Negative Theatrics:
Writing the Postdramatic Stage

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“We must get rid of our superstitious valuation of text!” Antonin Artaud’s disdain still echoes in an ongoing theoretical discussion: what role, if any, should writing be understood to play in theatrical performance? Current theater scholarship, in both German postdramatic theory and American drama studies, tends to promote a paradigm wherein actual performance inherently exceeds or surpasses any text it puts to use. Despite its great appeal, this model threatens to obscure the ways writing can, so to speak, produce its own theater: both by simulating the dimensions of theatrical experience and by constituting an alternative site that undermines the totality of performance’s here-and-now. The modernist works analyzed here construct theater as a medium whose heightened exposure to the present provokes an equally heightened contestation of that present. In these texts, theatricality becomes a negative relation to the actual.

More concerned with formal experimentation than with suspenseful storytelling, these works can benefit from the “postdramatic” critical framework that has developed in theater studies during the past two decades. Yet postdramatic discourse frequently identifies the postdramatic departure from storytelling with a liberation from the “dominance” of the script. Likewise, the postdramatic is often characterized as a theater where presence supplants representation. In order to challenge these assumptions, this dissertation returns to Peter Szondi’s and Bertolt Brecht’s critiques of drama. For these earlier theorists, drama itself relentlessly affirms the present; it thus becomes possible to reconceive the postdramatic as a theater that rejects presentness. Within such a theater, text acquires a heightened, not a diminished, importance. Directing us towards an “elsewhere” of poetic composition, and hence providing an intense sense of what is not present amidst performance, experimental playwriting constitutes a vital component of the postdramatic landscape.

In order to conceptualize this development, I draw on Theodor W. Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Although Adorno is rarely engaged as a resource for thinking about theater, his work provides a framework for understanding the written script as a negative, critical structure that resists the real-time event of performance. The first chapter of the dissertation introduces Adorno, Brecht, and Szondi as theoretical interlocutors, situating their work in relation to postdramatic discourse and the problematic status of the theater text. Having argued for a modernist theatrical tradition that is both postdramatic and highly literary, the study then traces this tradition through a series of modernist and contemporary works. A model of theater as distraction, rather than presentness, structures both the late fiction of Henry James and the landscape plays of Gertrude Stein. In
*Waiting for Godot,* this negation of the present becomes dialectical: Samuel Beckett intensifies dramatic presence to the point of exhaustion, constructing theater as the utopian desire for that which is not yet present. In the last two chapters, I show how two contemporary American playwrights have adapted this modernist legacy. Suzan-Lori Parks finds ways to construct writing as a site of performance in its own right, alternative to the presence of the stage. Mac Wellman devises a text that consistently refuses the economy of communicative transaction, figuring a yet-unimagined mode of collectivity. Through close readings of their work, “Negative Theatrics” shows how all these writers enact a profoundly critical theatrics of the page.
Contents

Acknowledgments ii

One Introduction: Writing Postdramatic Theater 1
   Defining the Postdramatic 1
   The Presence of the Stage: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Theater 9
   Drama and the Present: Peter Szondi and Bertolt Brecht 14
   The “Wrong Life” of Performance: Adorno and Postdramatic Theater 18
   The Theatrical Text and the Postdramatic Play
      1. A Note on Methodology 23
      2. Postdramatic Playwriting 24

Two “Something stranger yet”: Theatrical Distractions in Henry James and Gertrude Stein 27
   I. Henry James 31
      The Beast in the Sentence: Writing Theatrical Space 32
      “something… had been wanted in the picture”: Disrupted Image in The Ambassadors 41
   II. Gertrude Stein 45
      Beyond Antitheatricality: “Plays” 47
      Negativity Beyond Contradiction: Paisieu’s Differential Landscape 53
      The (Dis-)continuous Present: Four Saints in Three Acts 58

Three “Gesture towards the universe”: Theater as Utopia in Waiting for Godot 63
   “What is there to recognize?”: Godot and the Dramatic Present 68
   “All the dead voices”: Writing and the Real 78
   Utopia in Attendance 84
   Towards a New Monologue: Beckett’s “scribal act” 88

Four The Promise of “Playwriting”: Suzan-Lori Parks 97
   “Watch Me Work”: Writing as (Counter-) Performance 99
   Writing the Death of the Last Black Man 104
   “Grave Departures”: A Postdramatic Poetics of Mourning 109
   The Burnin Page 115
   “Land/:HO!”: Textual Performance and Theatrical Utopia 124

Five “Small, fierce creatures”: Mac Wellman’s Auratic Theater 131
   Mouthing Off: A Murder of Crows 135
   In Spite of Intimacy: Aura as Phenomenological Rebellion 150
   “This will kill that”: Speculations 157
   Coda: Girl Gone 160

Works Cited 167
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Chapter One
Introduction: Writing Postdramatic Theater

ESTRAGON: [gesture towards the universe] This one is enough for you? (Samuel Beckett, Waiting for Godot)

In his 1999 book Certain Fragments, director Tim Etchells describes “the spectacle of ‘new playwrights’ at a 1997 conference in London’s Royal Court Theatre”: the writers’ “biggest (almost only) topic of conversation seemed to be long pontifications on the understanding of a comma” (104). “Hard for me to understand,” he continues drily, “having never much cared for punctuation…. Never cared much for playwrights” (104-5).

Etchells is the founder and artistic director of Forced Entertainment, the UK’s highest-profile experimental theater company. He is also a writer, and the essay that contains these remarks, “On Performance Writing,” expounds on the kind of text that might ultimately make the pedantic “playwrights” obsolete: this is theater’s newfound “gabbling voice composed of scraps and layers, fragments, quotations” (99). In this vein, the essay makes a case for the theatrical power of writing. And yet it dismisses the playwrights for taking the writing of writing, its literary mechanics, too much to heart: “How directors and actors can’t understand a comma these days. The terrible shame of it” (104). The implication, of course, is that directors and actors have more important, more exciting things to worry about. If a writer wants to hang with theater’s advanced guard, she’d better shake this stodgy graphophilia, put down the MLA guide and get into the game.

Etchells’s work with Forced Entertainment exemplifies the formally and conceptually innovative theater that has increasingly become known as “postdramatic.” His rejection of the playwright would seem to fit neatly with this label; after all, playwrights are also called “dramatists.” And in fact, the critical discourse on postdramatic theater often assumes that a dethronement of the once-dominant playtext marks the crucial divide between the old theater and the new. The present study attempts to refute this theatrical common sense. I will argue for a concept of the postdramatic that not only includes such punctuation-obsessed playwrights as Gertrude Stein and Suzan-Lori Parks, but needs them; a postdramatic theater for which literary work is not one theatrical “material” among others, but a privileged mode of enacting theater’s most urgent project. Briefly, this theater is one of heightened negativity: a specifically utopian response to the heightened actuality that has often seemed to distinguish performance from other kinds of art. I will explain this formulation in what follows, grounding it in Theodor W. Adorno’s critical theory, and suggesting that it structures a series of modernist and contemporary texts. But I want to begin by reviewing the scholarly discourse that has arisen around the idea of the postdramatic, and clarifying my own relationship to this discourse.

Defining the Postdramatic

Although the word “postdramatic” was coined decades earlier by Richard Schechner (in English) and Andrzej Wirth (in German), Hans-Thies Lehmann launched it into widespread scholarly use with work culminating in his tremendously influential book Postdramatisches Theater (1999), translated into English in 2006.¹ Richly theorized and packed with concrete

¹ Parenthetical citations of “Lehmann” refer to the English edition of Postdramatic Theatre (2006). Where it has seemed useful to include Lehmann’s original German words in brackets, the page number of the translation is given followed by the corresponding page number in the original, e.g. “(37/54).” The same applies to quotations from Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno.
analyses, Lehmann’s book has provided a philosophical framework for analyzing contemporary experimental theater, along with a new taxonomy of qualities and devices. Lehmann discusses many theatrical tendencies throughout the book, and argues that the postdramatic is necessarily an open category (19-21). Still, it seems to me that five major criteria emerge. Briefly, postdramatic theater is theater that: 1. refuses to construct a “fictive cosmos” (22, 31); 2. actively explores the medial conditions of theater (35); 3. responds to the contemporary condition of an omnipresent “media society” (which means that for Lehmann, postdramatic theater proper has only existed since the 1970s) (22); 4. replaces the “dominance of the text” with a practice where text is just one “theatrical means” among others (54-55); and 5. chooses “presence over representation” (109). Of these five criteria, I adopt the first two wholeheartedly; I take issue with the third and fourth; and I draw on some of Lehmann’s own insights and sources—including Peter Szondi’s 1956 Theory of Modern Drama—to dispute the fifth. In this section of the Introduction, I will discuss each of these points in turn.

First, the theater whose textual manifestations I will be tracing is not primarily a storytelling, or fiction-building, theater; it does not labor to construct a compelling alternate positivity, or frame its stage as a self-enclosed world inhabited by “believable” characters. In this sense, invoking the “postdramatic” provides a useful conceptual shortcut, shearing the terms “theater” and “theatrical” of a host of potentially misleading associations: narrative, role-playing, illusion. Of course, whether these associations arise at all will depend on one’s frame of reference. In the academic world, the rise of performance studies—despite coinciding with the very era Lehmann describes—tended to perpetuate the notion of “theater” as a narrative, illusionistic form, against which “performance” could define itself. Where theater was “artificial,” performance was “orificial” (Diamond 84): corporeal, subversive, real. By demonstrating again and again what scant respect contemporary theater shows for the narrative norm ascribed to it, Lehmann obviates any assumption that theater is fundamentally a way of projecting fictions. This is especially important for my study because I will at times be exploring theater as a force that disrupts dramatic narrative within the texts I read. Lehmann’s privileged examples of the postdramatic often dispense with storytelling completely; but I find that the concept of a non-narrative theatricality can be just as useful where narrative is present in attenuated form: it enables us to see this attenuation as narrative’s falling foul of theater, narrative’s more or less violent encounter with an other medium.

2 To say that postdramatic theater is not a “theater of illusion” just means that it directs its energies towards shaping the performance situation in particular ways, rather than towards making that situation recede in favor of a concrete alternate world. This should not be taken to imply that postdramatic theater shakes off the “semblance character” or Scheincharakter that has been theorized since Kant as fundamental to all aesthetic experience. As Adorno explains: “everything that artworks contain with regard to form and materials, spirit and subject matter, has emigrated from reality into the artworks and in them has divested itself of its reality: Thus the artwork also becomes its afterimage. Even the purest aesthetic determination, appearance [das Erscheinen], is mediated to reality as its determinate negation” (Aesthetic 103/158). In this sense, the disappearance or attenuation of fiction in postdramatic theater does not entail a disappearance of Schein or seeming—although, as we will see, the medium of performance itself does seem to endanger art’s critical distance from the real. Lehmann implicitly acknowledges postdramatic theater’s semblance character when he writes that theater “exemplarily represents, not as a thesis but as praxis, an alliance of the heterogeneous that symbolizes the utopia of an ‘other life’ ” (Postdramatisches Theater 457, passage not in English translation). Brandon Woolf discusses this passage as an “homage to Adorno” in “Cries of Representation: A Postdramatic Politics” (2010).

3 For discussions of this dynamic, see Shannon Jackson, “Why Modern Plays Are Not Culture: Disciplinary Blind Spots,” 30-32; Ric Knowles’s Introduction to Modern Drama: Defining the Field, viii-ix. In fact, in a brief section called “Narrations” (109-110), Lehmann writes that the “principle of narration is an essential trait of postdramatic theatre; the theatre becomes the site of a narrative act.” This formulation is, I think, somewhat confusing: Lehmann’s point is that acts of narrating (rather than the acting-out of fictional narrative) takes on a newly important role as a vehicle of intimacy between performers and audience, serving a “foregrounding of the personal” (110).
The second feature of the postdramatic, its interrogation of the theater medium itself, goes hand-in-hand with the displacement of fiction. “If texts and staged processes are perceived according to the model of suspenseful dramatic action [Handlung, also “plot”],” Lehmann explains, “the theatrical conditions of perception, namely the aesthetic qualities of theatre as theatre, fade into the background… These elements (the form), however, are precisely the point in many contemporary theatre works” (35/51). The substance of these works is inseparable from their form, inhering in their temporally and spatially specific performance. Postdramatic theater thus irreducibly concerns “the eventful present, the particular semiotics of bodies, the gestures and movements of the performers, the compositional and formal structure of language as a soundscape, the qualities of the visual beyond representation, the musical and rhythmic process with its own time, etc.” (35). With this account, Lehmann argues for the necessity of a critical approach to theater that would break completely from literary scholarship (31). While my own effort will be, somewhat perversely, to return the postdramatic to literature, this moment of separation is crucial because it establishes theater as a set of formal dimensions. These particular dimensions do not belong as fundamentally to literature as to theatrical production; but written texts can both posit and problematize them. The elements that Lehmann lists are the medial givens of theater; postdramatic theater raises them to the status of conscious, generative concerns. And correspondingly, I would argue, postdramatic-theatrical texts have to fabricate them in such a way that they invade the experience of reading and thus come into question. This is not just a matter of activating, for example, a reader’s spatial imagination, as in the detailed description of a landscape. Nor would a text that relies on the reader’s temporal sense of urgency, or anxiety, count as theatrically postdramatic for that reason. A text makes postdramatic theater when its space and time are no longer merely imaginative substrates for storytelling, but vexed sites of attention in themselves; or more succinctly, when they are problems. The theatrical/textual problem on which this study will focus is perhaps best captured by the first entry in Lehmann’s list, “the eventful present.” Indeed, theater’s space, time, embodiment, and sociality are all tightly bound up in the problematic that this term generates.

The idea of postdramatic theater as interrogating its own medium is also suggestive at another level: “interrogating its own medium” is a textbook definition of modernism, and as such leads us to the question of periodization. Lehmann explicitly offers the term “postdramatic” as an alternative to “postmodern theater” (25-26); while he explains that this is because the latter lends itself too easily to generalizations with little descriptive force, I suspect that he also rejects the “postmodern” label because of the confluence between the theater he describes and the larger modernist project of medial self-reflection. Needless to say, modernist experimentation (especially so conceived) cannot be rigorously confined to any one period—there is no real contradiction between Lehmann’s depiction of a postdramatic theater that looks very modernist and his insistence that it dates from the era we usually think of as postmodern. But the intergenerational confluence suggested here might lead us to wonder whether theater’s decisive “break” from dramatic fictionality can really have held off for as long as Lehmann claims.

5 As Martin Harries puts it, “a history of the desire for medium specificity… provides one way to define the project of modernism” (14). A classic text for this definition is Clement Greenberg’s 1940 essay “Towards a Newer Laocoon.”

6 At a seminar discussion of Postdramatic Theatre at the 2011 Mellon School of Theater and Performance Research, this proved to be the most contentious of Lehmann’s claims. Many of today’s young theater scholars seem less willing than their forebears to accept the “common knowledge” expressed by Eugene Ionesco: that “The theatre is always twenty or thirty years behind poetry” (qtd. in Kostelanetz 9). Of course, the lag-time Lehmann’s argument suggests is even greater.
movements Lehmann marks off as “antecedents, first beginnings and anticipations” (23). He writes:

This study proceeds from the conviction… that the undoubtedly deep caesura caused by the historical avant-gardes around 1900, despite their revolutionary innovations, largely maintained the essence of the “dramatic theatre”…. Only within limits did they question the traditional model of theatrical representation and communication…. By comparison, the spread and then omnipresence of the media in everyday life since the 1970s has brought with it a new multiform kind of theatrical discourse that is here going to be described as postdramatic theatre. (22)

This taxonomic division into the postdramatic (1970s on) and, so to speak, the pre-postdramatic makes sense strategically, since Lehmann aims to convince his readers that contemporary theater requires a new and different critical approach: readers might be more willing to accept a new paradigm for the last thirty years than to reconceive a whole century. Perhaps more importantly, it seems clear that Western theater has only recently moved into anything like a postdramatic era: the opportunities for this theater to manifest in production have increased enormously in recent decades, and there is, not only a new “market” for experimental theater, but also a common vocabulary and a set of expectations among generations of artists for whom companies like the Wooster Group, Forced Entertainment, or Frank Castorf’s Volksbühne are models of aesthetic integrity and accomplishment. Therefore I want to retain Lehmann’s understanding of postdramatic theater as “the new theatre” (37), insofar as this refers to a set of sensibilities that are currently powerful, determining the work many of us are seeing and making today. But I do not believe that postdramatic theater has only existed in this era, nor that the term “postdramatic” can only be productively specific in reference to work since the 1970s.

That it is meaningful to speak of a postdramatic experience of theater well before the ascendancy of television, and that the texts I am reading manifest this experience, are theses of this dissertation. My analysis, accordingly, locates continuities between the contemporary artists I examine in Chapters Four and Five and the modernist forebears I read in Chapters Two and Three. As I have already confessed, however, my readings are readings: analyses of literary work by Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and Samuel Beckett, and of contemporary playwriting by Suzan-Lori Parks and Mac Wellman. Whether this study will count as extending postdramatic theater back to the start of the twentieth century will thus depend on a more fundamental question: whether texts can be read as theater, in a sense that is more than metaphorical. This claim puts us in tension with the fourth criterion of Lehmann’s “postdramatic”: its emergence through a “drifting apart of text and theatre” (46) or, put more agonistically, through a coup in which “the dominance of the text” that has presumably characterized drama (54) gets overthrown.

Lehmann’s readers have often taken this criterion as especially definitive for the postdramatic paradigm, even where they, like the present study, seek to discover the postdramatic operations of texts. Gerda Poschmann, for example, states early in her capacious study Der nicht mehr dramatische Theatertext (1997) that “the literary text is no longer the uncontested center and goal of theatrical performance, but is noticeably regarded as the linguistic material of an autonomous stage art and used as such” (20), suggesting that any study of contemporary theater texts needs to take this change into account. In a more recent study of Elfriede Jelinek and Heiner Müller, Dagmar Jaeger argues that in their work “The postdramatic… is already invested in the text itself and thus first creates the condition

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7 All translations from Poschmann are my own.
leaves no visible trace afterward” (166) Phelan says much the same thing about performance when she writes for my own theorization of text and performance below. Christoph Menke’s reading of Adorno’s aesthetics is particularly support this misconception, in ways the present discussion seeks to redress. Some of his formulations, however, tend the theatre, rather than referring to something that has supposedly been overcome” (17). Some of his formulations, however, tend to this study the often dismissively used term ‘text theatre’ will turn out indifferent to text. He certainly never makes this claim in In a conversation in March 2011, Lehmann lamented the widespread perception that “postdramatic theater” means a theater indifferent to text. He certainly never makes this claim in Perceptual Culture” (Shakespeare 13-27), we might look to Peggy Phelan’s now-canonical 1993 essay “Representation without reproduction: the ontology of performance” (Unmarked 146-166). Despite its rich theoretical complexity, Phelan’s article erects a binary opposition between writing, as a technology of the Same, and performance, whose disappearance teaches us to value the non-identical (148-149). Within this influential

8 My translation.
9 Other scholars contest the dramatic/postdramatic distinction by arguing that the works in question have more in common than Lehmann’s “caesura” would seem to permit; see e.g. Loren Kruger’s “Making Sense of Sensation: Enlightenment, Embodiment, and the End(s) of Modern Drama.”
10 In a conversation in March 2011, Lehmann lamented the widespread perception that “postdramatic theater” means a theater indifferent to text. He certainly never makes this claim in Postdramatic Theater, announcing on the contrary that “in the course of this study the often dismissively used term ‘text theatre’ will turn out to mean a genuine and authentic variant of postdramatic theatre, rather than referring to something that has supposedly been overcome” (17). Some of his formulations, however, tend to support this misconception, in ways the present discussion seeks to redress.
11 Nevertheless, I would argue that Phelan’s article is very much aligned with Adorno’s negative aesthetics, which will be crucial for my own theorization of text and performance below. Christoph Menke’s reading of Adorno’s aesthetics is particularly resonant with Phelan’s argument. Throughout, Menke emphasizes that “The aesthetics of negativity limits the validity of the aesthetically experienced to its actual enactment” (166). Phelan says much the same thing about performance when she writes that it “honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward” (Unmarked 149). Phelan contends that performance’s “radical negativity is valuable, in part

[149]
framework—which Phelan herself, it should be acknowledged, continually troubles—it becomes difficult to see “text theater” as anything but a reining-in of performance’s subversive potential. This discourse supports a pervasive text-versus-performance binary, with performance privileged as the destabilizing, insubordinate force that undermines conservative textual authority. As Shannon Jackson has observed, the disciplinary formation of performance studies has frequently relied on this binary to assert the value of its own objects and methodologies, and in particular to distinguish “performance” from the traditionally text-allied “theater” (“Why Modern” 30-32).

Within theater discourse too, of course, a powerful anti-textual tradition has long existed, Antonin Artaud being its most spectacular, but hardly its original, exemplar. Martin Puchner points out that “the familiar story of the emancipation of theatrical performance from the dramatic text” belongs to “a century-long polemic against the dramatic text, launched by actors, directors, and theater visionaries” (“Drama” 292-3). The account of postdramatic theater bravely dethroning a dominant text renews this tradition, but comes under pressure in work like Worthen’s, which questions oppositions between conservative “text theater” and bold experimental performance. And yet it seems to me that, despite its own intentions, this recent scholarship has itself increasingly yielded to anti-textual sensibilities. Emphatically denying that drama is marked by the “primacy of the text,” such work tends ultimately to diminish text by insisting that performance always surpasses it. This trend emerges clearly when, for example, we compare Worthen’s Drama: Between Poetry and Performance (2010) with his controversial 1992 article “Disciplines of the Text/Sites of Performance.” As the titles themselves suggest, an earlier unwillingness to assume an absolute distinction between text and performance becomes, in the later work, a project of defining “drama” (by which Worthen means text theater) in terms of this very distinction. In the “Disciplines” essay, Worthen had criticized the anti-textual rhetoric of some performance scholars, pointing out that poststructuralist theorizations of text accord it the same values being celebrated, within the new discipline, as the exclusive province of performance (17). In Drama, however, the deconstructive possibility that text might be performance has been left behind. Text is now, for Worthen, an “agency” of performance, a tool performance uses in order to make meaning (xvii iff). Throughout his readings of several plays which, he claims, allegorize this fact, the major thrust of his argument consists in showing how performance subverts, exceeds, and outpaces text at every turn, as “a specific kind of doing that lives outside the text” (55) and “cannot be kept captive to its writ” (109).

Worthen’s analysis poses a crucial challenge to those performance and postdramatic discourses which demonize traditional theater by misconstruing the “dominance” of the script; in this respect, his argument offers a much-needed corrective. But it is curious that the defense of text theater now seems to require a sort of apology for the text, as if the best reply to its detractors were something like: “don’t worry, all those playwrights you’re sick of know they aren’t really running the show.” Similarly, Benjamin Bennett’s thoughtful and provocative All Theater Is Revolutionary Theater (2005), which Worthen discusses at length in Drama, understands theater’s value as its departure from text: theater is “a kind of training in revolutionary resistance to the otherwise unchallengeable conservatism of writing… And now, in the age of ‘literature,’ it is still the same conceptually refractory intrusion of writing into the domain of the immediately real, it is still the theater, that preserves the possibility of a...

because it resists reproduction” (165); Menke writes that for Adorno, “The negativity of the aesthetic” is directed against “automatic repetition or identity” (11). Menke, however, also suggests that Adorno’s aesthetics need to be shorn of their insistence on art’s fundamental relation to suffering (7-11), an approach J. M. Bernstein has described as “far too formal” (308); Adorno’s emphasis on suffering, his elaboration of the claim that “all art is mournful” (Aesthetic 28), aligns him with Phelan’s aesthetics of performance just as much as his emphasis on processuality does; see Unmarked 150-152.
progressive or revolutionary writing” (68). Theater is revolutionary because of what it does to text and to the textual, hermeneutic mode of understanding; since we live “in the age of ‘literature,’” performance does its social work by undermining the reigning conceptuality. Throughout the book, Bennett continually associates writing with stable—one might say constative—positivist conceptuality, as when he rather bafflingly asserts that “it is theoretically all but impossible, in any literary form, to convey a genuine sense of chance, disorder, contingency, negativity” (120). Text therefore becomes subject to these properties only through the “exposure of writing to performance” (64, 67) that takes place through theater. Although Bennett’s terms are different from Worthen’s, both scholars refute the notion of text/theater as conservative by assuring us that, in theater, the text does not come out on top. They dispute Lehmann’s dramatic/postdramatic binary, but share his vision of theater proper as something that inherently eludes or exceeds text—a vision my own study seeks to challenge.

As these critical conversations suggest, the question of text’s “place” in postdramatic theater is tightly bound up with the question of periodization. In Lehmann’s analysis, the desire to distinguish sharply between the literary and the scenic, and the desire to delimit postdramatic theater chronologically, become mutually dependent. His treatment of Gertrude Stein exemplifies this entanglement. On the one hand, he devotes a section of his “Prehistories” chapter to Stein, noting that her “aesthetics is of great importance” to postdramatic theater; he even observes, suggestively for my purposes, that “Stein’s written text in a way already is the landscape” that would materialize much later in productions by Richard Foreman and Robert Wilson (63). On the other hand, however, Lehmann insistently maintains Stein’s “ancestor” status (62) precisely because her works are texts and not productions. He reinforces the binary with italics: “These ‘deconstructed’ kinds of texts anticipate literary elements of postdramatic theatre aesthetics” (49). The insistence that “theatre aesthetics” must be foreign to a written text is redoubled in Lehmann’s next claim, that “Gertrude Stein’s texts will only find their congenial theatre aesthetics with Robert Wilson” (Ibid). This is a curiously passive construal of texts that, as I will argue in the following chapter, do nothing if not arrogate a theater aesthetics of their own. Lehmann also here dismisses Stein’s significant production history pre-Wilson, a history that might itself argue for those texts’ theatrical generativity: they have not been lying on the shelves waiting for the theater to catch up, but have on the contrary instigated postdramatic production throughout their existence. Lehmann’s treatment of Stein seems designed to shore up, by circular logic, both the text/theater binary and the periodization of the postdramatic, and this effort shows a certain amount of strain: “Asking merely how ‘successful’ her texts were on stage, one would have to attest to her unequivocal failure as a theater author,” he asserts without justification, continuing in an oddly romantic mode: “Yet in the forms of her texts, too, a dynamic force declares itself, which eventually dissolves the tradition of dramatic theatre” (50). In order to maintain that postdramatic theater forecloses the understanding of theater as literature or vice-versa, Lehmann must posit a mysterious “force” that inhabits Stein’s writings—a ghostly anticipation of productions to come, rather than a sustained, concrete theatrics inhering in the texts themselves.

If one wants to insist that there is a postdramatic theatrics of the page, hence a postdramatic theater of literature, it becomes more difficult to consign writers like Stein—or Beckett, or even Brecht—to the status of “precursors,” and hence to delimit “postdramatic

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12 Lehmann himself mentions The Living Theatre’s 1951 production of Stein’s Ladies Voices later in the chapter; tellingly, he places an exclamation point in parentheses after the date (63). For a complete list of Stein productions up to 1984, see Ryan 165-189.
theater” as exclusively contemporary. Thus Poschmann, pushing for the consideration of text as theater, likewise differs from Lehmann in attributing to Brecht and Beckett a “new, non-dramatic theatricality” that unites them with the contemporary writers on whom she focuses (33). These artists’ texts leave behind drama as a fictional, representational form and thus devise a postdramatic theater (47) in themselves. The Texttheatralität through which writing can constitute theater, Poschmann explains, is present where texts “either imply scenic theatricality or model themselves on it through properties of linguistic form” (43). Similarly, my own readings of James, Stein, Beckett, Parks, and Wellman will show that their writings imply and perform a postdramatic theater: and by this I mean, exactly not a “de-literarized” theater, but a highly literary or writerly theater, one for which theatrical performance has become a reflexive problem at the formal level.

I differ with Poschmann, however, in her emphasis on the postdramatic as a post-representational theatricality—also the fifth of Lehmann’s criteria as I have listed them. It has become common to construe the postdramatic as a theater of heightened actuality (“the eventful present”); this logic suggests that postdramatic theater, since it no longer primarily represents a “fictive cosmos” (Lehmann 22, 31) can be better understood as presenting or producing meaning here and now. Thus, for example, Lehmann contends that postdramatic performance “becomes more presence than representation” (85), such that “the [theatrical] sign merely communicates itself, or more precisely: its presence” (98). Polish theater scholar Małgorzata Sugier writes that in postdramatic work “the theatrical ‘here and now’ no longer keeps up the pretence of creating an illusory ‘there and then’… presentation (understood as presence) outs traditional representation, turning into an interactive act of creation” (25). For Poschmann, “Meaning is no longer represented by theatrical signifiers, but produced in the aesthetic playing space between stage and house [Bedeutung wird von ihnen nicht mehr dar- sondern... hergestellt]” (319). In contrast to these accounts, my argument will emphasize a negative utopianism of the theatrical, which ultimately orients us towards that which is emphatically, so to speak, neither dar- nor her-.

In fact, despite repeated references to theatrical “presence” throughout his book, Lehmann evinces a similar understanding when he turns to this topic with more sustained attention. The “presence” of postdramatic theater, he explains, is really better understood as a “present,” in the sense of an “experience of lack [that] takes place at the seam of time” (143): “The present [Präsenz] is necessarily the erosion and slippage of presence [Präsenz]. It denotes an event that empties the now and in this emptiness itself lets memory and anticipation flash up. The present cannot be grasped conceptually but only as a perpetual self-division of the now into ever new splinters of ‘just now [eben noch]’ and ‘in an instant [jetzt gleich]’” (144/259-260). 14

The notion of a theater that subjects presence to “erosion and slippage,” in which “the now” undergoes “perpetual self-division,” is one I develop throughout this dissertation. I differ from Lehmann terminologically by treating “the present,” like “presence,” as a problematic rather than a recuperative term. So often used to mean “right here, right now,” the word “present” seems to me to obscure the ways theatrical experience can contest the here-and-now in

13 Poschmann criticizes the contemporary tendency, derived from avant-garde movements, to “equat[e] theatricalization with de-literarization,” arguing that this view reduces verbal language to its representational function (32-33).

14 Here Lehmann is very close to Peggy Phelan’s theorization of performance as disappearance “into a maniacally charged present.” See Unmarked 146, 148-149. Erika Fischer-Lichte discusses the history of “the topos of presentness in theatre,” noting that presentness has been used both to value and devalue performance, and investigating the phenomenological payoff of what she calls “radical presence” in performance (Transformative 93-101).
which it exists.\textsuperscript{15} The present may always contain an experience of disappearance, but to totalize this aspect is to ignore the historical weight we invoke when we speak of “the present,” its \textit{reference} to \textit{what is}; what testifies to having been perpetrated; what we are tolerating and perpetuating. I do not believe the present can be parsed from this burden of actuality, and hence I understand postdramatic theater as taking issue not only with the spatial and social qualities of presence (“here”) but also, as Lehmann himself suggests, with the temporal category of presentness (“now”)—sometimes by drawing space and time into a conflictual relation with each other. Before laying out the terms of this argument, however, I want to take a moment to review the larger discourse on presence and presentness in theater—a subject that has preoccupied theorists for the past half-century.

The Presence of the Stage: Phenomenology, Deconstruction, and Theater

When Lehmann remarks that theater’s presence “can never be completely ‘there’ or ‘fulfilled’ [and]… always retains the character of the ‘longed for’ and the ‘alluded to’” (141), he is distancing himself from the concept of theatrical presence that Jacques Derrida famously critiques in Artaud. Derrida’s two essays devoted to Artaud in \textit{Writing and Difference} (1967) argue that Artaud pursues a theater of “pure presence” (\textit{Writing} 247), where the live event of performance would restore its participants to a primal state of immediate reality. Conventional theater, with its script and its storytelling, always represents something else, someplace else, another time. It divides us from the present and from ourselves. By contrast, Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty would make us find ourselves, here, now, at the actual scene of the performance. For Artaud, this possibility is what constitutes and distinguishes theater as a live medium. Its vital promise is obscured by the traditional, “superstitious valuation of texts” (Artaud, \textit{Theater} 78) that converts the stage into a medium of representation. At issue here is not only the representation of fiction through theatrical mimesis, but, as Derrida emphasizes, the re-presentation of a written work (the script) which exists outside and apart from the performance present, and hence divides the present event from itself (\textit{Writing} 237). Artaud’s ideal of a theater “without works” springs from a sense of writing as “that which dispossesses me and makes me remote from myself, interrupting my proximity to myself,” whereas performance, as an “art of life,” can put me right where I am (Ibid 183).

Derrida is seizing upon a tendency in Artaud that Bert O. States identifies as phenomenological: “Artaud’s is what we might loosely call a \textit{phenomenological theater} (as opposed to semiological) in that it seeks to retrieve a naïve perception of the thing… before it was defined out of sight by language” (\textit{Great} 109). While “phenomenology” names a richly varied field of inquiry, Artaud’s insistence upon a field beyond linguistic representation does correspond to a fundamental phenomenological premise. In the Preface to his own \textit{Phenomenology of Perception}, Maurice Merleau-Ponty cites Edmund Husserl on the priority of a non-linguistic reality:

we have the experience of ourselves, of that consciousness we are, and it is on the basis of this experience that all linguistic connotations are assessed, and precisely through it that language comes to have any meaning at all for us. [As Husserl writes,] “It is that as yet dumb experience… which we are concerned to lead to the pure expression of its own meaning.”… In the silence of primary consciousness can be seen appearing not only what

\textsuperscript{15} In James, especially, this occurs through the kind of rending into “memory and anticipation” that Lehmann describes. As we’ll see, other writers find other ways of subverting performance’s “now.”
words mean, but also what things mean: the core of primary meaning round which the acts of naming and expression take shape.

Seeking the essence of consciousness will therefore not consist in developing the Wortbedeutung of consciousness and escaping from existence into the universe of things said; it will consist in rediscovering my actual presence to myself. While Merleau-Ponty is hardly demanding that we burn all our scripts, this passage could be called Artaudian in the way it rejects the primacy of linguistic meaning, casting the turn to “the world of things said” as an evasion of “primary” truth. “Rediscovering my actual presence to myself” is precisely the ambition Derrida attributes to Artaud’s theater. This same ambition reappears in the accounts of postdramatic theater we saw above, as a movement whereby “presentation (understood as presence) ousts traditional representation, turning into an interactive act of creation” (Sugiera 25). Such accounts suggest that a truly phenomenological theater has finally been achieved in contemporary work.

Already in reading Artaud, however, Derrida deconstructs this vision in which “The present offers itself as such” (Writing 248). In a much-quoted passage, Derrida argues that this ideal of presentness must ultimately defeat itself, because its very accessibility as an ideal occurs through its opposite, representation. “The present offers itself as such, appears, presents itself, opens up the stage of time or the time of the stage only by harboring its own intestine difference, and only in the interior fold of its original repetition, in representation…. Presence, in order to be presence and self-presence, has always already begun to represent itself, has always already been penetrated” (248-9). “Presence” means that which is not re-presentation, a state of being that is just here, now. But to conceive presence, or to experience presence as presence, is “always already” to cast it within a system of past and future identifications—to inscribe it within “the universe of things said” (Merleau-Ponty), corrupting the very actuality that was supposed to define it.

Postdramatic scholarship tends to exhibit a kind of selective amnesia when it comes to Derrida’s critique, now acknowledging and now forgetting that “presence” is a problematic term. The fact is, we seem to need some account of presence (or “the present”) in order to distinguish performance from other kinds of art. Certain theorists have sought to reconcile this imperative with deconstruction by flipping the script: since performance cannot be the site of presence, it becomes the site where we feel presence’s “impossibility” (Derrida, Writing 249) most keenly; theater becomes a medium of absence, dispossession, and loss. Lehmann’s account of postdramatic “erosion and slippage of presence” belongs to this late-twentieth-century response, as does Phelan’s influential work on performance as disappearance (Unmarked 146-166). These accounts strive to preserve the medial specificity of performance, not through appeals to the full presence of performer and audience, but by reference to a sense that, as the time of performance passes, we are never quite present enough. The impossibility of Artaud’s theater thus becomes the very lesson of performance, which emerges as the deconstructive art form par excellence. Even before Phelan made this argument a staple of performance theory, Elinor Fuchs had offered

16 Artaud: “Written poetry is worth reading once, and then should be destroyed…. Then we might even come to see that it is our veneration for what has already been created, however beautiful and valid it may be, that petrifies us, deadens our responses, and prevents us from making contact with that underlying power, call it thought-energy, the life force, that determinism of change, lunar menses, or anything you like. Beneath the poetry of the texts, there is the actual poetry…” (Theater 78).
17 For the history of “the topos of presentness in theatre,” see Erika Fischer-Lichte (Transformative 93-101). Fischer-Lichte notes that presentness has been used both to value and devalue performance, and investigates the phenomenological payoff of what she calls “radical presence” in performance.
18 In Performing Remains, Rebecca Schneider discusses and challenges the critical tendency to understand performance in terms of ephemerality; see especially 87-110.
a similar reading of contemporary experimental theater in her important 1985 article “Presence and the Revenge of Writing: Re-Thinking Theatre after Derrida.” Among other pieces, Fuchs describes the use of mirrors in a 1975 Mabou Mines production: “The actors performed the entire short piece from a balcony above and behind the spectators; we saw only their ghostly reflections. Such a staging undermined habitual expectations of bodily presence and actor-audience contact” (“Presence” 164). This emphatic deprivation of immediacy, Fuchs argues, typifies a new kind of theater, marked by the Derridean awareness that presence is always contaminated by the doublings of representation.

Other scholars, however, have felt that this critical emphasis on absence, mediation, and textuality in theater threatens to occlude the embodiedness that is also fundamental to the medium. Stanton Garner’s 1994 Bodied Spaces criticizes what he sees, in poststructuralist theory, as a pervasive “uneasiness with the body… as a site of corporeal and subjective elements that always resist reduction to the merely textual” (26). Garner suggests that the post-Derridean presence embargo has encouraged a critical tendency to ignore, or evade, the corporeality that constitutes theater as the “most bodied of all mediums” (39). He therefore proposes a renewed phenomenology of theater, one which would incorporate poststructuralist insights and resist falling back into a naïve confidence in presence “as a stable essence, given in itself within the perceptual act” (43). Theater’s “phenomenological complexity,” Garner writes, “comprehends, indeed is fueled by, difference and absence” (Ibid). But these factors need not be seen as eliminating presence altogether; on the contrary, it is the way presence sustains their assault that constitutes theatrical experience. In particular, this complexity defines the condition of language in theater. “Although theatrical language may aspire, in the hands of certain artists and theorists, to the condition of pure textuality, it maintains its inherence in a field of embodied utterance, even when it subjects this field to transformation, substitution, or dispersal” (123). Garner thus hopes to rescue the specificity of theater (and of writing in theater) by conceiving its presence as both metaphysically unstable and experientially real.

Now, it seems to me that this argument does not fully address the depth of Derrida’s critique, since it still rests on a binary conceptual distinction between embodied presence and signification, even while it presents the two as mutually inextricable. Early in Bodied Spaces Garner asserts that “not only are such rigid oppositions as sign/phenomenon unnecessary, they are also theoretically untenable” (16). But throughout his brilliant readings, phenomenal presence still tends to appear as something other than, or beyond, linguistic meaning, something that “infiltrate[s]” and disturbs representation (123). In this regard, Garner’s response to poststructuralism parallels Bert States’s earlier phenomenological response to the ascendancy of theater semiotics. The “danger of a linguistic approach to theater,” States had written, “is that one is apt to look past the site of our sensory engagement with its empirical objects. This site is the point at which art is no longer only language” (Great 7). States thus saw a “need for rounding out a semiotics of the theater with a phenomenology of its images—or, if you will, a phenomenology of its semiology” (29). The Derridean retort would be that there is no

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19 In The Domain-Matrix (1996), Sue-Ellen Case makes a parallel critique of the discourse on “queer performativity,” exemplified by the work of Judith Butler and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Case writes: “It is confounding to observe how a lesbian/gay movement about sexual, bodily practices and the lethal effects of a virus, which has issued an agitprop activist tradition from its loins, as well as a Pulitzer Prize-winning Broadway play (Angels in America), would have as its critical operation a notion of performativity that circles back to written texts, abandoning historical traditions of performance for the print modes of literary and philosophical scrutiny” (17).

20 For example: “When a cast-iron pot is ‘played’ by a cast-iron pot, imported from actual use, the transparency of fictional semiosis is pressured by a material opacity, and the stage announces itself as a territory of surfaces, dense, particularized, sensory, radically actual” (Garner 92, my emphasis).
phenomenality that cannot itself be (or has not itself been) captured as a sign; that a “semiology of its phenomenology” will always be equally possible. In other words, to recur to Merleau-Ponty’s language, “my actual presence to myself” cannot count on being an alternative to “the universe of things said,” but is always liable to discover itself already within that sphere, whereupon its own identity vanishes. When Garner proposes to “complement[1] the ‘always already’ of signification with the ‘always also’ of the subject’s corporeal fields” (39), his “also” signals an immanence not recuperable within representation, a claim that cannot be fully reconciled with the deconstructive argument.

Nevertheless, part of what makes Garner’s and States’s work so compelling, and doubtless also lies behind less cautious espousals of “presence” in postdramatic discourse, is the same thing that lends Artaud’s manifestoes their own irresistible conviction: the fact that it does seem to make a difference to us when our fellow beings are performing here and now. It may well be that this experiential fact is bound up with what Derrida calls the “closure” of our “historico-metaphysical epoch” (Grammatology 4)—that any experience of performance as such is only possible within that closure. 21 This is, I think, a possibility Garner, Lehmann, and Phelan would all like to evade. But if we grant it (at least provisionally), we can shift our focus from the question of how much presence there “really is” in theater, to the question of how various artists have registered the experience of a distinctly present medium, and have devised their innovations in response to that experience. We need not ask whether these innovations bear out a particular thesis about the ontological status of presence/presentness in theater: for example, that Beckett’s Not I “discloses deeper levels at which its dramatic language is infused with the speaking present” (Garner 135). In this study, I ask instead how the perception of theater’s heightened phenomenal presence, or here-and-now-ness, pushes Beckett and other writers to discover countervailing powers of negativity within the theatrical.

In the chapters that follow, therefore, my own analyses take as a premise the conviction so carefully articulated by States and Garner: that theater can be a medium of heightened phenomenality. That is, the spatial, temporal, corporeal, and intersubjective dimensions of this event always produce at least the potential to call our attention to the real as real, the present as present, even or especially where these quantities reveal their instability and we become aware of presence as indissociable from representation. I think it is indisputable that theatrical signs operate, as States writes, “not simply by signifying the world but by being of it” (Great 20). Taken one way, of course, this description applies to all signs; it also has special application to other media, as Stanley Cavell’s writings on film demonstrate. But because of the simultaneity and spatial contiguity of production, presentation, and reception that distinguish theater from film and other forms, “the world” that theater’s human and nonhuman materials are “of” is, emphatically, ours; it is this world, sharing our moment in history. If there were an earthquake or a bombing or the paradigmatic fire, we would all go down together. And when, on the contrary, the show goes on, this fact bespeaks the greater going-on of the world in which we watch it. The

21 In Liveness, Philip Auslander argues that “relationship between the live and the mediatised is volatile and subject to significant change over time, as is the definition of liveness itself” (187). While Auslander’s argument is more cultural-historical than theoretical, his contention that we may not value live performance as much as we think we do, and will likely come to value it less and less, suggests that we may be approaching a post-metaphysical relationship to performance.

