entitled *Rock 'n' Roll*, is a wonderfully witty and poignant exploration of the role of popular culture in history. This two-act play, set in Czechoslovakia and the United Kingdom over a span of twenty-two years (1968-1990), follows the life of a Czech student and hopeless fan of Rock and Roll, Jan, who pursues his studies in the United Kingdom, then returns to Czechoslovakia just as the Warsaw Pact tanks are rolling in. This play uncovers the struggle that young fans of Rock 'n' Roll faced beyond the Iron Curtain. Other important characters include Jan's professor, Max who is one of a select minority of British Marxists, a flower-child-turned-mother named Esme, and a clueless Western journalist by the name of Nigel. Oscillating between Britain and Czechoslovakia, the play discusses a number of social issues, especially the fate of Marxism in the 20th Century and the role of music in a free society.

Although the play takes place in a politically charged setting (Czechoslovakia during the period of "normalization"), it would be a mistake to think that the rock and roll scene is simply a means of protest. In the introduction to this play, Stoppard paraphrases Milan Hlavsa of the Plastic People of the Universe:

> The fact that the Russian Invasion of Czechoslovakia had occurred in August was not immediately relevant: “We just loved Rock ‘n’ Roll and wanted to be famous.” The occupation by the Warsaw Pact was just the background, “the harsh reality,” but “rock ‘n’ roll wasn’t just music to us, it was kind of life itself.”

This is a common thread in Stoppard’s play as well, especially in relation to the British journalist, Nigel, who simply does not understand this distinction when he says (on more than one occasion), “It’s about dissidents.Trust me.” A vibrant culture cannot emerge simply to stand as some sort of political voice of dissent. Rock and Roll is much more than that, and Stoppard demonstrates this beautifully in his play.

Concerning the music, I would like to discuss the function of Rock and Roll music in the play, since the music does a lot more than serve as the title or a theme in the play. In the course of the play, 22 songs are mentioned by the playwright to be played during the production. These songs are mainly by Western bands from the 1960s and 70s—especially Bob Dylan, Pink Floyd, and The Velvet Underground. One notable exception is the inclusion of a number of songs by the preeminent Czech Rock and Roll band, The Plastic People of the Universe, whose role in the play I will discuss later. These songs tend to be played between scenes, and often they serve the important function of providing the setting of the scene—especially in determining the year it is. Therefore, Bob Dylan comes first in the play, with “I’ll Be Your Baby Tonight,” which was first released in 1968. This song sets the scene, the end of the Prague spring, and serves as a contrast for the problems on the horizon for Czechoslovakia. The songs begins, “close your eyes, close the door, you don’t have to worry anymore…kick off your shoes, do not fear, bring that bottle over here.”

As time elapses in the play, the music changes. The Rolling Stones’ “It’s Only Rock and Roll,” originally released in 1974, is playing at the start of the scene that takes place in 1975. As far as subject matter goes, this seems a rather ironic song to be playing, as the Communist officials of the state go to great pains to eliminate music that is “only rock and roll.” In 1987, U2’s “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m looking For” is playing in the background, which also has some significance, as the time had not yet come when the socialist regime had been toppled. What is most critical in the success of the musical selection in this play is the idea that the music parallels or contrasts with the action on stage. The beautiful music is both a thematic element and a formal and functional device. The play premiered in Britain’s Royal Court Theatre on June 3rd, 2006. Perhaps even

more interesting than its original British premiere is the reception it got in the Czech Republic. There, it premiered on February 22nd, 2007 at the National Theatre (*Národní divadlo*) in Prague. This premiere was much more than a theatrical performance; in fact, it was a massive cultural event, which was staged with the help of The Plastic People of the Universe, who played their songs live before the audience. That a rowdy production of a play about Rock and Roll could be performed in the magnificent and almost sacred house of high Czech culture is truly an amazing and singular event in history.

Stoppard's *Rock 'n' Roll* brings together a number of important issues concerning art and society. Although we should try not to fall into the trap of reducing the play's complexity to its political message, we cannot deny the fact that politics are an important element of the play. Beyond its dissident connotations, the music is an aesthetic object in its own right. Perhaps the most important element of this play is its inter-textual condition. Its use of music and images to propel the story give the reader (or viewer) a collage of various textual elements—from popular music to theatre to ancient poetry. This renders the piece highly amusing to the viewer and highly rewarding to the reader.

Adam Grunzke

creative writing

first bird

arlyce menzies

Bird, I hear your empty call
your soul is a small cave
where bones lie
bleached and weighing nothing.
Your heart is a minnow
in dark water
and your body
is a balcony in Spain
with the moon tied to it
like a balloon.

Bird, I never heard your name
so I pretend it is Eve
and before the fruit
you take away the rib
and wash it in a stream
then use it as a boomerang,
then a scythe.

It is beginning to rain, bird,
there are many places to hide
especially if you are small
and have learned to keep quiet.

movement

arlyce menzies

Still, the ten stones you chose
beside the lake on your trip alone
lie inside my drawer
in their leather pouch
and the stories you told
for each one
rest there, too.
Many stones from you, in fact
rest throughout my house
in boxes, bureaus, behind doors
stones piled like altars
burial sites
building materials
from another life.
I find them one by one
and place them in the garden,
on the sidewalk,
by the maple,
but they appear again—
amber-colored on the shelf
and obsidian in the tub,
tiger's eye in my music box
and micah in the closet.
Perhaps I will call upon
many hands to come
help me move them
back outside
where they are only stones,
nameless weight.

obligatory toronto poem (for the aspiring canadian poet)

hugh leonard

walking through Toronto
I merely record
white ladies talking gingerly
on ice hills ankle-high
their words and bodies balanced
as someone somewhere dies

street car up Spadina
the world spills everywhere
merchants, strange produce –
our familiar sights –
eyes that know not China
beyond one wrong or right

they gather like battery hens
keith nunes

They gather in the mornings like battery hens
Pecking away at boxes
Emptying the contents onto shelves for
List-driven shoppers to put in chock-a-block trolleys
The Portuguese shelf-filler with the hang-dog moustache
Walks to his beaten-up car with two bottles
Of cheap and nasty
He has daydreams he wants to crush with his
Artist girlfriend who cuts her childhood away like
A cancerous growth
The gallant tribesman in the green uniform calls
Out bro to the slow-witted trolley pusher
In the car-park, dead-weight boots, orange jacket
They pour out of the supermarket
Scurry to their safety net homes
And hope that it will all change
With the flick of a switch
As they say goodnight
To whoever is there to listen

gypsy

jan thorburn

We knew Waikino School was better than Muritai School because we had no Maoris.

Well, just the Kingi family.

And they didn't count because they were so tidy.

Those Kingi boys dressed for school like my brother dressed for church—white shirt and grey pants … and their sister, Nita, always wore her gym frock with the pleats pressed down neatly. Even her gym girdle looked ironed.

Muritai School, two miles down the coast, had Maoris though.

Actually it was nearly all Maoris at that school and they always beat us at basketball too. They were rough, those Muritai girls. They'd grab that ball and chuck it really hard—right down the court. If one of them was going for the ball I just stayed back and let them have it. Most of the game I'd just run along beside them, making little reaching-out movements with my hands towards the ball as it shot between them—trying to look like I was making an effort.

It was much better playing against Wharua School up the valley. They only had five kids so we had to make up their basketball team with two kids from our school. Wharua School always lost unless we gave them Nita Kingi. Then they would win. But we knew it didn't count because Nita Kingi was ours.

When I was in the Primers, though, we had some Maoris at our school. The Ngatais. Fay, Marleen and little Gypsy Ngatai. Gypsy was in the Primers' room with me.

They were real Maoris—the Ngatais. They lived on the other side of the river and we always had to wait for them in the school bus outside the store in the mornings because they were crossing the river in their row boat. The Ngatais wore bare feet and old clothes, not like the Kingis. Of course, all us kids wore bare feet in those days—but we carried our shoes in our school bags. The Ngatai kids didn't have any shoes at all. They didn't have school bags either, actually, so they had nothing to carry their shoes in. Or their lunch. I asked Fay once why she never had any lunch and she said she didn't like eating lunch. Anyway, the Ngatai kids' feet were dirty too, dirty right up to their knees from getting out of the boat on the river bank.