22 Early in The World Viewed (1971), Cavell quotes Erwin Panofsky’s remark that “The medium of the movies is physical reality as such” and André Bazin’s claim that “Cinema is committed to communicate only by way of what is real”. Cavell argues that “‘Physical reality as such’ is not correct... What Panofsky and Bazin have in mind is that the basis of the medium of movies is photographic, and that a photograph is of reality or nature. If to this we add that the medium is one in which the photographic image is projected and gathered on a screen, our question becomes: What happens to reality when it is projected and screened?” (16). Cavell pursues this question throughout the book.
successive moments of production, its ongoingness before our eyes, prove that things are functioning; and as an audience, we are on the scene of—we take part in—that functional success. Garner quotes Herbert Blau’s remark that in theater the actor “can die there in front of your eyes; is in fact doing so” (Blau, Take 83; qtd. in Garner 44); but this also means that theater is where we survive, where the world in its present form keeps on turning. That insistence can feel like a triumph; it can also feel awful. For the artists whose works I will be reading, the present is above all something to break out of. In light of the perception that theater can emphatically place us here and now, these texts search for ways in which this actuality might prompt us towards its opposite: that which is not here or now, that which is radically different. 23

To claim that this orientation has a special pertinence to postdramatic theater is necessarily to contest the notion that the postdramatic is a theater “of” the present in any simple sense. But this need not entail returning to an ethos of representation. It is true that, insofar as representation in the Derridean sense undoes the actual by marking its dependence upon what is not here, there is at least a gestural parallel between representation and the postdramatic theatricality that interests me. But as Derrida also argues, the concept of representation is still bound up in a hierarchy that asserts an erstwhile present as the origin and source of its value. The works I read exhibit no such nostalgia. Their logic is much closer to the operation that Derrida suggests “representation” is meant to cover over: writing, which is never truly just the copy or mark of a presence, but enacts an unrecoverable dissemination of difference. Writing “displaces the proper place of the [spoken] sentence, the unique time of the sentence pronounced hic et nunc…” (Grammatology 281). A theater that seeks to displace us from the site where we are, but not towards a second, imitative present, is neither a theater of presence nor a theater of representation. It might, however, be a theater of writing.

This possibility returns us to Fuchs’s argument that “Writing, which has traditionally retired behind the apparent presence of performance, is openly declaring itself” throughout contemporary theater (“Presence” 163). For Fuchs, the aim of this tendency is specifically deconstructive: it reveals a “normally ‘occulted’ textuality” and thus undoes the illusion of the purely actual in theater (“Presence” 166). 24 The artists I examine are less concerned to discredit the concept of presence than to escape the experience of it, but their work, like the work Fuchs describes, teaches us to value writing as disruptive of the present. In fact, Lehmann too—despite his claims for a dethroned text—notes that postdramatic theater continues a modernist valuation of “the written text as an interruption of the self-sufficient imagery of the stage” (146). 25 Even more suggestively, Lehmann consciously adopts the terms “text” (61, 85) and “écriture” (74) to refer to the mise-en-scène itself, placing postdramatic theater “in the tradition of such textures” as Finnegans Wake (92) and arguing that the most highly “visual” postdramatic theater should be understood as itself textual: “Scenography, naming a theatre of complex visuality, presents itself to the contemplating gaze like a text, a scenic poem, in which the human body is a metaphor, its flow of movement in a complex metaphorical sense an inscription, a ‘writing’ and not ‘dancing’” (94). Although Fuchs refers to the literal existence of writing onstage while Lehmann propounds

23 This reversal has precedent within the discourse of theater phenomenology; States cites Martin Heidegger’s argument in “The Work of Art” that “In the vicinity of the work we are suddenly somewhere else than we usually tend to be,” suggesting a kind of “presence” that absents us from our present lives (Great 4).
24 The artists Fuchs discusses include Len Jenkin, Adrienne Kennedy, Daryl Chin, Richard Foreman, and the Wooster Group.
25 Lehmann glosses Giorgio Barberio Corsetti’s argument that “the theatre needs the text as a foreign body, as a ‘world outside the stage’ ” (146). Małgorzata Sugier states this description in her reading of a “postdramatic” play by Roland Schimmelpfennig: “The world [is] brought into being by the spoken words and existing only on the strength of these words; the world… does not exist on stage, but… can be heard from it… we reach the opposite pole of the theatre understood as a reality to be observed” (19).
writing as an analogue for the entire theatrical event, both scholars suggest that the postdramatic must be theorized as a theater whose relationship to writing is especially intimate, because of the way writing complicates the actual.\textsuperscript{26}

**Drama and the Present: Peter Szondi and Bertolt Brecht**

If we understand postdramatic theater as, fundamentally, a theater that has finally dispensed with the “dominant” text, we will miss writing’s renewed significance for the postdramatic stage. If we contrast a robust postdramatic “presence” with dramatic “representation,” we will fail to grasp the problematic status of the actual in postdrama. And just as (per Worthen) the first notion seems to arise from misconstruing the role of text in drama, the second fails to acknowledge the sense in which drama is itself a theater of actuality, which tends to affirm presence and the present in particular ways. To the extent that drama does this, we cannot simply regard it as a “theater of representation” against which a new, postdramatic presentness would supervene. This problematic understanding of both dramatic and postdramatic theater, however, continues to exert a certain commonsense appeal: after all, the actors in dramatic theater are pretending to be somewhere else, whereas postdramatic performance dispenses with fiction in order to acknowledge the “here and now” in which it occurs.\textsuperscript{27} But my own project will make little sense if the postdramatic is conceived as a return to the presence that drama had withheld; on the contrary, I will be exploring the postdramatic as a utopian sensibility that reacts against the sense of performance’s actuality, an actuality drama tries hard to hold intact. So I want to take a moment to review the classic study that theorized drama itself as the very form of presence and presentness: Peter Szondi’s *Theory of Modern Drama*.

Writing in the mid-1950s, Szondi interprets the history of modern dramaturgy from Henrik Ibsen through Arthur Miller as a series of responses to an aesthetic “crisis”: drama proper could no longer accommodate “the problems of contemporary life” (5), and so, as per Hegelian aesthetics, changed content was “precipitated” as changed form (4). Szondi declines to articulate programmatically the contemporary situation that has produced these changes, insisting that analysis should stick with the “technical contradictions… internal to the concrete work itself” (5). But the implied historical shift clearly entails a loss of confidence in the social sphere as the site of truth. Ideal Drama had emerged in the Renaissance, when

a newly self-conscious being… sought to create an artistic reality within which he could fix and mirror himself on the basis of interpersonal relationships alone. Man entered the drama only as a fellow human being, so to speak. The sphere of the ‘between’ seemed to be the essential part of his being; freedom and obligation, will and decision the most important of his attributes. The ‘place’ at which he achieved dramatic realization was in an act of decision and self-disclosure. (7)

\textsuperscript{26} In *Dionysus Writes*, Jennifer Wise argues that Western theater was fundamentally literary in its origins: “theatre emerged as the first text-based art in the Western poetic tradition, as an art form whose central generic features depended on the alphabetical literacy of its first practitioners” (3). In this sense, European theater may have always been a “theater of writing,” but I contend that postdramatic theater appeals to this entwinement with a new urgency. Wise, it should be noted, insists upon a strict conceptual separation between writing and theater even as she presents the latter’s dependence on the former, asserting that “in the theatre there is an ‘outside’ of writing” (231). In this respect, her argument is similar to those of Worthen and Bennett, discussed below.

\textsuperscript{27} For Lehmann, working from Christoph Menke’s reading of Hegel, drama is premised upon an “internally necessary exclusion of the real” which postdramatic theater no longer tries to maintain (43). Szondi’s and Brecht’s analyses, however, will help us see that such exclusion—figured most succinctly by drama’s “fourth wall”—can nevertheless contribute to a reifying affirmation of the real as such.
The growing inability of “freedom and obligation, will and decision” to account for daily experience, however, meant that by the late nineteenth century, the drama could no longer serve as a form of expression. “Modern drama” therefore exists in tension with itself: it consists of a series of incursions into the dramatic form, efforts that unmake drama even as they adapt it to contemporary sensibilities. Clearly in dialogue with Brecht throughout (despite only briefly discussing his work), Szondi adopts the term “epic” to designate the tendencies through which theater departs from drama; Szondi reads modern dramaturgy in terms of the infiltration of epic elements, most fundamentally the “epic I.” In drama, consciousness is realized as the actions of characters in an interpersonal space; in epic, consciousness remains apart from such events, and the subject “stands facing the others,” evaluating the social world rather than finding realization in it (37).

This construal echoes Brecht’s famous claim that the subject or “I” of epic theater “must not simply set myself in [man’s] place, but must set myself facing him” (Brecht 193).28 And indeed, although Lehmann cites and builds on Szondi’s theory throughout Postdramatic Theater, he critiques Szondi’s Brechtian assumption that, as it were, the drama had no place to go but epic. Supported by Brecht’s “overpowering authority,” Lehmann writes, Szondi’s “conception of the epic as the successor to the dramatic” occluded the fundamental theatrical possibility of a stage where “the idea of theatre as a representation of a fictive cosmos in general has been ruptured and even relinquished altogether” (Lehmann 29-31). Postdramatic theater as Lehmann conceives it is importantly “post-Brechtian” (33); part of the impetus for Lehmann’s project is precisely the sense that the model of “epic theater” no longer accounts for much contemporary innovation. Fundamentally, epic, like drama, is a mode of fictional narrative; and as we began by observing, Lehmann’s “postdramatic” is a theater beyond storytelling.29 Lehmann thus diverges from Szondi by tracing an alternative genealogy including the anti-narrative projects of artists like Gertrude Stein (whom Szondi never mentions). At the same time, Szondi’s organizing notion that the tendencies he observes constitute “Modern Drama”—even as they undermine Drama itself—implicitly supports Lehmann’s claim that the definitive break from drama only takes place when even these “epicized” forms are left behind.

In seeking to replace Szondi’s dramatic-versus-epic binary with the new opposition dramatic-versus-postdramatic, Lehmann shifts the crucial classifying question from how a story is told to whether the theater event is fundamentally one of storytelling in the first place. Nevertheless, I find that Szondi’s formulations, and Brecht’s, shed more light on the postdramatic than has generally been recognized. The specificity of postdramatic theater and, particularly, of postdramatic writing is still marked out by some of the tendencies Szondi describes; while Szondi presents these tendencies as epic, and hence implicitly binds them to a narrative project, they can also lead to the unmaking of epic itself. In other words, Szondi’s

28 All citations of Brecht in English refer to John Willett’s translation. Where an original German phrase is also given, the second page number after the slash refers to the Suhrkamp edition of Schriften zum Theater, Vol. 7.

29 Where Lehmann rather surprisingly affirms that the “principle of narration is an essential trait of postdramatic theatre” (109; see n. 4 above), he is careful to characterize postdramatic storytelling—that is, a performer onstage literally telling a story, rather than acting it out—as, primarily, a means of “closeness” between performers and audience, and to distinguish this tendency from the distanced representation of epic (110). One implication, here, is that in postdrama the telling (and hearing) of the story takes priority over the story itself. It should be pointed out that within theater and performance discourse, the word “narrative” very often refers to the aim of conveying a story and hence to mimetic presentation or “showing,” as occurs in drama. I have been following this convention above, rather than restricting the term “narrative” to the verbal, diegetic “telling” of a story, a meaning it more often has in literary studies. In general, Lehmann expounds postdramatic theater as a theater beyond “narrative” in the broader sense; his reference to “narration” in this particular passage, by contrast, appeals to the literary-theoretical distinction between the act of telling and what is told.
theorization of drama’s dissolution is at least partially valid even beyond the “modern drama” for which, as Brecht could still proclaim, “The ‘story’ is the theatre’s great operation” (Brecht 200). Elements that worked to undermine drama “from within” in the period Szondi examines are still at work well beyond the primacy of dramatic or epic fiction in theater. And this is the case, I would argue, in part because the performance forms that have arisen in between the period of Szondi’s study and our own, despite having rejected drama’s “fictive cosmos,” are still engaged in contesting what is perhaps the most fundamental quality of the dramatic as Szondi and Brecht theorize it: the affirmation of the present as such.

“In the Drama,” Szondi writes, “time unfolds as an absolute, linear sequence in the present” (9); “Its presence is pure actuality” (38). In light of today’s tendency to think of the postdramatic as “more presence than representation” (Lehmann 85), readers might well be surprised to find the following description attached to drama, rather than to postdramatic theater or to performance: “It is not a (secondary) representation of something else (primary); it presents itself, is itself. Its action, like each of its lines, is ‘original’; it is accomplished as it occurs” (9). Or again: “An action which represents is not dramatic: the events in the Drama, absolute in themselves, can stand for nothing beyond themselves” (36). Szondi’s scare quotes around the word “original” reflect two facts: that drama is a written text before it is a performance, and that it is a fictional story. But the former fact is rigorously suppressed by the play itself, which occludes its own author through the very consistency of the second fact. “The dramatist is absent from the Drama,” Szondi observes. “He does not speak; he institutes discussion. The Drama is not written, it is set. All the lines… are spoken in context and remain there” (8). For Szondi, dramatic fiction does not take us away from the present, in either spatial or temporal terms. Rather, drama absolutizes the here and now, ideally producing what Derrida, glossing J. L. Austin, would call the “total context”: that scene where “no remainder escapes the present totalization” (“Signature” 322). Speeches and actions that interrupt the consistency of the fiction, reminding us of the elsewhere of its poetic composition, also perforate the actuality of performance. They thereby break with drama, which consistently affirms and even institutionalizes the performance present.

There is undoubtedly a risk, here, of eliding key differences beneath polyvalent terms. Is the kind of “presence” or “presentness” typically attributed to postdramatic theater and performance really the same as the “absolute” present Szondi accords to drama? One objection might be that drama’s actuality excludes the audience, whereas the here-and-now of other performance forms constructs itself openly as a “co-presence” with the audience.30 But this is where Brecht’s analysis becomes especially relevant: as he suggests, the distinction is not so clear-cut. Drama may not overtly make a place for the audience within its closed circuit of fictional relationships, but the internal magnets of this circuit draw us in through empathetic identification: ideally, it absorbs us into the present so fully that no elsewhere, no other time remains to us. The dramatic work does not incorporate its audience explicitly, in the manner of a postdramatic Peter Handke piece (“You become aware that you are sitting in a theater. You become aware of the size of your limbs… You become aware of your tongue. You become aware of your throat” [20]). As Brecht observes, however, drama operates no less directly on the audience’s bodies, calibrating those bodies to the actuality inhabited by the actors and, with all

30 The notion of performance as co-presence is most commonly associated with German performance theorist Erika Fischer-Lichte. Citing early-twentieth-century performance theorist Max Herrman, Erika Fischer-Lichte writes: “The bodily co-presence of actors and spectators enables and constitutes performance. For a performance to occur, actors and spectators must assemble to interact in a specific place for a certain period of time” (Transformative 32). This co-presence is “the specific mediality of performance” (38).
its social and political implications, by us. Drama’s spectators, “strenuously… tensing all their muscles, except where these are flabby and exhausted,” are drawn into the closed world of the same fiction that disavows them, and closure becomes the principle of their own world too. Brecht summarizes this effect in resonant phrasing: in drama, he writes, “everyone can say at once: that is how it is [so ist es]” (187-8/25).

In dramatic theater, then, we are more firmly present than ever: fascinated by the tautological affirmation of “how it is,” we grasp at our actuality and cling to it as such. What distinguishes dramatic actuality from that of other performance forms is thus not so much drama’s putative exclusion of the audience as its occlusion of any other scene from which the shared present might have diverged—or derived. The perception that drama fixes us within the present of its own occurrence motivated Brecht’s call for “The Literarization of the Theatre” (43), a phrase that remains terrifically suggestive for postdramatic playwriting today. Just as Szondi aligns drama’s absolute present with its disavowal of writing (“The Drama is not written, it is… spoken in context”), Brecht thinks the inclusion of writing can dislodge us from this kind of fixation. Thus he defends his use of title cards in productions:

The orthodox playwright’s objection to the titles is that the dramatist ought to say everything that has to be said in the action, that the text must express everything within its own confines. The corresponding attitude for the spectator is that he should not think about a subject, but within the confines of the subject. But this way of subordinating everything to a single idea, this passion for propelling the spectator along a single track where he can look neither right nor left, up nor down, is something that the new school of play-writing must reject. Footnotes, and the habit of turning back in order to check a point, need to be introduced into play-writing too. (44, my emphases)

As Martin Puchner rightly points out, this assumption that reading offers more critical freedom than theater is “not self-evident” (Stage 148); we’ll consider in the next chapter how the page can maintain a dramatic immediacy of its own. But Brecht’s notion of the literary, here, arises through the question of what writing might do in performance, and more specifically what it might do to a theater dominated by dramatic habits. Brecht’s sense that writing undermines the “single track” of dramatic affirmation by producing alternate sites will emerge as a fundamental tenet for the artists considered in this study. For them, Brecht’s idea of “literarization” has its most profound resonance not in the epic self-possession of a reader mastering a text, but in the ways writing can beckon us outside the moment of performance, often disclosing a repetitive structure (“turning back”) that undermines the self-sufficiency of the performance’s here-and-now.

“[C]onscious of nothing outside itself” (Szondi 8), drama’s significance is ideally exhausted within the time and space of the play, so that no other knowledge is necessary. By contrast, the epicized forms of “modern drama” that Szondi analyzes expose and emphasize the performance present as continuous with factors that are not precisely onstage or “in the room.” So, of course, do multiple avant-garde performance traditions. For example, fin-de-siècle cabaret, as Lehmann observes, “is based on the possibility of allusions to everyday reality shared by players and audiences and hence contains a performance moment that is inseparably connected to urban life” (62). Many decades later, when asked if a “happening” should be lifelike, John Cage responded: “Not that it should be lifelike but that we should be able to consume it in relation to our lives. So that it would introduce us to the other things in our lives which we consume” (qtd. in Kostelanetz 54). There is indeed a significant difference between the perceived actuality of such forms and that of dramatic theater, one which we might express as
follows: where dramatic actuality is bounded, these forms’ actuality would be limitless; an intensive, impervious present contrasts with an extensive, inexhaustible present. But the latter ideal, just as much as the former, threatens to affirm what is at the expense of any radical alterity: utopia, or that which is not yet. Utopia would be, precisely, that which is still not happening—“the longing for the new, not the new itself” (Adorno, Aesthetic 32). This negativity characterizes the postdramatic theater of writing that will emerge, in different forms, throughout in the following chapters.

The “Wrong Life” of Performance: Adorno and Postdramatic Theater

Theodor W. Adorno is not commonly regarded as a major resource for theater and performance studies, at least among Anglophone academics. Where many performance scholars have devoted themselves to discovering meaningful social resistance within popular forms, Adorno’s work maintains an unpalatable bitterness towards mass culture; where theater scholars have continually returned to Brecht in theorizing the political and phenomenological aspects of the medium, Adorno appears as an infamous Brecht detractor. But by the current norms of these discourses, the most objectionable feature of Adorno’s work (though not the most widely known) is probably his assertion of “the primacy of the text over its performance” (Aesthetic 100). Adorno applies this assertion to theater as well as to music, which preoccupies him much more deeply. For the study of performance forms today, “the primacy of the text” appears less as a serious challenge to prevalent assumptions than as an outmoded piece of antitheatrical modernism.

Those of us invested in the theory and practice of theater, however, should take this notion seriously—and not only because it might unsettle certain disciplinary complacencies about performance’s punk-rock status. Adorno’s argument signals a way to value text within the performance context as something performance does not simply instrumentalize, exceed, or undermine; to value the script as a form apart. I have no wish simply to reverse the poles of the prevailing hierarchy, making Text the radical and Performance the conservative term. Such an exercise might be invigorating but would certainly be irresponsible, both to my own sense of what theater is, and to the richly complex and dialectical theory that lies behind Adorno’s “primacy of the text.” What I do want to do is suspend the assumption that this “primacy” is a fallacy that we of the performance disciplines have long moved past. Instead, I hypothesize that Adorno’s privileging of the textual artifact over the performance event corresponds to a crucial problem with performance, a problem whose negotiation marks the emergence of certain postdramatic forms.31

That problem is, I have already suggested, the “eventful present”: the phenomenological fact that performance happens, as we are so often reminded, here and now. Drama celebrates this fact, but celebration becomes difficult if, to put things baldly, “here and now” names a horror—a “wrong life” that, as Adorno famously said, “cannot be lived rightly” (Minima 39). We need not

31 In Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama (2002), Martin Puchner incorporates Adorno into his argument that “a suspicion of the theater plays a constitutive role in the period of modernism, especially in modernist theater and drama” (1). For Puchner, Adorno’s criticism of Wagner and Stravinsky extends Nietzsche’s fundamentally “anti-theatricalist” critique of mimetic gesture (35-40); as Puchner rightly points out, Adorno tends to identify performance as a “regressive” aesthetic practice (e.g. Aesthetic 100). My own argument, while indebted to Puchner’s, differs from his in that the theatrical problem I trace below is not a problem with mimesis as such, but with the heightened actuality of all performance. I also take issue with the term “anti-theatrical” (no matter how dialectically conceived) since I believe it obscures the way artists like Stein and Beckett activate postdramatic possibilities of, not against, the theater medium; see Chapter Two.
commit to a total abomination of life as we know it, or pretend there is nothing we love here and now, in order to grant the legitimacy and the ethical necessity of acknowledging that our present, sustained by institutionalized global suffering, is unacceptable; and that all that exists is in some way complicit with this suffering. The relentlessness with which Adorno’s writing asks us to keep this in mind has made his work unbearable for many readers, and surely there are other readers whose instinctive sympathy with this “dark” outlook has made them uncritical enthusiasts of the critical stance. The critical attitude that drives Adornian negative dialectics is exactly not a whole-scale dismissal of “everything,” but a commitment to engage at the minute level of the most particular, to interrogate phenomena in their utmost specificity. Nevertheless, Adorno’s works are full of references to a bad totality, in which the fundamental operation of both art and theory is defined as the refusal of positivity as such: the operation of differing with what is. This labor, while utterly implicated in and conditioned by historical reality, imaginatively exceeds that reality by negating it. The prospect of thus exceeding what is real motivates philosophy’s “contradictory effort to say, through mediation and contextualization, what cannot be said hic et nunc” (Lectures 74), as well as art’s “determinate negation of the existing world order” (Aesthetic 344).

This configuration defines art’s autonomy—a term that has sometimes served as a straw man in contemporary academic discourse. For Adorno, the autonomy of an artwork is not a matter of its standing outside history, independent of the forces and relations of production, immune to the marketplaces of labor and taste, or impervious to ideology. To begin with, he explains, art’s claim to autonomy is itself a historical phenomenon, as “a function of the bourgeois consciousness of freedom that was itself bound up with the social structure”; the individual work, too, is obviously socially conditioned, both in its “mode of production” and in its “thematic material” (Aesthetic 225). But while Adorno continually warns against any inclination to dehistoricize art, his major theoretical target is less this bourgeois mythology than strains of Marxism that value art for its social efficacy. Such reckoning places art squarely in the current of existing reality, subjecting it to instrumental reason. It is against this sort of demand for an “engaged” art that Adorno develops the notion of aesthetic autonomy as negativity—which is itself, he argues, art’s most profound social engagement. “[A]rt becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with existing social norms [including revolutionary norms] and qualifying as ‘socially useful,’ it criticizes society by merely existing…” (225-226). Autonomy is the “historical gesture [that] repels empirical reality, of which artworks are nevertheless part” (227). The artwork is autonomous in its insistence on differing from what is, what it itself is: the here and now, the compromised reality of existing social, economical, political relations.

Autonomy, then, is art’s protest against the actuality to which it belongs. For Adorno, this protest is inherently processual: the artwork needs to be understood as an ongoing process because it never achieves the total self-determination or alterity it seeks, but is continually confronted with its own dependence upon the material realities it also continually transcends. “[A]rt’s dynamic,” he writes, is “an irresolvable antithesis that is never brought to rest in the state of being. Artworks are such only in actu because their tension does not terminate in pure

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32 Adorno also makes this argument in his essay “Commitment,” where he writes that “it is now timely to speak in favor of autonomous rather than committed works in Germany” (92). Again, the work’s utopianism, its rejection of empirical reality, is its engagement: “As pure artifacts, products, works of art… are instructions for the praxis they refrain from: the production of life lived as it ought to be” (93). Nevertheless the work has “no content, no formal category… that does not, however transformed and however unawarely, derive from the empirical reality form which it has escaped” (89).
identity with either extreme" (Aesthetic 176). The paradox of art, its inability to achieve itself completely, marks it off from the world of instrumental reason; art’s constitutive unfinishedness is, one might say, both its difference from itself and, thus, its difference from a world governed by the “reality principle,” the ideology of self-preservation. If the work were able to overtake its disparate elements and unite them into a seamless whole, it would have definitively sacrificed their otherness for the sake of its own self-constitution. It would therefore no longer be a work of art, since what art seeks is “the identity of the identical and the nonidentical” (Ibid)—a goal that the finished achievement of pure self-identity would betray. Because art’s nonidentical identity can only exist as an ongoing project, never as a static outcome, its essence is process.

This might seem like an aesthetic theory that would privilege the utterly processual, time-based medium of performance. For Adorno, however, the work’s internal conflict is maintained as such within the delimiting sphere of a fixed artifactual form. The work’s violent life is forged, that is, through its “objectivation”: its coalescence into a formed thing. Adorno writes:

it is only as finished, molded objects that they [artworks] become force fields of their antagonisms; otherwise the encapsuled forces would simply run parallel to each other or dissipate…. The movement of artworks must be at a standstill and thereby become visible…. What crackles in artworks is the sound of the friction of antagonistic elements that the artwork seeks to unify; it is script [Schrift] not least because, as in linguistic signs, its processual element is enciphered in its objectivation. (Aesthetic 176-7/263-4)

The work’s objectivation, its taking the form of a static object (a piece of written text, a musical score, a painting or sculpture), is what captures and intensifies its processuality. We might say that objectivation is a kind of constitutive crisis for the work, whose conflicting forces are thereby locked up together in an echo chamber that magnifies and sustains their “antagonisms.” The clash between processuality and fixed form also redoubles the conflictual dynamic that produced the processuality in the first place: the dialectic between the work’s identity and its nonidentical elements reappears as the dialectic between that dialectic and the static form that confines its processuality, so that here too the work “negates itself” (176). Art’s difference from the world’s tyranny of identity, art’s fundamental negativity and allergy to affirmation are thus at work most robustly in the self-negating aesthetic object—for which writing (Schrift) offers a privileged model.

Adorno’s remarks on performance suggest that its capacity for protest is compromised not only by its ephemerality—which is, in fact, a moment of all art (3, 80)—but more specifically by its spatial and temporal inseparability from its own production. “The fixation through print or scores is not external to the work; only through them does the work become autonomous from its genesis: That explains the primacy of the text over its performance” (100, my emphasis). I understand this statement as follows: performance is bound to its own genesis in a way text is not, by the very fact that performance is its own genesis: its existence is coextensive with its arising, which it can never outlast. And since its genesis is what anchors it in worldly economies, that is to say, in history, performance itself is more emphatically worldly than objectivated forms. 33 Whereas the object-work abides both within and in excess of the actuality

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33 Puchner writes: “Both the friends and the detractors of the theater have always suspected that along with its collaborative production and collective reception came a more direct relation to the social and the public spheres” (Stage 10); he suggests that theater can “be considered the art form that is most directly tied to social normativity” (17). Similarly, Shannon Jackson observes that “For those of us identified with performance, the language of autonomy is a conflicted one, as the art form’s interdependence with ensembles, technologies, and audiences has always been hard to disavow” (Social 15). Jackson proposes that, rather than “bemoan” this heteronomy, we might see it as performance’s challenge to the very notion of autonomy: “What if performance challenges strict divisions about where the art ends and the rest of the world begins?” (Ibid). For the particular postdramatic
that has determined it, becoming “foreign to the world” (183) within the walls of its “force field,” performance erects no such extraterritoriality: it is constantly being born here, its citizenship reconfirmed at each instant. Phenomenologists of theater such as Bert O. States and Stanton Garner have theorized this insistent presentness as fundamental to performance, where “actuality continually infuses the alterity that seeks to displace it” (Garner 41). In a different register, Brecht bemoaned theater’s institutional tendency to engulf each new play “so that it no longer represents a foreign body within the apparatus” (43). For an Adornian sensibility, this re-assertion of the actual realm as against the alterity of the “foreign” constitutes a problem at once aesthetic, political, and ethical.

Adorno is of course not advocating the abolition of performance, but he does insist that performance—theatrical and musical—be referred to its text, that its aesthetic value be located apart from its actual occurrence. This stance becomes especially clear in Adorno’s condemnation of the “happening,” a performance ideal very much on the rise at the time of his writing. I want to dwell on Adorno’s vision of the happening for a moment, without testing it against the real events (engineered by Allan Kaprow, Cage, and many others) which would certainly have complicated Adorno’s account, had he let them. It seems to me that his remarks on the happening are most illuminating, not as criticism of concrete works, but as the articulation of a threat that seems to inhere in all performance, the degree-zero of its dependence on happening in the everyday sense of the term. Specifically, Adorno sees “the happening” as a culmination of art’s tendency to “become[e] its own enemy, the direct and false continuation of purposeful rationality” (Aesthetic 103). The happening’s extension of purposeful rationality is “false” both because it can never fully escape the aesthetic “semblance character,” the unreality, it wants to leave behind, and because it inevitably fails by purposeful-rational standards (103-104). I am not going to enter into the debate about Adorno’s contention that artworks are “cut off from real political effect” (104), which is the question of whether and how art might enact a meaningful protest within the purposeful-rational procedures that sustain reality. Instead, I want to focus on the idea that the happening’s continuity with purposeful rationality is (in a

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34 States, whom Garner interpretively glosses here, describes “points at which the floor cracks open and we are startled, however pleasantly, by the upsurge of the real into the magic circle where the conventions of theatricality have assured us that the real has been subdued and transcended” (States, Great 34). For States such moments, which let us “see the familiar in the defamiliarization” (Ibid), are fundamental to theatrical experience.

35 A poststructuralist framework that follows Roland Barthes in positioning “the work” as the locus of “filiation,” “conformity,” and epistemological stability (“From Work”) will not share Adorno’s sense that performance risks conformity in failing to be a work; see e.g. Weber (43, 259) and Worthen, “Disciplines.” I am suggesting that there are dispositions for which performance’s non-objectivation, rather than automatically constituting subversive “play,” can begin to feel more like a risk of playing along—and I am asking what kind of theater such a disposition might produce.

36 In an argument itself informed by Frankfurt School theory, Judith Rodenbeck contends that the happening should “be understood in its critically negative relation—that is, its dialectical relation—to theatrical and performance practices” (56). Far from a naive affirmation of everyday experience, the “fundamentally mediated, split, antiepithetic, and inaccessible subjectivity that produced, and was produced in, the happenings was utterly counter to the ‘authenticity’ of both charismatic acting and unmediated experience” (69). Rodenbeck also, however, describes happenings in terms that would seem to support Adorno’s criticism of them as an antiaesthetic “continuation of purposeful rationality” (Aesthetic 103; see below): “these works figured participants—and attention and senses—as objects, collage elements, exchangeable tokens” (Rodenbeck 58). In this sense, at least, the happening openly colludes with capitalism’s totalization of exchange value, if it also exposes that totalization. On the other hand, it would be foolish to try to subsume all the pieces known as “happenings” (or, perhaps, all the elements of any one piece) under a single ideology, although it may be useful to identify pervasive elements of ethos. For several artists’ accounts of these works and their intentions, see Kostelanetz (1968) and Lebel et al. (1967).

37 Adorno refers to these events using the English word “happening.”

38 For an alternate (Habermasian) approach to the political value of theater in particular, see Jon Erickson, “Defining political performance with Foucault and Habermas: strategic and communicative action.”
remarkable but typical moment of dialectical condensation) not only “false,” but also “direct,” that is, that there is a continuity. This would work out as follows: eschewing the dream of autonomy, the happening tries to throw itself wholeheartedly into the real, where purposeful rationality reigns supreme. Embracing an ethos of the immediate, the happening tries to shut down the utopian dimension that the work, in its struggle to differ from life, holds open. And if the work’s utopian protest is its only meaningful “engagement,” then the happening is doomed to complicity.

Now, the happening is just one specific mode of performance, apparently as different as can be from other modes—for instance, from the theatrical performance of a scripted play. And yet as performance of a text, as the move to a medium where exposure to contingency constantly compromises autonomy, the theater piece seems to manifest a kind of will-to-happening. The project of performing a text could even be considered a more emphatic rejection of aesthetic autonomy than the unscripted performance event, since the former actively compromises a level of objectivation that has already been achieved. To repeat: performance is the form for which “autonomy from its genesis” is least available; by definition, performance is its own genesis, which means that it never stops asserting its implication in the material reality that (not only has produced it, but) is producing it. If all art is the determinate negation of what exists, producing reality’s other by way of immersion in reality, performance specifically threatens to block this transcendence at every moment because its immersion is overly emphatic. The choice of live performance, as medium, just is the choice of ongoing susceptibility to the real. And in a society becoming more and more “total” and “contracting to a unanimous system” (Aesthetic 31), this means susceptibility to laws which constantly threaten to corral the work’s difference, drawing it into society’s mechanics. The problem with the happening, in other words, was already a problem with theater.

One possible response to this understanding of performance would be to point out its consistency with millennia of antitheatricalism; another would be to set about deconstructing the performance/text binary in Adorno, although it seems to me that his dialectical understanding of both terms goes a long way toward anticipating any such critique. At present, however, I am less concerned with whether Adorno is “right” about performance than with the question of what his apprehensions might do to performance, were they shared, consciously or not, by some of its practitioners. How might they reinvigorate theater’s aesthetic negativity, driving it to new levels of utopian vehemence? For the artists I consider in the following chapters, the heightened actuality of performance no longer, as in drama and some avant-garde forms, constitutes the theatrical ideal. But neither does this revaluation imply a rejection of theater itself. Instead, the prospect of being caught up in an ongoing present leads these writers to discover resources for contesting that present within the dimensions of theatrical performance, illuminating the ways in which this medium resists being reduced to its own “happening.”

The postdramatic theatrical text is key among these resources, invoking the resistant force of its own objectivation even while providing for performance. It will come as no surprise that of all the artists considered here, Beckett—poster child of Adorno’s modernism—forges the
most rigorously dialectical relation between text and scene. For Beckett, writing gestures towards utopia amidst a totalizing present that engulfs the stage; it does so, however, only by indicting its own complicity with this present. In contrast, someone like Stein may seem a less likely fit for the negative poetics of a “bad reality,” or the deployment of writing as against the actuality of performance. But this is because for Stein as for James, theater always harbors something other than the presentness drama exploits—an alterity manifest not only in text, but in the very space and time of the theatrical situation itself. Their poetics are based in a sense of theater’s dimensions as disrupting or dispersing its own present; writing does not so much intervene in this dynamic as describe, anticipate, and expand it. For Beckett at midcentury, this has changed: the experience of radical multiplicity has all but vanished in a world of “unanimous system” (Adorno, Aesthetic 31). Theater’s promise therefore comes to reside in its dialectical construction of what isn’t here: theater becomes a site for u-topia, and writing takes on the agonized function of both refusing and promising a constitutively unrealized alterity. This orientation remains in the texts of contemporary playwrights, who continue to work and re-work the relation between writing and a problematic theatrical present. They do this in part by cultivating the disruptive force of monologue that Beckett unleashes in Godot; as we’ll see, monologue becomes a crucial device for shaping performance as the performance of text, in a specifically nondramatic sense. But they also find many other ways to point us towards an unplaceable site of writing, straining against the “direct continuation” of what goes on here and now. And at the same time, they also reach back past the certainty of a bad totality, grasping for the alterity that still quivers just out of sight in the theaters of James and Stein.

The Theatrical Text and the Postdramatic Play
1. A Note on Methodology

This dissertation consists of four more chapters. In Chapters Two and Three, I read works by James, Stein, and Beckett; I explore the ways in which their writing performs a postdramatic “textual theatricality” (Poschmann), often through the very features that mark that writing as writerly, or palpably literary. If my study has a telos, however, it emerges most clearly in Chapters Four and Five, where I read late-twentieth-century plays by Suzan-Lori Parks and Mac Wellman. I am especially interested in the fact that these works are plays: not just “theater texts” offered as material for a directorial or devised assemblage, but scripts that promise to organize a corresponding theatrical event, a promise that exploits the legibility of dramatic textual conventions (such as character-distributed speech). Building on Chapter Three’s analysis of Waiting for Godot, my readings of Parks and Wellman argue that the term “postdramatic playwriting” is by no means an oxymoron; on the contrary, it marks a crucial strand of contemporary theater.

Before launching into this argument, I want to address what might seem like a methodological peculiarity: not all of the works I read are plays. My reading of James focuses on his late fiction, and while most of my Beckett chapter concerns Godot, it ends with an analysis of Beckett’s novel The Unnamable. In a work that will ultimately make a claim about playwriting, why devote so much time to texts that were never meant for the theater? The answer is that I do not believe we can understand how text is disposed in theatrical performance without investigating text’s resources of theatrical performance. Approaching a theater text from the perspective of what can be done with it (or to it) onstage may be extremely fruitful, but the

41 Jane Palatini Bowers does, nonetheless, argue powerfully for the latter reading of Stein; I discuss Bowers in Chapter Two below.
results will also depend on what the text itself does. This is a literary question, and it is answered (though never settled) by searching out the text’s ways of writing—verbal qualities that it will turn out to share with other verbal texts, only some of which will have been written for the theater. There is no reason to assume that texts can only engage with theater by being destined for the stage. Ultimately, the question of what writing can bring to theater, and more specifically of *what theater* writing can bring to theater, demands that we explore all the texts whose relevance to theatrical problems impresses us, whatever their genre. To restrict this field to theater texts would eliminate from consideration certain texts whose engagement with theater is profound and fascinating—including works like James’s which, since they will not “get their theater” in production, exert themselves all the more spectacularly to fabricate a theater of the page.

For these reasons, I have not limited my study of textual theater to a study of theater texts. But as the very names of James, Stein, and Beckett suggest—names that will hardly catch anyone in theater or performance studies off-guard—I have let myself be guided by the fact that each of these authors does engage explicitly and extensively with theater *qua* theater: that there is reason to hypothesize from the outset that theater takes up space in each author’s imagination, and hence in that of the work. This approach amounts to recognizing these texts, not merely as examples of, but also as authorities on the theatrical. When I shift my focus to contemporary writers, I present Parks and Wellman as picking up their modernist forebears’ postdramatic textual theater, and delivering this tendency over to the production theater of a postdramatic “era.” In order to understand what today’s playwrights are doing for and to theater, it will behoove us to have seen what the earlier writers were doing with it.

2. Postdramatic Playwri(gh)t(ing)

Still, why hold onto the words “playwright” and “playwriting”? Almost in themselves, these terms seem to overstate the case for script, perversely evoking the textual domination that postdramatic discourse typically attributes to drama. Not only does “play” conflate the performed with the written, as if what we went to see were, fundamentally, the script; but the slippage between noun (“playwright”) and participle (“playwriting”) redoubles this sense, as if the fundamental instrument through which a show got “wrought” were the word processor. However faintly, this language suggests an indifference to the particularities of performance and production. These terms seem to whisper that the document already constitutes, or at least structures, the event, whose other features thus become incidental. And accordingly, as we saw at the beginning of this chapter, “playwrights” have come to stand in some circles for a regime of bookish tyranny. They are theater’s nerds, averse to the dangerous pleasures of embodied performance; this nerdiness confirms the need for a different kind of “Performance Writing” (Etchells) that would emerge from the ruins of the playwright’s boring old authorship and authority.42

We have already seen that this kind of account has engendered a critical divide in theater studies. On one side of the field, Team Postdramatic celebrates the overthrow of the playwright’s dominance, explaining that “the step to postdramatic theatre is taken only when the theatrical

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42 On the other hand, this same logocentric “playwright” also has plenty of friends—organizations and individuals who maintain that her work is the heart, or lifeblood, of the theater, and are eager to help her do it. These adherents often threaten to kill her with kindness, however; the mentality that exalts the writing of plays as the righting (or righting) of theater tends, accordingly, to imagine the playwright’s fulfillment as the creation of a really strong script, and thus to invite her through a series of readings, workshops, feedback sessions, and more readings, as the prospect of actual production recedes ever farther into the distance. On this impasse, sometimes known as “Development hell,” see Stowe.
means beyond language are positioned equally alongside the text and are systematically thinkable without it” (Lehmann 54-55). On the other side, Team Drama Studies—W. B. Worthen its captain—disputes the assumption that text can dominate performance to the degree this configuration suggests, hence that such domination can distinguish dramatic theater from other performance forms. What is missing from these accounts is the consideration of text as a disruptive theatrical force in its own right; and this is precisely where Adorno’s aesthetics can suggest a different perspective. If text is reconceived as a monadic “force field” that asserts its “foreignness to the world” through its objectivation, we can supplement Worthen’s formulation with its opposite: performance may be “a specific kind of doing that lives outside the text” (Drama 55), but equally, text is a specific kind of doing that lives outside the performance. And I want to suggest that plays are works that can activate this autonomy in a particular way: by acting as though writing could determine performance, by scripting theater as the performance of writing, the postdramatic play undermines performance’s actuality. Any theater text introduces writing’s ontological alterity to the stage, but a text that looks like a play promises—falsely but assiduously—to dispose an entire happening to that alterity, to hijack the performance here-and-now in the name of that which is neither.43

This fantastical assertion carries playwriting’s unique contribution to postdramatic theater. And in fact, some of Lehmann’s own remarks begin to suggest how a performance “of” writing might constitute a break with drama. “Fixed onto the cognitive programme ‘Action/Imitation [Handlung/Nachahmen]’,” he writes, “the [dramatic] gaze misses the texture of written drama as much as that which offers itself to the senses as presentational action, in order to assure itself only of the represented” (37/54). In other words, dramatic theater does not assert itself as writing but, on the contrary, represses its own textuality in order to guide us towards the fictional object of its representation. Here we can recall Szondi’s emphasis on the absolute presence of the dramatic universe, which Brecht wants to explode through “literarization.” Drama is an experience of important things happening to people like us here and now; it is exactly not an experience of text. To the extent that we become aware of writing as such, we depart from the dramatic framework.

Nevertheless, Lehmann still insists that the “crucial” criterion distinguishing drama from postdrama is “the close connection between the text of an action, report or process and the theatrical representation oriented towards it. This connection ruptures in the postdramatic theatre of the last decades” (56, my emphasis). Needless to say, this criterion is meant to apply to productions, not texts themselves; by this rationale one could mount a dramatic or a postdramatic Hamlet, a dramatic or a postdramatic Waiting for Godot.44 But while any text can be deployed in drastically different ways, it seems clear that a script can itself anticipate either of these two theaters. Given criteria that define a dramatic or postdramatic production by its orientation or lack of orientation towards its text, that is, a dramatic or postdramatic text could presumably be distinguished by the kind of face it turns toward production. Poschmann tries to preempt such a

43 States puts this beautifully when he writes that “all dramatic texts are hypotheses, yearnings” (Great 127).
44 Beckett is not an entirely neutral example here, given his infamous attempts to restrict directors’ freedom in staging his plays. For a discussion of this issue see Jonathan Kalb’s Beckett in Performance, especially 71-94. Kalb makes his own position quite clear: “Beckett is confusing, even infuriating, to the average director precisely because he constitutes the most convincing and disturbing of contradictions: proof that theater events can be envisioned in the mind, at the desk, so completely, and those visions noted so faithfully, that the resulting notations are blueprints for visual poems as profound and theatrically effective as anything most directors could create even after years of workshop rehearsals” (150). By Lehmann’s criteria as just cited, this would seem to be a caution against any postdramatic production of Beckett; according to the sense of “postdramatic theater” that I am elaborating, however, even the most obedient productions of Beckett’s plays would count as postdramatic. See Chapter Three below.
division by arguing that the conventional textual features of “dramatic form” do not necessarily imply an overall dramatic function (95). And yet there is a real experiential distinction between plays and other kinds of theater texts. To the extent that texts look like dramas—with dialogue distributed between characters, events (however vitiated) that could form a plot, clear distinction between the spoken and unspoken levels of text—they will not immediately beckon the reader’s directorial intervention and invention, will not appeal to emphatic co-authorship through nonverbal scenic elements, to the same degree as texts structured without these conventions. Plays lean on these conventions, that is, to perform a kind of imaginary self-staging. They offer to do what (per Lehmann) texts only do in dramatic theater, what (as Worthen and Bennett show) texts never really do at all: determine the content of the performance event.

Plays are works whose performance is never quite separable from their texts, works whose performances will always be, meaningfully, performances of (and not merely with) texts. We need not assume that a performance can function as the mere “declamation and illustration” of a text—which, as Worthen persuasively argues, it can’t—in order to describe a dynamic where the illusion of something like this possibility is a powerful component of our experience. Within this dynamic, the structure of the text promises, deceptively but compellingly, that performance can be its translation into the real. When that structure is perceived in performance (as opposed to in reading), it constitutes the reverse promise: that the performance has been the text’s translation, that the text, as origin of the performance, will continue to make the essence of that performance available on the page. I propose that this dynamic distinguishes plays within the larger category of “theater texts.” In choosing to shape their texts as plays, in adopting the conventions that make plays legible as such, writers invoke that dynamic. So as not to return us to a dramatic theater of the signified, however, characters and events must be subject to ongoing interruption and dispersal through the very text whose existence they signal. In short, in the postdramatic play, character and plot and their attenuation become marks of writing itself.

This is possible because writing can collude in the theatrical project of contesting the present as such, wielding a negativity that attacks (itself as) what is. “Space thinks, Something something something,” Wellman writes of theater; “Time thinks, This will kill that” (Speculations 29). As we’ll see in the next chapter, theatrical space can attack the “something something something” of time, too. Such assaults takes place in the name of something else:

RAYMOND: And what will this new sky look like?
SUSANNAH: I told you I don’t know.
Like a sprig of blossoming mustard. (Wellman, Murder 32)

Through their literary theatrics, these texts strain against the world as we have lived it, as we are living it. This study tries to trace their furious blossomings.

45 Similarly, in “Beyond Drama: Writing for Postdramatic Theatre” (2004), Małgorzata Sugiera writes: “even if [theater texts] observe the widely accepted distinction between the primary text and the stage directions, and stick to the traditional pattern of scripting dialogue cues, each of them introduced with the name of the speaker, it does not follow immediately that they still imitate on stage interpersonal relationships in compliance with the expectations and the perceptual habits of the majority of the spectators” (18).

In Bodied Spaces (1994), Stanton Garner writes that a play contains “a field of perceptual and corporeal activity that exists as a latency within the text… phenomenological reading seeks to reembodi, materialize the text, draw out this latency—not simply as a teleological point of realization beyond the playscript, but as an intrinsic component of dramatic textuality itself” (7). While Worthen discusses Bodied Spaces approvingly in Drama (79-87), his own argument mainly tries to dissipate this sense that performance exists “within,” and not just “beyond,” the play’s text—the very sense I want to seize on here.
Chapter Two
“Something stranger yet”: Theatrical Distractions in Henry James and Gertrude Stein

The scene, that evening, at which… I did not assist, is one of the most ineffaceable in my tolerably rich experience of the theatre. (Henry James, 1903)

I think my first play really was *Pinafore* in London but the theatre there was so huge that I do not remember at all seeing a stage I only remember that it felt like a theatre that is the theatre did. I doubt if I did see the stage.

(Gertrude Stein, 1934)

He said, Can you tell me, Miss Stein, what authority you have for so frequently using the split infinitive? Henry James, said Gertrude. (Alice B. Toklas, 1963)

In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, Gertrude Stein identifies Henry James “quite definitely as her forerunner,” James having been “the first person in literature to find the way to the literary method of the twentieth century” (78). The relationship between the two authors’ bodies of work has been the focus of several critical studies, the most sustained being Charles Caramello’s *Henry James, Gertrude Stein, and the Biographical Act* (1996).¹ Caramello explores the two writers’ deployment of biography for modernist self-fashioning, and in particular, their related and complex poetics of the portrait. This term, used by James and more determinedly by Stein to characterize their own literary creations, suggests the extent to which the visual arts (and the visual more broadly) influenced their writing, a theme that has organized much scholarship on both writers: James, with his perpetual recurrence to the vocabulary of “picture,” his legendary development of “point of view,” and the exquisite phenomenology of seeing he presents in works like *The Turn of the Screw*; Stein, whose historical and aesthetic involvement with cubism not only appears throughout, but very often serves as a heuristic for, her formally radical writings.

Similarly, both James and Stein have often been read for their texts’ relationship to theater—no surprise, since the *theatron* is etymologically a “place for viewing.” On the one hand, both authors wrote about and for the theater, with James more prolific in the former and Stein in the latter position. Especially in James’s case, critics have presented highly diverse characteristics of various texts—from representational economy to affect to ethics—under the sign of theatricality. Meanwhile, Stein’s pioneering contributions to experimental theater continue to place her prominently within the genealogy of the contemporary stage. Sarah Bay-Cheng, for example, devotes the last chapter of *Mama Dada: Gertrude Stein’s Avant-Garde*

¹ See also Ira B. Nadel’s “Gertrude Stein and Henry James,” which suggests a number of ways in which Stein “extends and expands the work of James” (81). Among these, Nadel briefly draws a “parallel” between what theater offered James and what it offered Stein: “the challenge” to “establish the ‘space of time’” (86). In a short 1974 essay, Sharon Shaw argues that James and Stein are linked through their “intellectualization of experience,” tracing Stein’s poetics of the “continuous present” back to the “widening circle of the moment’s experience” in James, where an increasingly elaborate perception suspends action (98-99). Although she presents both writers’ achievements in somewhat simplistic psychological and perceptual terms, Shaw interestingly (for this chapter) claims that James, and presumably also Stein, “added an extra dimension to the life… depicted” and that these representational complexities “add depth to what has traditionally been a horizontal approach in American fiction” (96). Bonnie Marranca casually but suggestively mentions James twice in the course of writing on Stein in *Ecologies of Theater*, noting that “Both writers wrote around a subject, not about it” (54).
Theater to tracing Stein’s legacy through to contemporary playwriting, cinema, and performance (115-142); Bay-Cheng argues that “the history of experimental theater and drama in America is virtually inconceivable without her influence” (1-2), and Stein’s influence on such seminal artists as Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and Elizabeth LeCompte (all of whom have staged her plays) is well known. On the other hand, however, both writers have also been understood as antitheatrical: James, in light of his incessant complaints, in fiction and nonfiction, about the fate of the dramatic text in the coarse hands of theatrical production (a fate he famously bore in person at the disastrous premiere of his Guy Domville); Stein, because her invention of the “landscape play” allegedly arises from a similar, modernist distaste for inherent properties of the theater medium. In this account, Stein’s alliance with visual modernism does not feed into an alliance with theater but, on the contrary, crystallizes her orientation against it.

In this chapter, I suggest that a postdramatic approach to theater can help clarify the theatrical/antitheatrical problematic that arises in the critical discourse around each author. As discussed in the Introduction, the term “postdramatic” has most often been applied to work from the 1970s and later; the concept of the postdramatic as I develop it throughout this dissertation, however, describes an approach to theater that emerges much earlier, as the readings that follow will show. To speak of the postdramatic theater of James and Stein is not an anachronistic imposition upon their texts, but a drawing-out of terms the texts themselves imply. By treating drama and theater as separate concepts, we can begin to see a theatricality in James that is directly in conflict with his fidelity to the dramatic; in his later fiction, a theatrical desire to see drama foiled perpetually disrupts a supposedly dramatic narrative. In Stein, a quite different picture emerges: her theater it is not the ongoing downfall of drama but is, rather, what emerges when drama is simply set aside (one is tempted to say, ignored). Critical accounts of Stein’s theater as antitheatrical have as their premise a fundamentally dramatic understanding of theater as defined by “spatial and temporal continuity” (Puchner, Stage 110). But I will argue that the idea of theater that Stein elaborates, both in her 1935 lecture “Plays” and in her plays themselves, already exceeds such a framework.

Much closer to both Stein’s and James’s sense of theater is the theatricality theorized by poststructuralist scholar Samuel Weber in his 2004 Theatricality as Medium. Weber’s analysis rarely engages with concrete instances of theatrical performance, and at times his notion of

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2 See also Kate Davy, “Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysterical Theatre: The Influence of Gertrude Stein”; Marranca (18-23); Andrzej Wirth, “Gertrude Stein und ihre Kritik der dramatischen Vernunft”; Elinor Fuchs, The Death of Character (92-107); Betsy Alayne Ryan, Gertrude Stein’s Theatre of the Absolute (137-156). Lehmann mentions Stein several times in Postdramatic Theatre, stating that “For postdramatic theatre Stein’s aesthetics is of great importance, although more subconsciously so outside America” (63). Despite relegating Stein to the status of a “precursor” to postdramatic theater (see Chapter One above), he also points out that her plays are “unplayable” only when “measured by the expectations of dramatic theatre” (49), an insight I hope to develop here.

3 David Kurnick usefully summarizes a substantial tradition of James scholarship that sees his late fiction as a victorious effort to make the novel “displace and replace the drama as an embodied social event” (Empty 1; “Horrible” 109-110). To my mind, the most insightful exploration of James’s antitheatricalism is Joseph Litvak’s reading of The Tragic Muse (Caught 235-270). Litvak argues that this novel is driven by an attempt to contain theatricality by transmuting theater into a metaphor: “By using the theater as a metaphor for ‘art’ at large” and then establishing a second stage to the theatrical metaphor—that is, by constructing the novel itself according to dramatic principles—James completes the process of refining the ‘vulgar’ out of his theatrical subject and of distinguishing himself from those whose interest is captured by “the poor stage per se” (Caught 243; see 235-270).

4 This position is most clearly elaborated in the fourth chapter of Martin Puchner’s Stage Fright (101-116), which I discuss below. For Andrzej Wirth, by contrast, analogies between Stein’s playwriting and modernist visual art provide a means of explicating her anti-dramatic (not antitheatrical) aims. Wirth argues that “from today’s perspective, Stein’s most difficult texts have gained much significance as an aesthetic program and a theatrical project” (“Gertrude” 64; all citations of Wirth are my translations). Wirth’s argument that Stein’s landscape plays constitute a “critique” of drama seems to me to impute a more profound engagement with dramatic convention than the plays in fact maintain, but he very helpfully elucidates several features of her departure from drama.
theatricality “as medium”—as in-between-ness, separation, and non-self-identity—becomes so powerfully conceptual that its relationship to theatrical experience slips from view. While neither James nor Stein appears in Weber’s analysis, I find that their writing lends a more concretely theatrical determination to his theory, and I will refer to him repeatedly throughout the following pages. In fact, Weber’s relative lack of interest in the prevailing norms of existing theater, even while he explores its medially, gives his approach an especially Steinian accent: while James’s theatricality arises in direct conflict with the dramatic standard of his day, Stein’s tends to bypass that standard entirely. Certainly, and indeed unlike James, Stein wrote plays that fly in the face of dominant theater norms; but her own writing encourages us to read these plays, not as a gesture of opposition to drama (much less to theater), but as arising out of alternative experiential possibilities that theater itself harbors.

Briefly stated, my argument in this chapter runs as follows: James’s apparent antitheatricalism is really the flip-side of a strongly postdramatic desire for theater, which emerges unmistakably in the pages of his later fiction. In Stein, what has sometimes been seen as the rejection of theater is in fact an enthusiastic and canny appreciation of the theater medium, an embrace of theater’s possibilities beyond the dramatic. The seemingly antitheatrical qualities of both writers’ work are, in my view, more promisingly understood as a cultivation of alternative theatricality. In making this claim, I don’t mean to misrepresent the dialectical nature of antitheatricalism, particularly as theorized by Martin Puchner: his readings in Stage Fright trace the ways in which antitheatrical, diegeticizing impulses have generated crucial new forms of theater, including Stein’s plays. The notion of a theatrically productive antitheatricalism also appears, if faintly, in Michael Fried’s famous 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood,” as well as in works by Stanley Cavell and Jonas Barish. Since this dissertation also theorizes a theater that takes issue with its own “happening,” it might seem odd that I do not ally myself more fully with this critical tradition. My resistance to doing so comes, however, from my belief that theater always bears the potential for such contestation—and that the awareness of this potential lies at the heart of the texts I read. Theater’s present-tense occurrence may come under attack, as in James; it may undergo a radical dispersion, as in Stein; or it may sustain a dialectical negation, as in Beckett. But for all these writers, the “anti-” lies within the scope of theatricality itself, and determines theater’s profound appeal. Theorizations of “antitheatrical theater,” by contrast, must at some point conceive of the theatrical as a more or less stable positive quantity, upon which negativity (or, say, modernism) supervenes as if from without. If one has defined theatricality in this way, one can quite properly show that a range of experimental texts repudiate it; but I find that such a conception of theatricality is false both to my own experience of theater and, more importantly, to the postdramatic sense of theater that emerges in the texts examined here. To put it another way: the sense of distress that overtakes some of these writers when they go to the theater does not mean that they’d rather stay home.

In the previous chapter, we began to consider the postdramatic as a theater that actively undermines the actuality of its own performance, reflexively attacking the shared here-and-now.

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5 Fried claims that modern art’s imperative “to defeat theater… is perhaps nowhere more evident than within theater itself,” where it manifests as “the need to establish a drastically different relation to its audience. (The relevant texts are, of course, Brecht and Artaud)” (“Art” 139-140). Cavell’s essay “The Avoidance of Love” reads King Lear in light of a specifically ethical concept of theatricality, which he sees the play as developing and critiquing (Must 267-356). Rather differently, in the last chapter of The Antitheatrical Prejudice Barish observes: “The theater has certainly never lacked a streak of antitheatricalism of its own. Perhaps a vigorous dose of it forms an essential ingredient in its vitality. When the theater grows self-satisfied, when it ceases to question itself, when it believes too uncritically in its own pomp, it begins to suffer from a kind of fatty degeneration” (450). In other words, dissent is patriotic.
Such theater produces distance, discrepancy, and discontinuity, qualities that, as I’ll argue, determine the theatricality of writing for James and Stein. But if this is true, then Stein’s theatricality in particular may need to be “rescued,” not only from readings of her texts as antitheatrical, but also from readings that assert her pro-theatricality through a simple identification of theater with concreteness and total presence. Such readings identify an uncomplicated theatrical presence with Stein’s well-known poetics of “entity” (orientation toward the thing-in-itself) and of the “continuous present.” Thus, for example, in her stunningly comprehensive study of Stein’s 77 plays and their performance legacies, Betsy Alayne Ryan writes:

The theatre’s concreteness, its relational movement within the limitations of the performance, and its purely present existence could not help but strengthen her concepts of entity and time… she could incarnate them for the theatre in a way that literature never would. What better way of ‘giving what I was realizing at any and every moment of them and of me until I was empty of them’—and of having it directly and immediately perceived by an audience as it occurred—than to do it through the theatre? What better way to insist upon the entity of a work than to isolate it from the world in a finite space and present its solid reality to an audience? (37, my emphases)

Compelling as Ryan’s work is, her conception of what theater offered Stein threatens to miss, or misconstrue, the most radical qualities of Stein’s playwriting—what makes that writing not only avant-garde, but specifically postdramatic. In my own reading, neither the “Plays” lecture nor the landscape plays themselves espouse theater as “solid reality” or as purely immediate, concrete presence. Rather, as we’ll see, Stein activates the spatial dimensions of theater to divide the concrete present from itself. Perhaps surprisingly, James can help us identify this maneuver, since the spatial logic that links his theatricality to Stein’s is even more clearly opposed to any “solid reality” that could be “directly and immediately perceived.” As the paired epigraphs to this chapter suggest, then, I will be offering a reading of James and Stein that emphasizes the extent to which each writer’s sense of theater depends upon what is not “solidly” present: a sense of the stage as a place that, so to speak, keeps itself apart.

This is precisely how Samuel Weber theorizes theatricality. Framing theatricality as the operation of “parting with” (17–22, 158), Weber writes:

Place as separable is the stage. However defined its borders may be, they must still remain in contact with what they exclude and yet presuppose. Such contact may be temporarily forgotten, excluded from consciousness, but its effects do not disappear. Separation, in short, does not dissolve the relation to the other or to the outside, nor does it reduce the other to a goal or purpose that would complete a story and make it intelligible. Rather, separation communicates with that from which it distances itself.…

(294)

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6 Jane Palatini Bowers also criticizes Ryan’s interpretation: “This idea that Stein’s plays are pure theater, in harmony with the physicality and immediacy of performance, is a common misperception about these texts… However, Stein’s plays are not ‘physical expressions’, they do not emphasize or even facilitate the physical realization of the play on a stage. In fact, Stein’s plays oppose the physicality of performance” (2). While I agree with Bowers that “immediacy” is a mischaracterization of Stein’s plays, Bowers here shares Ryan’s assumption about the “immediacy of performance”—an assumption that might hold for drama, and even to some extent for “hyperdrama” like Beckett’s (see Chapter Three), but not for the performance of Stein’s theater. As will be evident in what follows, I would dispute Bower’s claim that a “theater of language… adamantly and self-consciously literary” opposes the physicality of performance for Stein. In fact, Bowers herself goes on to complicate this claim; I discuss her study in Part II of this chapter.
Both James and Stein explore the intuition that theater functions as the separation and interrelation of place(s) and time(s), fracturing the dramatic present. For James as for Stein, theater rends the here-and-now into irreducibly distant parts.

Throughout what follows, I hope to show how this theatricality aligns James’s writing with Stein’s most striking literary innovations—perhaps to a greater extent than Stein herself allowed. Indeed, readings that present Stein’s work in terms of either cubism or twentieth-century technology, as Stein herself frequently did, tend to imply that a figure like James, culminating master of “nineteenth-century” literature, could have had only a transitional (“proto-modernist”) relationship to her modernist achievements. If Stein’s work is “Cubism,” then James’s is still “Realism” (Caramello 164). If Stein’s work manifests twentieth-century physics, responding to a “universe where multidimensionality, not directionality, seemed the defining characteristic” (Ryan 10), we might well assume that James, too old to catch this Zeitgeist, must have been outpaced by its literary manifestation. Glossing Stein’s account of airplane travel in “Picasso,” Ryan writes: “Driving in a car within the landscape on a road naturally resulted in a vision of progress or development—travel through time—where points of the journey are perceived in order, according to the movement of the car. The airplane, on the other hand, freed the traveller to order the journey as he wished while hovering over the whole landscape… an experience of time had become an experience of space” (9). And yet the dispersion of progressive time through a differential space is likewise, as I’ll suggest, a major project of James’s late fiction. With Stein, we can picture this kind of project forming from an airplane window; but James helps us imagine it forming, just as urgently, from a rather uncomfortable seat at the theater.

I. Henry James

The intensity of Henry James’s relationship to theater is not only a biographical fact; it has also become a critical commonplace. A theatrical vocabulary dominates his essays and his fiction, where narrators and characters alike seem to process almost every experience in terms borrowed from the stage. But this register has been marshaled for widely diverse interpretive purposes; throughout literary studies, the elucidation of Jamesian theatricality has referred to everything from a “rigid economy” of representation (Edel 115) to a perceptual politics of “surveillance” (Seltzer 296). Both Joseph Litvak and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describe Jamesian theater as a queer erotics of display; Julie Rivkin posits a parallel between the famous “dramatic method,” as instituted in James’s The Awkward Age, and that novel’s thematic concern with promiscuity as “exposure” (168). I want to trace a rather different sense of theater that I find emerging in James’s later fiction. On the one hand, this theater not only exceeds but challenges “dramatic” storytelling tendencies, and on the other, its qualities are not reducible to perceptual experiences of “seeing” or “showing.” As such, James’s texts begin to delineate a postdramatic aesthetic that will go on developing in the work of subsequent writers who engage the stage.

David Kurnick hints at James’s movement beyond drama when he argues that The Awkward Age “strains against the novel toward a kind of performance, [while] it also resists the actually existing theater,” a “naturalist drama” which in James’s day was rapidly “adopting a

7 In Caught in the Act, Litvak explores the way James’s writings “show how power gets a charge out of appearing, at selected moments, to make a spectacle of itself” (198). In Touching Feeling, Sedgwick reads the Prefaces of James’s New York Edition as “gorgeous with the playful spectacle of a productive and almost promiscuously entrusted or ‘thrown’ authorial narcissism, yet also offer[ing] the spectacle of inviting… annihilation by the blankest of nonrecognizing responses from any reader” (39).
notion of psychological truth in turn borrowed from realistic fiction” (“Horrible” 111). The “kind of performance” towards which James’s late fiction strives, insofar as it is exactly not naturalist drama, is what I hope to elucidate here. I will also be making the related claim that theatricality in James belongs to what is not straightforwardly seen or shown, an approach suggested by John Carlos Rowe’s argument that “there is no perception, no impression in the ocular or present sense possible in James’s epistemology” (202). Through close readings of selected passages from “The Beast in the Jungle” and The Ambassadors, and drawing upon the critical work of Leo Bersani and other theorists, I argue that James’s refusal of the present—which is also the refusal to present—drives his discourse into deeply strange configurations. Narratologists’ accounts of reading as a process of “linear detailing through time” (Chatman 107) will help establish the challenge James faced in importing his disintegrative sense of theatricality into a page-bound medium. This challenge was functionally analogous to the dramatic norm that confronted him in theater, but it was in his prose fiction that James attacked it most decisively. For James, theater’s multidimensionality tends to explode the sense of ongoing immediacy that characterizes both drama and reading; at the same time, it undermines the planar integrity of the image, as we’ll see in the second section below. In turn, writing becomes theatrical by simulating the disruptive multiplicity of a deeply distracting space.

**The Beast in the Sentence: Writing Theatrical Space**

Calling Henry James “postdramatic” might sound at first like outrageous historiography. But James’s own approach to temporality would seem to smile on critical anachronism: having been going to have been postdramatic is exactly the kind of description his writing invites us to apply. The following sentence, from the fourth chapter of James’s 1903 tale “The Beast in the Jungle,” exemplifies such tortuous syntax quite beautifully: “It deepened the strangeness to see her, as such a figure in such a picture, talk of ‘horrors,’ but she was to do, in a few minutes, something stranger yet—though even of this he was to take the full measure but afterward—and the note of it was already in the air” (523). These typically Jamesian acrobatics have a specific temporal function: what begins as the conveyance of a temporally immanent response—“it deepened the strangeness to see her”—soon abandons that immanence, splitting one moment into three. The “scene” is not allowed to unfold in anything like a continuous sequence; instead, the present becomes the site of a doubly proleptic dis-traction, a graph-like surface on which multiple times are rendered.

Of course, a narrator’s reference to what’s going to happen, the dear-reader-if-she-only-knew technique, may just be a device for creating suspense—a ploy typical of literature’s “hermeneutic code” (Barthes, S/Z 61-63). But such usage normally affirms that one moment will lead to the next, making us relish the vector that points inexorably towards a payoff at the end of the read. In James’s sentence, by contrast, we get a promise of a promise of a retrospection: to move forward will not be to arrive at a climactic present but to continually negotiate a paradoxically simultaneous future and past. In fact, as the last few words of the sentence suggest,

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8 This “Rowean” element of my reading in fact represents a departure from Kurnick’s argument, since for Kurnick, theater is ultimately summoned as “the present tense… of actual spectatorship,” itself “a collective present” (“Horrible” 125). I will be investigating the ways in which both James and Stein complicate the notion of “actual spectatorship”—as does postdramatic theatricality in my argument. Still, Kurnick’s project is highly resonant with mine, especially where he reads The Awkward Age as “creating an ‘event’ whose very failure to take place made it a rich site for imagining relational possibilities beyond the constraints of the given” (111)—although Kurnick suggests that this “failure to take place” is the result of dramatic and social convention and of novelistic form, rather than (as I argue throughout this dissertation) an experiential possibility formed within the theater medium itself.
there is no such thing as a discrete moment: the space of the scene, its very “air,” is “already” inhabited by a time that exceeds it. This is what Leo Bersani describes as the “Jamesian tendency to extract all events, as well as all perspectives on them, from any specified time, and to transfer them to a before or after in which they are de-realized in the form of anticipations or retrospections” (Intimacies 23). As Bersani also observes, “The Beast in the Jungle” is remarkable in that it not only exhibits but “thematizes” this default of event (Ibid). John Marcher is, James writes, “the man, to whom nothing on earth was to have happened” (“Beast” 540).

Still, why characterize James’s attack on the present as theatrical? After all, theater—and performance as such—is often described as the medium of the present, the form whose only time is now. While many theorists have sought to deconstruct the notion that theater offers full presence or immediacy, the very insistence of this “debate” shows how forcefully theater’s actuality continues to summon our attention.9 As we saw in Chapter One, Szondi and Brecht suggest that dramatic theater directly affirms this actuality, asserting the here-and-now of performance and excluding the prospect of any alternative site. For Adorno, performance’s heightened actuality becomes a problem more broadly in that performance, constantly emerging into the real, fails to achieve the artwork’s constitutive “foreignness to the world.” And yet Adorno’s objection to the presence of performance is an objection that theater itself is also uniquely posed to make. Precisely because theater demands simultaneous, spatially adjacent appreciation, it can become a site for the contestation of the present. We’ll see in the following chapter that Beckett’s theater seizes on drama’s “absolute present,” exacerbating it to the point of dialectical reversal. For James and Stein, however, theater’s power and pleasure arise from properties that always threaten to undermine the presence drama exploits. In James’s theater, what we will (borrowing from Bersani) call the medium’s “other parts” keep rising up against the centralizing force of the dramatic present. Accordingly, to read James is to see how theater might appeal to a sensibility critical of the present as such—and how theater, so to speak, brings its own resources to this critical project.

From such a perspective we can acknowledge that drama’s affirmation of actuality exploits a fundamental aspect of performance, while also seeing that dramatic logic works in reaction against other elements of the theater medium. In particular, drama must try to foreclose the looming possibility that a performance will offer too much for us to synthesize “now.” James describes this sensory surfeit in The Ambassadors, when the protagonist attends a play at a London theater:

He felt as if the play itself penetrated him with the naked elbow of his neighbor, a great stripped handsome red-haired lady who conversed with a gentleman on her other side in stray dissyllables which had for his ear, in the oddest way in the world, so much sound

9 I discuss this discourse in Chapter One above. Briefly, Derrida’s critique of Artaud’s “metaphysics of life” (Writing and Difference, 1967) was foundational in questioning the notion of theatrical “presence.” The deconstruction continued in (e.g.) Fuchs’s “Presence and the Revenge of Writing” (1985); in Connor’s Samuel Beckett (1988); in Auslander’s Liveness (1999); and in Lehmann’s Postdramatic Theatre itself (1999). Meanwhile, Erika Fischer-Lichte’s assertion that performance is constituted through “co-presence” (The Transformative Power of Performance, orig. 2004) has been widely influential, retaining a strong commonsense appeal in spite of poststructuralist concerns. Stanton Garner’s Bodied Spaces (1994) suggested that the deconstructive dismantling of theatrical presence needs a phenomenological corrective: “a field of performance theory dominated by these practices risks an analytic desiccation if it persists in denying the phenomenal dimensions of its object… it risks losing the very livedness that theater so boldly puts into play” (16). More recently, Martin Harries has proposed a historicizing consideration of theater’s presence: “How can we specify the function of the embodied presence of performers and audience at a particular historical moment? How does theater put such presence to use—appeal to it, assume it, reject it, challenge it—in concrete ways, in particular performances?” (11). Harries notes: “This… does not necessarily entail questions of ontology at all. It does mean patiently asking what it means when people assert that it matters that two people were present in the same room and that a performance happened in that room” (Ibid). See also Fischer-Lichte, Transformative 93-101.
that he wondered they hadn’t more sense…. He had distracted drops in which he couldn’t have said if it were actors or auditors who were most true, and the upshot of which, each time, was the consciousness of new contacts. (92)

At once unsettling and thrilling, theater is a field where “new contacts” loom on every side, where “distracted drops” ongoingly divide our attention. Amidst all these solicitations, there is little chance of our focusing on the plot.

In an attempt to prevail against this field of distractions, drama pursues an ideal of maximal clarity. This ideal still organizes contemporary dramaturgy to a remarkable extent; in James’s day, it was even more pervasive. H. G. Wells could write, in his review of James’s play Guy Domville, that “A play written for the stage may very well be compared to a pen-and-ink drawing that is to undergo reproduction by some cheap photographic process. Delicate turns, soft shades, refinements of grey must be avoided; bold strokes, black and firm—that is all that is possible” (qtd. in Edel 212-213). In reading James’s play, though, one is struck by its relative shortage of “delicate turns”—verbal or psychological—compared with his fiction. It is difficult to imagine words like the following in the novels or stories James would write after his “dramatic years”:

MRS. PEVEREL. You speak for him as if—(Breaking down with excess of feeling. Re-enter FRANK HUMBER and LORD DEVENISH.)

GUY. As if I didn’t love you to passion—heaven hear me! And as if—heaven hear me!—

I hadn’t come down here to tell you so! (Edel 199)

This directness, the sparse economy (for James) with which the characters speak their minds, suggests that James shared Wells’s sense of theatrical performance as threatening a phenomenal overload. The “incorruptibility of line” that the protagonist of another James tale ascribes enthusiastically to “the dramatic form” (“Nona” 5) is drama’s response to a theatrical potential for distraction: the danger that a viewer or performer will lose the thread of her own experience. Ideally, each instant of the drama would offer itself to immediate comprehension and thus ease us along to the next, producing the “pure actuality” (Szondi 38) that sustains the continuity of the dramatic timeline.

Looking back at our sentence from “The Beast in the Jungle,” it is easy to suspect that James would have trouble with this project. And yet the lines from Guy Domville suggest that when it came time to contribute to the theater of his day, James tried to abide by dramatic standards. Indeed, his own theatergoing preferences were in some respects quite conservative, even antitheatrical; and he often expressed frustration with the ways actual theater confounded dramatic law. When characters in his story “Nona Vincent” describe the transition from page to stage as “a sudden descent” into “vulgarity” (6), they may well be speaking James’s own conviction. But James’s keen frustration with the ways theatrical production departs from the “pure art” (“Nona” 6) of drama is only the obverse of his equally keen awareness of theater as precisely this departure, or difference. I do not believe we can make sense of his continued return to the theater without supposing that he got a tremendous charge from the “distracted drops” of

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10 One beginners’ playwriting textbook informs us that “Compelling plays” have an “essential simplicity and clarity at the core,” and that “Writing plays is about picking the crucial moments of your story and putting only those on stage” (Parra 12, 14). Marc Robinson observes that critics of contemporary American experimental playwrights (including Suzan-Lori Parks and Mac Wellman) often suggest that a writer “clarify[ ] her vision” (Robert Brustein, qtd. in Robinson 195). I discuss the postdramatic resistance to clarity and efficiency in Chapter Five.

11 Likewise, James’s early protest against theater whose “whole is a pictorial whole, not a dramatic one” (Scenic 231) might now be read as protesting, from beyond the grave, against experimental “landscape theater” in the tradition of Gertrude Stein and Robert Wilson. Elimor Fuchs theorizes this tradition in “Another Version of Pastoral” (Death 92-107); see n. 14 below.
theater’s continual, constitutive “descent.” This theatrical charge is the thrill of taking pleasure in perversion. “I want to intensely,” says the playwright when asked if he wants “to be acted,” “but I’m sorry I want to” (Ibid). Ultimately, as Kurnick suggests, the dramatic conventions of James’s day—conventions to which he himself subscribed—prevented him from realizing his own polymorphous theatricality in works for the stage. Those conventions were (and are) geared towards repressing precisely the experience that James knew so well: the expansive, disintegrative moment of falling apart, the rending of the dramatic moment from itself. Turn-of-the-century British theater would not willingly house such an art of disintegration; James therefore transplanted his sense of theater to the comparatively unpoliced field of prose fiction.

But what does it mean to make theater on the pages of a story or novel? For a playwright-novelist like James, this turns out to be less a question about text versus performance—after all, he would be writing either way—than a question about reading versus attending. What would prose fiction have to do to fabricate a theatrical experience for its reader? What basic differences between these activities would such a hybridizing project need to surmount? We have already encountered one answer in Brecht’s converse idea of “literarization.” For Brecht, reading’s appeal resides in the way the page lies open to investigation, meeting my gaze; theater, by contrast, threatens at once to compel and to dodge my attention. This account of reading finds corroboration in the work of narratologists like Gérard Genette and Seymour Chatman. According to Chatman, written narrative describes by way of a “linear detailing through time” (107): it presents its objects by doling out their information in a sequence of units, producing them in a forward temporal movement that corresponds to the progress of our eyes over successive characters on the page. We get our information as we go; the written text “has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading” (Genette 34). Funneling all information through the channel of my uptake, the text has no room for an other time. The now of my reading is all there is, temporally, to this activity. Anything more can only come in its turn; that is, when I turn to it.

Of course, the notion that I could ever be fully coincident with what I read, that a piece of language could really be delivering its whole meaning to me at any moment, has long been recognized as theoretically untenable. As we will see, Stein in particular complicates the understanding of written narrative as a continuous stream of immediate communication, through her explicit insistence that most texts harbor “two times” as well as through her writing itself. Nevertheless, I think the narratologists’ account does speak to a normative experience, or expectation, of reading: a page of text will tend to present itself as a direct stream of information, where the reader can regulate the stream’s flow in order to access each moment’s content. She accesses the text in her own time; there is nothing given there that she can’t, in principle, receive.

In theater, by contrast, there is always a potential for overload. Events occur with or without our uptake, distributed across a differential space of things, bodies, and places that can compete for our attention. James’s writing boils with the specific awareness that even the most unassuming drawing-room scenery threatens to rear up, in its recesses and furnishings, and distract us from whatever is going on at center stage. Theater’s constitutive simultaneity, the fact that its “here” can always be divided into “there, there, and there,” means that in any given moment there is always, phenomenally, more than what we attend to in that moment; this excess

12 To sustain the “expert” gaze of a reader, Brecht implies, theater would have to be better than ever because it would, so to speak, have no place to hide: “No chance of the actors having the effrontery to offer such people those few miserable scraps of imitation which they at present cook up in a few rehearsals ‘any old how’ and without the least thought! No question of their material being taken from them in so unfinished and unworked a state” (44).
is part of the medium itself. Here, any stream of consciousness flows over rough terrain, which always threatens to interrupt and divert it: “linear detailing” cannot describe the course. Instead, the spatial dimensions of the medium house a time other than mine. If drama reduces this plurality to a single, emphatic now, it does so in the face of an ongoing danger: I might fall out of step with that present, something else in the room might suddenly call me away.

This way of conceiving the difference between theater and reading can help resolve an apparent paradox in the history of the novel, remarked by Genette as follows:

Up to the end of the nineteenth century, the novelistic scene is conceived, fairly pitilessly, as a pale copy of the dramatic scene: mimesis at two degrees, imitation of imitation.

_Curious_ly [my emphasis], one of the main paths of emancipation of the modern novel has consisted of pushing this mimesis of speech to its extreme, or rather to its limit, obliterating the last traces of the narrating instance and giving the floor to the character right away… [This is the procedure that] has been quite unfortunately christened ‘interior monologue,’ and which it would be better to call immediate speech… (173)

Genette, here, alludes to the commonsense assumption that theatrical mimesis is immediate—at any rate, than narrative diegesis, because theater “giv[es] the floor to the characters right away” instead of re-presenting or mediating their discourse. Given this understanding of the difference between writing a novel and writing for theater, it seems “curious” that the novel should attain “emancipation” from the paradigm of theater by becoming _more_, not less, immediate. Why, Genette encourages us to ask, does a passage like the last chapter of _Ulysses_ feel like a powerful exploitation, indeed articulation, of the _particular_ powers of its medium? Why doesn’t its construction of immediacy seem like a compensatory attempt to make something like theater—the way, he claims, the nineteenth-century novel was always trying to do? The paradox disappears, however, when we regard prose fiction as in fact offering much more “immediacy” than theater ever can. To repeat: written matter promises to engage the reader _now_, as she reads, limiting its content to the perpetually reestablished present of her reading. By contrast, theater’s differential space always threatens to interfere with the “now” of the spectator’s attention, making palpable how much that attention might be failing to attain. This is exactly _not_ the experience of immediate uptake, but experience interrupted by the awareness of what my present does not hold.

To ramp up the feeling of immediacy in a novel, then, might not be a departure from the dramatic ideal of presentness; but it _would_ mean taking another step away from the theatrical field of spatio-temporal distractions. In this sense, the “immediate speech” novelist is indeed carrying fiction further from the shadow of the stage, just as Genette suggests Joyce has done. Conversely, a novelist for whom fiction really did appear to be a “pale copy” of theater might look for ways to undo the effect of immediacy that reading offers. And if she had to remain within the parameters of the textual medium, she might try to simulate theatrical interference _on the level of narrative_. A writer with an inveterate desire for theater, that is, might look for ways to set forks in the stream of her story, to pull open a disruptive additional dimension, to achieve a pseudo-spatiality in writing. Such a “theatricalization of literature” would in one sense constitute a kind of anticipatory counter-move to Brecht’s “literarization of theater”: a repudiation of epic clarity and control, a subjection to the rhythms of a realm not cognitively my own. It might seem that James’s Strether, in his throes of elated frustration, could not be farther from Brecht’s ideal of the “literarized” theatergoer: relaxed, self-possessed, “smoking-and-watching” (44). And yet as we saw in Chapter One, Brecht’s “literarization” also fundamentally works to diversify
spectatorial attention, pulling us away from the “single track” of drama (Ibid). In this sense, Jamesian theatricality is already highly “literarized”; Brecht and James converge in seeking analogies between the two media’s possibilities for disrupting dramatic focalization.\(^{13}\)

Throughout James’s later work, this project amounts to what I have called his attack on the present—exactly what we see in our passage from “The Beast in the Jungle,” which I will quote again here: “she was to do, in a few minutes, something stranger yet—though even of this he was to take the full measure but afterward—and the note of it was already in the air” (523, my emphases). The proliferation of tenses and disparate temporal markers (“yet,” “but afterward,” “already”), the pronouns whose referents are perpetually deferred (“something,” “this,” “it”), the elaborate refusal to give us any temporally intact moment or simply show us anything now stretches our attention towards multiple points at once. The time of the narrative thus takes on a back-and-forth movement that simulates the distracting multidimensionality of theatrical space. James scatters the “now” of reading into a field of other moments, inaccessible alterities.

Bersani might well be thinking of this passage when he observes that “James’s habit of giving us the consequences and the implications of a thought or a fact before giving us the thought or the fact itself shifts the organizing principle of the text from the temporal logic of a character engaged in the story’s movement to the spatial perspective of a narrator who ignores his character’s time for the sake of his own designs” (Future 143, my emphases). We could take this remark as an invitation to see James simply privileging space over time, but I don’t believe this is the most productive reading of either James or Bersani. After all, as the next section of this chapter will emphasize, movement along the temporal axis plays a key role in James’s disruptive theatrics. In this passage from “The Beast,” what we witness is less a subordination than a reorganization of time, such that temporality itself takes on the discontinuous multiplicity of theater space. Narrative sequence is thus driven, as it were, to distraction: not one thing after another, but each thing always behind, before, beneath, beyond something else—“something stranger yet.”

Bersani does not discuss James’s work in terms of theater, but his writing on performance offers terms for understanding the way Jamesian narrative explodes any unified or “immediate” present. In *A Future for Astyanax*, Bersani’s analysis of “contemporary theater,” exemplified for him by the work of Robert Wilson, suggests precisely this goal. Such work, he writes, is “engaged in *decentralizing* the audience’s attention” (my emphasis): whereas “Numerous aspects of traditional theater work to centralize our attention” and “the movement toward climaxes or dénouements could be thought of as a way of closing in, during the time of the drama, on its central significance,” the phenomenal multiplicity of Wilson’s productions works the opposite way (284). Wilson “teaches us that visual mobility doesn’t necessarily reduce heterogeneity… theater becomes the laboratory for the recovery and even the fabrication of psychic diversity, of the heterogeneity of desire” (285). In identifying the way Wilson’s work at once embraces the fundamental heterogeneity of the theater medium and rejects the “centralizing” project of “traditional theater,” Bersani anticipates Hans-Thies Lehmann’s articulation of the

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\(^{13}\)This convergence of Brecht’s “literarization” with another writer’s “theatricalization” seems to me to testify against the notion that Brecht’s “work is not so much a modernist reform of the theater as one directed against it” (Puchner, *Stage* 139; Cf. Fried, “Art” 139-140). “Literarization” names a particular mode of theatricality and should not be confused with an attempt to strip theater of its supposedly fundamental properties. It is true that Brecht calls for “mistrust of the theatre” (Brecht 44) and complains famously that theater “theatres [everything] down” (43); but these suspicions and frustrations attach specifically to theater’s institutional reality. Most of us would probably say similar things about the University system; would we therefore consider ourselves “anti-academic”? (See Puchner, *Stage* 148-152.)
More importantly for our purposes, he presents the polymorphous perversity of the postdramatic stage—a perversity we have already begun to associate with James—in terms of a particular relationship between time and space. The heterogeneity and decentralization Bersani observes correspond to the way theater’s differential space always offers to diversify “the time of its drama,” undermining any sense of immediate uptake. “The action [is] always somewhere else,” he writes. “If we look intently at one part of a Wilson tableau, our attention is peripherally solicited by other parts of the tableau” (284-285). Through this heightened experience of what Bersani calls “other parts”—what James calls “new contacts”—theater resists the dramatic ideal of continuous presentation. As we will see in the next chapter, the centralizing present of drama can seem to exert a terrible power over theatrical experience; but Bersani’s account helps us recognize that theater also holds deep pockets of deviance with respect to dramatic law.