One morning Gypsy Ngatai came rushing onto the school bus wearing a long pink petticoat. I stared. It was exactly like one I had in my box of dressing-up clothes at home. She gave a little whirl as she skipped down the aisle in her muddy feet, running her fingers down the shiny, smooth satin. She sat down in the seat across from me.

— Hey, I said, that's just like my princess dress I have at home in my dressing-up box!

She looked at me. Her eyes went still.

— Must be two the same, she said

But I looked when I got home after school that day and I couldn't find my one anywhere. I even tipped my box out onto the floor—Mum's flowery cotton dress with rosebud buttons, Granny's old black high heels, the long silk scarves, the pearl studded white gloves, Dad's old pyjama pants for when we did Aladdin plays.

No, it wasn't there.

I went and asked Mum and she said she'd gone though my box and taken some stuff to the second-hand clothes stall for Women's Division fund raising last weekend.

— Aw, Mum!

— I'm sorry, dear—but there's so much junk around the place. I had a big tidy up.

That was my best princess outfit, that petticoat. There was a small rip in the back and the side seam was coming apart but that didn't matter. It was beautiful. Mum gave me another one to shut me up. It was blue and even longer. But I wasn't allowed to wear it to school.

— Don't be silly, dear! Of course you can't wear an old petticoat to school!

— Gypsy Ngatai does!

But I didn't argue very hard because I knew really that you shouldn't wear a petticoat to school. I felt a bit embarrassed for Gypsy actually, deep down, because she didn't seem to know that. I felt mainly jealous though. I would've loved to wear it to school! Anyway, she never wore it again and I didn't ask her about it again either. For some reason.

I remember one other thing from back then to do with Gypsy Ngatai.

Us Primers had this really neat game we used to play. It was called Gypsy. The game was that Gypsy had to try and catch us.

She was really good at it, the way she chased after us with her hands stretched out, her wild, curly black hair flying round her face. She looked just like I imagined gypsies looked—especially with her front baby tooth missing—the bad, scary gypsies I read about in my Enid Blyton books. I still remember the scratchiness in my throat from screaming so hard as we ran away from Gypsy.

God, we loved that game.

One lunchtime, in the middle of a really good game of Gypsy down among the native trees on the nursery slope, Gypsy suddenly stopped. She just stopped and stood there.

We all squealed at her in excitement—keeping our distance, peeping out from behind the rimu and pohutakawa trees, ready to run when she began chasing us again.

— Chase us, Gypsy! Come on!

— Why've you stopped?

— Can't get me! Can't get me!

— Gypsy! Gypsy! Gypsy!

She stood there looking at us. We couldn't understand it. Then she screwed her face up and said in a small voice,

— I want someone else to have a turn at being Gypsy.

I remember how quiet we all went. I was stunned, myself. None of us could be Gypsy!

— But you're the best Gypsy! I tried to explain after a moment.

— And your name is Gypsy too, Marie McDougall said.

I was pleased that we had this really good reason about Gypsy's name. I nearly added that Gypsy looked like a gypsy so of course she had to be the gypsy - but I didn't for some reason.

— I just don't want to be Gypsy anymore, Gypsy said.

Then, to my horror, her eyes filled with tears. I felt a squirmy feeling inside my stomach. It was how I felt when Mum caught me being mean to my baby sister.

— You all run away from me and scream, Gypsy said, wiping her nose with the back of her hand—And I am always by myself.

It might sound really stupid to you but I had never actually thought about that. About how Gypsy might feel. I just loved the game so I didn't want it to stop.

No-one did!

Except Gypsy, of course.

However, at that moment, as Gypsy stood there in the middle of all us dumbstruck girls under the trees, I realised I would hate being Gypsy too. I would hate being the one everyone screamed at and ran away from—every lunchtime, every playtime, every day.