It is as the space of this deviance that theatricality operates most profoundly in James. It may therefore be time to revisit an old topos of James criticism, sprung from James’s own accounts of his work: the famous “scenic method.” This term refers to various ways in which, as is commonly held, James’s fiction models itself upon theatrical presentation. Leon Edel’s classic account of James’s vexed relationship to theater, for example, suggests that fiction is scenic wherever conversations “unfold without the intervention of the narrator” (115). Seeking a more rigorous definition, Joseph Wiesenfarth explicates the theatrical provenance of James’s fiction in terms of “intensity,” “economy,” and “objectivity” (3). Such readings once again construct theater, and by extension James’s “scenic” writing, in terms of a heightened immediacy—an association that should by now appear thoroughly problematic. On the contrary, James works from a feel for theater, and hence for scene, that emphasizes theater’s potential interference with immediacy, the heterogeneity and dis-traction that can counteract the temporal unity of spectatorial attention and narrative “stream.”

James himself discusses his work’s “scenic consistency” in the Preface to *The Ambassadors*, a novel I will return to in the following section of this chapter. James designates one particular passage of *The Ambassadors* as “an excellent standard scene” (47-48); before coming back to “The Beast in the Jungle,” therefore, it seems worthwhile to inquire how this apparently exemplary Jamesian scene plays out. In fact, it is the same episode that includes the passage about theater I quoted earlier. In this scene, the protagonist Lewis Lambert Strether goes to a play with his new friend Maria Gostrey; between the acts, he explains to her how and why he has become an “ambassador” to Paris, with orders to bring home Chad Newsome, the wayward son of a wealthy New England family. This definitively “scenic” scene does begin with several lines of dialogue between Strether and Gostrey; but if we expect this shining specimen to be devoid of narrative “intervention,” we are mistaken. About halfway through the scene, Strether and Gostrey are discussing the identity of “the article produced” at Woollett, Massachusetts, the source of the Newsomes’ (and potentially Strether’s) fortune. She tries to guess; “he persuaded her to patience. But it may even now frankly be mentioned that he in the

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14 Fuchs similarly analyzes “a signature style of contemporary experimental theater,” including Wilson’s, which she traces back to Stein’s landscape plays: “the spectator's focus on [the] stage is no longer convergent: it is darting or diffuse, noting some configurations, missing others, or absorbing all in a heterogeneous gaze” (Death 92; see 92-107). I would only wonder about the possibility of “absorbing all” in this theater; the “always somewhere else” quality that Bersani identifies seems to me to preempt this possibility.

15 Actually, James offers his own version of this experience in his glowing 1891 review of *Hedda Gabler*: “such a production asks the average moral man to see too many things at once” (Scenic 252-3). It is telling that James figures ethical sophistication here as sensory overload—and that he refigures Ibsen’s theater in these terms, an imaginative move that anticipates Stein’s treatment of melodrama (see below).
sequel never was to tell her. He actually never did so…. She could treat the little nameless object as indeed unnameable—she could make their abstention enormously definite. There might indeed have been for Strether a portent of this in what she next said” (97-98).

Even in its most “standard” edition, then, the Jamesian scene refuses to let the time of the story unfold with the continuity proper to drama. Instead, it labors to create the sense of a theatrical “more”: a content in excess of the present action. James proleptically adapts the “always somewhere else” of postdramatic theater for written prose, by creating a narrative that is always somewhen else. If we peremptorily identify theater with the immediacy of drama’s here-and-now, we cannot grasp the way such maneuvers constitute a “scenic” poetics; but a reading attuned to postdramatic sensibility can recognize theater in the way these scenes deny the possibility of a self-contained moment. James’s own characterization of the ideal scene enacts this very denial: “copious, comprehensive, and accordingly never short, but with its office as definite as that of the hammer on the gong of the clock, the office of expressing all that is in the hour” (Ambassadors 48). Itself a spatialized image of time, the simile divides our attention; the sentence’s syntax encourages us to accept the clock’s office as the scene’s—which might bring us close to a traditional understanding of scenic temporality—but the emphasis at the end suggests that clock and scene really have opposite functions: where one expresses the hour, the other expresses all that is in it. The scene, that is, turns the hour inside-out, subjecting temporal flow to the distractions of heterogeneous copia. As the passage from The Ambassadors shows, what is “in” the hour for James includes what is, by the standards of the clock, definitely outside it. And that means not only the future occurrence—or, here, the future non-occurrence, the proleptic “never”—but also the parallel time of the hypothetical: what “there might indeed have been.” By means of the hypothetical, Bersani argues, “James empties his stories of any actual, or actualized content… what presumably takes place in Jamesian fiction is reduced to mere hypotheses about it” (Intimacies 20). James dissolves the dramatic event that, like the hammer striking the gong, would register temporal progress. Indeed, as if to illustrate this point, this striking never even happens in James’s parable of the clock; the hammer hangs suspended in the strange phrase of its “office on” the gong. These scenes hardly lack content, but the very abundance of their content makes them resistant to actualization, stretching them insistently beyond the “now.” In forsaking drama’s presentism, they also fight against the flow of readerly consciousness, simulating the distractions of theatrical space.

If we return to “The Beast in the Jungle,” we can identify the moment that would, in a truly “dramatic” writer, be the story’s climax; instead, it becomes a climax of the special Jamesian theatricality that only a postdramatic approach lets us recognize. Recall that our original passage referred to “something stranger yet” that May Bartram “was to do”; I want to turn now to James’s account of this strange action. We have also been told that John Marcher “was to take the full measure [of it] but afterward”; as this foreshadowing suggests, Marcher’s retrospective rearticulation of this scene will constitute the story’s final crisis. The passage in question, which begins when the dying May tells Marcher “it’s never too late” (526) but ends by her affirming that “what was to” happen has happened (527), is exactly a compositional space kept open for subsequent interpretive re-crossings: May’s, Marcher’s, and our own. It is not the narrative transmission of anything we (or Marcher) can immediately recognize, in the “now” of our reading (of his beholding), as an event. In marking out this empty space, proleptically and analeptically determined as the story’s center, James deploys his typical anti-event moves: “She had, with her gliding step, diminished the distance between them, and she stood nearer to him, as if still charged with the unspoken. Her movement might have been for
some finer emphasis of what she was at once hesitating and deciding to say” (526, my emphases). Here though—as with the plot of “The Beast” as a whole—James also provides a concrete image of not-happening, in the eerie “minute” of May’s stasis, which outlasts and frustrates Marcher’s retrieval of any “movement” that “had” preceded it.

May now usurps the function of the Beast and of Jamesian narrative: “She only kept him waiting, however; that is he only waited” (Ibid). This sentence repeats in miniature the entire thrust of the story: a default of event, at first presented as the fault of the hero’s virtual antagonist, is then interpretively relocated (“that is”) as a fault of his own. Marcher spends most of his life under the impression that he is being “kept waiting” by another—fate, the Beast—only to revise this formulation at the end: the problem all along has been that “he only waited,” the leap having all along been his to take. But in thus encapsulating the story, this self-revising sentence also helps to produce a theatrical dispersion of time: the “minute” of Marcher’s waiting is rendered multiple, not only by the fact that we get two different accounts of it (one where May only keeps Marcher waiting, one where Marcher only waits) but also by the fact that this “minute” will turn out upon re-reading to have contained “all that is in” the story. This specifically Jamesian “scenic consistency,” however, is not simply a matter of moments pregnant with meaning. Rather James constructs, for the reader as for Marcher, the experience of an utter refusal of meaning in any dramatic sense—the scene’s absolute refusal to signify within the here-and-now in which it (only barely) occurs. “[W]hat he saw in her face was the truth,” we read (Ibid): but in the Jamesian theatron, “the truth” can be “seen” without thereby becoming accessible, without granting us anything now. Staging this refusal, James offers a breathtaking pre-vision of Weber’s “theatricality as medium”: “Since no narrative sequence succeeds in framing or enclosing the places it traverses,” Weber writes, “it winds up being traversed by them, being opened, every time it tries to conclude, toward other scenes, which remain inconclusive” (22). For James, too, the theatrical “distance between them”—between Marcher and May, audience and performer—turns out to be an intervening, mediating space through which seeing the truth is exactly not getting it.16

The vehemence with which space intervenes, not only between characters but between reading and “getting” more generally, manifests itself here in the odd eruption of yet another typical Jamesian peculiarity: what Ezra Pound called James’s “dam’d fuss about furniture” (“Henry” 308). There is no end of moments, throughout James’s work, when the material trappings of a room rise to such prominence in narrative consciousness that they seem to menace the story’s continuity. One of the most startling, though, occurs in the middle of the passage we’ve been discussing:

Her movement might have been for some finer emphasis of what she was at once hesitating and deciding to say. He had been standing by the chimney-piece, fireless and sparely adorned, a small, perfect old French clock and two morsels of rosy Dresden constituting all its furniture; and her hand grasped the shelf while

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16 For a powerful argument that May’s performance is never successfully interpreted in the story, see Sedgwick’s famous queer reading (Epistemology 200-212). Applying Sedgwick’s insight to Kurnick’s, I would suggest that May is successor to the weeping Nanda as Kurnick presents her in the last scene of The Awkward Age, in which Nanda has traditionally been read as disclosing her unrequited love for Van. “Far from disclosing her real feelings,” Kurnick contends, “Nanda’s body has simply been tortured into expressive significance. Her stammering self-description is less the voice of her truth than a cry for help as the walls of the novel—and the novelistic—close around her” (“Horrible” 122). May, with her enigmatic performance in this scene of “The Beast in the Jungle,” shows what it would mean to withstand the “torture” to which Nanda finally succumbs; May’s “body,” of course, pays a terrible price for this heroism.
she kept him waiting, grasped it a little as for support and encouragement. She only kept him waiting, however; that is he only waited. (526, my emphasis)

By the standards of dramatic storytelling, the excursus on tchotchkes is simply bizarre. It is only a brazen commitment to theatricality that leads James to let “all that is in the hour” rise up at this moment; to let the multiplicity of space assert itself, in a veritable aggression of mise-en-scène, as a violent distraction from the drama of May’s love and John’s greed. The clock, with its outrageously nested adjectives, seems to flaunt an ability to suspend the present occurrence, stopping the narrative in its tracks and insisting that something else must be acknowledged. James’s passage illustrates this theatrical capacity of objects: they assert themselves at the most outrageous possible moment, in blithe defiance of our desire to follow the plot. They are like the dark doubles of the Chekhovian rifle, with its promise of dramatic significance. Unlike that emphatically meaningful weapon, Jamesian things mark a theatrical excess of differential space, the irruptive disabling of synthesizing comprehension.

“something… had been wanted in the picture”: Disrupted Image in The Ambassadors

When things also go awry for Lewis Lambert Strether in Book XI of The Ambassadors, the explicit theatricality of this incident brings us to a different, but related, mode of Jamesian theater. In “The Beast in the Jungle,” theater operates as a mode that pulls apart its own present. Simulating the multiplicity of theater space, James’s narrative undermines the “now” of reading—and the fluid progression that drama tries its best to impose. In the scene I want to look at now, however, the “stream” of temporal flow is not the target but the agent of theatrical disruption. In what we can call the disrupted image, a differential element of motion comes to disturb an essentially static “picture,” mobilizing the difference of change over time against the relative stability of a pictorial surface. In either mode, theater emerges as the disruptive opening of an additional dimension; we might say that while devices like prolepsis and hypothesis let James theatricalize narrative time, the disrupted image lets him theatricalize presentational space. Moreover, the fact that the former mode always remains in play means that “action” in the latter still fails to centralize, or focus, the scene. Instead, space and time rend dramatic unity along both axes.

In the scene at hand, Strether has embarked on a day in the countryside, in search of “that French ruralism, with its cool special green, into which he had hitherto looked only through the little oblong window of the picture-frame” (452). The “picture” seems at first to be a metaphor for Strether’s naïve romanticization of the land, but James soon grounds it in a surprising (one might even feel, excessive) literality: Strether’s desire for this landscape turns out to be bound up with his onetime desire for an actual picture. “[H]e could thrill a little at the chance of seeing something somewhere that would remind him of a certain small Lambinet that had charmed him, long years before, at a Boston dealer’s and that he had quite absurdly never forgotten…. The little Lambinet abode with him as the picture he would have bought…” (Ibid). The identification of the painting as “the picture he would have bought” already invests it with a kind of multiplicity, splitting it between the actual non-event (of purchase) and the hypothetical act. At the same time, though, the apparently perfect coincidence of the countryside with Strether’s desire suggests—in a Jamesian context—that the picture may be a repressively limiting conceit. “The oblong gilt frame disposed its enclosing lines; the poplars, and willows, the reeds and river… fell into a composition, full of felicity, within them”: the landscape becomes the picture only as the effect of the “enclosing” frame, whose odd grammatical position as the subject of the sentence underscores the sense of this synthesis as forced. We are also invited to notice that the
pictorial metaphor itself depends on the additional dimension the metaphor promises to exclude. Thus Strether can find himself “freely walking about” in the painting only insofar as the painting is more than its pictorial surface: by “boring so deep into his impression and his idleness that he might fairly have got through them again and reached the maroon-coloured wall” (Ibid). This playful suggestion contains the serious reminder that the picture can be violated, precisely because it has—as no ideal plane does—an other side. Only apparently manifest as surface, the image holds its own alterity in reserve. In quartering Strether for the day, the French countryside hints at its own hindquarters—its “other parts.”

We might think, here, of John Marcher’s final posture in “The Beast in the Jungle”: “he flung himself, on his face, on the tomb” (541). In this position, he at once exposes himself to the Beast he hallucinates and, by refusing to “meet” his fate, extends the tale’s postdramatic refusal of immediacy to its very last sentence. This theatrical obscuration of “other parts,” in both passages, might further remind us of Antonin Artaud’s desire to activate theater space “in its undersides (dans ses dessous)” (Theater 124): to seize it in its dimensional difference, which traditional theater represses for the sake of “a culture without shadows” (12). And indeed, in Strether’s idyll, the jocular prospect of “boring” too deep heralds his eventual realization that the picture has not offered a sufficient analogy for his day after all: “this had been all day at bottom the spell of the picture—that it was essentially more than anything else a scene and a stage, that the very air of the play was in the rustle of the willows and the tone of the sky” (458, my emphases).

What prompts this medial transformation is Strether’s dawning awareness that “though he had been alone all day, he had never yet so struck himself as engaged with others and in midstream of his drama” (457-458). That “drama” is young Chad Newsome’s affair with the married Madame de Vionnet, and the question of how this drama is, and isn’t, “his” (Strether’s) is the novel’s central problematic. But in the imaginative context of a static picture, the “drama,” and specifically the “stream” of its temporality, provides the dimensional disruption that makes the painting erupt into theater. As Rowe observes, “visual impressions” in James are “always already involved in complex semantic, social, and historical determinations” (194); Strether’s “hopes of finding nothing but surfaces” in the countryside are therefore destined to be dashed (197). The “sharp fantastic crisis” (Ambassadors 462) that takes place when Chad and Madame de Vionnet show up, evidently in the country on an adulterous overnight trip, does not exactly destroy Strether’s Lambinet; rather, their disturbing presence now seems to have been the telos of the entire afternoon, “as if these figures, or something like them, had been wanted in the picture, had been wanted more or less all day” (461). And the foregoing revelation, that the picture “had been all day… a scene and a stage” because it could still be traversed by the “stream” of drama, prepares us to understand the “crisis” of the episode as theatrical.

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17 James here strikingly anticipates Una Chaudhuri’s account of the shift from landscape painting to the twentieth-century phenomenon she and Elinor Fuchs call “landscape theater” (after Stein): when it enters the realm of theater, the meaning of “landscape” shifts “from a tract of land capable of being seen at a glance to an environment one can explore and inhabit” (“Land/Scape/Theory” 21; see also Chapter 3, n. 39).

18 Sedgwick’s reading of “The Beast in the Jungle” ends by emphasizing the suggestiveness of this posture (Epistemology 212); my own emphasis on the theatricality of the Jamesian underside is indebted to her readings here and in Touching Feeling (35-65), as well as to Joseph Litvak’s readings of James in Caught in the Act.

19 Rowe claims that “the uncanny coincidence of Chad and Madame de Vionnet’s appearance in this apparently random scene is already governed by the secret textuality of Strether’s bid for impressionistic freshness and spontaneity,” a textuality figured by the book Strether carries “in his pocket” (198). Since I find it difficult to regard the textuality of the episode as “secret” even from Strether, whom I do not see as “struggling for some preartistic recognition” (197), I propose that the episode’s real “secret” is not its textuality or its “formalism” (199) but rather the theatrical depths that turn out to sublend those qualities.
Theatricality bursts forth, that is, as the manifestation of what the pictorial surface in itself lacked—and as what Strether, unbeknownst to himself, must have “wanted.”

This sense of picture as both in want of (lacking) and wanting (inviting) the dimensional irruption of scene and stage corresponds to standard Jamesian poetics: “The picture is to set the stage in every needful way for the action of the scene” (Wiesenfarth 34). We should, by this point, have complicated our sense of the Jamesian scene as “action”; but by literalizing the “picture” of novelistic description, the Ambassadors episode enacts both the tension and the cooperation between static and (spatio-)temporal media, where the picture’s “want” opens the space of performance, or “sets the stage” for the scene that will come to disturb its planar surface. Perhaps the clearest illustration of this dynamic appears in the role of the river in Strether’s countryside. Explicitly bound up with the pictoriality of the landscape, the river is twice marked as a site of ignorance. At first “the poplars and willows, the reeds and river—a river of which he did n’t know, and did n’t want to know, the name—fell into a composition…” (453, my emphasis): Strether’s willful unknowing, which for Rowe would exemplify a red-flagged excision of history, is set forth in the discourse as if to produce the “want” it denies. Then later, shortly before his friends’ appearance, Strether arrives for dinner in “a village that affected him as a thing of whiteness, blueness and crookedness, set in coppery green, and that had a river flowing behind or before it—one could n’t say which” (457, my emphasis). The river marks precisely the depthlessness of the pictorial impression, which denies the difference between “before” and “behind”: denies the theatrical space of undersides and backsides, even as here, too, the discourse registers that denial as a lack. But this same river will emerge with a vengeance from the indifference of the pictorial: it is by way of the river that Chad and Madame de Vionnet invade Strether’s picture, rather violently literalizing and affirming Strether’s perception that he has been “in midstream of his drama” all along. The river has twice marked Strether’s pictorializing repression of alterity, his refusal to acknowledge either the differentiations of history (the river’s name) or the differential resources of space (“behind or before”). As if in retribution, the river now comes to disrupt all pictorial self-evidence: it becomes the conduit of movement whereby the “others” we hadn’t seen turn out to make all the difference in the world. In the process, we come to understand Strether’s initial exclusion of such “others” as a symptom of “want” in both senses: a lack, but also, perversely, a desire.

Just as the strategies of Jamesian syntax diffract the linear stream of narrative events into a spatializing diachrony, the Jamesian disruption of picture mobilizes that stream against the immediacy of the planar image, revealing the image’s historicity in a “crossing of time and space” (Rowe 216). Both of these operations, I contend, respond to a theatrical imperative: the desire for a heterogeneous, differential medium. And the two operations collaborate: Strether experiences the scene that has exceeded his Lambinet most significantly, and typically, in retrospect, as the “belated vision” of a subsequent vigil: “He then knew more or less how he had been affected—he but half knew at the time” (465). Alone in his rooms, Strether revisits the day’s events; describing his ride back to Paris with the lovers, the discourse passes between pluperfect and narrative past, so that it becomes impossible to locate his realization firmly in either scene: “The eating and drinking, which had been a resource, had had the effect of having served its turn… and it was during their somewhat tedious progress to the station, … their silences in the dim compartment of the much-stopping train, that he prepared himself for reflexions to come” (466). Consciousness, here, is half anticipation and half retrospect; by returning to the preterite with “he prepared himself” (not “he had prepared himself”), James

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20 On the insufficiency of “picture” in James’s later work, see Caserio.
suggests an experience that slides back and forth between these two moments, unable to locate itself in either one.

This temporal dispersion of the event of consciousness, moreover, is inseparable from what the consciousness is of: the fact that Madame de Vionnet’s disposition all evening “had been a performance…” (Ibid). Here as so often in James, that is, a character’s behavior gets recognized as theater, and while this recognition seems somehow illuminating, its meaning proves resistant to any other formulation. “Performance” is by no means, for instance, just a synonym for “deception,” even though the substance of Madame’s performance is indeed the falsehood that she and Chad “had left Paris that morning, and with no design but of getting back within the day” (467). Strether’s response to this “lie” (466) is not only moral but also keenly appreciative, a response to her virtuosity: “From the point of view of presence of mind it had been very wonderful indeed, wonderful for readiness, for beautiful assurance, for the way her decision was taken on the spot, without time to confer with Chad, without time for anything” (Ibid). “Performance” is not merely a metaphor for what Madame has done; she has literally engaged body, voice, and language in creating an aesthetic experience, as she constantly does throughout the novel (we already know that as a child she had “made a clean sweep… of every ‘part’, whether memorized or improvised, in the curtained costumed school repertory” [224]). Strether becomes this particular performance’s producer only in tortuous Jamesian retrospect, and he produces it as a performance of immediacy: that “presence of mind,” that punctual temporality of acting “on the spot… without time for anything.” But by making it the imaginative product of Strether’s “belated vision,” James shows us how this dramatic ideal of action as self-contained, undistributed unity arises out of—and, in spite of itself, remains within—a theatrical space of diffraction. The theater where Madame de Vionnet’s performance can be “seen” is precisely the differential space that arises when the moment of recognition is pulled apart, distributed between preparation (when Strether “but half knew”) and recollection (when he “knew more or less”).

Ultimately, too, Strether’s retrospective focus shifts from the performance itself, which disturbs him with “the quantity of make-believe involved,” to “the other feature of the show, the deep, deep truth of the intimacy revealed” (468). Like the “truth” John Marcher sees in May Bartram’s face, this “truth” never unfurls discursively; it maintains the maddening ineffability of an object whose dimensions—“deep, deep”—resist sublimation into dramatic logic. The theatricality of the Jamesian “show” is just this kind of depth, the evasive recess whereby narrative manages to withhold what it “reveals.” The afternoon-as-painting had promised total accessibility, with Strether “freely walking about in it” (453) in recuperation of the lost but, in principle, accessible Lambinet. Reconceived as theater, the same day gives day onto a depth that is irreducibly a distance, and Strether finds himself excluded from the very “show” he attends (or at which, we might say, he assists). But this distance is also the dimension of desire. The space between Strether’s lonely rooms and the colorful village—and the space between both of these and those other rooms, somewhere upstream, where Chad and Madame de Vionnet must have enacted their “intimacy”—describes the stage on which Strether can finally unleash his nocturnal fantasies. So staged, these exhibit the riotous multiplicity of the postdramatic: “He recognized at last that he had really been trying all along to suppose nothing. Verily, verily, his labour had been lost. He found himself supposing innumerable and wonderful things” (468).

For James, theater carries us away; it works on us by pulling us apart. Marcher and Strether are both subjected to this theater, and neither will succeed in “getting back, as he might put it, into his own presence” (“Beast” 536). And yet this gap determines the playing space of
Jamesian erotics, where love itself is the individual’s subjection to anachrony, the dispersive force of a desire that knows no present. This ceaseless undoing constantly interferes with the drama of James’s writing; but it opens the page into a space of theatrical departure.

II. Gertrude Stein

Reflecting, as she so often did, on her own earlier work, Gertrude Stein observed that her sentences “had a balance which was the balance of a space completely not filled but created by something moving as moving is not as moving should be. As I said,” she continued, “Henry James in his later writing had a dim feeling that this was what he knew he should do” (Writings 132). This chapter began by observing that Stein identifies James as “her forerunner” in The Autobiography; here, Stein conceives herself as developing a particular Jamesian tendency. We might note, however, that this recognition itself takes place by way of a temporal gymnastics that makes James’s own innovation proleptic: it’s not James who influences Stein, but as it were the other way around. Beyond reversing the logic of influence, Stein’s insistence that writerly space is “completely not filled” might make us think of the exactly opposite terms in which James had extolled drama: “the real [dramatist] gets down on his knees, disposes of his goods… and at last rises in triumph, having packed his coffer in the one way that is mathematically right. It closes perfectly; between one object and another you cannot insert the point of a penknife” (qtd. in Edel 39-40). In discerning a language that opens space rather than filling or “clos[ing]” it, Stein begins to identify the theatricality by which James exceeds his own dramatic ideal of communicative compaction—the pen/knife that disruptively pushes its way into every scene. And this identification proceeds by way of a literary historicity we can now recognize as itself a piece of Jamesian theatricality: Stein constitutes the event of James’s writing retroactively, as anticipation. James, in other words, becomes not a writer who was, but a writer who has been going to be (i.e., to be Stein). “He came not to begin but to have begun,” she writes of him in Four in America (Writings 291).

If Stein positions her own writing here as the culmination and even, paradoxically, the origin of James’s, elsewhere she frames her work’s value in terms of its kinship with the visual art of her contemporaries: cubism. As we can now observe, however, Jamesian theater seems to haunt this affinity too. Stein identifies cubism’s “triple foundation” as the “composition of which one corner was as important as another corner,” the disappearance of “faith in what the eyes were seeing,” and the pictures’ new desire “to leave their frames” (“Picasso” 19); this is the same perspectival rebellion we have discovered in James’s theatrics of undersides and backsides. Nevertheless, Stein would most likely want to qualify the similarity; although she acknowledges James’s importance, she is always careful to distinguish his achievement from her own. James, Stein writes in Four in America, “is a combination of the two ways of writing” (291), which are “the way when you write what you are writing” and “the way when you write what you are going to be writing or what some other one would have written if they had been writing” (282). Within the latter “way” we can recognize, if hazily, the two techniques Bersani identifies with James’s attack on the actual: the temporal dispersion of analepsis or prolepsis (“you write what you are going to be writing”) and the lateral distraction of the hypothetical (“what some other one would have written”), both of which we have found in James’s “standard” scene. By contrast, “the way when you write what you are writing” would seem to denote the ideal of a unified, self-contained present. And indeed, Stein proclaims her dedication to the present throughout her work. In “Portraits and Repetition,” for example, she reflects that “intelligent people although they talk as
if they knew something are really confusing, because they are so to speak keeping two times going at once, the repetition time of remembering and the actual time of talking” (Writings 106). She describes her “portraits” as an attempt at “making what I know come out as I know it, come out not as remembering” (107), and in “Plays” she insists that “The business of Art… is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that complete actual present” (65).

Given this poetics of the present, it is surprising that the piece in which she formalizes her binary of “the two ways of writing” should bear the name of, and keep returning to, a figure who she insists combines them. This fact alone suggests that Stein’s present is inherently permeable. If it can exclude the “two times at once” of “remembering,” it still maintains relations with the “going to” and “would have”; these can impose themselves productively upon the present in such a way as to yield, for instance, the general that Henry James “was or was not” (283). Just as Henry James, in the ways this chapter has been tracing, explodes the dramatic integrity of the narrative present, “Henry James” seems to undermine the poetic present as a time that must be fully or “completely” its own.21 This composition signals to Stein’s reader that her “complete actual present” is more conceptually complex than we might assume. In what follows, I will be examining the theatrical ramifications of that complexity.

Nevertheless, Stein does continually makes it clear that in her own most important writing, she has attempted to make the present her sole temporal site.22 She frames her ability to recognize and achieve this goal—to activate “something moving as moving is” rather than “as moving should be”—as her advance beyond James, who keeps one foot stuck in the dispersive temporality of recollection, anticipation, and hypothetical that Stein will (have been going to) transcend. Her commitment to the present makes her cast James’s innovation “in his later writing” as an approach to presentness; she is no doubt responding to the outrageousness of his syntax, the incredibly elaborate and processual—because never finished—construction of sense, glaringly driven by imperatives other than communicating narrative information, or telling what happened. This is, of course, the quality that makes James’s later work look modernist, or writerly: the degree to which it draws our attention to its own textual procedure, rather than its represented fiction.23 In different ways, Caramello explains, James and Stein both “present acute cases of the tension between referentiality and autoreferentiality that has haunted formalist aesthetics in music, painting, and literature for more than a century. They are difficult, in sum, for the same general reasons that most modernist writers are difficult” (193).

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21 In fact, some readers (including Caramello) interpret Stein’s “Henry James” as espousing the integration of both “ways of writing,” rather than privileging one over the other, and hence as asserting an even stronger continuity between James and Stein; see Caramello 178-186, 191-192. As I have indicated, though, I believe the statements throughout her theoretical writings (and especially the American lectures, chronologically very close to Four In America) privilege writing in the present consistently enough to support my reading of her meaning here. Stein does say that her own translation of a poem by Georges Hugnet exemplifies the “second way” and associates a certain “excitement” with that fact (or, perhaps, with her own discovery of it) (Writings 285). But she also associates this “way” with Shakespeare’s sonnets as opposed to his plays, and she seems to me to privilege the latter over the former, both in “Plays” (68-69) and in Narration: “the words in the sonnets come out with a smooth feeling with no vibration in them such as the words in all his plays have as they come out from them” (52). See also Ryan (14).
22 Allegra Stewart’s Gertrude Stein and the Present is a book-length elucidation of this project.
23 See Kurnick for a reading of a passage from The Awkward Age that brings out this quality: “Synopsizing the plot of the novel in which she figures—and thereby mitigating the interest we might take in its progress—Mrs. Brook instead highlights her own utterance (‘as I say’) as a site of readerly attention. With a string of future perfect clauses that draw attention to themselves through the sheer oddity of their temporal orientation, Mrs. Brook talks about the marriage plot as a way to forestall moving through it” (“Horrible” 118).
This shift of emphasis from story to discourse, or from the narrated to the narrating, easily evokes an ethos of the present moment. Indeed, the very word “modernism” seems to name an ascendency of the present moment, deriving from the Latin modo, or “just now” (“modern”). But while some modernisms have certainly provoked audiences through their assertion of the “now” as such, this chapter has pursued a different temporality of outrageousness in James. Far from asserting the present, James’s writerly texts operate as an explosive dispersion of the present, constantly re-orienting the reader towards other temporal sites. In so doing, his texts simulate the spatial heterogeneity of theater. James thus becomes theatrical precisely by subverting presentness. Given this understanding, how do we make sense of Stein’s concerted effort to embrace the present in her writing? Must we find her “modernism” antithetical to James’s theatricality?

To arrive at this conclusion would mean shoring up a binary familiar from both literary and visual art criticism: theatricality on one side of an aesthetic divide, and modernism on the other. On the contrary, however, I claim that we can read key aspects of Stein’s literary innovation as theatrical, in a sense which directly relates to Jamesian techniques. To make this argument, I begin by reviewing the discourse on Stein’s supposed antitheatricalism in light of her 1935 lecture “Plays,” in which she challenges the very assumptions that make the antitheatricalist reading possible. I then turn to two of Stein’s “landscape” plays: Paisieu (1928) and the surprising Broadway hit Four Saints in Three Acts (1927, produced in 1934). It is true that Stein does not subject actuality to an all-out attack, as James does. But neither does her treasured “present” correspond to the present James tries to demolish. The unifying immediacy of drama’s “so ist es” (Brecht) could not be farther from Stein’s landscape; her “present” is not a communion with what is happening here and now, but a movement that splinters the here-and-now beyond recognition. For Stein, this is the promise and pleasure of theater: a fundamentally dispersive, discontinuous field.

Beyond Antitheatricality: “Plays”

The theater of James’s texts, as we have been reading them, offers an alternative ground for understanding the theater of Stein’s—alternative, that is, to the fundamentally dramatic sense of theater that seems to have grounded the interpretation of Stein’s work as antitheatrical. If we assume that theatricality is constituted by “unities of space, time, [and] action,” then Stein’s “utterly broken and fragmentary stage,” in works like Four Saints in Three Acts, must indeed seem antitheatrical (Puchner, Stage 109). But by treating the dramatic and the theatrical as separate concepts, we can begin to trace Stein’s construction of an iconoclastic but still emphatically theatrical logic. James’s writing in particular helps us see how theater is itself conducive to the “broken and fragmentary.” Returning once more to Samuel Weber, we might say both James and Stein anticipate his argument that theatricality is the “separability of place.

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24 In Chapter One, we saw a parallel assumption being made in theater studies: the idea that postdramatic theater, because it no longer focuses on conveying (“representing”) a fictional story, entails a shift “from representation to presence.”

25 Fried’s “Art and Objecthood” has been the most influential articulation of this binary; Fried identifies “the imperative that modernist painting... defeat or suspend theatre” as crucial to its project (135), and argues that “theatre is now the negation of art” (125). Puchner sees Stein as espousing “the high modernist values of engulfment and solitary reading,” values he specifically associates with Fried: “What Fried and Stein share in particular is an aversion to distracting audiences as well as to human actors on the stage” (Stage 103-104). Of course, by imputing antitheatricalism to so many of modernism’s most canonical writers and playwrights (Mallarmé, Joyce, Stein, Yeats, Brecht, and Beckett), Puchner’s own larger project cannot but reaffirm Fried’s binary opposition: modernism is once again “a form of resistance” (Puchner, Stage 2) to theatricality. In another literary-critical example, Fredric Jameson contrasts the “theatrical” perspective of the nineteenth-century novel with Joseph Conrad’s truly modernist method of sensory fragmentation, which Jameson identifies with film (Political 231-2).

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‘itself’" (294): for the earlier writers, too, theater is what undermines any attempt at spatial, temporal, or subjective “unity.” The stage is a riotous space; dramatic continuity can only impose itself upon this space in an act of repressive violence. If Stein’s plays institute a fragmentary experience, then, this need not be understood as an attack on the theater medium itself. On the contrary, Stein activates theater’s own resources in excess of the integrating dramatic present. We should thus question the terms of Martin Puchner’s claim that Stein devised an “antitheatrical drama” (Stage 105): it’s precisely when we look past the rules of drama that her theatricality becomes legible.

To begin with, Stein makes it clear that she understands the province of theater as utterly distinct from the narrative ambition basic to drama: “I concluded that anything that was not a story could be a play,” she writes in “Plays” (73). Indeed, the fact that this sentence occurs in a lecture devoted to “Plays” might make us miss the breadth of its scope: it articulates, not just a sense of theater, but a radical theatricalism, claiming not only that plays should not be stories, but that anything other than story can make for theater. This claim should encourage us to regard Stein’s marking as “plays” some very un-play-like texts, not as an attack on theater’s presumed integrity, but on the contrary as an aggressive expansion of theater into new realms. For example, the following text is from her 1928 piece Paisieu: A Play, which I will discuss later in this chapter:

ACT ONE
Geronimo in season.

ACT ONE
Seasonable dishes.
Scorpions and butterflies and scorpions are non-existent so she could be easy.

ACT ONE
Its beginning is twenty twenty-two.
Nobody counts poplars.
Nobody counts poplars.
Nobody.
Counts.
Poplars.
Nobody counts poplars as counts counts poplars.
Next. (155-6)

Although the piece preserves one remnant of dramatic form—the designation of “Acts” and, later, “Scenes”—it is not at all clear what exactly these terms designate. Needless to say, their repetition confounds their original function of marking progressive stages; the architecture of drama seems to have crumbled into found artifacts, to be rearranged at will. Perhaps more troubling is the fact that none of these lines are attributed to speakers, nor do they obviously describe onstage actions. Instead, they have the feel of a single, authorial discourse, not radically unlike the voice of non-“play” texts like 1912’s Tender Buttons:

A seal and matches and a swan and ivy and a suit. (4)

[...]

COLD CLIMATE.

26 Wirth observes that in Stein’s plays “dialogue is dissolved into discourse; characters are only discernible as voices of the discourse... the basic model of her pieces [is] more like a lyric poem than a conventional drama” (“Gertrude” 64-65, Cf. 68). For more on the contemporary significance of the shift “from dialogue to discourse,” see Wirth’s essay “Vom Dialog zum Diskurs: Versuch einer Synthese der nachbrechsten Theaterkonzepte.”
A season in yellow sold extra strings makes lying places.

MALACHITE.

The sudden spoon is the same in no size. The sudden spoon is the wound in the decision. (12)

Either of these pieces, like all Stein’s work, is unsettling enough on its own. Regarded side by side, they bring the question of genre to a kind of crisis. “I think and always have thought that if you write a play you ought to announce that it is a play and that is what I did,” she writes in “Plays,” remarking as well: “I have written a great many plays and I am quite sure they are plays” (73, 69). What, she dares us to wonder, makes her so sure? By insisting that *Paisieu* is “A Play” while *Tender Buttons* is not (but presumably “could” have been 27), Stein challenges her readers to interrogate their assumptions about theater. Her “plays” are not plays in the sense we will take up in Chapter Four: they do not use familiar formal conventions to evoke the conflation of script and scene, and hence we are unlikely to feel that we are “seeing” the play as we read. Stein withholds this experience from her reader; by marking her texts as “plays” nevertheless, she produces a dissonance that goads the reader towards a new logic of staging. She assigns us the task of discovering what might make her works appropriate to performance. We have no legitimate basis, she argues, for assuming that such works cannot suit the stage.

Critics have been oddly eager to dismiss this provocation, however, and to apply their own commonsense parameters of theatricality in judging Stein’s work antitheatrical. Sarah Bay-Cheng, for example, even while helpfully situating Stein’s work within the tradition of avant-garde performance, claims that Stein’s “dramatic writings before 1920 are distinctive for their antitheatricalism. They contain no list of dramatic characters, no discernible actions, and no plot.… As many have argued previously, these early texts labeled ‘plays’ are not terribly stage-worthy (though numerous productions have been attempted)” (35). I am not sure how one might distinguish an “attempted” production from, say, a fully accomplished one, although this kind of distinction consistently subtends such readings. Bay-Cheng herself, moreover, goes on to implicitly challenge the idea that a list of dramatic characters, discernible actions, or plot is what makes a play stage-worthy. Reading Stein’s post-1920 works, Bay-Cheng argues for a decisive shift from the “earlier more poetic work” to the truly “stageable” plays, a shift that she contends derives from Stein’s “experiments with film” in the ‘20s (Ibid). But she never provides firm criteria for the “newfound theatricality” (74) which, she claims, is only beginning to emerge in the transitional *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927) and culminates in *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938). 28 While she disputes Puchner’s account of Stein as a writer of closet drama, she does so solely on the basis of his failure to note “the progression of Stein’s drama over three decades” (48), and she approvingly quotes his statement that “The transformations that were necessary for staging *Four Saints* can serve as a measure for the distance Stein’s text maintains from the theater” (Stage 111, qtd. in Bay-Cheng 54). But it is not clear to me that Virgil Thomson’s active manipulations of Stein’s text really constitute radical “transformations” of that text, nor that the particular interventions Thomson made “were necessary.” In fact, Bay-Cheng’s own account of the 2000 Mark Morris production (140) suggests that very different approaches

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27 In “Poetry and Grammar,” a lecture in which Stein ponders the difference between prose and poetry, she makes it clear that *Tender Buttons* is “very good poetry” rather than prose (Writings 138). Earlier in the essay, she notes that “words in plays written in poetry are more lively than the same words written by the same poet in other kinds of poetry,” adding: “It undoubtedly was true of Shakespeare, is it inevitably true of everybody” (123). She never answers this question, but the thought suggests at once a continuity between plays and nonplay texts and a real, if elusive, experiential distinction.

28 At different moments, Bay-Cheng associates Stein’s “newfound theatricality” with visual evocativeness (18) and with characters’ “internal” relationships to language (74), but never theorizes the theatricality of these qualities any further.
to the text of *Four Saints* have been theatrically fruitful. To insist that Stein’s collaborators had to *make* her script theatrical, as it were rescuing *Four Saints* from its own literariness, is to ignore another possibility: that in such texts, Stein pursues theater itself beyond dramatic limits.

Jane Palatini Bowers, in her 1991 study *They Watch Me As They Watch This*, makes a more nuanced argument about Stein’s plays in their relation to theater, elucidating various ways in which Stein sets text and other aspects of performance in productive opposition. *Four Saints*, for instance, “counteracts the very performance it initiates in a kind of counter-text, a written text which asserts itself at every moment of performance” (48), while 1936’s *Listen to Me* is “a collision that [Stein] engineers” between “conception and its projected enactment” (91). Bowers’s analysis is strongest where it presents Stein’s texts as *engaging* theatrical performance in order to investigate its possibilities and impossibilities in a kind of immanent critique. The “adamantly and self-consciously ‘literary’” quality of these plays (2) emerges, as Bowers shows, through their orientation toward, anticipation of, and (sometimes) realization in theater, that is, a medium which is not literature. In fact, Bowers’s readings in many places provide a precedent for my own project: in showing the ways in which these texts at once demand and resist enactment (as, for example, in her wonderful consideration of verbs in the early plays [17-19]), she is revealing what I would call their postdramatic procedures. In these moments, Bowers points to Stein as exploiting specific formal possibilities inherent in the medium. For example: “In the theater the forward march of time is inexorable,” but it is equally true that the “flow of speech and action is checked, as it were, by the way the eye perceives performance in space—instant by instant. Really then, the dynamism of performance… is at once continuous and discontinuous” (49-50). Thus *Four Saints*, far from ignoring the “reality” of performance, simply “emphasizes the discontinuity of performance rather than its continuity” (50).29 With this formulation, Bowers neatly preempts much of the discourse on “antitheatrical” Stein.

Ultimately, Bowers concludes that Stein’s plays are “a performed poetry, at once textual and theatrical” (135). At other points in her argument, however, she seems unduly bound by dramatic norms, as when she characterizes Stein’s *A Play Called Not and Now*, in which “No one acts; nothing happens; no one speaks,” as accordingly “a play that cannot play in the theater” (91). Similarly, while her claim that Stein’s *A List* asserts “the primacy of the written text… over the performance text” is suggestively Adornian, it rests on the problematic argument that some of the play’s clarity would be lost in performance (31-32). Bowers writes that “Only the written text can set us straight” if, for instance, we hope to follow Stein’s extensive play with homophones like “for” and “four” (Ibid). But as we have seen, being “set straight” is a specifically dramatic requirement. In Stein, such devices are not brakes on theatrical performance, but projections of a theater where meaning is never available to a synoptic gaze, where we are always being invited to zig and zag between different possibilities. The sound that might either be “for” or “four” *is* theatrical in this sense: the word never stops referring to its own alternatives, or “other parts.” If written text is ascendant here, its primacy lies not in correcting performance, but in anticipating and providing for this dynamic.

Throughout the rest of this chapter, I try to explicate the postdramatic logic of Stein’s fundamentally discontinuous theater. This reading should unseat the conception that her work is antagonistic toward theatrical performance. Still, the “Plays” lecture does seem to provide ample

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29 Bowers characterizes theater’s discontinuity as that of “a succession of present instants” (50). As I have suggested in my reading of James, I would be wary of assuming that the formation of “present instants” is the only way theater opposes linear flow, since it seems to me that such a flow can easily be made up of present instants—that this is in fact exactly what drama tries to achieve. The “continuous present” in Stein’s sense, however, actively resists incorporation in a linear stream, as I discuss below.
justification for the claim that Stein shows at least a “conflicted relation to the theater” (Puchner, *Stage* 102). In particular, Stein objects to the “nervousness” she associates with many of her experiences at the theater, a discomfort she ascribes to the “syncopated time” that arises between spectator and spectacle (“Plays” 58-59). As if in response to the same sense of theater we’ve traced in James, Stein here records an agitating discontinuity. This feeling arises for her, before the show has even begun, from the sight of the curtain: “the curtain already makes one feel that one is not going to have the same tempo as the thing that is there behind the curtain” (59). The potentially disruptive presence of other viewers compounds the effect: “the audience and the fact that they are or will be or will not be in the way when the curtain goes up that too makes for nervousness and nervousness is the certain proof that the emotion of the one seeing and the emotion of the thing seen do not progress together” (Ibid). Stein seems to see (or feel) past the drama being presented, into the space and time of theater as a matrix of disparities. This is, as I have been repeating, a specifically Jamesian experience; similarly, when Stein writes that “before it had commenced it was over” (71), she could just as well be describing the anachronic Jamesian “scene.” And yet the two writers’ confluence is far from complete: the problem is that Stein objects to the theatrical discomfiture James had embraced. We might therefore wonder if Stein’s “nervousness” implies a renewed dramatic impulse to centralize the stage.

It would be convenient for my argument if “Plays” told the story of Stein learning to embrace the theatrical “nervousness” she describes: the spatial discontinuity embodied by the curtain, and the temporal discontinuity of “syncopated time.” Instead, however, her lecture continues to treat these features as problems: “This thing, the fact that your emotional time as an audience is not the same as the emotional time of the play is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play,” she writes, “because not only is there a thing to know as to why this is so but also there is a thing to know why perhaps it does not need to be so” (58, my emphases). For Stein, as for dramatic authors, the bifurcation between the audience and the play is a problem that must be creatively overcome. By repeatedly casting the problem in the terms that “there is a thing to know,” however, she also seems to luxuriate in the critical task thus generated, suggesting a desire to dwell on the theatrical terrain where this conceptual “thing” is “there” to engage her. Puchner claims that Stein tries to solve the problem of the “two times” through “the attempt to import [the] quality of synchronized reading into the dramatic form,” since “[i]t is only in private and ideal circumstances, Stein and so many modernists argue, that a perfect synchronicity between story and the affective reader can be achieved” (Stage 102). As we observed earlier, however, Stein by no means regards the written-and-read medium as a guarantee of “perfect synchronicity.” In “Plays,” she argues that theatrical syncopation has its analogue in the realm of reading: “in a book it is always a strange doubling, the familiarity

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30 Laura Luise Schultz, in her study of Stein as a postdramatic writer, does claim that in this lecture Stein “decides to understand the conflicting notions of time in the theatre not as a contradiction but a combination,” thus ultimately embracing discontinuity rather than rejecting it (“Combination” 255). For Schultz, Stein’s ultimate acceptance of the two temporalities in “combination” corresponds to her production of a performative, postdramatic text which thus overcomes the text-theater-versus-performance-theater binary (see also Schultz’s essay “The missing link: Gertrude Stein and postdramatic theatre”). Although this latter achievement, as elucidated by Schultz, seems to me undeniable, I do not believe that Stein presents herself as coming to embrace temporal disparity as a theatrical condition in “Plays.” Stein does write “The thing I found out about plays was too a combination and not a contradiction” (58), and in this way seems to be likening the difference between the “two times” of theater to the difference between “sentences and paragraphs” (Ibid), but I do not find that the analogy implies an acceptance of the former dichotomy as of the latter. Indeed, Stein’s welcoming interest in difference, which Schultz describes so well, itself supports the typically Steinian usage whereby analogy itself harbors significant differences—here, perhaps, the difference between the grammatical combination that “causes one to think endlessly about sentences and paragraphs” and the theatrical combination that, though it similarly “makes one think endlessly about plays,” also “makes one endlessly troubled” (Ibid).

31 Thanks to C. D. Blanton for suggesting this latter point.
between the characters in the book is a progressive familiarity and the familiarity between them and the reader is a familiarity that is a forcing process… It makes of course a double time…” (67). Ridding the written text of its “two times” is for Stein an ambition as necessary, and as new, as the corresponding project for theater. It is clear, therefore, that the solution to theatrical syncopation will not simply consist in writing plays meant to stay on the page.

And indeed, Stein goes on to suggest an irreducibly theatrical model for this reform: the experience of going, in her youth, to see Sarah Bernhardt’s company. “[I]t was all so foreign and her voice being so varied and it all being so French I could rest in it untroubled. And I did… It was better than the theatre because you did not have to get acquainted” (71). This theater was “better than the theatre”—that is, the theater as institutionalized, as normative and as normally available to young Gertrude. It was, therefore, barely recognizable as theater, much as innovative forms (as Stein herself knew) generally go unrecognized.32 And yet it succeeded for her, as theater, precisely by being “foreign”: by keeping its distance, offering an alternative to the normal sociality of “the theatre.” The repeated “all” (“all so foreign… all being so French”) emphasizes the spatially distributed copia of performance, the “visual mobility” (Bersani) that registers how much is going on, just as the “voice being so varied” describes the temporally differential experience of Bernhardt’s virtuosity. Of course the performance might not, on its own terms, have been formally radical or postdramatic; but it is precisely the freedom from taking it on its own terms—from having to get acquainted—that Stein celebrates here. Nor does this distance have anything to do with a “fourth wall”; on the contrary, Stein’s pleasure ensues from her own elimination of the dramatic fiction, which opens a space for her to “rest in.”

Stein thus describes a theatrical sensibility that arises first with her own in situ revision of other artists’ work. Not only “French” or “foreign” plays are susceptible to this re-shaping, moreover: the Bernhardt play “awakened in me a desire for melodrama on the stage, because there again everything happened so quietly one did not have to get acquainted and as what people felt was of no importance one did not have to realize what was said”; her favorite melodramas “made the whole stage the whole play… silence stillness and quick movement” (72). Here again, Stein blithely dispenses with the play’s own self-conception—imagine a melodrama for which “what people felt was of no importance!” Re-staging these works as a kind of ballet, what Stein excises is not theater as such, but the centralizing emotional coercion of dramatic theater. By refusing to let the melodramas engage her on the Aristotelian level of sympathetic fiction, she is able to enjoy the sensory qualities of the performance. Thus reimagined, “the whole play” is dispersed over “the whole stage”: no longer focused through the progressing fortunes of particular characters, theater manifests itself as a space of plethora. Theater is valuable as a sensory panoply (“all so foreign”; “the whole stage”) that can come together as a powerful impression without imposing the continuities either of human interest or of discursive meaning (of realizing what was said”). By “eliminating progression” (Davy 116), Stein’s kind of theater abandons not its own theatricality but the dramatic unification of theater’s spaces and times.

In her girlhood, Stein found her “desire” “awakened” when theater’s dimensional copia could manifest itself outside narrative compulsion. The “clothes, voices, what they the actors said, how they were dressed and how that related itself to their moving around” are, for Stein, “things over which one stumbles over which one stumbled” (“Plays” 71, my emphasis): the shift in verb tense is decisive. Costume, sound, text, and movement remain to Stein as the

32 See Stein’s “Composition as Explanation,” Writings 21-30.
heterogeneous “things” of theater, that is, but one no longer stumbles over them—provided one has found a way to stop the headlong vector of progressive dramatic narrative. 33

Negativity Beyond Contradiction: Paisieu’s Differential Landscape

Clearly, then, Stein does not object to theatrical multiplicity in itself. What bothers her is rather the experience of that multiplicity jarring against the expectation of continuous unity. Stein’s desire to overcome the “two times” of theater is not a pseudo-dramatic intolerance of discontinuity or discrepancy as such. The problem of the two times is rather that they keep theater trapped in a binary struggle. The conflict between drama’s demand for immediacy and theater’s own dimensions of distance crowds out the differential pleasures of the variously discontinuous experience that results when dramatic expectations are released altogether. Accordingly, Stein’s solution is perhaps less to prescribe a drama of “perfect synchronicity” (Puchner, Stage 102) than to remove the dramatic ideal itself. Temporal syncopation and spatial separation are neutralized once we set aside the standards by which both are measured: continuous immersion, maintained by narrative momentum, in drama’s “absolute present” (Szondi), and the unbroken togetherness of a theater that demands we “get acquainted.” Stein’s problem is not with theater’s multiplicity but, so to speak, with its duplicity, the way its phenomenal disposition contradicts its prevailing norms. If I can come to accept theater as a panoply of differentially distributed contents—and myself as one alien among others—then a maddening bifurcation will dissolve into a texture of potentially infinite, nonexclusive variants. Stein initiates this process, in “Plays,” by developing a contentedly alien persona: the young woman we see at the theater seems utterly immune to twenty-two hundred years of dramatic expectations and desires, rather as if she had just dropped in from outer space.

In thus dismissing drama altogether, Stein does indeed move away from the two-ness she had noticed in “Henry James.” She also announces a mode of postdramatic theatrical pleasure quite unlike the one we have traced in James. For him, theater emerges as a difference or “descent” from drama’s centralizing ideal. In this mode of theater, drama never disappears completely; instead, it is perpetually subjected to subversion, distraction, and rupture. In fact, as we saw in the Jamesian device of the “disrupted image,” the “stream” of dramatic action can itself be mobilized to produce theater as against the stasis of the pictorial. It is the violent interplay between drama and “other parts” of the playing space that produces theatrical pleasure for James, and his is likewise a violent pleasure. 34 For Stein, by contrast, theater’s essential operation is not the interposition of disruption and disparity between drama and its others but, instead, the nurture of difference within an already-decentralized perceptual field. The delights of this theater are exploratory and, as it were, distributive—a rhizomatic pleasure of lateral textures, as compared to the more oedipal pleasure of chopping away at dramatic tradition’s towering tree. 35 In Stein, Bonnie Marranca writes, one is “continually absorbed by the pleasure of tracing the endless diverging lines impressed upon constantly transforming surfaces, and at every turn discovering winding, wider pathways leading to ever more mysterious corridors of experience”

33 As Bowers writes: “The movement of language in the conventional Western play can best be represented by an unbroken, unidirectional arc. According to Stein, if the spectator tries to follow the arc, he will be distracted by the broken line of visual perception” (76). Rebecca Schneider finds a particular emphasis latent in Stein’s remark that temporal syncopation “makes one endlessly troubled” (94, Schneider’s emphasis); I would suggest that this one corresponds to the unifying effort of drama.
34 The “question” Stein poses in Tender Buttons, “What is the use of a violent kind of delightfulfulness if there is no pleasure in not getting tired of it” (4), might almost stand as her retort to these Jamesian erotics.
(24). The difference that structures this theater is not fundamentally a force of opposition. Rather, to quote Tender Buttons again: “The difference is spreading” (3).

Jamesian theater thus ceaselessly contends with dramatic and narrative norms, while Stein’s theater simply discards them. This difference typifies the authors’ respective senses of their own relation to literary tradition more broadly: “James was preoccupied with his predecessors and with himself as their terminal point, Stein with herself as successor and as originator of a new lineage” (Caramello 20). But the distinction also speaks to the sharply different facts of their respective theatrical careers. If James painfully came to renounce his long-held dream of being a prominent playwright (Edel 55, 108, 115), Stein’s biography shows something like the opposite trajectory: theatrical success at sixty, followed by twelve more years of work addressed to the stage. 36 So the logic that led us to explore James’s prose fiction as a kind of refuge for his renegade theatricality—which neither the institutional theater of his day nor his own dramatic standards could accommodate within playwriting—does not apply to Stein, who continues to insist that her pieces can actually “play.” As a theatrical reformer, she sought to provide for a radically new theater, one that would correspond to her singular experiences of some of the old. James, much more deeply invested than Stein in extant theater, maintains his theatricality as a negative relation to the dramatic: divergence and distraction, his various techniques of fracturing the narrative present. These techniques simulate the “stumbling” Stein sees as expendable, since her theater will simply eliminate the dramatic norm such divergence is from. 37 As Ryan remarks, “Ibsen did not exist for her” (1); dramaturgically speaking, neither did Aristotle. 38

In the empty space created by this full-scale eviction of precedent, Stein decides to construct “a play... exactly like a landscape” (“Plays” 75). Stein’s “landscape plays” are like nothing James would have recognized as theater, nor perhaps as literature—and yet they proceed from an intuition of theater as a differential space of riotous multiplicity, an intuition we can recognize as Jamesian. Included in Stein’s notion of landscape is the sense that these plays will provide their own context, establish their own terrain; unlike Strether’s paysage in The Ambassadors, these landscapes will not find themselves perforated by someone else’s “drama.” But this is because they perforate themselves: they are already structured as a network of

36 Accordingly, I find it hard to accept Ira Nadel’s contention that James and Stein had “parallel careers as playwrights” (84). While it is true that both authors’ plays were “difficult, obscure, undramatic in the traditional sense, [and thus] little appreciated or understood” (85), I don’t believe Stein experienced the same ravaging desire for and frustration with this “career” as James, a difference that manifests itself in their respective theatricalities.

37 In fact, Bersani’s account of Wilson also registers this mode of postdramatic theater: “we were constantly seeing things we hadn’t noticed before. And it can’t be said that these things distracted our attention, for there was nothing genuinely central from which our attention might be distracted” (Future 284). I don’t agree that distraction (dis-traction) always requires something “genuinely central,” but it might be said that where “distraction from” fails to apply, we are in the midst of Steinian, rather than Jamesian, theater.

38 At least until Stein took to well-made melodrama with Yes Is for a Very Young Man near the end of her life. In Yes, as Sarah Bay-Cheng writes, “Stein embraces unity of time, place, and action with nearly textbook-like devotion. Absent is her continuous present. Stage time is fixed and linear, without interruption or deviation” (102). As if to mitigate the disappointments of the piece, Bay-Cheng argues that Yes should be read together with the avant-garde The Mother Of Us All; as a diptych, the plays exhibit and even amplify “Stein’s divided sense of self” (98). As Bay-Cheng points out, Yes shows that Stein “clearly understood conventional dramatic form much better than has previously been acknowledged” (105), although one might question whether the “dramatic form” of the play is so masterful as to have required much subtle understanding (especially from a mind like Stein’s). Ryan examines Stein’s late turn to narrative, challenging the notion that a rigorously definable “narrative period” in Stein’s dramaturgy exists, but affirming that Stein “consciously used story only in her late plays” (65; see 55-66). The fact that Stein’s late plays began to approach dramatic norms does not, I think, invalidate the notion that Stein took up playwriting in a spirit of radical independence from those norms, which remained entirely optional for her in a way they never were for James. Bay-Cheng’s argument, throughout Mama Dada, that Stein needs to be situated amongst the theatrical and cinematic avant-garde of her day offers a historical context for Stein’s permission to abandon those norms.
incommensurabilities. We should not mistake Stein’s espousal of “untroubled” pleasure for a dismissal of negativity altogether. Rather, her plays must generate their own theatrical negativity internally, precisely because they no longer have a dramatic norm against which to react. A part of Stein’s job therefore consists in manifesting the negative, giving it the substance of a topographical feature. This occurs quite literally in the opening lines of Paisieu: A Play:

- Not Paisieu a play.
- Arbuthnot or hollowed is constant eggs and grasped.
- Failure in white clouds.
- Arbuthnot
- Geronimo (155)

The first line seems flatly to deny its own premises. But this cheekiness really manifests as a kind of showing-off: the play will be capacious enough to accommodate its own negation, which becomes a generative moment within it. Although the lines in Paisieu are not attributed to characters, I find it particularly rewarding to imagine this statement spoken by a performer, as if correcting the assumptions of an audience who, perhaps, hold programs emblazoned with the very referent being denied (and created). The question that would then arise is not just “then what is it?” but also “then where am I?”, a question to which we would at once know and not know the answer: we are in Stein’s landscape, a field that harbors incommensurable alternatives simultaneously. The second line enacts this tension through its translation of “or” into “and,” as well as through the outrageous zeugma of each pair of terms, held together only at great strain: “Arbuthnot or hollowed,” “constant eggs and grasped.” The play thus alerts us that its challenge will be to perceive radically different terms together. As Andrzej Wirth observes, Stein enacts a “splintering [Zersplitterung] of language, whose fragments (‘bits’) let themselves align with different constellations of meaning” (“Gertrude” 67). Her procedure will be, to use Stein’s own words, “a combination and not a contradiction” (“Plays” 58)—but despite the “eggs,” a combination that refuses to emulsify.

To support this kind of radical heterogeneity, the negative emerges as a phenomenon operative within the perceptual field, rather than as its limit: the “other parts” of Jamesian theater are, for Stein, already here. Accordingly, the first word—“Not”—becomes “Arbuthnot,” the name of a definite historical entity. John Arbuthnot was an eighteenth-century doctor and satirist, friendly with Jonathan Swift and Alexander Pope; but more important than this particular association, I think, is the sense Stein conveys of the “not” as a fundamentally mobile quantity, now negating phenomena and now filling them out. Things “are, but not”: the “not” is a modification, not a cancellation, of their being. “Arbuthnot” then becomes “Geronimo,” the improbable surname of the family whose members will become, if not the play’s characters, the subjects and objects of much of its language. Stein’s negative doesn’t erase the world, but populates it. We may start out with the expectation that these “nots” will yield to a “but…,” but by withholding the negative’s negative, Stein re-trains us to regard the “no” as a phenomenon in its own right, equal in status with the objects it negotiates. In the same way, “Failure” is no longer an attribute of something (“white clouds”) but manifests as an element “in” an arrangement, a compositional feature in itself. Negativity operates here not as binary opposition, nor even as dialectical negation, but as the ongoing parsing of specificities within a fundamentally accommodating field.

That the negative has a place within Stein’s theatrical world returns us to the question we encountered earlier: how should we understand Stein’s conviction that “The business of Art… is to live in the actual present, that is the complete actual present, and to completely express that
complete actual present” (“Plays” 65)? I have argued for a concept of the postdramatic as a mode of theater for which the present is not an ideal but a problem, a mode of theater that operates by negating its own actuality. Must we place Stein entirely outside this tradition? Marranca suggests as much when she claims that Stein’s “affirmation of life, untouched by modern and at times fashionable alienation, is a joyous modernism” (20). This kind of observation certainly speaks to a real affective difference between Stein and the other writers treated in this study. But as we have already begun to see, Stein’s difficult work effects an “alienation” of its own; and whatever “affirmation of life” she may evoke, I think the life of her language is far too various to support any totalizing affirmation or negation. There is thus no question of attacking the present, as in James. Nor is Stein’s negative theatricality a determinate negation of the actual, as we will see in the more obviously alienated Beckett; rather, hers is a fundamentally differential, ramifying movement, within a present too complex to brook totalizing rejection. And yet Stein’s landscape, like those of James and Beckett both, unfurls at the expense of any phenomenal immediacy. In fact, even in the above sentence about “The business of Art,” Stein’s words multiply in a manner that undermines the “complete actual present” to which they refer. Characteristically courting redundancy at every turn, this sentence produces a discursive present which is never “complete,” but submits to continual adjustment and elaboration. The nested emphases of the phrase “complete actual present,” as well as its repetition, promote a heightened sensitivity to each word’s distinctiveness, each time it occurs, while at the same time creating a system of echoes. This is language hard at work disabling any synthesizing moment of uptake. Its present is not the “complete,” absolute present of drama; rather, it is divided and provisional, constantly yielding to supplementary excavations.

Stein’s theater operates this way too. Her landscapes preempt the dramatic “so ist es” by investing every word with its own vector of movement: there can be no single surface of reception, no point at which to converge. Between Scene III and Scene IV of Paisieu’s first act, we find:

Scene in preciseness
Whole button come can couple with all division in antics of required lame and dew.
Germaine and her child.
Germaine and her child. (159)

Here again, Stein’s “preciseness” consists of acknowledging the difference made by increments of space and time. If it is not enough to say something once, this is because the stage is continually criss-crossed by micro-currents of difference, such that no moment’s content can be identical to the last. This is not, as many have claimed, a poetics of “stasis.” Rather, it is a theatrics for which the passage of time and the shifting disposition of space emphatically count. If one were to stage this passage, one might bring the lights up on a woman and a child, then dim them, then bring them up again; the audience would experience a tableau divided from itself (a “couple with all division”?). Repetition here is not an attempt to impose “synchronicity,” but a display of fundamental variation: “A matter of fact is that there is a blue sky of different colors. A blue sky of different colors” (Paisieu 159). Or again, on the next page: “It is the difference between very quickly and very quickly” (160).

It’s tempting, once again, to regard such lines as invitation to staging: just think of all the ways performance could produce “the difference between” two iterations of the same phrase. Certainly these lines instance the invitation to co-creation that so many have found in Stein: “Whatever you find” in her plays “depends on your own way of looking” (Marranca 7).

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39 For example, see Bowers (e.g. 26 and 62), Wirth, “Gertrude” (71), Puchner, Stage Fright (108), and Bay-Cheng (55).
Luise Schultz points out the specifically theatrical valence of the Steinian open text, which thus makes room for directors,’ designers’ and performers’ innovations: Stein wrote “in such a way that the performance on the stage could never be reduced to a three-dimensional illustration of the words on the page, but would have to develop its own compositional expression with theatrical means” (“Missing” 10). Far from being unstageable, that is, Stein’s texts are uniquely appropriate to theater as a collaborative medium. But the theatricality of these lines goes beyond their appeal to creative collaboration. Already on the page, they exhibit and promote a sense of language as spatially and/or temporally distributed: one “very quickly” is different from the other “very quickly” because there are two of them, that is, because they occupy different places on the page simultaneously, or because they occupy two distinct moments of writing or reading. To thus render the identity of a phrase numerically rather than qualitatively is to insist on the discrete phenomenal value of each appearance of that phrase. By emphatically occupying a particular position, each word exceeds the signification that makes it the same word wherever it is. Stein thus emphasizes the way words can take up space and time. “Stein treats her words as though they are material objects related to each other spatially, that is, visually on the page and sonorously in the air,” Bowers writes (26). The word becomes thing-like, in the sense Stein identifies elsewhere: “a thing that seems to be exactly the same thing may seem to be a repetition but is it” (Writings 103). As in the Jamesian parlor, these “things” arrange themselves to the consternation of any sublimating gaze.

If Stein’s theater text beckons collaborators’ innovation, then, it also demonstrates writing’s ability to stage itself—an effect that aligns it with the more formally conventional playwriting we’ll encounter in subsequent chapters. In Stein, the effect of self-staging occurs through the use of repetition, but also through her work with parts of speech—in particular, her refusal to let “little” words play a merely supporting role in the construction of sense. Prepositions and other inconspicuous terms swell with a newfound materiality:

Disuse of in between. (Paisieu 158)
To be called to be. (161)
Thanks for it as in by kept call. (162)

“To be called to be” is, we might say, the state of such words in Stein—and the state of the playscript in general. By summoning these words to positivity, Stein’s syntax simulates the theatrical vector that thrusts text into the actual. But it would be wrong to assume that the newly emphatic presence of words like “in,” “to,” and “by” corresponds to an ideal of absolute, immediate being—Ryan’s “purely present existence... directly and immediately perceived” (37). The positivity being foisted on these words is not something that “purely” or “directly” happens; instead, their new substantiality feels burdensome, like a mission the small words—or our imaginations—can’t quite discharge. Numerous readings of Stein bear witness to this difficulty, which often leads critics (I don’t exclude myself) to make “sense” of her works by bracketing the very words she wants us to notice. Thus, for instance, Pamela Hadas cites a passage from Two: Gertrude Stein and Her Brother that includes the sentence “This was the remainder of there were having been or being any martyr” and notes: “Leo [Stein] might easily have seen himself as a martyr” (66, my emphasis). The temptation of reference interferes with our perception of the very words Stein wants to make us see, words whose very impropriety should discourage us from trying to “get acquainted.” These words exist among the others without qualifying or

40 Ryan points out the influence of William James on Stein’s practice of “treating transitives as substantive parts of the sentence” (19). William James had written: “We ought to say a feeling of and, a feeling of if, a feeling of but, and a feeling of by, quite as readily as we say a feeling of blue or a feeling of cold” (qtd. in Ryan 19).
reducing them; they do not coalesce, via signification, into a unity.41 And this coexistence of terms in undecidable relation—in a relation that only yields determinate meaning at the cost of active exclusion or reduction—anticipates theater’s ability to dispose things (and people) in an unresolvable sensory multiplicity.

The (Dis-)continuous Present: *Four Saints in Three Acts*

The subtitle of *Paisieu* is *A Work of Pure Imagination in which No Reminiscences Intrude*. This description, like many passages throughout Stein’s writing, seems to announce an unquestioning dedication to the present; but as we have seen, Stein consistently troubles the very immediacy she announces. If “No Reminiscences Intrude” upon her theatrical landscape, this does not yield a dramatic “absolute present,” with spectator and spectacle plunged into the unity of the here-and-now. Rather, the play distributes itself through a structure of relays and echoes:

There are passes in a mountain and if a tree can be used they will put it where they are.
Leave where they went. Leaves are where they are where they went.
Leaves where they went. (176-7)

It is true that the utter unpredictability of this language, its freedom from narrative or discursive logics such as that of “reminiscence,” compel our attention to each moment of the text anew. But we risk mischaracterizing the particular consistency of these moments if we adopt the vocabulary of the “present” too quickly. Especially dangerous is Stein’s own term for her aesthetics: the famous “continuous present,” which she mentions repeatedly in the lecture “Composition as Explanation” (*Writings* 21-30). With this term, as with the subtitle of *Paisieu*, Stein espouses a refusal to ground language in the authority of what has been or will be. Only a sustained attention to the present in its uniqueness, she suggests, can ward off the reifying force of convention.42 By calling her present “continuous,” Stein emphasizes the ongoing dedication and perpetually renewed effort this project demands. And yet what determines the present, for her, is precisely the perceptual absence of continuity. As Wirth observes, Stein’s continuous present entails the “abandonment of the chronological linearity of succession and progression” (“Gertrude” 71). What is “continuous” about it is only that the singular moment *refuses* to situate itself among its precursors and successors. To experience presentness in this sense is exactly not to experience continuity.

Stein’s “continuous present,” in other words, is not only an experience of rupture, “a gap, where past and future… are momentarily unhooked” (Stewart 39). It is also a concept that redoubles this gap as the disjuncture between theory (the “continuous present” as a *term*) and creative or receptive practice (the experience to which the term refers), marking the discontinuous work off from the discourse that formalizes its procedure as “continuous.” This present, in other words, not only displays but perpetuates a constitutive disparity. This explains why Stein would forego the textual conventions of drama, which use recognizable conventions to imply the structure of a performance event: for her, the promise of each writerly choice lies in the way it doesn’t accord with a predictable structure, or extend a causal logic. The title of her 1927 play *Four Saints in Three Acts* gives a nod to dramatic convention, but it also conveys a sense of disjuncture: how will *four* saints fit into *three* acts, without something sticking out? As one scene heading puts it: “Could Four Acts be Three” (462)? Indeed, once the play gets under

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41 As Wirth observes, Stein’s playwriting “refuses any coherence based on traditional unities” (“Gertrude” 65).
42 For a sustained treatment of Stein’s concept of the present, see Stewart. Kate Davy provides a thoughtful examination of Stein’s “continuous present” in relation to the theater of Richard Foreman, which she presents as an extension of the landscape play.
way, we find Stein’s eccentric arithmetic operating directly in service of a triumphant discontinuity. As in many of her plays, Stein employs Acts and Scenes out of sequence, conveying her commitment to a language that determines its own procedures anew at every (dis)juncture. But Four Saints’ obsession with number goes beyond this characteristic Steinism. The phrase “How many” arises again and again, and—as has frequently been observed—seems to emerge as a question about the text’s own production:

Saint Therese. How many saints are there in it.
Saint Therese. There are very many many saints in it.
Saint Therese. There are as many saints as there are in it. (Four 458)
Saint Therese. How many windows and doors and floors are there in it. (463)
How many saints are there in it.
How many saints are there in it.
How many acts are there in it.
How many Acts are there in it.

... How many Acts are there in it.
Four Acts. (478)

These questions of number emphasize multiplicity, implying that the important determinations of textual production and reception are choices among infinite alternatives, rather than between binary options—and that these choices can be made anew at each moment: “It is very necessary to have arithmetic inestimably” (479). Defiantly inestimable, Stein’s numbers are not the sign of an inevitable succession. She treats the sequence of “natural numbers”—normally the privileged register of the a priori—as manipulable verbal material, their sensory qualities rising to prominence:

One two three all out but me.
One two three four all out but four
One two all about but you. (Ibid)

Number is de-idealized; we are asked to imagine it as equal among the other features of a verbal landscape, rather than as an a priori category that would structure a work in advance. “Scene VII” is thus followed by “Scene Eight” (458-460): numbering is an act of language that must be renewed each time with a conscious, discontinuous gesture. The implication, consonant with Stein’s model of radical independence from tradition (rather than perpetual rebellion against it), is that nothing need be taken for granted: we are free to reimagine not only the rules of grammar, but the grammar of experience itself. 43 Thus, for example, in Act I, “Scene IV” is followed by “Act Two,” “Scene One,” “Scene One,” and “Act One” before we reach “Scene V” (453-454); in Act II “Scene V” occurs nine times in a row, each time with a different content (456-7). Act I’s “Scene VIII” reads simply: “Saint Therese in time” (454). Time itself has become an empirical, malleable, topographical feature. 44 Stein refuses simply to mark time as it passes; rather, she posits time—like the negative—as a member of the perceptual field, subject to (and of) unpredictable divagations and specificities.

43 Stewart suggests throughout Gertrude Stein and the Present that Stein’s poetics imply the possibility of experiencing rare states of being. “The root experience which produced her most curiously vital and yet often unintelligible writing,” she proposes, “was a serious practice of meditation—and not merely meditation but, at times, genuine recollection” (53). For Stein, “meditation is more than reflection: it is an act of communion with the ongoing reality around her” (194). The relevant implication here is that Stein’s texts ask us not to assume that space and time must always work the same way—even, or perhaps especially, in the theater.
44 Bay-Cheng points out that in performance, the multiple Scene V’s could take place simultaneously (59). This would be an example of the ways Stein’s abandonment of linear time makes room, so to speak, for the spatial intervention of the stage.
Does this kind of usage deny the inherent temporal conditions of performance? Are these tricks that only “work” on the page? Certainly, if we assume “the spatial and temporal continuity of the theater” (Puchner, *Stage 110*); but again, this is precisely the assumption Stein’s insights consistently unsettle. As “Plays” makes clear, dramatic conventions don’t always succeed in organizing our theatrical experience as a seamless passage of time. This means that, for instance, the familiar sequence of Act I, Act II, Act III may itself turn out to be “unstageable,” since it implies a linear continuity that the heterogeneity of theatrical space, and our perceptual existence in relation to it, can always subvert. We should not, therefore, simply dismiss the possibility of staging the kind of event Stein’s texts demand, or assume that such passages are being pragmatically “transformed” when we adapt them for performance. Rather, we need to take these features seriously as reminders that theatrical production *can’t count on* the continuity for which dramatic structure aims. No longer assumed to be the constant vector that sublimates spatial heterogeneity into meaning, time fissures into a multiplicity of its own.

If in *The Ambassadors* Strether’s countryside landscape explodes its own pictorial integrity through the movement of the “others” it has harbored, Stein’s landscapes never present themselves as integral in the first place: discontinuity is the principle of their formation. “I felt that if a play was exactly like a landscape then there would be no difficulty about the emotion of the person looking on at the play being behind or ahead of the play,” she writes in “Plays,” “because the landscape does not have to make acquaintance. You may have to make acquaintance with it, but it does not with you, it is there…” (75). Stein is not claiming that the landscape play is immediately and entirely accessible, simply “there” for us in a rapturous continuity of life and art once the interference of the fourth wall has been removed. Rather, she acknowledges in landscape an asymmetry between subject and spectacle, through the latter’s carefully cultivated independence: “it” does not have to return your attentions. The following lines from *Four Saints* seem to imitate this configuration:

A pleasure April fool’s day a pleasure.
Saint Therese seated.
Not April fool’s day a pleasure.
Saint Therese seated.
Not April fool’s day a pleasure.
Saint Therese seated. (*Four 445*)

The first, third, and fifth lines above pursue a train of thought with which “Saint Therese seated,” in its impassive repetition, seems utterly unconcerned. Stein thus celebrates the way a composition can abide, impervious, while the mind busies itself in rumination. “What is the difference between a picture and pictured,” says the text a few pages later (452); that difference, which had caused such a disturbance in Stein’s early theatergoing experience, has now become the very terrain of her theatrical landscaping. The dramatic work entices us with the promise of emotional confluence, then fails to accommodate—has no space for—our perceptual idiosyncrasy, as the curtain itself seems tacitly to admit. The landscape, however, doesn’t dog us with the offer of “acquaintance,” of mutual recognition, of fellow-feeling, then punish us when our singular perceptual apparatus shifts us out of line. Instead, it opens out into expanded possibilities of relation between essentially discontinuous elements—elements among which we can therefore place ourselves. “[T]he landscape not moving but being always in relation, the trees to the hills the hills to the fields the trees to each other any piece of it to any sky and then any detail to any other detail…” Stein writes in “Plays” (77): the sky itself, no longer an all-encircling dome guaranteeing unity (and symbolizing the “unities”), becomes subject to
differentiation as its relational possibilities multiply. $^{45}$ Similarly, Strether’s heightened awareness of a shifting “engagement with others” is what makes his landscape theatrical, makes him perceive it as theater “at bottom.” In Stein as in James, landscape becomes theater when we perceive it, not as the continuous extension of life as we (already) know it, but as a system of relations with others, relations built on constitutive disparities that keep space and significance open.

Saint Therese and Saint Therese and Saint Therese.
Many saints as seen and in between as many saints as seen.
Saint Therese and sound. (448)
[...]
Saint Therese can know the difference between singing and women. Saint Therese can know the difference between snow and thirds. Saint Therese can know the difference between when there is a day to-day to-day. To-day. (453)

Just as Saint Therese appears multiply divided from herself, so the saints “as seen” seem to harbor a fleet of others “between” them, in a multifarious agglomeration of what we see and what we don’t. “Saint Therese and sound” recommends precisely the kind of theatrical attention that will appreciate irreducibly different media (the corporeal, the aural) without synthesizing them: like the saint, we “can know the difference between” these features of experience by entertaining them, strangely, together. And as the end of the second passage above reminds us, “the difference between” can always insert itself where no two things were evident. In fact, this “difference” can wedge itself into the very consistency of the present: the fact that “there is a day to-day.” Stein’s usage even seems to delight in the standard hyphen that keeps “to-day” in pieces.

The landscape play’s perpetual inscription of discrepancies between “any detail” and “any other detail” thus extends to the theatrical present itself. Finally, Stein’s present bears no resemblance to the absolute present of drama; her plays grasp and magnify the heterogeneity that dramatic narrative tries to reduce. Because these pieces look more like Stein’s other experimental texts than like plays as we usually encounter them, many readers have concluded that Stein was uninterested in, or even downright hostile towards, the particularity of the theater medium. It is true that Paisieu is no more a drama than Tender Buttons; but to forsake drama is not necessarily to reject the theatrical itself. Far from eviscerating theater of its medial specificity, Stein’s insistence that “anything that was not a story could be a play” demonstrates her rigorously expansive approach to theater. This far-flung definition indicates not a lack of interest in the properly theatrical, but a desire to destabilize that “properly”—and in particular, to leave its dramatic investments in continuity, unity, and immediacy far behind. Nor can it be maintained that Stein’s postdramatic theatricality exists only in hindsight: James, her avowed “forerunner,” had set a precedent for her landscapes in the disruptive, dispersive spaces of his own scenic poetics.

These readings have tried to show how two modernist writers, whose uncompromising literariness has sometimes seemed to thrive on a rejection of the theatrical, were in fact using writing to pursue and proliferate the theater they loved—a theater whose manifold elements perpetually retreat from, and interfere with, drama’s totalizing display. The shift to postdramatic theater plays out within the formal structures of their texts. Once we recognize this dynamic, it

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$^{45}$ Citing this passage, Fuchs writes that in the Steinian tradition of landscape theater, “structures are arranged not on lines of conflict and resolution but on multiervalent spatial relationships” (Death 106-7).
becomes difficult to maintain that “the new theater” must belong to the stage as distinct from the page. In James and Stein, writing enacts specifically theatrical evasions, subversions, and ruptures of its own. This theatrical capacity still inspires today’s writers; and it helps solve the otherwise baffling riddle of the contemporary playwright, who perversely chooses to approach theater’s “eventful present” through the medium of text. The last two chapters of this dissertation will explore the work of two contemporary playwrights who, though much closer than Stein to traditional forms of playwriting, nonetheless extend her emphasis on theater as a radically differential medium. These writers pursue Stein’s intuition that “there is something much more exciting than anything that happens” (Writings 113), an excitement whose theatrical ramifications we have also traced in James. And indeed, like James, Suzan-Lori Parks and Mac Wellman maintain pleasurably violent relations with the dramatic norm; for them, the moment when Stein’s theater could imagine itself thoroughly “untroubled” by drama’s ideals belongs to a different modernism.

In between Stein’s landscape plays and the landscape of contemporary playwriting, however, there arises another kind of textual scene: “A country road. A tree. / Evening.” In Samuel Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, the very idea of landscape will come to feel laughably insufficient to the horror at hand: “You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms!” (207). Beckett’s foreclosure of landscape corresponds to a theatrical attitude towards the present that differs, once again, from either James’s or Stein’s. In Beckett, the absolute present of drama reasserts itself with a vengeance; the reification of “how it is” becomes a compositional obsession. Determined to exacerbate the text’s complicity with the here-and-now of performance, however, Beckett thereby inscribes a rigorously utopian movement, which transcends actuality through the very determination to manifest it. Before passing on to the postdramatic playwrights of our era, we need to spend some time on the well-worn terrain of Godot and its vexing relationship to the actual. For Beckett’s theater there is no longer “a blue sky of different colors” (Stein, Paisieu 159); there is only a sky “like any sky at this hour of the day” (Beckett, Waiting 121). This is a theater for which the heterogeneity of the stage no longer promises difference, or rupture. The prospect is bleak; but as we will see, in turning to meet the terrible continuity of “this hour,” Beckett will draw postdramatic writing into the breathtaking stringency of a negative dialectic.
Chapter Three

“Gesture towards the universe”: Theater as Utopia in *Waiting for Godot*

Life at the time was too demanding, too terrible, and I thought theater would be a diversion. (Samuel Beckett, qtd. in Bair 361)

No other writing so steeps us in total aversion from whatever the present immediacy may be: absorption, possession, by a time and place cloudily remembered, elsewhere, nowhere. (Hugh Kenner, *Samuel Beckett: A Critical Study*, 21)

... what is wants the other: the artwork is the language of this wanting. (Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 132)

Few scholars have taken Beckett’s well-known statement that his early playwriting was “a diversion” as a cue not to treat his plays seriously.¹ On the contrary, these texts have received an overwhelming amount of scholarly attention throughout the last six decades—to the point where any attempt to revisit them critically must be haunted by a slight sense of the gratuitous. This chapter will nevertheless focus on one of the most tirelessly worked pieces from this oeuvre: the smash-hit, era-defining *Waiting for Godot*. This is not only, I hope, evidence of my having been infected with that “gratuitousness provoking acts without use or profit” which Artaud offers as a definition of theater (*Theater* 24)—a notion by no means alien to the piece in question. Rather, I focus on *Godot* because its very ubiquity has made it a text that rings in our collective theatrical ears and in those of the contemporary playwrights I discuss in the following chapters. Mac Wellman and Suzan-Lori Parks belong to a trajectory for which *Godot* is a decisive moment; while these writers were Beckett’s contemporaries when he died in 1989, they have also been the inheritors of his early work, and I want to be able to chart this inheritance.

*Waiting for Godot* constitutes a crucial step in the development of postdramatic theater. In Chapter One, drawing on a range of theorists, I described the postdramatic as a mode for which theater’s heightened implication in the actual—which drama fundamentally affirms—has become a problem. I also argued that this theatrical problem lends itself to textual exploration, whereby it also becomes a problem of writing. In the previous chapter, we saw two writers embark on this exploration. For both James and Stein, theater harbors the potential to diffract drama’s “absolute present” (Szondi), dismantling the narrative continuity that functions as that present’s delivery system. James thus devises a prose fiction that subjects “dramatic” narrative to the ongoing interference of theater’s “other parts”; Stein writes plays for a theater without narrative, a theater whose present is unrecognizably dispersed into differential spatial and temporal relations. For both writers, drama’s reifying affirmation of the present—in Brecht’s words, drama’s “*so ist es*”—is thus overcome by structures of alterity, structures they find within theater itself.

James and Stein, that is, both discern a theater where what goes on here, now, before our eyes is only a slender part of the entire experience. In Beckett, by contrast, that here-and-now becomes total: his theater insists that there are no “other parts” anywhere. We thus encounter something like the furious return of the dramatic present: an actuality that asserts itself as such more explicitly, and tyrannically, than ever before. This tendency has not passed unnoticed, and

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¹ Beckett gives a similar account in his interview with Colin Duckworth (Duckworth 17).
from its earliest moments, the critical discourse on Beckett’s theater has invoked “presence” and “the present” as key terms. While this orientation has drawn poststructuralist critique, deconstructive insights have ultimately been absorbed into an ongoing conversation that continues to place the issue of actuality at the heart of Beckett’s theater. Theorists such as Herbert Blau, Bert O. States, and Stanton Garner have all identified a complex dynamic of presence and absence, here and elsewhere, as central to Beckett’s plays. In this chapter, I propose to step back from these critics’ phenomenological and poststructuralist vocabularies. Instead, I suggest that the dynamic they describe in Beckett might be most usefully understood as utopian, in the negative sense briefly introduced in Chapter One. This concept will enable us to see how Beckett’s emphatic staging of the actual, while enormously different from the techniques of dispersion we observed in James and Stein, winds up exceeding its own present just as forcefully. Through utopian procedure, what looks like a return to drama’s “so ist es” becomes, instead, a postdramatic negation of what is.

The word “utopian” summons a host of associations, only some of which I want to activate here. For example, in Utopia in Performance (2005), Jill Dolan argues compellingly that “in the theater, we can encounter our inarticulate longings toward a future that… might still remain mute, but can on some deeper level be felt” (164). The utopia of Beckett’s theater does operate in this way; but I do not believe a sense of utopia that implies “a hopeful feeling” (Dolan 5, Cf. 13) can account for Beckett’s emphatically, indeed pleasurably hopeless works. Still less do I mean to invoke the kind of utopianism associated with Thomas More or Plato’s Republic: engagement in conceiving of a perfect society. Such associations go violently against the grain of Beckett’s entire sensibility, and while teasing them out of his texts might be a fascinating exercise in devil’s-advocacy, I will be deriving my concept of Beckett’s utopianism from a theorist whose work this dissertation has already engaged at length: Theodor Adorno.