I can't remember exactly what happened after that but I know we never played the Gypsy game anymore. Not with Gypsy as Gypsy anyway. I think we had a go at it with Marie McDougall as Gypsy—but it just wasn't the same—no matter how much she went "Yahhhhh!" and ran after us, her reddy blonde curls bouncing round her cheeks, stretching her hands out to grab us.

Gypsy screamed and ran—but the rest of us didn't much. We probably all went back to playing Bull Rush on the football field with the boys.

At some stage the Ngatai family left our school—I think their dad got a job in town—and the house across the river was never lived in again. It started to fall down. My brother used to row over there with his mates to explore it. The glass in the windows was all broken, and sheep had got inside and left droppings everywhere. The corrugated iron over the porch was hanging right down- you had to be careful not to cut your head on it. My brother reckoned there were ghosts there.

We had a big reunion for Waikino School a few years ago. There was a dance in the hall. I went down for the weekend to see what everyone had been doing.

The Kingi boys were there dancing the foxtrot with their wives. They told me Nita was a Primary School teacher now down in Wanganui. I saw Marie MacDougall. She had been married to a stockbroker and divorced so her and I were having a good old talk when I noticed a Maori woman standing outside the hall door.

—That's Fay Ngatai, Marie said.

I went out to speak to her. I asked why she didn't come inside. She said she was fine out there. I asked what she had been doing since she left school. She said not much really—a bit of sheep shearing. I got cold so I went back inside.

I asked Michael Kingi for a dance and we had a good talk, and then I went and got an egg sandwich and a lamington from the supper table. When I went back outside again, Fay had gone.

Later, I wished I'd asked her how Gypsy was getting on these days.

I'd thought of it but I just didn't, for some reason.

remembering my mother's memories

lori a. noll

The distance between us seems like much more than the expanse of a tablecloth. He is an attorney who is defending the drug company, Pfizer. He calls his apartment a loft, refers to his bag as an attaché, and takes me to independent films that I'm not sure I understand.

I come from flip flops and rosaries. From track housing and a sagging card table bearing flea market treasures at daybreak. I am from the broad flat nose of Lolo Andy and the Sari Sari store of Mama Loring,

We are having dinner after a film (not to be confused with a movie) entitled "Winter Spring Summer Fall," and he is commenting on the breathtaking cinematography. I take in the mural of Parisian vineyards behind him, the waiter in a stiff suit standing with his hands crossed behind his back. I want to ask the waiter if he's Filipino, to tell him that I just got back from Cebu. That I ate balut for the first time and danced tinikling. He looks at me as if I am a traitor. Or I might be imagining the look. I might be imagining that he is Filipino.

I wonder how I got here. To a life where I work out at a gym, hang out at bars and go out on dates. And on these dates I have thoughts like, do I have to sleep with this guy now because I ordered the lobster? Which doesn't make any sense because foods that you wear a bib to eat don't seem that sexy. A disobedient laugh escapes my mouth.

"What?" he asks, bringing his hand to his face. "What's funny?"

"Nothing…" I laugh. "It's just, these bibs are funny," I point at the cartoonish lobster on his chest. "I spent such a long time figuring out what I was going to wear tonight and now I've got a plastic bib on."

"Oh," he says, looking relieved. He inhales deeply and then continues rambling.

I'm comparing this scene to my past life. My huge family back in California, our relentless karaoke. The house of my childhood welcoming guests with a warm pile of shoes in the entrance. I wonder what this guy would think of our plastic runners tacked to the carpet in the hallway, the old blankets that cover our couches, and our kitchen chairs on wheels. Precautions taken to protect our new possessions. To protect our dreams.

We were the only family on the block with a Fry Daddy that shot angry, stinging sprays of oil, offering treasures of golden brown adobo, chicken wings, lumpia. My mom made stir-fry in a wok, not a pan. Our leftovers stayed on the kitchen table with paper towels covering the mouths of bowls like an afterthought.

We didn't have a cordless phone, but the cord was long and I used to talk to my friends while rolling recklessly across the black and white checkered linoleum in the kitchen. Like the floors of an ice cream shop, the floor my mom had dreamed of long before they built this place. Our house with its promise that there wouldn't be any dirty fingerprints left from other people's children on the hallway walls. No surprise slivers of soap under the sink in the bathroom, or someone's old brown hairpin stuck in the vacuum. A small, square house that had the same bored face as all the others on that block. Rows of too close together addresses in an assortment of neutral, suitable shades.