In itself, reading Beckett through Adorno is no novel move. For half a century, Beckett scholarship has had recourse to Adorno’s 1961 essay “Trying to Understand Endgame,” which has become a classic source on the representational and political logic of Beckett’s text. More broadly, readers of critical theory are well aware that Beckett is something of a golden child amidst Adorno’s theorization of modernist negativity; when one finds oneself athwart the dizzying dialectics of Adorno’s critique, a reference to Beckett is a sure sign that something is being approved of. But Adorno is rarely read for his theory of theater, and even the Endgame essay rarely receives sustained attention from writers focusing on Beckett’s theatrical exploration. This is an oversight, since Adorno’s aesthetic theory profoundly illuminates Beckett’s theatrical sensibility, and even Beckett’s turn to the theater as a medium. I propose to reframe the actuality of Beckett’s theater through Adorno’s concept of utopia as “the determined negation of that which merely is” (Bloch and Adorno 12); in this way we can begin to see how “the present” names, for Beckett as for the writers who follow him, not just an ontological or phenomenological category that theater puts into play, but an ethical and affective crisis that theater must face.

A utopian reading also brings into relief the special significance that text acquires within Beckett’s theater. For James and Stein, again, theater’s spatial and temporal dimensions harbor an alterity that undermines the unifying present of its “happening”; theatrical writing is language that registers and simulates this experience, whether or not it also literally provides for the stage. In Beckett, by contrast, the space and time of theater have coalesced into the unrelenting identity of a single place, a single moment. Deeply entrenched within this field, writing nevertheless

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See Blau’s Sails of the Herring Fleet, especially 115-6; and discussions of States and Garner below.
becomes the sole custodian of negativity; theater, we might say, comes to operate as a utopia of writing. To trace this logic is in a certain way to take Beckett at his word about playwriting being a “diversion”—but in the literal or topographical sense. How might the writing of his theater, in its very saturation with what Beckett calls “Life at the time,” have established a utopian path away from that “terrible” present?

Because utopia develops as a quite specific problematic in Adorno’s work, I begin by reviewing his concept below. While my treatment is necessarily brief, I hope it will ground my continued use of the term throughout the chapter. I then launch into a discussion of moments in Godot that establish a utopian dialectic between the actuality of performance and the virtuality of an unstaged script, considering the play’s remarkable relation to drama’s “absolute present.” But Godot by no means rigidly opposes a subversive text to a conservative scene; accordingly, in the next section, I examine the ways in which the play explores writing as thoroughly implicated in a tyrannical present. Following this, I examine the way a utopian logic develops out of this agonized complicity, whereby theater becomes a site of attendance in a double sense: as in English, a site of heightened presence; but also, as in the French “en attendant,” a site of waiting, indeed longing, for what the present fails to comprehend. Finally, I end by considering the immediate legacy of Godot’s theatrical discoveries, and particularly its use of monologue, in Beckett’s 1949 novel The Unnamable. The last section thus acts as a kind of coda to the first chapters of this dissertation, picking up one last time on the question of how a text not recognizably structured for theatrical performance might nonetheless be shaped by problems of theatrical performance. While subsequent chapters will focus more resolutely on postdramatic playwriting, I hope this brief reading of The Unnamable will signal an alternative, subterranean path for theatrical writing through the experimental fiction of the mid-20th century—and beyond.

Adorno’s insistently negative concept of utopia adheres literally to the word’s etymology: u-topia as no-place. He adapted this concept from Ernst Bloch, a philosopher he greatly admired; in a conversation between them in 1964, Bloch identifies the negativity of utopia as their common ground. “I believe, Teddy,” he says, “that we are certainly in agreement here: that the essential function of utopia is a critique of what is present” (Bloch and Adorno 12). And indeed, Adorno consistently elaborates the term “utopia” in terms of the negative relation between the concrete reality of suffering and an unnamable, unspecifiable alterity which could replace—and which we know precisely as difference from—the present. Utopia’s “inextinguishable colour comes from non-being,” he writes (Lectures 210); utopia develops as a longing in the face of what the real fails to be. Max Blechman observes that for Adorno, “the morally necessary negation that brings the untruth of existing totality to the light of day, that reveals the whole as not yet what it should be, itself implies a critical knowledge of the whole—a knowledge that rests on an inkling of the whole that is yet to be” (181). “Utopia,” that is, while irreducibly negative, always exceeds its own negativity. Its “not this!” always articulates the possibility of a different world, although it is only the possibility, and not the different world itself, that gets

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3 Max Blechman, who argues that the idea of utopia is fundamental to Adorno’s negative dialectics, also argues for the crucial influence of Bloch’s thought here: “Adorno’s ‘utopian particular’ is none other than Bloch’s ‘deepest utopian part of the consciousness’—in every instance, the consciousness that the purported identity of the universal is ‘perpetuating nonidentity in suppressed and damaged form’” (189). For Adorno’s own powerful account of Bloch’s importance, see “The Handle, the Pot, and Early Experience,” where Adorno writes: “Bloch teaches persistence in the face of what is unfamiliar and unknown, yet known... This secret would be the opposite of something that has always been and will always be, the opposite of invariance: something that would finally be different” (219).
articulated. In an article on the concept of utopia in Frankfurt School thought, Adriana S. Benzaquén explains:

a future that is expected to be different (utopian, reconciled) cannot be described with categories taken from the present. No present categories would be adequate to describe the radically different future, if it is to be radically different... Negative thinking criticizes the existent as that which can and should change, and in so doing it marks the space of an absence. That absence, however, is not to be filled with images or given a positive content; it is to remain as absence, as possibility. (150-1)

This restriction applies to critical thought, but also—as Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory continually makes clear—to art. Adorno offers Romeo and Juliet as an example of how aesthetic utopia operates:

Shakespeare was not promoting love without familial guardianship; but without the longing for a situation in which love would no longer be mutilated and condemned by patriarchal or any other powers, the presence of the two lost in one another would not have the sweetness—the wordless, imageless utopia—over which, to this day, the centuries have been powerless; the taboo that prohibits knowledge of any positive utopia also reigns over artworks. (Aesthetic 247)

Waiting for Godot might seem like a far cry from Shakespeare’s tragedy; but for Adorno, Beckett represents with sharp legibility the modern moment of the same “taboo.” Now, though, even the “sweetness” of lost love has become suspect: contemporary art has reached a new level of ferocity in the refusal to represent happiness. This ferocity comes, in part, from the modernist rejection of any fictive imitation, a loss of relish for “the presentation of the nonempirical as if it were empirical” (19). In a world whose reality is experienced as crushing, art no longer wants to render this kind of homage, as it were, to the real: “New art is so burdened by the weight of the empirical that its pleasure in fiction lapses” (Ibid). Moreover, the emphasis on concrete detail, on the object’s quiddity, that had characterized realism would now constitute a false report, since real concreteness, the quality of particularity that escapes the dominance of a general system, has all but disappeared from the world. “The concrete serves for nothing better than that something, by being in some way distinct, can be identified, possessed, and sold,” Adorno writes; “The marrow of experience has been sucked out,” and a work of rich fictional representation would implicitly be claiming otherwise, thus participating in the charade of “pseudoconcreteness” (31; see also “Trying” 123-9). In order to avoid this complicity, “New art is as abstract as social relations have in truth become” (Aesthetic 31).

This situation pulls the artwork, with increasing urgency, in two opposite directions. On the one hand, reality’s bleakness demands, ever more sharply, that the work produce an alternative: “art must be and wants to be utopia, and the more utopia is blocked by the real functional order, the more this is true” (32). And yet to make a utopia, even fictively, would be to induct it into the “administered world” in which it could only operate as a ruse: thus “art may not be utopia in order not to betray it by providing semblance and consolation” (Ibid). Art therefore has to nurture utopian desire without attempting to concretize that for which it longs, warding off any such representation with new levels of vehemence. As Fredric Jameson argues, utopian writing “recovers its vocation” as “the answer to the universal ideological conviction that no alternative is possible, that there is no alternative to the system… by forcing us to think the break itself, and not by offering a more traditional picture of what things would be like after the break”
(Archaeologies 231-2).\textsuperscript{4} Or as Adorno himself writes: “Through the irreconcilable renunciation of the semblance of reconciliation, art holds fast to the promise of reconciliation in the midst of the unreconciled” (Aesthetic 33).

Adorno also continually emphasizes, however, that the utopia of art (or of theory) is constituted through, and intrinsically depends upon, the very reality it negates. Its negation is determinate negation (bestimmte Negation, sometimes translated as “determined negation”), a concept Adorno takes directly from Hegel. In Phenomenology of Spirit, Hegel introduces this concept during his discussion of skepticism, the moment when the mind comes to doubt its own conscious experience. This doubt, which says no to “phenomenal consciousness,” can either be a dead end or a generative movement, depending on which kind of negation this is: abstract or determinate. The former “only ever sees pure nothingness in its result and abstracts from the fact that this nothingness is specifically the nothingness of that from which it results. For it is only when it is taken as the result of that from which it emerges, that it is, in fact, the true result; in that case it is itself a determinate nothingness, one which has a content” (Hegel 50-51). Abstract negation, that is, detaches itself from what it negates (here, conscious experience) and thereby becomes the position of a generalized no. “But when, on the other hand, the result is conceived as it is in truth, namely, as a determinate negation, a new form has thereby arisen” (51): a thought that is dialectically of that which it negates, and from which neither the negation nor the negated can be eliminated. When Adorno says that “utopia is essentially in the determined negation, in the determined negation of that which merely is” (Bloch and Adorno 12), he thus emphasizes that utopia is never entirely detached from the present reality; on the contrary, the present reality remains utopia’s “content,” to use Hegel’s term, alongside that reality’s negation. Utopia, then, is not simply nowhere, or elsewhere; its “u-” is saturated with its actual topos, the site that it rejects. This is true of the utopian artwork as well; ultimately, the term “realism” can be rehabilitated as denoting this dialectical relationship between the real and the work that negates it. Beckett exemplifies this modern aesthetic: his “shabby, damaged world of images,” Adorno writes, “is the negative imprint of the administered world. To this extent Beckett is realistic” (Aesthetic 31). Beckett registers the present in recoiling from it, and this preserves the longing for something else through its very refusal to make the “something else” manifest.

To read Beckett’s work as utopian, as I do here, is thus hardly a daring departure—even if that word’s persistently positive undertones continue to create a certain dissonance. What will be somewhat unorthodox, however, is associating Adorno’s utopia with Beckett’s sense of theater—and through Beckett, with possibilities of the theater medium as such. While readings of Beckett within theater studies often briefly cite the Endgame essay, they rarely engage Adorno in depth when considering Beckett’s specifically theatrical dimensions.\textsuperscript{5} Nor is this lack of deep engagement surprising: as noted in the Introduction, Adorno appears in Anglophone theater studies more often as an antagonist than as a resource. When Benjamin Bennett dismissively

\textsuperscript{4} Throughout Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions” (2005), Jameson focuses mostly on works that do offer positive visions of utopia; but he repeatedly emphasizes the negative function of even these works (see e.g. 12, 175, 230-2). He also offers a brief but fascinating reading of Adorno’s concept of utopia as “the falling away of the ‘instinct’ of self-preservation” in which “some altogether unrecognizable ‘human nature’ would take the place of this one,” pointing out that for all the negativity of Adorno’s utopianism, it still—like any utopia—“vehiculates the most complexly historical themes and undertones” (172-5). I discuss this situatedness of utopia in the following paragraph.

\textsuperscript{5} Jonathan Kalb is an exception; his argument against historically specific stagings of Beckett’s plays (particularly JoAnne Akalaitis’s famous 1984 production at A.R.T.) builds on Adorno’s remarks about “the horror of historical anonymity” in Endgame (Kalb 80-82, 91-93). This argument is part of Kalb’s larger argument that Beckett’s playwriting already includes, and therefore to some degree pre-empted, the traditional domain of the director—a position that, like his engagement of Adorno, reads as rather anomalous within the context of theater studies.
declares in *All Theater is Revolutionary Theater* that “For Adorno, Beckett is mainly an excuse to make pronouncements about the postwar age” (235, n. 13), he voices an extreme version of this antagonism. For Martin Puchner, who acknowledges that Adorno could not be counted “in any simple sense [among] ‘enemies’ of the theater” (*Stage* 40), Adorno is nevertheless a key figure of modernist anti-theatricality; accordingly, Adorno’s admiration of Beckett’s “negative representation” in the *Endgame* essay becomes an index, for Puchner, of Beckett’s own “anti-theatrical strategies” (170).

It is true that, amidst Adorno’s abundant remarks on Beckett, there is scant evidence of any interest in seeing (or imagining) the plays performed. I believe, however, that Adorno’s concept of utopia is poised to comprehend Beckett’s theatrical innovation. Beckett’s plays do not only exemplify the utopian nature of art; they describe it and render it legible as *a theatrical operation*. For Beckett, that is, utopia emerges when writing attends to the prospect of performance: when text conceives of itself as enacted in the real.

“*What is there to recognize?*: *Godot* and the Dramatic Present

At the beginning of *Waiting for Godot*, the two tramps reunited, Vladimir asks Estragon where he has spent the night:

ESTRAGON: In a ditch.

VLADIMIR: [admiringly] A ditch! Where?

ESTRAGON: [without gesture] Over there. (11)

With these lines, Beckett introduces a problematic of performance that he will continue to develop: the deeply vexed relationship between language and place. Anna McMullan has observed that Beckett’s work always “foregrounds the tension between text and stage” (137); in *Godot*, the conventional fact that a play is both written and staged becomes an opportunity to test the utopian force of writing amidst a heightened actuality. The first episode of this endeavor consists in a little act of omission which elegantly throws the whole scene, for a moment, out of joint: the fact that Estragon’s “Over there” is “without gesture.” Deprived of a referent, the utterance fails; as if unable to find semantic nourishment in the world, Estragon’s words are simply wasted. The play thus announces its power to separate the verbal from the physical, and thereby also desire from pursuit, the impulse of utterance from any space where utterance would go into effect. This moment is, of course, just one more instance of Beckett’s famous aesthetic of failure. 6 But Beckett discovers here that theater can provide for that aesthetic in a very particular way: by invoking its physical reality as wrong for its words.

Commenting on this passage, Puchner points out that it “introduces a rupture between words and gestures that becomes increasingly central for [Beckett’s] plays” (*Stage* 159). Puchner contends that this rupture should be understood as “one of the strategies with which Beckett

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6 “[T]o be an artist is to fail, as no other dare fail,” Beckett writes famously in his “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit” (1949); “… failure is his world and the shrink from it desertion” (126). Also frequently cited is his comparison of himself to James Joyce in a 1956 interview: “The more Joyce knew the more he could. He’s tending toward omniscience and omnipotence as an artist. I’m working with impotence, ignorance… I think anyone nowadays who pays the slightest attention to his own experience finds it the experience of a non-knower, a non-can-er. The other type of artist—the Apollonian—is absolutely foreign to me” (qtd. in Kalb 99). Practically all substantive Beckett criticism considers his espousal of failure; one of the most sustained and thoughtful engagements is found in *Arts of Impoverishment* by Leo Bersani and Ulysse Dutoit, in which the authors argue that most prior readings consider Beckett’s representation of failure rather than his project of failing to represent, or express, at all (12-14). See also Bersani’s essay “Beckett and the End of Literature,” Wolfgang Iser’s “The Art of Failure: The Stifled Laugh in Beckett’s Theater,” and Peggy Phelan’s “Samuel Beckett: Lessons in Blindness.”
attacks the integrity of the actor” (Ibid). It is certainly true that Beckett’s performers are made to disintegrate, and go on disintegrating throughout his oeuvre; but the particular content of the line in question suggests an operation whose scope is broader than the person of a single performer: it is not just Estragon, or the actor playing him, who is made to fail here, but the entire relation between the play’s language and the concrete terrain on which it occurs. Adapting Stein’s famous witticism, we might say that there is a “there,” but it isn’t there. With this direction, Beckett seems to sabotage the staging of his language. The trajectory that should lead from script to production is anticipated, and stalled. The concatenation of body and space proves inadequate to the language that should inhabit it, so that language seems to hover, awaiting emplacement. It is as if the realization of these words, their distribution through a field of bodies, had not quite happened yet. Within the concrete space of performance, then, Estragon’s line simulates the still-unstaged script. In this moment, the play works backwards; the words resist incorporation into the performance event, as if to deny themselves the means of production. Puchner is right when he observes that Beckett “recreates on the stage the experience of reading a dramatic text” (Stage 168). And yet the negativity of such an experience is only possible given the prospect of performance: only in the course of a theatrical event produced live, here and now, can the play constitute “the experience of reading” as an experience of refusing the actual. Arrayed on the page, these words direct us to imagine their performance; uttered on a stage, imagined or real, they declare their independence from that scene, even or especially where this comportment means they are words wasted.

This line introduces a principle that will be crucial for the play, ultimately accounting for its most famous pairing of spoken and unspoken words: “Yes, let’s go. / They do not move,” the lines that end both acts (187, 357). Meeting with actors for the London premiere in 1955, Beckett suggested the technique of “contrapuntal immobility”: the strict separation of speech from movement throughout, which the last line’s devastating yoking of announced movement to actual stillness would presumably crown (McMillan and Fehsenfeld 82). The humanist content of this refrain is hard to resist; Beckett had taken the title of an earlier, unfinished play from Samuel Johnson’s poem “The Vanity of Human Wishes,” and it would be difficult to deny that Godot is equally “about” our inability to enact our own projects—to produce our own plays, as it were. But if the technique of isolating speech from movement seems to find its thematic justification in a fundamental sense of impotency, this also works in the other direction: Beckett’s despair here comes to see itself as a specifically theatrical possibility. Not only does theater turn out to be an appropriate medium for Beckett’s exploration of failure, hypocrisy, incommensurability and so on; but the exploration itself is revealed as a problematic that belongs to theater, insofar as theater forces the issue of the relationship between writing and place.

Estragon’s motionless “Over there” briefly but decisively throws the situated nature of performance into crisis. On the one hand, there is a momentary lapse of the speaker’s power to claim any spatial context (of his “there” to mean anything); we seem to witness a fantasy of shedding emplacement as such along with the requirements of interpersonal communication. In

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7 Puchner interprets Beckett’s “attack” on the actor’s integrity as an attack on the theater medium itself. My objection to this interpretation runs parallels my objection in the previous chapter to Puchner’s reading of Stein: just as Stein’s theater is only “anti-theatrical” if one assumes that theater is fundamentally an experience of spatial and temporal continuity, Beckett’s rendering of the actor could only be an assault upon theatricality as such if theater depended, at some baseline level, on an experience of the actor’s wholeness or complete mimetic efficacy—an assumption I would dispute. To pursue this argument, however, would take us further afield from Beckett’s own writing than I propose to go.

8 The play, which was about Dr. Johnson’s last years and his love for his younger friend Mrs. Thrale, would have been entitled simply Human Wishes. For discussions of this early project in relation to Beckett’s completed plays, see McMillan and Fehsenfeld 25-29, and Ruby Cohn, Just Play 143-162.
this antisocial instant, breaking with the rules of good conversation, the play madly behaves as if its language could separate itself from the fact of our being here, now, together. On the other hand, however, the refusal to indicate simultaneously suggests an opposite awareness: a sense that such specification would be false, because there is no “over there,” no place else to point to. In this sense, it is as if the shared here-and-now had monstrously swollen, occluding the possibility of any other referent: as if, as Beckett will write in The Unnamable, “there are not two places” (Three 403), so that here is all the there we get. Writing thus becomes a foil for the present and the presence of performance, but not in the sense that actuality is decisively foiled, fractured or obscured. Rather, the shared here-and-now becomes more palpable than ever in the face of a language that, as it were, dies trying to escape it. This moment, in short, is both a flight from the present and an affirmation of the present’s overweening power.

This complex engagement with the present has long been registered by the critical discourse on Beckett’s theater. In the influential 1957 essay “Samuel Beckett, or presence on the stage,” published in For a New Novel, Alain Robbe-Grillet describes Godot’s innovation as the fact that its characters’ “situation is summed up in this simple observation, beyond which it does not seem possible to advance: they are there, they are on the stage” (115). Robbe-Grillet ends the piece, however, with a remarkable twist, declaring that absence, “the common fate of all Beckett’s characters,” ultimately overtakes the plays too: “The stage, privileged site of presence, has not resisted the contagion for long.... No one was ever there” (125). While scholars have continued to cite this essay throughout the ensuing half-century, they have tended not to discuss the twist at the end; Robbe-Grillet thus becomes the founding figure for an ongoing discourse that has (rightly, if sometimes one-sidedly) treated Beckett’s theater as emphatically present.

These readings have been challenged, in the wake of deconstruction, by scholars like Steven Connor. Drawing on Derrida’s critique of Artaud, Connor criticizes the “live” theater/“dead” writing binary that, he argues, underlies the claim that Beckett’s stage is a “theatre of presence” (115-118). Connor argues that Beckett’s own work consistently undermines this metaphysical logic; in Krapp’s Last Tape, for example, “the theatre has been transformed from a place of being to a place of writing” (131). In turn, theater phenomenologist Stanton Garner contends that such textualist readings fail to grasp Beckett’s concern with embodiment, the way he “foregrounds the corporeality of actor and character within his stage’s exacting field” (28).

Garner proposes to combine poststructuralist insights with phenomenological sensitivity in order to trace the way “theatrical language [is] language caught up in a play of bodiedness and disembodiedness, presence and absence, self and nonself” (124)—a “play” he sees exemplified in Beckett. While both Connor and Garner are critical of readings that “ignore the problematic status” of presence in Beckett’s work (Garner 29), neither mentions the problematic, sharply paradoxical end of Robbe-Grillet’s essay. But I think Robbe-Grillet’s coup de théâtre hints at a relationship between presence and its other which is captured neither by the deconstructive supersession Connor envisions (“from a place of being to a place of writing”) nor by the phenomenology of “oscillation” or “always also” that Garner identifies (85, 39). The paradox of Robbe-Grillet’s essay suggests that Beckett’s theater transcends its own presentness precisely by immersing itself in the present; this is not oscillation, but dialectical reversal. To talk about the presence of Beckett’s theater, then, is not necessarily to embrace—or to claim that Beckett

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9 Critics who cite Robbe-Grillet approvingly in this “presence” vein include Colin Duckworth (46-47), Ruby Cohn (Back 138), and Jonathan Kalb (47; see below). Steven Connor describes and criticizes the “presence” tradition of Beckett reception in Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text (115-118; see below). In addition to Robbe-Grillet, Connor cites Michael Robinson, William Worthen, and Sidney Homan as having seen Beckett’s theater “as a theatre of presence” (118).
embraces—presence as a positive metaphysical value. But neither is Beckett’s presence simply one pole of a phenomenal experience that is “also” attuned to absence. Rather, the intensification of the present itself furnishes the content of Beckett’s determinate negation, becoming the motor of a strictly utopian desire.

Critical work that investigates the sense of presence in Beckett’s theater remains indispensable for understanding this process. Jonathan Kalb’s 1989 study Beckett in Performance is particularly illuminating here. Beckett’s theater, Kalb writes, “creates scenes whose subject matter is their duration in the present time. His dramas are not about experiences; they are those experiences themselves…” (3-4). In this theater, the “fiction” is of the performance present—there is no way to separate the story from the realm of its presentation. “Any activities separating the actors from their characters, such as asides or non-realistic physical predicaments, are part of the internal fictions and require no conscious shifts of context on the performers’ parts,” Kalb writes (46-47). The actors onstage cannot transcend the situation in which they are placed. Unlike James’s Madame de Vionnet, or Stein’s Saint Therese, they can only ever be where they are, as they are; they have no “other parts” to play. In this theater of what cannot be otherwise, actuality consumes the possible. Beckett “uses performance circumstances to dramatize the impossibility of escaping the proscenium frame, and hence of transcending life’s theatrical circumstances” (47). Beckett surpasses drama’s production of theater as a transfixing image of life by producing theater as life, theater whose content is ruthlessly coextensive with the here-and-now of our watching.

Kalb presents this total actuality as Beckett’s break from dramatic tradition, aligning him instead with “contemporary performance art and avant-garde theater” (4) and with Artaud’s Theater of Cruelty (146-8). But the immediacy Kalb describes is in fact the intensification of an entirely dramatic principle: drama’s assertion of an “absolute present.” We saw in Chapter One that although the present of drama lies behind the fourth wall of its fiction, this fictional present will ideally impose itself upon the viewer with such total effectiveness as to incorporate the actual present of the performance, obliterating any trace of difference between the two scenes: “that is how it is [so ist es],” says the viewer complacently (Brecht 188/25). To take Brecht’s and Szondi’s theories seriously, I suggested, means that we cannot understand the postdramatic as a shift “from representation to presence,” from a fictional then-and-there to a concrete theatrical here-and-now, since drama itself already shunned any quality of then-and-thereness in favor of a rigorous concrete immediacy. In ideal drama, the fictional and the actual are not antagonists but, as it were, collaborators in the name of “how it is.”

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10 Kalb is adapting Beckett’s own remark in “Dante… Bruno.Vico. Joyce” that Joyce’s “writing is not about something; it is that something itself” (503).
11 Kalb makes these observations in the course of arguing that Beckett’s theater is fundamentally different from Brecht’s. In “Ending the Waiting Game,” an essay that has greatly influenced my own reading of Beckett, Stanley Cavell makes a similar observation about the difference between Beckett and Brecht: “Brecht calls for a new relation between an actor and his role, and between the actor and his audience…. But in Beckett there is no role towards which the actor can maintain intelligence, and he has nothing more to tell his audience than his character’s words convey” (Must 160). I do not quite agree with Cavell’s subsequent statement that for Beckett, “Theater becomes the brute metaphysical fact of separateness; damnation lies… in theatricality as such” (Ibid). As I argue throughout this chapter, I believe Beckett is most interested in theater’s determinate negation of its own ability to withhold distance, i.e. of the fact that it can keep us all in the room together.
12 In this respect, Beckett’s theatrical utopianism differs sharply from the kind Jill Dolan theorizes; for her, “performance… rests lightly in its own moment, referring to all of time in the images of its spectacle, in the projection of its presence, in its gesture of hope toward the wishes, predictions, and resolutions of its future” (14). While we might well say that Godot is “referring to all of time… in the projection of its presence,” this is so in the sense that the presence of the present engulfs the past and future and neutralizes their alterity.
This argument bears specifically upon how we understand Beckett’s relationship to the dramatic. I have already said that I hold Beckett to be an exemplary postdramatic writer; but to acknowledge that his work submits to the actual is to appreciate its difference from either James’s concerted attack upon the actual or Stein’s ongoing complication and fragmentation thereof—both of which bear some resemblance to the multiplying vectors of Brecht’s own “literarization.” Waiting for Godot confronts us, for the first time in this study, with a kind of theater that problematizes the dramatic present by immersing itself in that present to the point of paralysis. There is a surprising continuity here between two very different theatrical projects: Beckett picks up on the reifying “that is how it is” that Brecht ascribes to drama—and, perversely enough, runs with it. Drama’s “so ist es” is thus carried, in Beckett, to the extreme of tautology: this is how it is, or more simply: this is it. If we sense this tautology at work in Estragon’s gestureless “Over there,” his outburst in Act Two is its most sustained articulation. Vladimir is trying to coax Estragon into admitting that they were in the same place the day before:

VLADIMIR: … Do you not recognize the place?

ESTRAGON (suddenly furious): Recognize! What is there to recognize? All my lousy life I’ve crawled about in the mud! And you talk to me about scenery! (Looking wildly about him.) Look at this muckheap! I’ve never stirred from it!

VLADIMIR: Calm yourself, calm yourself.

ESTRAGON: You and your landscapes! Tell me about the worms! (207)

This response is funny, in spite of its bitterness, because Vladimir has hardly been talking to Estragon “about scenery.” That Estragon thinks he has suggests at least two things we should notice: first, that he understands the referent of Vladimir’s “the place”—i.e., this place—as automatically theatrical (“scenery”), lending more support to Kalb’s contention that Beckett leaves no room for any distinction between theater and metatheater, fictional present and performance present. “A country road” is “scenery” for the characters as for us, although this fact is so obvious as not to arouse much interest; it is not, for example, an occasion of proud metatheatrical demystification. At the same time, Estragon seems to be imputing to Vladimir’s question a more broadly cultural register, one that includes visual art (“You and your landscapes!”) and perhaps even idealist philosophy (“Recognize!”). The implication is that these spheres of experience are no longer relevant, precisely because they imply a dimension of distance that has collapsed into the total immanence Kalb describes. Landscapes are impossible because there is no standing apart, no view to an elsewhere; recognition, the knowledge of the other as such, would also require an epistemological stance apart—the very opposite of the amphibious immersion Estragon announces. There is nothing to recognize because there is only the one thing, what we cannot not know, body and soul: “this muckheap.”

But recognition is also a specifically dramatic term, describing the climactic and decisive moment when someone learns who or what someone or something is: I am my father’s murderer; you are in fact a woman; this is a house for dolls. In disavowing the possibility of such a moment, Estragon thus severs his play from dramatic tradition—but in a very particular way. After all, the possibility of recognition has always threatened to succumb to hubris or blindness or bad odds; a theater without recognition scenes might simply be a theater pessimistic about our

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13 Beckett’s English version departs from his French quite considerably here: “And you talk to me about scenery!” renders “Et tu veux que j’y voie des nuances!” (literally “And you want me to see nuances!”) The French does not provoke the same dissonance as the English, nor does it harbor any particular theatrical reference. On the other hand, the cultural reference of “You and your landscapes!” is already active in “tes paysages,” and “Recognize” is a straightforward translation of “Reconnais” (206).
chances of understanding our world and each other, a nondramatic theater of lonely, entropic drift. The theater Beckett announces here is different: the drama of recognition is renounced, not because we can’t seem to place one another, but because there is no longer any question about where anyone stands: it’s us, we’re all right here, and there is nowhere else to go.14 The severance from drama is thus achieved by what amounts to a terrible intensification of its laws: the “absolute present” manifests here as a hyperbolic version of the neoclassical dramatic “unities” of time and place.15 Estragon’s outburst is precisely an agony of the “unity of space,” and it has its temporal counterpart in an analogous outburst from Pozzo later in Act Two. Pozzo has just informed Vladimir that his slave Lucky is “dumb,” Lucky having delivered a tour-de-force monologue in Act One, or what Vladimir is sure was the day before:

Vladimir: Dumb! Since when?

Pozzo: (suddenly furious) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time!

It’s abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we’ll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (333)

Pozzo is not merely angry because Vladimir is pressing him for unimportant details; rather, his “suddenly furious” rage rehearses Estragon’s, along a different axis. Whereas Estragon cries that there is only one place in his universe, Pozzo roars that there is only “one day”: the play thus trumpets its obedience to dramatic law, and in the same breath denounces the life that supports such a law, that stops brutally short at the edges of the here-and-now and leaves no other space, no other time imaginable.16

Hardly a clean break from dramatic tradition, Godot’s “absolute present” is an element of drama hyperbolized. This present now provokes a “suddenly furious” rage. Overgrown, it cannibalizes drama’s other constitutive elements: not only recognition, but the very principles of change, action, and meaningful communication (“Estragon: [without gesture] Over there”). In other words, Godot is hardly promoting the absolute present as a revolutionary theatrical program, much less a metaphysics; rather, the disappearance of other space and other time, the “impossibility of escaping” that Kalb locates in Beckett’s theater work, is the experiential problem the work sets for itself. This problem is posed by a monstrous persistence of the dramatic, or rather by the perception that drama’s absolute present is true to a certain modern experience of the world—an experience Adorno describes:

the social apparatus has hardened itself against people and thus, whatever appears before their eyes as attainable possibility, as the evident possibility of fulfillment, presents itself to them as radically impossible... compelling them to identify with this impossibility and

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14 Cavell articulates this sense of entrapment in Beckett while describing what he calls the “hidden literality” of language in Endgame: “The logician’s wish to translate out those messy, non-formal features of ordinary language is fully granted by Beckett, not by supposing that there is a way out of our language, but by fully accepting the fact that there is nowhere else to go” (Must 126).
15 McMillan and Fehsenfeld discuss Beckett’s lost first play, a parodic burlesque called Le Kid, as specifically making fun of these unities, “by having a tall student standing on a ladder synchronising his watch with a tall cardboard clock” and “a set that indicated no recognisable scene” (19-20). Godot still plays with these conventions, but the joke has gotten much more desperate. Meanwhile, Ruby Cohn points out that “French concern with the unity of time begins with Chapelain’s ‘Lettre à Godeau sur la règle des vingt-quatre heures’” (Just Play 36, Cohn’s italics). Adorno writes of Endgame: “The three Aristotelian unities are retained, but the drama itself perishes” (“Trying” 136).
16 There is even a kind of pun that implicates narrative itself in this relentless universality: “One day” is first of all the announcement of storytelling, of a fiction not liable to historical specificity: One day a rich man started off for the fair with his slave, in order to sell him... So Pozzo’s “One day, is that not enough for you” seems to suggest that—contrary to what we might have believed—our habit of telling ourselves stories is bound up with, and binds us up in, the maintenance of a tyrannical present. See n. 50 below.
make this impossibility into their own affair. In other words, to use Freud, they “identify themselves with the aggressor” and say that this [i.e., the possible] should not be....” (Bloch and Adorno 4)

The rage with which both Estragon and Pozzo deny the plausibility of another space or another time corresponds to the self-directed aggression Adorno describes, the ferocity with which we have learned to attack our own longing for a different world. As Stanley Cavell writes of Endgame’s Hamm and Clov, “the power of belief… has become, because useless, the source of unappeasable, unbelievable pain” (Must 131). The response to this pain, which Adorno describes and Beckett depicts, is not to cling tighter to the utopian belief that a different life is possible, but to try to gouge out that belief like an offending eye. The play translates this violence into theatrical terms as a kind of hyper-drama: the maintenance of an absolute present, as the eradication of any avenue to other time and space. This formal situation becomes the ground of Beckett’s playwriting—its premise, not its goal.

The theater medium, that is, becomes an opportunity for Beckett to struggle directly with a tyrannical actuality: to engage the present in a more or less violent battle. This is the image Bert O. States suggests in his 1978 essay on Godot. “The present (of things present) is a monster to be slain,” States writes, “an encumbrance (as the body is for certain mystics), above all a medium of diversion in which being is centrifugally spun out into what was (‘What exactly did we ask him for?’) and what will be (‘We’ll hang ourselves tomorrow’)” (Shape 96). The monster, however, does not surrender so readily as States’s remark might suggest. The inaccessibility, to the characters, of what was, and the utter unlikelihood that anything else will be—both born out by the same lines States cites—testify to the present as monstrously unslayable. If present-participle “being is centrifugally spun out” into past and future throughout this play, this is true not in the Jamesian sense of a present that is repeatedly banished, but in the much more desperate sense of a present state that extends to past and future, as it were includes them, so that there is no prospect of a different time. This means that the theatrical present cannot be, as in drama or Brechtian epic, the moment of a radical event. Nor can the stage rigorously distinguish itself from the world beyond it, since the principle of the “beyond” is precisely what is being foreclosed. “Thus, forever shuttling between memory and expectation,” States continues, “[Beckett’s characters] carry to the extreme the condition in which all normal life is lived” (Ibid, my emphasis).

This last statement is worth pausing over; it fascinatingly both registers and re-enacts the play’s insistence on the identity between here and everywhere else, now and all the time, and in so doing, sheds light on a major tendency of (primarily early) Beckett scholarship. I refer to the fact that States, discussing the logic of actuality within the play, suddenly begins making huge claims about the world outside the play: “all normal life.” Now, despite the brilliance and precision of States’s essay and his status as a major innovator in theater studies, I think this

17 Or, as Cavell writes later in the same essay, Endgame’s characters perceive that “Only a life without hope, meaning, justification, waiting, solution—as we have been shaped for these things—is free from the curse of God” (Must 149). We might say that what Adorno’s concept of utopia rejects is precisely a utopia “we have been shaped for.”
18 Cf. Robbe-Grillet’s comment: “In this universe where time does not pass, the words before and after have no meaning; only the present situation counts” (119); also Ruby Cohn’s remark that in Godot “The present is thick and ubiquitous” (Just Play 42, my emphasis). Here I disagree with Connor, who sees Godot as emphasizing “the paradox of all time; that is, that the only tense we feel has real verifiable existence, the present, the here-and-now, is in fact never here-and-now.... Vladimir and Estragon... can never be fully in their present either” (120). No doubt Godot’s present lacks metaphysical integrity—as States’s account of it “spin[ning] out” in fact also suggests. I am arguing, however, that an experience of the present is crucial to the play’s sensibility, and central to its hyperbolic appropriation of drama. The particular pathos of Godot is not that we lack access to the “here-and-now,” but that we seem to lack egress from it.
sentence will read to many today as an example of an early, now-outmoded mode of Beckett criticism: the humanist or existentialist approach that tended to celebrate Beckett’s insight into such quantities as “mankind.” Paul Sheehan nicely summarizes the divide between this work and more recent readership: “on one side, [there are] those critics who bestowed intellectual authority on Beckett by seeing him as an exemplar and exegete of the human condition in its starkest, most essential form; and, facing them, a later generation that sees Beckett’s writings as too anomalous and refractory to sustain abstractions like ‘human’ and ‘condition’ for long, and too unsettling and polymorphous to be reducible to essences” (178). And yet the context of our discussion, and States’s, may help to account for the power of the universalizing impulse in reading Beckett: Beckett’s work is heavy with the sense that apparently individuated experience just is “all normal life,” the fear that there is such an in-different creature as “man,” and that we are living that indifference. This sense belongs to the vision of reality as systematically obstructing possibilities of spatial, temporal, or interpersonal difference: the elsewhere, the elsewhen, the alterity of another’s perspective. The universalizing tendency of so much Beckett reception, then, is not merely an artifact of “modernist” chauvinism; rather, such readings respond to an anxiety within the work itself, which forces the prospect of a life that could not offer any resistance to our generalizations—a life for which what happens on one stage for two hours could, horrifically enough, be valid everywhere and always.

To recognize Beckett’s stage as the site of “all normal life,” as States does, is therefore to see its double critical force. Godot is critical not just in the sense that what happens onstage represents, say, the futility or emptiness of “normal life” offstage (the province of satire) but in that it labors to express the experience of there being no escape from, or exception to, the normal as such—onstage or off. This experience marks Beckett’s fundamental confluence with Adorno. But their confluence also extends beyond the baleful: when Adorno elaborates utopia as determinate negation, he describes how Beckett’s resolute vision of uninterrupted sameness becomes, dialectically, an exception to that sameness. By manifesting uniformity as a particular experience, Beckett’s work contravenes that uniformity. “The more total society becomes, the more completely it contracts to a unanimous system,” Adorno writes,” and all the more do the artworks in which this experience is sedimented become the other of this society” (Aesthetic 31). By testifying resolutely to a present reality that excludes any avenue of departure, a work can create a path of departure, constituting radical otherness negatively. This notion not only accounts for Beckett’s social or political value; it also, I would argue, describes the theatrical ambition of Waiting for Godot.

This approach differentiates Beckett from the older writers discussed in Chapter Two. For James, theatrical desire could diffract reality into “innumerable and wonderful things” (Ambassadors 468); for Stein, a phenomenology of discontinuous experience could announce a

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19 In fact, Adorno anticipates the development Sheehan describes; in the Endgame essay he writes of “Humankind, whose general species-name fits badly into Beckett’s linguistic landscape” (“Trying” 126). Among the most influential readers of the first group is Martin Esslin, whose analysis of Beckett in his 1961 The Theatre of the Absurd repeatedly reads Godot and other works in reference to “the human condition” (e.g. 45, 50, 59, 61). As Sheehan’s account would suggest, Esslin’s existential approach indeed seems little able to handle Beckett’s most “unsettling and polymorphous” writerly moments; for instance, Esslin reduces Lucky’s breathtaking monologue to “a parody of philosophical jargon and scientific double-talk—the very opposite of what either Joyce or Beckett ever wanted to achieve in their writing” (69). Ruby Cohn’s pathbreaking Beckett scholarship certainly tends toward humanism as well, and yet a passage from her 1973 study Back to Beckett evinces a discomfort quite similar to the one Sheehan describes. Cohn writes that Beckett’s fiction “concentrates the breadth and depth of human experience,” but then continues: “‘Breadth and depth of human experience’: the critic summarizes with a pat phrase, but the artist, Beckett, suggests the experience with excruciating concreteness, if only to dispense with it as finally irrelevant to basic being” (79). Essentializing terminology thus wavers, then reasserts itself (“basic being”); I am trying to account for this kind of persistence.
“difference between very quickly and very quickly” (Paisieu 160). For Beckett, such subversions are no longer available; his is a world of tyrannically coherent actuality. Accordingly, Beckett returns to the play as dramatic form, a form from which both James and Stein had mainly abdicated—James in the flight to fiction, Stein in “plays” only barely recognizable as such. By embracing the forms of the genre that had proclaimed an absolutized “so ist es,” Beckett’s playwriting reflects the awareness that the only escape from the present is to register the impossibility of escape as fully as possible. The play’s content continually articulates this awareness:

VLADIMIR: We’re surrounded! [Estragon makes a rush towards back.] Imbecile!
There’s no way out there! [He takes Estragon by the arm and drags him towards front. Gesture towards front.] There! Not a soul in sight! Off you go! Quick! [He pushes towards auditorium. Estragon recoils in horror.] You won’t? [He contemplates auditorium.] Well I can understand that. (263)

This passage makes one of Beckett’s cheaper jokes, and could easily be labeled “antitheatrical.” But it functions, in fact, as Beckett’s declaration that he needs the theater. First, because the fundamental situation of performance is revealed as what makes the horror of contiguity palpable: what registers the burden of existing in a space bereft of radical difference, a space that is here identical with the social as such. Estragon’s “horror” is conventionally recognizable as stage fright, but that convention now becomes an opportunity to take fright at the very fact that we are all here, now, that we are in the same place to the point of being in each other’s way. Theater’s “co-presence” (Fischer-Lichte, Transformative 32) thus becomes the embodied experience of the contracted unanimity Adorno describes.

Second, however, theater also reveals itself in this moment as perforated by an other medium. Kalb rightly observes that there is no Brechtian rupture of character in the gesture whereby Beckett’s characters acknowledge us (46-47). But there is a confluence with Brecht in the way the suddenly heightened coincidence of the tramps’ words with our bodies makes us remember that the scene is rehearsed. These gestures, which wanly pretend to respond to our presence, were in fact planned in advance—and first of all, scripted. Moments like these feel like tricks precisely because they run us along the seam of two different systems: the performance, in which our presence participates in the inescapability of the present, and the text, which has had to anticipate this present before it was here and which therefore refers us to a scene of virtuality. This reference suggests, however improbably, that the present could have been imagined and realized otherwise. The moment when writing openly submits to the actual is thus also, dialectically, the moment when it begins to escape the actual.

20 In his famous essay on the “Street Scene” as an ideal of epic theater, Brecht writes: “The street demonstrator’s performance is essentially repetitive. The even has taken place; what you are seeing now is a repeat. If the scene in the theater follows the street scene in this respect then the theatre will stop pretending not to be theatre... The element of rehearsal in the acting and of learning by heart in the text, the whole machinery and the whole process of preparation: it all becomes plainly apparent” (122).

21 McMullan writes of this moment: “While the audience’s actual position in the auditorium is alluded to, they are simultaneously displaced by their textual reflection: ‘not a soul in sight’” (141). While I agree that Beckett touches on a potential for displacement here, I would suggest that this particular displacement is not quite carried off: “not a soul in sight” functions more as an insult to us (asserting that the audience is soulless), or an insult to Estragon (telling him an obviously transparent lie), than as a real displacement. The line is about the performer seeing us, not about his failing to see us; the ruse doesn’t work.

22 An anecdote from Godot’s production history is telling here: in 1956, when the American director Alan Schneider suggested that Godot be staged in the round, Beckett objected, opining that the play “needs a very closed box” (McMillan and Fehsenfeld 80). According to historians, Beckett “preferred a prosenium production because it retained the formal confrontation with the audience, allowed for clearly defined entrances and exits, and heightened the sense that the characters are ‘all trapped’” (Ibid). The logic of this list is suggestively odd: if the aim is to trap the characters, why would “clearly defined entrances and exits” be...
The perception that Beckett’s theater both heightens and attenuates actuality forms the basis of Garner’s phenomenological readings of Beckett’s plays. In this theater, Garner writes, “the present moment is both actual and deferred, caught up in an oscillation between the physically here and the elsewhere, displayed for spectators who are drawn into its instabilities” (85). Garner wants us to acknowledge the persistence of spatial, temporal, vocal, and corporeal presence in Beckett’s plays so as to see how these dimensions sustain Beckett’s unceasing onslaught against them. Reading Beckett’s 1973 play Not I, Garner considers the operation of language within this process. He observes that “the play’s scrupulous suppression of its discourse’s potential deictic framework”—that is, of words like “this,” “there,” “that,” and “I” which would refer to the actuality of performance—contributes to a “theater of verbal displacement” (132-136). We have already observed what could be described as an especially flagrant suppression of deixis in Estragon’s “Over there.” But we might also adopt Garner’s concept of “verbal displacement” in later Beckett to refer to the various ways in which Godot’s language at once colludes in the construction of its “absolute present” and, in the same gesture, undermines that present’s authority. This logic is at work in the following passage from Act One, just after Estragon has dozed off and reawakened:

ESTRAGON: I dreamt that—

VLADIMIR: DON’T TELL ME!

ESTRAGON: [gesture towards the universe] This one is enough for you? (37-39)

As in the earlier line, Estragon couples a deictic phrase (“This one”) with a behavior that refuses to refer. “The universe,” that is, cannot properly be the object of gestural reference; it is not something we can point to, and since it is by its very concept not one thing among others, it cannot sensibly be the referent of Estragon’s words. We may easily feel that we know what Beckett means: reality, which gives us “enough” to worry about without having to consider an extra dreamscape. But Beckett specifically chooses “universe,” the term whose hyperbolic inclusiveness is calculated to arouse a delicious dissonance in the reader: we know what he means, and we can easily imagine gestures that might convey this meaning, but... would they really, in the absence of any immediate cue?

If our earlier stage direction makes the character do too little for his words to be meaningful, this one asks him to do—to encompass—too much. The text is recalling us to the fact that it is a piece of writing; it is briefly constructing the intimacy of a closet drama. And yet this moment can operate on a theatrical audience too: through the strangeness of a necessarily

desirable? Beckett’s theatrical mind seems to imagine the form of the most rigorous enclosure as the form that best allows for egress: here we have a picture that could almost illustrate the dialectics of utopia.

23 McMullan makes a similar argument; she notes that Beckett’s “increasing use of monologue in the stage drama exploits the power of textually invoked vision to displace or destabilize the spectator’s perception of the visual scene” (137). McMullan’s argument differs from Garner’s in that she is primarily interested in Beckett’s problematization of the visual, whereas Garner focuses on his problematization of the actual. They both, however, discuss the failure of text to entirely displace performance in this theater. “While the use of monologue in Beckett’s theatre increasingly destabilizes the audience’s visual perception of the stage scene and multiplies possible viewing positions,” McMullan notes, “Beckett’s focus on the process and struggle of speech also means that textually invoked visions are constantly threatened with dissolution back into the register of utterance, or voice” (144). I will discuss Beckett’s treatment of monologue at the end of this chapter.

24 The French is slightly more determinate, since Vladimir’s shout is “NE LE RACONTE PAS!” (38); don’t tell it, i.e. the dream. Estragon’s “Celui-ci te suffit?” thus more clearly means: this dream, the one we can’t wake up from, is enough for you? With this sense established, the French audience is less likely to search for a referent for “celui-ci”; but the question then arises why Beckett needs to stipulate the gesture (“geste vers l’univers”) at all.

25 Puchner makes this point in Stage Fright; discussing other stage directions in Godot whose “specificity [is] certainly lost on any audience and only perceptible to the reader of the text,” he observes that “Beckett was thinking as much about the reader of his stage directions as about the viewer of their enactment” and concludes that “Beckett takes the textual apparatus of the drama and, in particular, stage directions as seriously as they were taken in the tradition of the closet drama” (164; Cf. 19-20).
insufficient enactment, we experience a gap between what is recited (“This one”) and what takes place. Borrowing Garner’s description of Mouth’s monologue in Not I, we might say that here the universe as such is being “‘deactualized’ in terms of the stage present and returned to the status of ‘possible world’” (132). But the fact that it’s literally “the universe,” or drama’s “this,” that gets deactualized here is significant: in this moment, Godot displaces the actual precisely by committing to the actual. What thus occurs is not only an “oscillation” between presence and absence, or actuality and virtuality, as Garner’s phenomenological account suggests. It is a rigorous negative dialectic, in which we arrive at the utopian consciousness that “this one,” our shared present, isn’t all there is, only through the gesture that tries to register that present as fully as possible. Theater thus wrests the prospect of displacement from the dramatic principle of placement, to articulate that which is not this, not here, not now.

Together, the line and the stage direction inscribe a dynamic whereby the most direct apprehension of the real as such—of something very much like the “bad reality” of Horkheimer and Adorno’s totalizing conception (116)—itself becomes the moment of a flight from the real. “The actual audience... is both addressed and disclaimed, oriented and ‘disoriented,’ subject to the eerie superimposition of the fictional and the actual,” Garner writes of Beckett’s Catastrophe (82). What problematizes the audience’s presence in our passage, however, is the “superimposition” of the actual and the textual. By writing down “the universe” in a line that corresponds to everything and nothing onstage, Beckett insists upon the page as an alternative site where the traumatic experience of the totalized actual can be inscribed and, only thus, transcended. Text and scene incriminate each other as the present’s means of production, and yet a mischievous discrepancy between them glimmers like a crack in a closed, black box. The crack is too narrow to see through, much less to provide escape; but it suggests another universe beyond the walls, a stage that we do not hold, that we have not reached. In Beckett’s hands, Adorno’s “wordless, imageless utopia” starts taking on a distinctly theatrical—if fugitive—shape.

“All the dead voices”: Writing and the Real

It would thus be too simple to say that in Beckett’s theater, a utopian text transcends the compromising actuality of performance. Beckett’s commitment to determinate negation means that language cannot just float free of the actual; on the contrary, Beckett continually emphasizes language’s complicity in maintaining the unbearable present. Indeed, critics have sometimes framed Beckett’s theater as one that empowers text above all. As we saw, Connor describes this theater as “transformed from a place of being to a place of writing” (131). W. B. Worthen argues that Beckett’s work “insists on the controlling authority of the text to govern the play” (Modern 140), establishing “a field in which... subjects are qualified by and painfully inspected for a ‘text’ that invades, objectifies, replaces, and destroys them” (142). The notion that Beckett promotes the (more or less violent) ascendancy of the written text over production, however, cannot account for his ongoing exploration of the ways text can fail to be anything but a vessel of the real.

One way Beckett explores this failure is by instituting a poetic pattern that organizes the passage of time in a particular way: a recurring ABCB in which Vladimir’s expressive advancements are brusquely capped by Estragon’s repetitions. The pattern appears throughout the play but reaches its climax early in Act Two:

ESTRAGON: All the dead voices.
VLADIMIR: They make a noise like wings.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
VLADIMIR: Like sand.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves. (211-213)

[...]
VLADIMIR: Rather they whisper.
ESTRAGON: They rustle.
VLADIMIR: They murmur.
ESTRAGON: They rustle. (213)

[...]
VLADIMIR: They make a noise like feathers.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves.
VLADIMIR: Like ashes.
ESTRAGON: Like leaves. (215) (Cf. 63-65, 111)

The repeated thrust of this pattern is that—like the tramps themselves—verbal poeisis isn’t going anywhere. Expression can only circle back to more of the same; more specifically, it cannot progress in time: the passage of moments will not mean the acquisition of new poetic correlatives for an experience which (as Godot never stops insisting) itself has nothing new to offer. These lines imply that the effort to keep saying our world cannot get us beyond the world as we’ve already said it. They dramatize the negative credo Beckett famously articulated in his 1949 piece “Three Dialogues with Georges Duthuit”: “nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express” (556). This is Godot’s first line, “Nothing to be done,” explicated as poetics.

To treat Estragon’s repeated “Like leaves” only as a brake put on Vladimir’s poetic efforts, however, would be to miss the phrase’s own specificity: “leaves” are also the leaves of books, and the middle part of the interchange quoted above could be a thumbnail for the dialectic between page and performance: “They rustle. / They murmur. / They rustle.” One particular book Beckett recalls here is Dante’s Divine Comedy; he combines the Purgatory’s exhortation to let “dead poetry ris[e] again” (199; canto 1, line 7) with the Paradise’s more sobering comment that “mortal usage”—mortal language—“is like a leaf on a bough” (467; canto 26, line 137). In Beckett’s hands, this juxtaposition constitutes a cynical comment on the afterlife of text, and on Beckett’s own limited ability to revive the dead voices of his predecessors; as such, it becomes a troubling touchstone for the play’s ongoing allusiveness.

26 The dialogue goes on from here:

VLADIMIR: What do they say?
ESTRAGON: They talk about their lives.
VLADIMIR: To have lived is not enough for them.
ESTRAGON: They have to talk about it. (213-5)

The graveyard humor of this exchange lies in how quickly the tramps’ concern jumps from what the “dead voices” are saying to the fact that, exasperatingly, they go on speaking at all. Estragon’s lines guide the conversation away from the possibility of communication: that the voices “talk about their lives” either seems so trivially true as to constitute a refusal to hear them at all, or suggests a narcissistic discourse that requires no auditor. The voices, in short, are locked up from us in their papery rustle: they are very much like Derrida’s “grapheme,” that unit of

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26 Discussing Beckett’s reference to the passage in the Purgatorio, Michael Worton writes that “the leaves here and the tree throughout the play… must be perceived less as objects with an allegorical meaning than as signifiers in a complex web of intertextuality” (78). My thanks to C. D. Blanton for pointing out the pertinence of the Dante reference.
writing which mocks the phonic ideal of immediate communication by flaunting the prospect of its own ghostly persistence long after there is no one to mean it and no one to whom it can mean. Indeed, if the “ashes” are, among other things, the ashes of recently burnt books, the “leaves” that reconstitute themselves in Estragon’s rejoinder suggest a literary legacy that has, as it were, outlived itself, pages still fluttering long after our ability to revive their voices is gone. Literature is precisely not a conduit to others in other worlds; no longer an escape from the present, the “dead voices” have become reified as the inarticulate topography of the present. As such they are so painful that the tramps will do anything, even keep on doing “Nothing,” just to drown them out: “we’re inexhaustible,” Vladimir observes, naming what might almost be called the play’s super-objective: “It’s so we won’t hear” (211). In having tried momentarily to revive the voices by asking what they say, Vladimir has uttered a desire which we are encouraged to understand the rest of the play as suppressing.

Vladimir’s question, however, also introduces a further complexity: he is not just asking for a report of what the voices say but, more realistically, asking Estragon to help him invent the dead voices’ words. Taken in this sense, the question is no longer unanswerable, and it yields a bifurcation in the subsequent dialogue: Estragon might be tabling the question by reporting (deciding) that the voices just “talk about their lives” or he might in fact be answering it by quoting the voices exactly as he hears (reads) them, with Vladimir continuing the recitation. The exchange would then proceed like this:

VLADIMIR: What do they say?
ESTRAGON: “They talk about their lives.”
VLADIMIR: “To have lived is not enough for them.”
ESTRAGON: “They have to talk about it.”
VLADIMIR: “To be dead is not enough for them.”
ESTRAGON: “It is not sufficient.”

[Silence.] (213-215)

The possibility of quotation, in other words, becomes the possibility that these lines are not about the voices, but are attributable to the voices—in which case “They” would seem to refer to the tramps themselves. And indeed, these sentences might just as well apply to Didi and Gogo, also “inexhaustible” talkers for whom, as we know, neither life nor death suffices. But to understand the tramps as intoning the dead voices, here, would be to observe the very mechanism that makes playwriting possible: the impersonation of mute, material text. I am not suggesting that we reject what is with good reason the standard reading of these lines, namely that the living are talking about, not for, the dead. The point is that the possibility of the alternate reading constitutes a basic structure of undecidable alternation between what is written (dead voices, like leaves) and what is happening before us (the tramps saying something). Not only have we lost access to the voices of others, then, we have lost the ability to trust that such voices

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27 In “Signature Event Context” Derrida argues that the “unity of the signifying form is constituted only by its iterability, by the possibility of being repeated in the absence... of every present intention of communication. This structural possibility of being severed from its referent or signified (and therefore from communication and its context) seems to me to make of every mark, even if oral, a grapheme in general, that is... the nonpresent remaining of a differential mark cut off from its alleged ‘production’ or origin” (318).

28 Bersani and Dutoit beautifully articulate this dead materiality of cultural tradition in Beckett, although they do not link it explicitly to writing: “There is no agonized reevaluation of tradition; rather, much like the derelicts of his fiction, he evokes art and philosophy of the past as if he were rummaging through a junkyard, giving an amused kick now and then at some useless and irrelevant relic of a dead imagination” (19). To say that the voices of the past cannot undergo “agonized reevaluation” is another way of saying that we can no longer converse with them.

29 “Do you remember the day I threw myself into the Rhône?... You fished me out” (Waiting 183).
are other: we can no longer tell the difference between the voices of the present and those which are traces of an other site.

This structure perfectly rehearses the device with which Act Two begins: Vladimir’s song about the dog. “A dog came in the kitchen...”; Cook killed the dog; the other dogs buried him and “wrote upon the tombstone/for the eyes of dogs to come: A dog came in the kitchen...”; thus the song begins again (193).  

The principle of endless repetition and the sense of a murderous world are what bind the song most obviously to the rest of the play; but just as important is the way what is sung becomes indistinguishable from what is written, so that ultimately the singer cannot know whether his object is the dog or the epitaph, or whether he himself or the “dead voice” of the tombstone’s text is telling the story. In the same way, it cannot be completely clear that Estragon and Vladimir are talking for themselves rather than sounding out the dead voices for the ears and “eyes” of us “dogs to come”—cannot, in part because the men onstage are sounding the dead voices of the rustling script called Waiting for Godot. Their words are already leaves. Correspondingly, the repetitions that dominate the play (including that of the title line) achieve something like the textual possibility of returning, re-reading, going back to check before moving on: as the time of performance flaunts its inability to advance our apprehension of the world, we are thrown backward instead. Connor has linked Godot’s destabilization of text/performance oppositions to its “curious déjà vu structure” (116-120); as Connor’s phrase suggests, characters repeatedly lose track of their place in the conversation:

VENALIMIR: Damn it haven’t you already told us?
POZZO: I’ve already told you?
ESTRAGON: He’s already told us? (135)

These quandaries are like having lost one’s place in a book; ultimately, perhaps the “rustle” the characters hear is the pages of their script flipping backwards and forwards in the breeze unnoticed, sabotaging any dramatic progression. Here again, we find something like a perverse relation to Brecht, as if Beckett were presenting an ominous underside to Brechtian “literarization.” In Godot, the stage-as-book still opposes the “single track” of dramatic plot development, but it no longer solicits relaxed, analytical mastery. Instead, the script imprisons its “readers” in a baffling structure that prevents them from getting anywhere.

At the same time, critics have often pictured Godot’s default of progress in terms of a missing script. Robbe-Grillet, for example, writes: “they do not seem to have a text prepared beforehand and scrupulously learned by heart, to support them. They must invent” (121). Hugh Kenner observes that “The tramps have plainly not learned parts” (135); John Spurling comments that “Vladimir and Estragon accept it as their responsibility to perform improvisations within the time allotted to them by the author” (Fletcher and Spurling 42); Connor describes the tramps as “vulnerably scriptless” (130). Given that Waiting for Godot is probably the most famous script of its century, what exactly do these critics mean? We have all seen plays in which scriptlessness is literally a conceit, in which the performance “breaks down” and the performers pretend to go off-book; this happens, in fact, in Beckett’s first play, Eleukhēria (142). We have also seen truly improvisatory work for which not having “learned parts” is a generative constraint. There is little chance of anyone’s confusing Godot with either kind of piece; why, then, have so many scholars converged in describing the play as unscripted? This might be merely a strategic category mistake, in which the critics induce a representational amnesia from a represented one, in order to tease out Godot’s implications for its medium. But as some of their comments suggest, I think they are more likely responding to the play’s theme of verbal effort:

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30 According to Esslin, this is an “old German student song” (76).
the way its characters are endowed with a self-conscious performance ethic that makes them seem to be the authors, if not of their own fates, then of their own texts. If Beckett constitutes performance as the site of a textual deficiency (where’s the script?), he does so by imagining performance as the movement that identifies and responds to such lack: as itself a kind of compensatory writing.

That a character should appear to be inventing the words she speaks is, as we know, a fundamentally dramatic ideal; thus Szondi’s remark that drama has no “room for quotation” (9). The appearance of invention in _Godot_ is distinct from dramatic “spontaneity,” however, by its emphasis on the studied labor of verbal production. This emphasis is, of course, most heightened in Lucky’s monologue, where the slave pours forth verbiage on the command to “Think!” (141). We encounter it also, earlier, in Pozzo’s disquisition upon nightfall (by turns “lyrical” and “prosaic”) and his demand for feedback afterwards:

POZZO: [...] I weakened a little towards the end, you didn’t notice?
VLADIMIR: Oh perhaps just a teeny weeny little bit.
ESTRAGON: I thought it was intentional. (125)

After Pozzo and Lucky depart, Estragon seems to begin trying to script the dialogue retroactively, at short range. “That’s the idea, let’s make a little conversation,” he replies when Vladimir observes that the other two men have changed (159). The motif continues:

VLADIMIR: No no, it’s impossible.
ESTRAGON: That’s the idea, let’s contradict each other. (219)

[...]
VLADIMIR: That what?
ESTRAGON: That’s the idea, let’s ask each other questions. (221)

[...]
VLADIMIR: Moron!
ESTRAGON: That’s the idea, let’s abuse each other. (269)

Lines like these do create the sense of a world whose script is missing, but they do so by imagining the characters’ ability to fill in for that script—here, one character’s ability to read back the other’s words, suspend their ephemerality as performance and re-produce them as prescriptive schemes.

On one level, this type of device simply continues the heightened reflexivity that characterizes most of Beckett’s writing: he extends the “tension between referentiality and autoreferentiality… salient in modernist literature” that we saw in James and Stein (Caramello 193). In Beckett, this tendency appears in the mordancy with which his discourse comments upon itself, as when the narrator of _Murphy_ states ironically, “The above passage is carefully calculated to deprave the cultivated reader” (69), or when Malone writes, on its own line, the phrase “What tedium” (_Three_ 181). Vladimir’s “This is becoming really insignificant” (243) could just as easily have sprung from the pages of _Murphy_ or _Malone Dies_. Transplanted to theatrical soil, however, this writerly tendency takes effect in a new way. In a novel, a sentence about the novel can momentarily displace the scene being conveyed: thus the farm where Malone’s fictional creation Sapo spends his time recedes when Malone recalls us to the scene of his own writing, and reappears once the reflexive interlude is finished (e.g. _Three_ 210). In

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31 Critics have offered various articulations of Lucky’s monologue as forced labor. Blau, for example, describes Lucky’s speech as “a sort of penitential insistence of runaway thought turning upon itself” (_Sails_ 129). Kenner writes: “The great casuistical speech of the vagrant Lucky is staged like a Master’s Oral before three examiners” (38). I discuss Lucky’s monologue in the final section of this chapter.
theater, however, Beckett finds the potential for a fictional scene (however attenuated) which will remain present through those moments when literary composition declares itself as such. No longer made to vanish by the consciousness of writing, the scene now encompasses that consciousness, becoming its medium. In Beckett’s fiction, the self-evidence of writing had offered a way out of the story, and vice-versa; but on his stage, characters root themselves in the scene as they textualize it. “What is there to keep me here?” Clov asks Hamm in Beckett’s next play, and Hamm responds: “The dialogue” (Endgame 58). Onstage, verbal invention is not what escapes the hegemony of the present but, on the contrary, what sustains it. This complicity prevents any smooth imaginative shift “from a place of being to a place of writing” (Connor): what Beckett forces us to consider is precisely the possibility that these are—to borrow the Unnamable’s phrase again—not two places (Three 403). The “four or five leaves” that appear on Godot’s tree at the top of Act Two (189) are like the visual proof of this proposition, as if all the exertions of the first act had precipitated themselves as a handful of pages. Those pages now flag the impervious persistence of this muckheap, which wears them like a trophy. “What have I said?” Vladimir asks himself towards the end of the play (339). That “said” is thus substituted for “done” in the conventional expression of guilt reflects, first, the “contrapuntal immobility” through which a great deal has been said and nothing done, the thorough dissociation of language from praxis: Vladimir’s asking what he has said thus emphasizes how little he has been able, how little people are able, to do. But there is also a sense in which the substitution suggests the equivalency of saying and doing in this theater, at least insofar as speech in the face of an unbearable present becomes the means of production of that present, the material of its presence to us. Beckett thereby takes what I have called the play’s “promise” at its word: he takes playwriting as an opportunity to present reality as constituted in words, to imagine—as I wrote earlier—that words are directly enacted in the real. For Beckett, this vision amounts to the condemnation of language. “To imagine a language means to imagine a form of life,” wrote Ludwig Wittgenstein, in a book published the same year as Godot’s premiere (7). For Beckett, to suffer a language is to suffer a form of life, and likewise to inflict one: this one. Theater offers him an opportunity to literalize this logic: not merely through the “immediacy” of performance but through the experience of that “immediacy” as scripted, as brought into being by language, which it reciprocally sustains. When Vladimir forbids Estragon from telling his dream, Estragon’s interpretation (“This one is enough for you?”) carries the same principle: he imagines that to describe a “universe” would mean having to inhabit it, a prospect to be regarded with horror.

32 I agree with Garner in questioning the “scriptocentrism” (26) of readings like Connor’s. But Connor also argues that Beckett challenges traditional text/performance binaries (e.g. 116), a claim born out by Beckett’s sense of writing and actuality as mutually implicated (and incriminating).

33 This sense of being imprisoned in the present by writing was seized upon in George Tabori’s 1984 production at the Münchner Kammerspiele. As described by Kalb, the production began by simulating an early rehearsal, with texts in hand: “At first, the points when they drop their scripts seem like sections that the actors happen to have memorized, allowing them to experiment with movement, as often occurs at early rehearsals of a play. Later those sections seem like improvisations, the actors attempting to depart from the text, or at least to lose themselves sufficiently in the action that they may call it ‘theirs.’ But each time the familiar exchange arises, ending with, ‘Wir warten auf Godot,’ [Thomas] Holtzmann [the actor playing Vladimir] holds up his crumpled paperback as if to say that they cannot leave because of the play, Waiting for Godot, and not because of any fictional character named Godot” (92). Kalb observes: “this is the only altered setting I know of that Beckett tolerated” (91). This staging seems to me to have articulated Beckett’s sense of the writer’s guilt, as discussed below.

34 Richard Begam points out the historical confluence of Waiting for Godot with Wittgenstein’s Philosophical Investigations and J. L. Austin’s development of speech-act theory (140); Begam argues that Godot is fundamentally an exploration of language’s performativity, and is thus (perhaps unwittingly) in dialogue with the two philosophers. For more on Beckett and Wittgenstein, see Marjorie Perloff’s Wittgenstein’s Ladder (115-144) and Andre Furlani’s excellent recent article “Beckett After Wittgenstein: The Literature of Exhausted Justification.”
This is also a way to understand Beckett’s infamous insistence on “faithful” productions, and in particular his insistence on the sparse set—Endgame’s “Bare interior” (1) or the comparably bare exterior of Godot: “A country road. A tree. / Evening” (7). As we know, the notion that a script could ever postulate a singular production, that there could ever be firm criteria for the performance of a text onstage, is illusory. But Beckett’s settings, with their minimalist and indeed discursive precision, suggest a world whose specificity derives from language—a space which harbors no refuge from, no excess beyond what has been written. The emptiness of the stage is marked here and there by discrete and specifiable objects recalling the images in language-learning books: a tree, a pair of boots, a carrot. And this austerity asserts a terrible responsibility of the writer, a responsibility reduplicated by the characters in their own language-work: that of having gotten us into this mess in the first place, by means of words. Beckett’s scenography, that is, points an accusing finger back at Beckett himself. In Éleuthéria this happens explicitly:

AUDIENCE MEMBER: ... By the way, who put together this flop? [Program] Beckett [he says Béquet], Samuel, Béquet, Béquet, that’s got to be a Jew from Greenland crossed with an Auvergnat.
GLAZIER: Don’t know. Apparently he eats his soup with a fork.
AUDIENCE MEMBER: No matter. Pulp it. (148)

The script is never so overt a reference in Godot or Endgame. Instead, the precise bareness of the stage takes up the mark of this literality, the sense of a performance executed to the letter. In this way, writing finds itself guilty of the real.

Utopia in Attendance

Amidst this very acknowledgment, however, an opposite trajectory begins to suggest itself: a path away from the concrete world, and in particular from the actual site of the stage. This tendency of Beckett’s work has sometimes been emphasized—we might say, taken at its word—to the detriment of productive exchange between readers and theater artists who want to realize his work through their own. Discussing her controversial 1984 production of Endgame in an interview with Jonathan Kalb, JoAnne Akalaitis expresses frustration with this impasse. She rightly points out the folly of the notion that her show at A.R.T. injected too much specificity onto the scene of Beckett’s blank stage:

I think it’s idiotic. I mean, everything onstage is in a specific place. At least it’s in the theater. At least it’s in Cambridge at the American Repertory Theatre. If you have it in a black box and put a chair onstage, the audience does not walk in and say, “We are in a no-man’s-land, we are in a vague, abstract, Platonic space.” I mean, that’s the thing about theater; it doesn’t happen in your mind, it doesn’t happen on the page, it happens in a place... It’s very academic, that whole idea that directors can’t be specific. Everything is

35 For a methodical dismantling of this notion, see Fischer-Lichte, “Was ist eine ‘werkgetreue’ Inszenierung?” I am, however, interested in the poetic possibilities that arise when a writer resists this commonsense conclusion; see the last section of Chapter One above, and Chapter Four.

36 A note in the 1995 Foxrock edition of Éleuthéria points out that a “béquet” is “a small part of a scene that an author either adds or alters during rehearsals” (195). Beckett’s very name, then, comes to signify an obstruction of the writer at the site of performance.

37 In an anecdote, Blau describes trying to persuade Beckett to approve JoAnne Akalaitis’s 1984 production of Endgame: Blau jokingly invoked “the death of the author,” and Beckett failed to see the humor (Staits 65, 145). Among many imaginable reasons for this misfire, I would hypothesize a certain outrage on Beckett’s part, at the suggestion that authorship, the tremendously guilty burden of continually sustaining a present with one’s words, could be so easily shed.
specific. I mean if you put a chair onstage it is chosen by someone and it means something. (qtd. in Kalb 82)

These remarks are salutary; they remind us of dimensions of theatrical experience that are all too easy to forget—especially when the discussion, like this one, is launched in front of a pile of books and a computer screen, not a stage. The “vague, abstract, Platonic space” is only a fantasy, and indeed, as Akalaitis suggests, a literary one. And yet it is, I would argue, a fantasy that a play itself can promote. 38 Throughout Godot, as we have seen, the play evinces an impracticable wish for a stage that could sustain the virtuality of the stage direction; for a performance which would not confirm the text’s commensurability with the laws of the real. This wish emerges from, and in direct opposition to, the intensified sense of the real as a textual site, of the present as that which we are always writing, to our great shame. Both the wish and the sense arise from the specifically theatrical experience of language placed.

One of Beckett’s stage directions literalizes this experience in a quite particular way. Vladimir has just informed Estragon that Godot is to meet them today, Saturday:


VLADIMIR: [Looking wildly about him, as though the date was inscribed in the landscape] It’s not possible! (35-37)

“As though the date was inscribed in the landscape”: is this only a joke about getting your dimensions mixed? We might recall Strether’s relation to landscape in The Ambassadors: out for a ramble in the country, he tries not to see historicity or temporality in this “picture”—only to be surprised by a vector of temporal progress Chad’s and Madame de Vionnet’s boat trip down the river, which explodes the still image into a “drama” of adultery. Like Vladimir, Strether is now forced to consider the question of passing time, since the crux of the scandal confronting him is that his friends have obviously planned an overnight stay. But Vladimir’s problem, in the moment cited above, is the opposite: he looks for the trace of time in his landscape, but can’t find it. In fact, as we know, Estragon will later passionately deny that their country road qualifies as a “landscape” at all, because a landscape is something you can travel towards and away from, something you can “recognize” across a distance, whereas: “Look at this muckheap! I’ve never stirred from it!” So we might say that what Vladimir looks for, “wildly,” in this moment is not just the date but the landscape itself, as the prospect of a space that one could regard from elsewhere. 39 Such a prospect would preempt Pozzo’s eventual claim, anticipated here by Estragon, that there is only “one day,” by making clear that that today is one day among others (Saturday and not Sunday, today and not yet tomorrow). And it would put this place in relation to other places, as one that could be reached from elsewhere, recognized, by us as by an other: for instance, by Godot.

38 Kalb, who interviews Akalaitis, seems to me to dismiss her point unfairly (82); but it is true that his own larger argument also develops out of a sustained engagement with concrete theatrical productions—and his whole book could be described as an attempt to show how Beckett productions can achieve the kind of effect Akalaitis suggests is impossible.

39 On landscape as a form predicated on distance and removal, see Chaudhuri, who writes: “The founding paradox of perspective as employed in landscape painting is that it appears to ‘give’ us the world… just at the very moment that it removes it from us—or rather, us from it—most decisively” (“Land” 19). In Chaudhuri’s analysis, the “alienation” thus established is anything but empowering: the spectator is “[u]nable to enter or alter the space of the world she or he is gazing upon” (20). But she explains that landscape theater—a term derived from Stein—concerns itself with immersion rather than alienation, shifting landscape “from a tract of land capable of being seen at a glance to an environment one can explore and inhabit” (21). It seems to me that the “landscape” that is conspicuously lacking in Godot cuts across this distinction: the possibility of change is eliminated along with the perspective of distance; we “inhabit” the space so completely that there is nothing to “explore.”
The text presents this as a fantasy, a desperate mistake. But its form is significant: Beckett tells us, not just that Vladimir looks around as if he could learn the date from the landscape, but that he searches specifically “as though the date was inscribed” therein. Vladimir acts, that is, as if his muckheap were a surface of inscription: a canvas, or a page, which we could not only “recognize,” but read. Like the gestureless “Over there” with which we began, this moment therefore suggests a shift back from performance to text, a leap that displaces the character from his position in a concrete actuality and towards the virtual condition of script. It is as if Vladimir were trying to see the play in the state it was in before being made real, as if this vantage could provide some kind of leverage against the present that now engulfs him. The leverage would be history, “the date” grasped as if from without; to apprehend the present this way would be “to think above the stream,” as Brecht recommends (44). Such a perspective would make revolution possible; it would make possible the advent of Godot.

It would, and for Beckett, it doesn’t. Akalaitis’s point could be recast as the fact that, whether Beckett likes it or not, the date always is inscribed in our cultural products: no “bare interior,” no “country road,” no tree but records the prejudices and expectations, the means of production of its time. The historical self-awareness of her subway-tunnel Endgame might be read as an attempt to render Beckett’s subjunctive phrase in a truer indicative mood; and Beckett’s resistance, as an effort to hold on to that subjunctive as such—even if the strangely ungrammatical “as if the date was...” seems almost to shudder against this insistence. What Beckett tries to preserve, against sound common sense like Akalaitis’s, is the sickening feeling that we can’t read the date after all, that dates are irrelevant because nothing can change. This is like the admission that we can’t receive the “dead voices,” or can’t be sure whether they are different from our own: it is the feeling of being trapped in an utterly indifferent actuality, a present that admits of no difference between now and then, and hence no difference between the now and the not-yet. Beckett’s theater plays its exclusion of history in order to endow its present with the greatest possible hopelessness. “Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful!” (Waiting 137).

And yet this awfulness is what launches the work’s rigorous utopianism: its insistence that the prospect of a radically other life remain unspoken, so that it can be radically other:

ESTRAGON: I was dreaming I was happy.
VLADIMIR: That passed the time.
ESTRAGON: I was dreaming that—
VLADIMIR: [Violently] Don’t tell me! [Silence.] (335)

What the “violen[ce]” of Vladimir’s repeated prohibition registers is the urgency of keeping the dream out of the actual, beyond the dramatic present into which its description would introduce it. By refusing to present the dream, Vladimir/Beckett maintains it as such: the possibility of a different universe. And in the theater, as opposed to in prose fiction, this means not just the difference of one universe from another—a subject contemplated at length in Murphy (63–66) — but, specifically, the difference between this one and one that is not here, not now, not this.

Correspondingly, in theater, the refusal to name the unnamable can be followed by “Silence”: the work can make us undergo the absence of what is not here. Enoch Brater has argued that Beckett’s shift from fiction to playwriting should be understood in terms of his project of imposing and organizing “actual” silence. “The novel has proven to be a clumsy vehicle indeed for letting silence speak its text,” Brater writes; “.... The shift in genre will have enormous practical consequences; they bear not so much on the metaphoric representation of silence as on its actual evolution into a highly choreographed performance space. In the theater
Beckett will make silence toe the line... silence [will] hold the stage with authority, sometimes even poignancy” (“Beckett’s” 194). Silence can really happen to us in the theater, that is, whereas a novel can at best tell us about silence, or find poetic analogues for it, while the room in which we’re reading goes on sounding however it sounds. This argument is intended to bring out the difference between page and stage; but it seems to me to elide the very actuality it wants to register, by imagining the sonic life of theater space as fundamentally compliant. As every director knows, the moments we “choreograph” as silences are just as likely to besiege us with a chorus of coughs, candy wrappers, vibrating phones and—if all else fails—our own breath; no writer or director can really guarantee that silence will “toe the line” as Brater claims, since the performance that makes silence “actual” also exposes it to all these disruptions.  

In fact, we might say that the only place where silence can truly “hold the stage” is in the pages of the playscript: in the virtual performance that the written play pretends, or promises, to imply. In this sense, the direction “Silence” (as distinct from, say, “Pause”) always refers to a difference between possible and actual performances, marking the discrepancy of what happens in the auditorium from what—the script tells us—could happen.

The “Silence” that follows Vladimir’s prohibition thus doubly marks the discrepancy between reality and its utopian other. If the silence goes off as prescribed, we may experience an emptiness where the dream would be, a gap that leaves a place for the happiness it dare not present. But if patrons are sniffing and shifting, and programs rustling like leaves, then performance itself becomes the field of interference between what could be (the utopia of silence, as written) and what is. Suddenly obtrusive, our own presence now collaborates in the foreclosure of the possible world. Is this orientation “antithetical,” a question merely of preferring the private copy to the public show? I think not: the audience’s presence is not an annoying inconvenience for this play, but the very medium through which the violence of actuality becomes palpable, and through which we can experience the desire for the unrealized as such. Perhaps Beckett would have liked to be able to shut us up, or shut us out, at such moments, so that silence really would take place in the theater as prescribed; but to plan on this would have been wishful thinking, and Beckett’s sophistication leads him to include “Silence” as exactly that: a wish, an event manqué, no matter how assiduously the performers themselves pause in hopes of securing it.

This is not a matter of disavowing the audience; on the contrary, the audience is crucial to Beckett’s theatrical poetics.  

As Garner observes, silence “is always rendered virtual by the inescapable sounds of a peopled auditorium” (40).

Herbert Blau writes: “A subterranean drama, appearing to care for nothing but its interior life, [Godot] searches the audience like a Geiger counter. No modern drama is more sensitively aware of the presence of an audience, or its absence” (Sails 33). These last three words reflect Blau’s own ongoing preoccupation with the audience as a site of lack (see The Audience), but they also suggest the specifically utopian dynamic we have been tracing.
by exposing this experience for what it doesn’t contain. Theater is where we attend something else.

With this understanding of Beckett’s theater, we reopen the question of what he and Adorno have to say to each other. On the one hand, it is true that Adorno likes to brandish Beckett against theoretical antagonists, and often seems to treat Beckett’s work as a poetically encoded treatise. Thus he writes, for example, that in *Endgame* “Being, trumpeted by existential philosophy as the meaning of being, becomes its antithesis” (“Trying” 147). Such a claim might seem like prime evidence of his using Beckett as “an excuse to make pronouncements,” as Bennett quips. And yet I think we are now in a position to see that even this remark of Adorno’s resonates with specifically theatrical—that is, formal and medial—concerns. “Being” is, of course, the privileged term of Heideggerian ontology, and Adorno invokes it as such. But if we are reading with an eye towards Beckett’s utopian deployment of theater’s actuality, then Adorno’s observation that being “becomes [the] antithesis” of its own meaning in *Endgame* indexes the very reason why Beckett turns to theater: in theater, the space and time of what is can engulf us so thoroughly that we can know for certain that what we seek is what is not. Truth, excluded by the airless consistency of a hyper-dramatic present, attaches to non-being, the not-this and not-yet of which writing is both the foil and the promise. Adorno would not have identified theater as the privileged medium of this negation; but as we saw in the Introduction, he does identify a special problem in the way performance stays bound to reality. As if in rejoinder, Beckett seizes on this problem and shows how, in consigning writing to the real of performance, he can make the here-and-now of the stage into the vivid content of a determinate negation. The landscape of alterity hovers here in shadow, “inscribed” as the longing for what isn’t. Adorno’s aesthetics thus turn out to function as a particular theatrical sensibility.

In the following two chapters, we’ll see how later playwrights have extended and developed these utopian theatrics, seizing on the *play* as a form that negotiates the disparate scenes of writing and performance. Like Beckett, both Suzan-Lori Parks and Mac Wellman elaborate new relations between text and stage, re-imagining the seam between the two media as a site of utopian possibility. One technique that remains central to these writers is the marked use of monologue—a device whose importance for Beckett we need, therefore, to consider. I want to end this chapter by speculating on the legacy of one of *Godot*’s most striking formal quirks: Lucky’s long, explosive speech.

Towards a New Monologue: Beckett’s “scribal act”

Beckett places Lucky’s monologue at the center of his play; as we will see in the following chapters, this decision anticipates monologue’s heightened significance in more recent playwriting, where it continues to operate as a utopian device. Here, however, I want to consider the relationship between Lucky’s speech and a different kind of monologue: that of Beckett’s novel *The Unnamable*, written in 1949 directly after *Godot*. *The Unnamable* completes the series of *Three Novels* that includes *Molloy* and *Malone Dies*, but I suggest it bears distinctive traces of the playwriting that had intervened in the trilogy’s production. Begun as a “diversion” from Beckett’s prose fiction, theater may have wound up effecting its own diversion of the fiction: with *The Unnamable*, Beckett’s prose begins to simulate the theatrical dialectic we have been tracing in *Godot*.

H. Porter Abbott has argued for a decisive relationship between *The Unnamable, Godot*, and what Abbott calls the “evocation… of being elsewhere”—a phrase that resonates strongly with our utopian analysis. “The immediate evocation in prose of being elsewhere was a project
requiring a different mode of writing from that used in the preceding works of the trilogy,” Abbott writes, “and my guess is that Beckett trained for it by writing Waiting for Godot” (“Grammar” 41). For Abbott, this “training” is essentially the cultivation of dialogue, which he links to The Unnamable’s undecidable alternation between voices, specifically between the grammars of “he” and “I.” As a result of this alternation, he writes,

One’s mind keeps flashing between two incompatible gestalts, as if there were some third it could finally rest in which would reconcile all the contradictions… [Beckett] keeps alive the possibilities in that hidden space of something lurking there, waiting to be discovered in the split second one travels through it, from subject to object, from object to subject, over and over again… It points beyond sight and sound, indeed quite beyond thought, to whatever it is, or they are, that drives the words and listens to them. (46)

Abbott’s description is masterful, but in identifying Godot’s structural influence on The Unnamable entirely with dialogue, he leaves out an element of Beckett’s playwriting that was, I would argue, at least as decisive for this subsequent work: stage monologue, with its particular potential for negativity. Monologue in The Unnamable is not simply a literary form that subsumes or sublates theatrical dialogue into prose, as Abbott suggests. Rather, Beckett’s monologue is itself an inter-medial construction—a fact which may help account for The Unnamable’s anomalous narratological status. The novel has been described as a “border” case of interior monologue (D. Cohn 176-7); but I believe its form is better understood as a novelistic mimesis of stage monologue, an attempt to adapt the latter’s utopian theatricality for a medium that will stay on the page. Accordingly, I will resume and conclude my consideration of theatricality in modernist texts that aren’t plays by turning to this strange piece of fiction.

As we saw in the previous chapter, narratologist Gérard Genette posits the modern novel’s cultivation of interior monologue (which he prefers to call “immediate speech”) as the novel’s decisive “emancipation” from theater, establishing a standard of representation that would be particular to prose fiction and not “a pale copy of the dramatic scene” (173-4). But interior monologue is also the fictional form that severs all ties—if illusorily—with writing. As Dorrit Cohn makes clear, interior monologue aims at a complete subsumption of the textual apparatus: this form “can create the illusion that it renders an unrolling thought only if it effaces the illusion of a causal link between this language and a written text” (175). We might wonder, therefore, whether a novelistic monologue that acknowledges its own textuality perhaps regresses, in the same gesture, towards the parasitism-upon-theater that the device of “interiority” had helped it overcome. Might the intrusion of writing upon this interiority constitute something like a re-theatricalization of fiction? And if so, how?