I rolled across the floor pretending I was talking to a girlfriend, giggling through my fingers so my mom wouldn't sense the crush. Some days she laughed happily and leaned back to limbo underneath the phone cord, but that day she looked annoyed when it caught her ankle. She grabbed the phone shrewdly from my hand. "Don't call here anymore," she said in a deadly tone, shooting me a deadlier glance. Everybody new I wasn't allowed to talk to boys on the phone. I was twelve.

"I know you are an American," she told me. "And I want you to enjoy your opportunities and have fun, but don't forget our Filipino ways." Although I tired of hearing this, I loved her stories of the Philippines, the lean, scrappy chickens in cock fights and caribou wading in the sultry indigo ocean. Naked brown children rushing out into the streets to bathe in warm rain. My head propped up on her stomach, she told me about dating rituals in her country. No matter how long she had been in the States, the Philippines was always "her country." In her country, she told me, when a man was interested in a woman, he came to her house on Sundays, bringing food and gifts. "Let them court you," she advised.

She smiled recalling the men who courted her. One brought her pan de leche every Sunday. He rode his motorcycle to her house. Navigating the rocky, twisted paths of her province was almost as difficult as dodging the intimidating questions of her brothers. "Weren't you embarrassed?" I asked her. "No," she said. "That's how it should be. Men should work hard to get a good woman."

She tells the tale of the motorcycle man as a warning to me. Her eyebrows arch when she gets to the part where he misses a Sunday, claiming that he has to make the arrangements for his nephew's baptism. Like everything else of any importance or none at all, she heard rumors from the neighbors. "His motorcycle was parked outside that nurse's house by the river. You know, Viegas?"

Her Tita Pang tried to comfort her. "She's not prettier than you, she's just white. You know that she told Boy that she has Chinese blood? What a lie! Her ancestors are in the same mausoleum as ours. Filipinos, all of them!"

Later she was walking by the river with her sisters, carrying a basket of laundry. In the distance she saw a young couple walking hand in hand and smiled to herself, thinking of her own budding love. Her oldest sister dropped her basket, her mouth open wide. "Did you see them?" she asked, shaking her head. "Shameless, those two. Anyway, you don't need him." She picked up the laundry and yanked my mom by the sleeve.

Her sisters had recognized her new boyfriend whispering loving things to the nurse. They saw him notice my mom, with her torn shorts and basket of dirty clothes and look away quickly, but my mom swore that it was not him. Her family forbade her to see him again, but she screamed and cried, not believing it was true. She made such a scene that they finally let her go. She ran the twisted path to his house in her slippers. As she approached, she saw two figures sitting on the porch drinking orange soda out of plastic baggies. It was her boyfriend and the nurse.

Her advice to me is a plaster cast of a thirty year old wound. "Dance. Date. Have lots of boyfriends," she tells me, "Not just one. You have the rest of your life to be stuck with just one."

I had two dates for the prom until the very last minute. Then they both found out and I had none, but I didn't care. My friends and I went as a group, eating salty snacks and listening to rap music as we dressed. We trashed the bathroom with hairpins and bright smudges of cheap make-up. My mom danced with us in the living room to "I Wanna Sex You Up" and "Freak Me Baby." Years later, when I looked back on my prom pictures I wondered aloud why I didn't go with a boy. "It's better," my mom said. "Don't ever commit to a man. They treat you better when you don't want them."

I hear her voice in my head and I know that if I ate both my lobster and his, I still won't sleep with him tonight. Watching his lips move, I'm starting to think I don't

really like him enough for that anyway. I consider making an excuse and going home to watch the Food Network, but I pause and remember another piece of advice my mom has given me, though I don't know if she's serious because she always laughs when she says it. "Always marry a man who loves you more than you love him," I hear her say. I sit up straighter in my chair and rejoin my date. "Yes, breathtaking," I agree, smiling warmly, resolving not to make the same mistakes in life that she has.

contributors

paul babiak is a professional actor, director and playwright, clown, and a doctoral candidate at the Graduate Centre for Study of Drama at the University of Toronto. His research interests include: the relationship between comedy and aggression; the religious component of the capacity for laughter; and the history of popular performance, particularly in Toronto. His dissertation (in progress) is entitled *Slapstick and Knockabout: Violent Comedy Enters the Modern Age*.

gina beltrán has recently finished an MA in Comparative Literature and will begin her PhD in Spanish Literature at the University of Toronto in September 2008. Her research interests include Latin American poetry and theatre of the early twentieth century. She also works constantly in her own corpus of poetry and short stories.

myra bloom has just completed her Master's at the Centre for Comparative Literature in Toronto. She hopes to pursue questions of aesthetic artifice in her doctoral work, also to be undertaken at the University of Toronto. Other academic interests include avant-garde poetry, translation, continental theory, as well as the intersection of these categories.

ryan culpepper is a PhD student at the Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Toronto. His research focuses on the relationship of language, politics and identity, and he is especially interested in the role of Russian language and culture in ex-communist Eastern Europe and Central Asia. He has worked as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ukraine and is a board member of International Outreach Coalition, which facilitates summer exchange programs for teenagers in former Soviet republics; he currently serves as director of its Armenia programs.

david degrow recently completed his MA in Drama at the University of Toronto's Graduate Centre for Study of Drama. He is presently the Backspace Coordinator at Theatre Passe Muraille, and is working as a lighting designer, actor and technician with various theatre companies in Toronto.

adam grunzke holds a Master's degree in Slavic Linguistics, and is currently a second-year PhD student in Slavic Languages and Literatures at the University of Toronto. His research focus is 20th century Czech literature and popular culture, especially the drama and prose. He has a great interest in the relationship between counter-culture movements and art in Europe and North America in the 1960s.

hugh leonard holds a Master of Arts degree in Comparative Literature from the University of Alberta. He has published poetry in the University of New Brunswick's *Saint John Journal*, *Vox*, and in the University of Alberta's journal, *Fait Accomplit*. He has attended the University of Toronto, as a PhD student in Comparative Literature, since 2006.

arlyce menzies recently moved to Somerville, MA after a period of readjustment to the U.S. She and her husband had been in Ukraine for two years teaching English and studying Russian through the Peace Corps. She now teaches GED courses for adults and writes. Her work has been published in several university journals and she is working on a manuscript for a book of poems as well as hunting for a promising MFA program.

lori a. noll is a high school English teacher in the South Bronx. Her work has appeared in *The Haight Ashbury Literary Journal*, *The Smoking Poet*, and *The Ignatian*. When not writing, Lori spends her time volunteering at Art for Change, an organization that incites social change through art making. She also reads, doodles, does yoga, and loves to cook and eat.

keith nunes is a former newspaper journalist who quit in a fit of pique and now fills shelves in a supermarket and writes at night. He has been published in several top New Zealand journals and online ezines around the world. He lives in Tauranga, New Zealand.

chiara sgro is a PhD student at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice. Her research interests include Postcolonial Literature and Theory, Film and Queer studies and Mythopoeic Literature. She is currently working on her dissertation on the relationship between poltics, editorial censorhip and literature in Eire in the '60s.

ioana isabella sion has recently completed her Ph.D. at the Centre for Comparative Literature, University of Toronto, with a thesis on Dante, Claudel, Beckett, and

Ionesco. Recent publications include: “Claudel and Dante: Salvation on the Seventh Day” (2007), “Mythical Self and Infernal Labyrinth: The Dantean Dimension of Ionesco’s Dreamscape” (2006), and “Beckett and the Jungian Mandala” (2006).

jan thorburn holds a Masters Degree in Education from Massey University in New Zealand and has a background in teacher education. Currently she is developing courses in English for foreign language speakers and is completing a postgraduate diploma in this field. Her publications include teacher texts, ‘readers’ for schools and EFL speakers, and the junior novel *Stranded*. Her story “Gypsy” won commendation in a national short story competition and is part of a story collection she has nearly completed.