The Unnamable tells us, fairly early in the novel, that his discourse is written; in this, he resembles the narrators who precede him in the trilogy: Molloy and Moran in Molloy, and Malone in Malone Dies. Malone, especially, fills his discourse with references to the act of writing; compared to this preoccupation, writing in The Unnamable draws much less attention to itself. This fact allows Ruby Cohn to state that the latter novel “has an oral quality that is unique

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42 In an article in the same issue of the Journal of Modern Literature as Abbott’s, Ruby Cohn argues for the central importance of “nonrealistic monologue” throughout Beckett’s plays (“Outward” 18). Cohn’s analysis, however, centers on soliloquy, defined as speech “for oneself” rather than for an audience (23), so she does not discuss Lucky’s command performance.

43 Some critics refer to the voice of The Unnamable only as “it,” since that voice’s radical ontological instability would seem to preclude any stable gender. It seems to me, however, that the specific references to sex throughout the novel foster the sense of a male voice: the narrator twice mentions having a penis (321, 326), and there are no corresponding claims to female anatomy; even more decisively, in a passage that (once again) thematizes the notion that this voice is not the Unnamable’s own, we read: “what can be worse than this, a woman’s voice perhaps, I hadn’t thought of that, they might engage a soprano” (357). The implication, of course, is that “they” haven’t. Accordingly, since it helps with clarity, I use masculine pronouns in what follows.
in written literature” (Back 108)—unique too, presumably, within the trilogy. Although Cohn goes on to offer a thorough account of the ways in which the Unnamable ongoingly “comments upon his composition as if he were the editor of a written manuscript,” and confirms that “despite his doubt about how he manages to write, the Unnamable does write” (Back 108-109), she concludes nonetheless that “the voice dominates, seeming to speak rather than write the novel” (118).\footnote{Elsewhere, Ruby Cohn simply drops the Unnamable from her count of the trilogy’s narrator-writers, noting that the novels of the trilogy are “battles for words and with words, which three of the [trilogy’s four] narrators explicitly commit to writing” (Back 78, my emphasis).} Similarly, Brater distinguishes The Unnamable from Molloy by noting that the earlier novel “keeps wanting to remind us that it is, in actuality, something written down” (Drama 8). With The Unnamable, Brater suggests, Beckett sheds this obsession, “[p]aring down his fictional enterprise to what a story has always been—a voice speaking aloud” (Ibid). Dorrit Cohn seems to agree, although she ascribes this orality to all the trilogy’s narrators: “Beckett’s narrators—Molloy, Moran, Malone—though they often mention working with pencil and paper, also ‘sound’ more like monologists than like authors. For their ultimate successor, the Unnamable, the origin of the text remains undecided, though it is discussed at some length” (177).

For each of these critics, the Unnamable’s writing appears ultimately less essential than the “sound” of his voice; this perception is what leads Dorrit Cohn to identify The Unnamable as “bordering” on interior monologue, noting that “a text that explicitly asserts its written status can border on the autonomous [interior] monologue if its fictional writer contradicts his scribal act” (176). There is certainly a self-contradiction in the Unnamable’s assertion of writing: “I have always been sitting here, at this selfsame spot, my hands on my knees, gazing before me like a great horn-owl in an aviary,” he says (287), but a few pages later: “How, in such conditions, can I write, to consider only the manual aspect of that bitter folly? I don’t know. I could know. But I shall not know. Not this time. It is I who write, who cannot raise my hand from my knee” (295). The critics just cited seem to take the self-contradictory nature of the Unnamable’s confession that he writes as mitigating, if not cancelling, writing’s presence in the novel—as if it means that the Unnamable is somehow just less of a writer (and hence more of a speaker) than his forebears.

But the contradiction that takes place in this passage has a deeper compositional significance: this is the first time the novel negates its own discursive authority outright, something it will do incessantly from this point on. The question of writing thus establishes the novel’s fundamental dynamic, instituting the impossibility of truthful self-report that will come to define the Unnamable’s entire predicament: he must try to speak of himself, and yet finds that whatever he commits to language is a lie. It is the consciousness of writing that here inaugurates the novel’s central project of unmaking its own representations, its own fictive scenes. “I shall not know. Not this time”: in the previous novel, Malone could present the logistics of his writing, which took place in bed. Now, by contrast, writing is precisely that which cannot be incorporated into the scene of a fiction; shattering the image of the “great horn-owl,” the fact of writing marks a transition from fiction to the vexed impossibility thereof. The written-ness of this text is therefore, I suggest, more determined than the above critics’ accounts imply. Not only does the Unnamable “contradict[t] his scribal act,” as Dorrit Cohn suggestively puts it; the “scribal act” is itself conceived as perpetual self-contradiction.

Writing does not disappear into the presence of voice here; rather, writing constitutes that presence as a problem, just as it does in Godot. And as in Godot, language is not spontaneous expression but interminable labor. The Unnamable’s characteristic syntax, his extended use of
commas, contributes to this sense of the written as *work*: “The slopes are gentle that meet where he lies, they flatten out under him, it is not a meeting, it is not a pit, that didn’t take long, soon we’ll have him perched on an eminence” (*Three* 352). The commas suggest that each phrase is provisional, tenuous; after each one there is only enough time to begin the next, no time to rest. The use of commas instead of dashes, even where a direct contradiction occurs, suggests inevitability rather than interruption: interruption is not called for, because no utterance takes itself to be complete in the first place. This sense that the discourse has perpetually not yet said what it has to say becomes explicit with the theme of the “pensum” that is the Unnamable’s task: “it’s of me now I must speak” (318). At the level of syntax, however, this ongoing deferral emphasizes the written nature of the text, by creating a kind of synchronic undertow: the phrases do not merely succeed one another, but rather each one signals that the next already has a place beside it. The commas turn the discourse into a *list*, an accumulation of language rather than a fluid, phonic stream. The Unnamable’s problem with words is not their ephemerality but, on the contrary, their tendency to stick around—much as Vladimir and Estragon are persecuted by the abiding of the “dead voices... like leaves,” a “charnel-house” (*Waiting* 223) whose actual scene just is a topography of writing.

Insofar as the category of “interior monologue” depends on a thorough dissimulation of writing, then, its application to *The Unnamable* (even as a “border” case) seems likely to mislead.\(^{45}\) And yet I would insist that the term “monologue,” shorn of its qualifier, does have a special relevance to this novel. In one sense, of course, this is trivially true: *The Unnamable* is a discourse in which the speaker refers to himself and his present situation, and frequently holds forth in the present tense, though he sometimes recounts a past-tense narrative. These facts alone would justify us in referring to the novel as a monologue, and indeed all the books of the trilogy, as well as Beckett’s four previous *nouvelles*, are sometimes referred to that way. But with a consistency and explicitness unmatched in these other works, the narrator of *The Unnamable* also constantly makes and unmakes the self and the situation that normally ground such discourse. The Unnamable tirelessly attempts to *place himself*, beginning with the novel’s inaugural question, and continually fails to do so. This process describes a crushing sense of writing as positively responsible for the actual, alongside an equally daunting awareness of writing’s negativity: the way writing can refuse to seize on the situation at hand and “go on,” go off, elsewhere. Through this double movement, Beckett describes a new theory of monologue—one which, I want to argue, emerges from his work on *stage monologue* in *Godot*. With *The Unnamable*, Beckett begins a literary extension of stage monologue; later authors will take up this project, even as—like Parks and Wellman—they return it to the stage.\(^{46}\)

It would be wrong to claim, however, that the Unnamable’s dialectic has no precedent in prose fiction. In fact, to see how the “diversion” of playwriting intervenes in Beckett’s trilogy, we should start by noting how this dialectic harks back to Beckett’s use of disruptively non-interior monologues in certain earlier novels. Near the beginning of *Watt*, Arsene, the departing servant whom Watt is replacing, holds forth for some 25 pages (out of the novel’s 250). The

\(^{45}\) Connor makes a similar claim about *Malone Dies*: “it is in reality very far from an interior monologue, for we are reminded repeatedly of... the uncomfortable and difficult materiality of writing” (68). I am suggesting that for the Unnamable, textual “materiality” has become the medium of existence itself.

\(^{46}\) To claim that *The Unnamable* manifests a kind of intermedial hybridity may be to contravene the critical commonplace that Beckett was rigorously dedicated to the purity of each medium in which he worked. Martin Harries has recently summarized this consensus and taken issue with it, arguing that “Beckett’s awareness of and involvement with forms of media” including film, radio, and television “altered his work for the stage” (12ff). Although the consensus has applied more to Beckett’s work in mass media and theater than to his work in theater and fiction, my argument for theater’s “diversion” of the prose could be seen as parallel to Harries’s claim about the effect of mass media on Beckett’s theater.
wild, virtuosic passage is introduced with the words “Before leaving he made the following short statement:” (39), a piece of silliness that suggests Beckett’s delight in abusing the convention of direct discourse. (The abuse becomes all the more outrageous in retrospect, when we learn that the narrator himself is only repeating what Watt has told him.) The third chapter of Mercier and Camier, the short novel Beckett wrote after Watt and before the trilogy, opens with the words “I trust an only child, I was born at P” and continues for some time in this autobiographical vein, but we learn on the next page that this is not the narrator speaking, but a talkative and “hideous” old man who addresses the protagonists during a train ride (27-29). Both of these passages exult in establishing an impropriety at once social and generic: the obliterating, narcissistic garrulity of these speakers in their interpersonal contexts is also the unwieldy grafting of an obviously literary, i.e. written discourse into what has been (Watt) or will be (Mercier) established as a scene of speech. The emphatic composition of such moments disrupts the convention by which the text is supposed to convey a spoken conversation; when the character’s speech begins to read like a piece of writing, the textual medium through which we encounter this speech becomes perceptible as such.

These irruptions of writing into the fictional oral scene anticipate the theatrical possibility Beckett exploits in Godot, where—as we have seen—script dialectically establishes its own incongruity with the scene of its enactment, as if writing cannot bear to confine itself within the scenes it has created. The part of the play that these passages anticipate most directly, however, is Lucky’s monologue, which turns out to be literally too much for the other characters to endure:

LUCKY: Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell [...]

[...it is established what many deny that man in Possy of Testew and Cunard that man in Essy that man in short that man in brief in spite of the strides of alimentation and defecation wastes and pines wastes and pines and concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown in spite of the strides of physical culture the practice of sports such as tennis football running cycling swimming flying floating riding gliding conating camogie skating tennis of all kinds dying flying sports of all sorts autumn summer winter tennis of all kinds hockey of all sorts penicillin and succedanea in a word I resume flying gliding golf over nine and eighteen holes tennis of all sorts in a word for reasons unknown in Feckham Peckham Fulham Clapham namely concurrently simultaneously what is more for reasons unknown but time will tell fades away I resume [...] the air the earth the sea the earth abode of stones in the great deeps the great cold on sea on land and in the air I resume for reasons unknown in spite of the tennis the facts are there but time will tell I resume alas alas on on in short in fine on on abode of stones who can doubt it I resume but not so fast I resume the skull fading fading fading [...] [All three throw themselves on LUCKY who struggles and shouts his text.] (141-5)

Lucky’s monologue, States observes, is the play’s “most sustained reference to the real world of men and nature” (Shape 40), and yet “the salient dramatic feature of the speech is that it

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47 In a certain sense, these scenes might be read as and intensification, even a parody, of the highly literary, hyper-articulate dialogue that appears in James Joyce’s novels and in Beckett’s own early fiction, including Murphy. On the diminishing role of such erudition in Beckett’s writing, see Ruby Cohn, Beck to Beckett (23, 28, 42, 74) and Fletcher and Spurling (27-30); see also Abbot, “Reading” 11.
simulates an explosion: as it builds, the human world... gradually ‘fades’ and is overwhelmed by a catastrophe that sounds suspiciously like the death of a star” (41). For States, Lucky’s monologue enacts the violent transcendence of its own reality, not only in that its register moves from the local (“camogie,” “Feckham Peckham Fulham Clapham”) to the cosmic or elemental (“the air the earth the sea the earth”), but also by way of its explosive form. The monologue burgeons beyond the verbal patterns and proportions of anything else in the play; it not only describes but is a cessation of life as we (as Vladimir and Estragon) know it. “In the context of Godot,” States continues, “this pell-mell madness functions very much like amnesia in the Beckett universe: it releases the character from bondage to a sensuous and temporal world” (43-44). The monologue’s theological scope does imply the possibility of such “release” with respect to thought’s object: hearing it unfold, we suddenly find ourselves faced with the prospect of the eternal, and to that extent lifted out of the “sensuous and temporal.” But we might also observe that Lucky’s speech is emphatically sensuous and temporal. It is sensuous in the feel of its sudden momentum, and its insistence on how compellingly, indeed compulsively, words can sound after their meaning has been exhausted: “quaquaquaqua,” “penicillin and succedanea,” “fading fading fading”; this exaltation of sound over sense is unique in the play.

Lucky’s speech is also sensuous in its emergence from the play’s most battered body, and the need of its onstage auditors to respond to it, and repress it, physically (“All three throw themselves on Lucky”), a response that emphasizes the speech as a physical transgression. Its duration, rather than making time stop, makes time extremely palpable, as Lucky’s tour de force begins to provoke the question—in his onstage and offstage audiences—of how long this can go on. Beckett’s stipulations for the other characters’ behavior during the speech occurs in four distinct phases: “Vladimir and Estragon all attention, Pozzo dejected and disgusted”; “Vladimir and Estragon begin to protest, Pozzo’s sufferings increase”; “Vladimir and Estragon attentive again, Pozzo more and more agitated and groaning”; “Vladimir and Estragon protest violently. Pozzo jumps up, pulls on the rope. General outcry. Lucky pulls on the rope, staggers, shouts his text. All three throw themselves on Lucky who struggles and shouts his text” (141-5). These segments emphatically mark the passage of time and, more specifically, the temporal condition of theatrical reception. Stage monologue thus becomes a way for language to plunge with redoubled energy into the embodied presence of performance, and to exacerbate its imprisoning present. And yet, as States suggests, the very fury with which language invests itself in the scene also accomplishes a kind of “release” from that scene—not only in the sense of a climactic expenditure of energy, but in the sense that the monologue ultimately exceeds the here-and-now by being too much for it. Rendered in response to Pozzo’s repeated directive to “Think!” (141), Lucky’s monologue is a theatrical misprision of interior monologue. It profits in comedy and in poignancy from the mismatch between this language and its concrete scene, a scene which reasserts itself, with violence, to quash it.

The unruly monologues in Watt and Mercier and Camier approach this dynamic, but ultimately the inner continuity of the novels’ prose form limits the havoc these speeches can wreak. If the rising duration of Lucky’s monologue heightens the crisis of his language with respect to its scene, the rising page count of Arsène’s monologue tends rather to abate tension by making us forget Watt’s presence: the monologist merely takes over the thread of the discourse. In the same way, the informational “stream” of reading presented a challenge for Henry James’s discontinuous sense of theatricality, which he re-asserted through his increasingly tortuous syntax. After devising Lucky’s monologue in Godot, Beckett too had imaginatively experienced theater as a potential for disparities greater than prose fiction had yet permitted him. Here was a
more profound, more exciting kind of failure: a flight of language, a virtuosic piece of writing that is emphatically of the world (sensuous, temporal) and yet finds no place there. How to transpose this dis-placement onto the pages of prose, pages that seem to guarantee that language, however errant, has its proper site—namely, by being that site already?

Beckett answers this question with The Unnamable, a book that simulates theatrical monologue by changing the way written prose relates to its here-and-now, establishing this relation differently than the novels that precede it. If Malone Dies already dwells on "the uncomfortable and difficult materiality of writing" (Connor 68), those difficulties remain something the novel’s discourse can be counted upon to convey. The novel certainly emphasizes the temporality and, indeed, the labor of writing; we receive this discourse as itself a performance, and never merely as a passive vehicle or transparent medium of sense. But Malone provides the discourse with a stable fictional origin (there is really no question about whose words these are), and the novel constructs a stable fictional setting: "Present state. This room seems to be mine... One day I found myself here, in the bed" (Three 176-7). Even the novel’s meta-discursive antics depend upon language’s ability to exist within a determined site: the fictional scene it generates and that reciprocally accounts for it, and the page itself upon which language plays. For example:

Sapo loved nature, took an interest

This is awful.

Sapo loved nature, took an interest in animals and plants... (Three 185)

Such moments depend upon a confidence that the pages of the novel Malone Dies are ultimately commensurable with those of Malone’s “exercise-book,” such that the former can render the latter without betrayal. In this double sense, Malone Dies is a literary monologue that has, and knows, its place.

48 Beckett’s discovery of this kind of monologue in Godot seems in fact to have been a rediscovery. Bair writes that in Beckett’s 1931 skit Le Kid at Trinity College Dublin, Beckett, as Le Kid’s father, Don Diegue, portrayed a very old man with a long white beard holding a small alarm clock in his hands. Don Diegue had a long soliloquy and Beckett wrote it to be the funniest scene in the parody. As Beckett talked, Pelorson, at the rear of the stage, began to move the hands on the clock, slowly at first, then faster and faster... Suddenly the alarm clock in [Beckett’s] hands began to ring... By this time, Beckett was shouting at full speed and his speech had degenerated into a series of nonsense phrases and syllables, wilder and wilder, with less and less coherence, until after a time it didn’t matter what he said because the audience was roaring with laughter... years later members of Le Kid’s audience remember the uncanny feeling they had when they first saw Waiting for Godot and heard Lucky’s speech. (127-8)

49 Or take the following passage from Malone Dies:

I have just written, I fear I must have fallen asleep again. In vain I grope, I cannot find my exercise-book. But I still have my pencil in my hand. I shall have to wait for day to break. God knows what I am going to do till then.

I have just written, I fear I must have fallen, etc. I hope this is not too great a distortion of the truth. (202)

The first paragraph arouses a sense of displacement from the page (figured too in the fictional misplacement of the page) which the second then assuages through a kind of retroactive reterritorialization.

50 This emplacement is obviously related to the earlier novel’s fictional consistency. As is so frequently remarked, The Unnamable is more radical in its attack on fiction, pursuing at a structural level the conviction that “there’s nothing to be got, there was never anything to be got from these stories” (373). But the very impatience with narrative richness can be understood as a utopian impulse. Jameson suggests that for Adorno, the urgency of maintaining a non-concretized utopia implies an antipathy to narrative itself: “We may... be tempted to conclude that he had little use for the very activity of Utopian fantasizing, whose reveling in details can only, from the standpoint of mass starvation, constitute a reprehensible luxury” Jameson writes, inquiring “whether this particular denunciation does not imply a repudiation of narrative as such” (Archaeologies 172-3). Jameson continues: “From the standpoint of narrative, indeed, Adorno’s fascination with the formal tour de force of Beckett’s Endgame brings us as close as we can get to non-narrative, while still remaining within the realm of the aesthetic (for Adorno an absolute requirement)” (173). We might dispute the idea that Endgame is as minimally narrative as Jameson suggests (indeed, we
When, after the “diversion” of scripting *Godot*, Beckett returns to prose fiction with *The Unnamable*, his practice of monologue has become permanently diverted from Malone’s bed of belonging. In the Unnamable’s famous “I can’t go on, I’ll go on” (407), that is, we hear a multiple echo of *Godot*. First, in that the play’s characters have literally shared these words: Vladimir says “I can’t go on!” at the end of his soliloquy (339), and Estragon says “I can’t go on like this” twice in the second act (239, 355) (the second time, very near the end, Vladimir chillingly replies: “That’s what you think” [355]). A more profound echo, however, arises from the theatrical condition that Lucky’s monologue carries to the point of crisis: the fact that “going on,” as talking and talking, implies going on, that is, going onstage, submitting extravagant language to the hostile actuality of performance. *The Unnamable* adapts this theatrical perception by embedding the hostile actuality within the principle of discourse itself, so that the page can only house its language in the same way the stage did: at grips. Writing ceaselessly constructs and falls foul of its present, in a dialectic modeled on a theatrical relation between text and scene. “The fact would seem to be, if in my situation one may speak of facts, not only that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak, but also, which is even more interesting, but also that I, which is if possible even more interesting, that I shall have to, I forget, no matter” (Three 285-6): *The Unnamable* is certainly not modernist prose at its wildest, or its most refractory. But it is prose that contrives to trap itself, to convert the fact that there is writing “going on” from a substrate, or given, into a palpable predicament. In this passage, the words that should help me navigate “my situation” immediately become my situation. The word “fact” starts out as a phrase of orientation, a means of conceptual mastery: by recognizing what “The fact would seem to be,” I might get the better of mere fact, transcend it. But the word is no sooner written than it crashes back to earth, confronting me as the verbal fact of the word “fact,” a thing I cannot quite get a handle on. This event, rather than my powers of speculation, seems to determine the content of the next clause: “that I shall have to speak of things of which I cannot speak.” The sudden reification of the word “fact” is then repeated with the words “also” and “I,” which obtrude in turn until all this language has obliterated whatever the main thrust of the sentence was going to be. Writing thus becomes a process by which language makes itself distressingly present: makes itself the scene, or “situation,” that it must then try to write itself out of.

The exhilarating momentum that develops in later passages of the novel comes from the intensity of this struggle, as writing starts racing, breathlessly, to outdistance itself:

The place, I’ll make it all the same, I’ll make it in my head, I’ll draw it out of my memory, I’ll gather it all about me, I’ll make myself a head, I’ll make myself a memory, I have only to listen, the voice will tell me everything, tell it to me again, everything I need, in dribs and drabs, breathless, it’s like a confession, a last confession, you think it’s finished, then it starts off again, there were so many sins, the memory is so bad, the words don’t come, the words fail, the breath fails, no it’s something else… (404)

Quotation does little justice to these sentences, since so much of their power comes from their length, the headlong determination with which they go on.\(^5\) This would be phase four of

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\(^{5}\) Jane R. Goodall has written that Lucky’s monologue is “the most visibly energetic and climactic episode in all of Beckett’s
Lucky’s monologue, the “General outcry” amidst which “Lucky pulls on [his] rope, staggers, shouts his text” as the others “throw themselves on” him (145). In *The Unnamable*, discourse has learned to become its own rope, and to pull against itself, heightening its own fury. Monologue emerges as this interminable attempt to get to somewhere else precisely by digging its heels in. It is *going on* (and on) in the mode of *going off*: this latter in the multiple senses of fleeing, raging, and exploding, “the death of a star” (States). This is a text at once tenacious and untenable.

“The place, I’ll make it...”: Beckett’s fiction thus appropriates theatrical monologue as the most rigorous form of desire, one that commits itself to the thought of an “elsewhere” by digging its heels into the hegemonic here-and-now. This discourse insists, in spite of everything, that there is something more than everything. Through the agony of its burgeoning, the monologue intimates what the present does not hold. That alterity remains necessarily unspecified, unreached; sometimes Beckett figures it as death, and sometimes as “Silence.” As Vladimir observes, though, to be dead is not enough; the dream of annihilation functions, in Beckett, as the sign of a life so radically different from *this* that it can manifest in our imaginations only negatively, as an absolute caesura. “Only by virtue of the absolute negativity of collapse does art enunciate the unspeakable: utopia,” Adorno writes (*Aesthetic* 32). And yet the moments of longing for nothingness are not themselves images of utopia; for Adorno, utopia inheres in the sustained relation to the this-ness amid which absolute negation, like Lucky’s supernova, keeps trying to occur. What Beckett discovers is that this relation is theatrical.

If monologue becomes a privileged form for utopian theatricality, this is not only because of the way its copious going-on digs into, and strains against, the present. As outrageously selfish speech, monologue also exacerbates the “co-” of theater’s “co-presence”: the community of characters within the scene, but also—as the savage response to Lucky’s speech is meant to mark—our own presence together in the auditorium. In *The Unnamable*, monologue enacts the perpetual unmaking and remaking of successive personae; not only those of the speaker, but also those of the audience his discourse implies. In this way, Beckett’s “page” monologue fabricates the same, violently negative relation to the social that stage monologue enacts in *Godot*. Chapter Five of this dissertation will take up the question of the postdramatic monologue as a form of resistant solitude which, precisely by flouting communicative aims, gives utopia a social contour. Rich in actual interpersonal proximity, the theater becomes the site of a furious loneliness, pitched towards the intimation of an other collectivity in which we *would not be the same*. This is where the thought of theater leads the Unnamable, whose imaginary attendance should remind us of another Beckettian stage:

… well well, so there’s an audience, it’s a public show, you buy your seat and you wait… it’s only beginning, it hasn’t begun, he’s only preluding, clearing his throat, alone in the dressing-room, he’ll begin any moment, or it’s the stage-manager… and the spectators, where are they, you didn’t notice, in the anguish of waiting, never noticed you were waiting alone, that’s the show, waiting alone, in the restless air, for it to begin, for something to begin, for there to be something else but you… (374-5)

“What is wants the other,” Adorno writes: “the artwork is the language of this wanting” (*Aesthetic* 132). For Beckett and those who follow, theater offers a place for this wanting, this waiting. And writing whispers that we’re not there yet.
Chapter Four
The Promise of “Playwrighting”: Suzan-Lori Parks

if you believe that history is in the present, you can also believe that the present is in the past.
(Suzan-Lori Parks, interview with Shelby Jiggets, 1996)

In Chapter One, I suggested that written plays—as distinct among the wider category of “theater texts”—use dramatic conventions to perform an imaginary self-staging. These conventions include language attributed to specific characters; a clear implication of events, even if these are only language events; and an evident distinction between spoken and unspoken text. All of these traits authorize our referring to something as a play; and “the play” is a term whose referent is, somehow, both a piece of writing and a live, embodied event. “Did you ever see it?” “No, but I’ve read it”: the very possibility of such commonplace exchanges proves that the word’s bifurcated meaning is no mere homonymy. The play you read and the play you see are, impossibly, the same thing. By writing within the conventions that make a play recognizable as such, then, an author inscribes this conflation into her text. The written play’s conventions actively promise that a performance—even the performance—is latent in the writing. As we saw in the last chapter, Beckett draws on this promise to elaborate a sense of writing as thoroughly enmeshed in, and indeed responsible for, the cruel reality that is the site of performance. Many have found his insistence that his plays be performed as written untenable, but this insistence only extends the logic of playwri(gh)ting’s fundamental conceit. That logic, moreover, has continued to bear theatrical fruit long after Beckett began his playwriting career. The present chapter will consider one of contemporary playwri(gh)ting’s most beloved practitioners: the American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks.

The idea that Parks’s plays inherit modernist tendencies is by no means a new one; on the contrary, many readers have pointed out her work’s affinity with both Beckett’s and Stein’s. No doubt, these perceptions have contributed to her attractiveness as an object of critical study; whether they also threaten to domesticate her work—as in Robert Brustein’s rather disturbing comment that Parks’s 2002 play Topdog/Underdog is “the homeboy equivalent of Waiting for Godot” (“Homeboy”)—is an open question. When prompted, Parks herself has agreed that the canonical modernists are an important influence: “I’m fascinated with what they are allowed to do, I guess. What Joyce was allowed to do or what Joyce allowed himself to do, what Beckett allowed himself to do, what Faulkner allowed himself to do, Woolf… What they got away with” (Drukman 72). Parks acknowledges that aspects of her work “com[e] out of that tradition of

1 Stein’s The Making of Americans furnishes the epigraph for Parks’s early short play Betting on the Dust Commander, a detail Deborah R. Geis picks up on in her book on Parks; Geis also pursues the topic of Beckett’s influence throughout the book (see Suzan, esp. 6-7, 23-37). Elinor Fuchs briefly analyzes Parks’s The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World and The America Play in relation to Stein’s landscape theater (Death 103-5). Steven Drukman discusses Parks’s affinities with Stein and Beckett (57-58, 70-72), and Robert Brustein has made this point repeatedly in his reviews of Parks’s plays. Jacqueline Wood argues that Parks adapts dramaturgical strategies from Beckett and Brecht: “she jazzes these European experimentalists’ dramatic strategies… to provide room for liberating black self-perception and self-representation” (34). Glenda Carpio analyzes Parks’s humor with extended reference to Beckett (196-224). Scholars have also placed Parks in a modernist lineage by including readings of her work in such books as The Other American Drama (Marc Robinson, 1997) and The Theatrical Gamut: Notes for a Post-Beckettian Stage (ed. Enoch Brater, 1995). At the same time, her modernism has also provided a target for the occasional rotten tomato, as when John Simon of New York Magazine called The America Play “a farrago of undigested Beckett and distantly ogled Joyce” (qtd. in Backalenick 27). Parks herself has identified Faulkner and Woolf as her most decisive modernist influences; see Drukman 72 and Jiggets 310.
doing whatever you want… and saying, ‘Here it is! You Mr. or Ms. Critic, you guys go away and think about it and exercise your brains and come up with something thrilling!’” (Ibid). The Critics have done their best to comply, in a wide range of scholarship that has frequently circled back to the theme of Parks’s “tradition” in one way or another. In what follows, I suggest that her relationship to her literary forebears is best understood in terms of the way she takes over and redirects the project we have traced in James, Stein, and Beckett: the theatrical imperative of undermining dramatic presence.

Reading Parks in terms of this project will also put her in dialogue with Adorno, a pairing that might seem strange to some of her readers. For one thing, Adorno infamously raged against jazz, whereas Parks has frequently cited jazz as a major influence on her work and a metaphor for her dramaturgy of “repetition and revision” (“From Elements” 8). It has become clear, however, that what Adorno meant by “jazz” was a commercialized, deracinated form bearing little resemblance to the adventurous music of Ornette Coleman and other jazz artists Parks discusses (e.g. Jiggets 316). Still, some of Adorno’s fundamental aesthetic values clearly run counter to Parks’s poetics as they are most often understood. Critics have championed Parks as a writer uniquely attuned to embodied performance, often citing her remark that “Language is a physical act” (“From Elements” 11). Parks would certainly not agree with Adorno that the “ideal” of artistic experience is “inward and mute” (Aesthetic 126), nor that performance is “usually below—not above—the fixated [art form], a vestige of an obsolete and usually regressive practice” (100). Indeed, the very concept of the culturally “regressive,” which Adorno frequently invokes, is at odds with the creative atavism Parks espouses when she writes that her work aims to “locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down” (“Possession” 4). And yet the last clause of this sentence—rarely emphasized in the readings that cite it—also hints at a convergence. For Parks, as for Adorno, the “fixated” or objectivated form of what is written down seems to represent the artist’s ultimate achievement.

As we saw in Chapter One, Adorno considers objectivation fundamental to the artwork’s autonomy, which for him means its ability to achieve the dimension of “foreignness to the world” that gives art its essential critical leverage. In various ways, critical response to Parks’s work has tended to downplay its autonomy, or foreignness. Sometimes this occurs in the course of readings that decode her plays in terms of straightforward political messages, rather than examining the ways in which the political and the formal/experimental at once constitute and complicate each other in her work. Parks has been vocal in challenging such responses, however, and her famous complaint—“Why doesn’t anyone ask me about form?”—has helped discourage reductive readings. More persuasive have been those responses we might call “co-creationist”: they account for the formal intricacies of Parks’s work, but characterize these as inviting the audience to a heightened level of participation. This is the model offered by Karen Jürs-Munby, the translator of Lehmann’s Postdramatic Theatre, in her introduction to the English version. Jürs-Munby names Parks in a very short list of “British and American authors whose texts could be described as postdramatic,” explaining her selection as follows: “All these writers produce

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2 In the only reference to Adorno that I have encountered in Parks scholarship, Drukman mentions the philosopher exclusively in order to make this comparison (58).
3 For an analysis and contextualization of Adorno on jazz which, to my mind, dispel the pertinence of his “jazz essays” for a discussion of Parks, see J. Bradford Robinson’s 1994 study “The Jazz Essays of Theodor Adorno: Some Thoughts on Jazz Reception in Weimar Germany.”
4 Parks made this complaint in 1990 during a talkback at Manhattan Theater Club (see Solomon, “Signifying” 73).
5 Jürs-Munby’s list is “Sarah Kane (especially 4:48 Psychosis and Crave), [the British] Martin Crimp (e.g. Attempts on Her Life, Face to the Wall, Fewer Emergencies), and Suzan Lori-Parks [sic] (e.g. The America Play, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom)” (6).
what could be called ‘open’ or ‘writerly’ texts for performance, in the sense that they require the spectators to become active co-writers of the (performance) text. The spectators are no longer just filling in the predictable gaps in a dramatic narrative but are asked to become active witnesses who reflect their own meaning-making and who are also willing to tolerate gaps and suspend the assignment of meaning” (Ibid).

This is a variant on the familiar story of a theater text that relinquishes its claim to determine performance—that is, relinquishes its status as a play—in order to become postdramatic; in this version, power gets redistributed among spectators rather than among “theatrical means beyond language” (Lehmann 55). As we began to see in Stein, however, the common perception of experimental texts as emphatically participatory can obscure an equally powerful valence of some of this work. The work’s obscurities, I would argue, produce a sense of indifference to and even rejection of the audience at least as much as they constitute an invitation to our faculties. There is a kind of defiant hermeticism in a passage like the following, from Parks’s *Imperceptible Mutabilities*:

SHARK-SEER: I dream up uh fish thats swallowin me and I dream up uh me that is then becamin that fish and uh dream of that fish becamin uh shark and I dream of that shark becamin uhshore. UUH! And on thuh shore thuh shark is given shoes. And I whuduht me no more and I whuduht no fish. My new Self was uh third Self made by thuh space in between. And my new Self wonders: Am I happy? Is my new Self happy in my new-Self shoes? (39)

Such passages may or may not leave us cruelly flummoxed; but part of their pleasure lies in a certain palpable unconcern with what we “get” or don’t—and in interpersonal terms, this is downright rude. If the “gaps” in the work are not just positions for me to fill but, rather, crevasses for me to fall through, the text might be suggesting that it would rather not have me around at all—that it could manage just as well on its own. This might be a delusion; after all, the work could not exist without its audience, much less without the social and economic systems that audience instantiates. But the work’s desire to flee from that fact, its current of unsociability, creates a meaningful variant of theatrical experience which the cheery picture of collaborative reception can easily obscure. In Parks’s case the jazz metaphor, with its connotation of collaborative improvisation, may have encouraged this picture. The direct address and playful, conversational tone she uses in her critical statements—“Write with yr whole bod. / Read with yr whole bod” (“From *Elements*” 18)—have no doubt also contributed to the sense of her work as soliciting our participation. But if we frame Parks’s writerly difficulty as a retreat from the audience, rather than an invitation to the audience, then we can begin to see how her compositions actively inscribe writing’s critical “foreignness” within work for the stage.

“Watch Me Work”: Writing as (Counter-) Performance

W. B. Worthen, one of Parks’s most thoughtful readers, has observed that her work “consistently locates a differential interface between writing and embodying” and “urges a rethinking of the relation between writing and performance” (*Drama* 141, 164). He notes that she “visibly brings the apparatus of writing into performance in ways that focus our attention to the duality of poetry and performance”—for example, by having characters announce their own

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6 To invoke the terms of another discourse, I would suggest that what Michael Fried calls “absorption” in painting—the attempt “to screen the audience out, to deny its existence” (*Absorption* 68)—should be understood as a mode of engagement made available within theatricality, and not primarily (as Fried maintains) as a resistance to theatricality. As I discussed in Chapter One, however, I believe that postdramatic modes accomplish the negation of theatrical co-presence more effectively than the dramatic model of absorption (i.e., the fourth wall) that Fried, reading Diderot, has in mind.
names at the beginning of a play, thus bringing a moment that conventionally belongs to play-reading jarringly onstage (169-70). Arguing that Parks thus “foregrounds the involvement of writing in dramatic embodiment” (163), Worthen’s analysis complicates readings that see such devices as establishing “performance [as the play’s] ideal medium” (Dixon 54), offering a more nuanced account of the ways Parks lets text haunt the stage.7

The relationship “between poetry and performance” furnishes the subtitle of Worthen’s book Drama and the subject of his ongoing critical thought, so Parks’s various ways of stressing and sometimes straining that relationship constitute an investigation congenial to his own. Unlike Parks, however, Worthen argues that written plays are “agencies,” or tools, of a theatrical performance that inherently exceeds them. When Parks’s own statements of poetics suggest otherwise, Worthen disputes and even corrects them: “As Parks suggests, [her use of repetition] creates ‘a real challenge for the actor and director as they create a physical life appropriate to that text’ (‘from Elements’ 9), or, more precisely, as they use the text to create a physical life outside it” (165, my emphasis). Worthen seems to account for Parks’s statements in this vein as a kind of residual mythology: “Parks’s critical account is haunted by a sense of the archive, the score, writing imaged in a more determining, prescriptive role in performance” (Ibid). In his readings of Parks’s Venus (1996) and, especially, of The America Play (1993), Worthen presents her artistic work as outstripping her critical statements by embracing “performance as an act of difference—from history, from writing—that creates revision, change” (176). Worthen thus winds up presenting another version of the “co-creationist” reading of Parks: her plays acknowledge and even allegorize their provisional nature as texts, awaiting and inviting theatrical collaboration as the “act of difference” that will ultimately make them meaningful.

This chapter is indebted to Worthen’s valuable insight that “the relation between writing and performance” is a central issue in Parks’s plays. But I also want to lend an ear to the statements in which Parks suggests that her texts are more, or other, than “agencies” of embodied performance events. I hypothesize that Parks’s vision of the actor and director who must “create a physical life appropriate to [her] text” describes a specific critical orientation that emerges in her plays as well as her poetic statements, a structure that Worthen’s “more precise” version of these relationships might not account for. Having watched her plays take shape in production from a young age, Parks surely knows as well as anyone that the script gets “use[d]” in creating “a physical life outside it”; and I think we should be curious about why her remarks consistently skew away from this common sense. For example, in a 2006 interview, Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr. asks Parks: “But what is the experience for you then, when you see these things on their feet? … Are there moments of discovery? Does someone else take your work and show you things about it, and it’s a sort of accidental genius?” Parks replies: “Moments of genius’ are all blessings, but I wouldn’t say my moments of genius are accidental…. Mostly I write something that’s good, I know it... the parts of my plays that people think are really good, I usually know beforehand. It’s not a surprise” (Wetmore 130). What’s fascinating about Parks’s response isn’t just her refusal to adopt the requisite playwright’s humility, the sense of grateful wonder we expect a writer to demonstrate when her work is “brought to life” onstage. Parks seems to be unabashedly taking credit for everything that’s “really good” in the productions—but in fact, she has shifted the topic of discussion from production back to text: “I write something that’s good, I know it.”

7 Dixon is presumably referring to the funny visual redundancy on the page, which performance would eliminate (as in “PRUNES AND PRISMS: Prunes and Prisms” [Death 101]). But Parks’s poetics of repetition, which I discuss below, seem to me to undermine this interpretation.
Accordingly, we can’t tell whether the “people” who like certain parts best are viewers or readers; either way, we get the sense that one might as well be the other.

In part, this re-centering seems to have a certain pragmatic, tactical value: as a writer, Parks occupies a particular position within the traditional division of theatrical labor, and she insists on the central importance of that position. The slip whereby she shifts attention from the spectacle of production to the scene of the writing, thus interposing the writer as the more interesting spectacle, has since been literalized in her performance piece “Watch Me Work”: on select afternoons in the fall of 2010 (and again in 2013), for seventy-five minutes at a time, Parks sat in the lobby of The Public Theater, typing away for all to see. Promotional material online presented the event as a fundamentally democratic experience, inviting people to work on their own projects during the piece and promising that “During the last fifteen minutes of the performance Parks will answer any questions the audience might have regarding their own work and their creative process” (“Suzan-Lori”). “Come on down and hang out with me and get some of your own work done,” Parks suggested in her own statement (Ibid). But despite the sincerity of the offer, the title’s bravado signals a different kind of project, which no amount of camaraderie could have displaced: the desire to present the scene of writing as a worthy spectacle in its own right.

Occupying a liminal space and an “off” time, “Watch Me Work” supplemented the theater’s onstage productions rather than supplanting them; but I would argue that Parks’s emphatic presence in the lobby constituted that space as a kind of reverse-backstage, a window into the authorial “work” from which, we are encouraged to imagine, theater itself originates (at the Public, Parks holds the Ibsenesque title of “Master Writer Chair”). Powered by Parks’s fame as well as her personal beauty and charisma, the performance enacted the fantasy of a writing that would not need the cooperation of other scenic elements in order to deserve our attention as theater. Parks may be courting narcissism, but her glamorized persona becomes an argument for the theatrical sufficiency of the writer—and, by inescapable metonymy, of writing. Her often-quoted essay “From Elements of Style” (1995), which Worthen cites above, includes sections with titles like “form and content” (7), “time” (10), and “humor” (15), but ends with one called “opening night”: “Don’t be shy about looking gorgeous. I suggest black” (18). Besides acting as an elegant reminder that black is beautiful, these last lines insist on the playwright’s spectacular value: don’t hesitate to give the show onstage some healthy competition.

Many scholars have discussed how language, in Parks’s plays, seems to become distinctively corporeal: her writing “has an almost overwhelming (a)ural component to its performativity” (Dixon 52), “concretizes language” (Ben-Zvi, “Aroun” 191-2), and presents
“Words… traumatically made flesh” (Kolin, “You” 49). The implication often seems to be that these qualities simply confirm Parks’s particular fitness for the stage, that her writing’s “performativity” makes it all the more apt for performance. Critics have rarely admitted a different possibility: that the distinctive corporeality of Parks’s writing might vie with, or even preempt, that of the performance. As Stanton Garner points out, language can “confront[the] field of performance with its own competing fields of embodiment and activity” (147). Parks herself consistently provides images of a writing that commands, or demands, more than its share of attention and power within the circuit of production. Perhaps the most outrageous of these images emerges during the Wetmore interview, when Parks is asked to comment on “the way Hollywood devalues writers.” Parks agrees: “too often, there are the industry people who don’t see the connection between what the writer does and the final product. Just like there are people who don’t respect their parents, or don’t respect the earth” (127). Although directed at cinema, the unwieldy comparison is surely meant to apply to theater too. The fantasy of the script as our parent is difficult to square with the co-creationist model of the script as our partner; and it is hard to imagine a figure more directly at odds with Worthen’s trope of performance as “outside” text than this image of the script as “the earth.” What Parks envisions here, if briefly, is a writing from which performance could literally never depart, a writing that would circumscribe all the eventualities of production—a page that would already be the stage. Indeed, the earlier “From Elements” essay contains a canny slip in this direction, one I am sure is intentional: “My interest in the history of words—where they came from, where they’re going—has a direct impact on my playwrighting because, for me Language is a physical act” (11, my emphasis). Parks explicitly embraces the conflation that is, as I’ve been arguing, built into the grammar of the “play.” To write a certain kind of text, for Parks and as per the improbable logic of the terms themselves, is already to make theater.

“Does the script provide the instrument for a revisionary, improvisational, unanticipated embodiment, or does it score its performers by representing the dramatic world and their

10 See also Bernard 694 and Louis 148.
11 For example, in Drukman’s interview with Parks and her longtime director Liz Diamond, he proposes that they are “both artists dedicated to the same thing: that is, theatre texts and theatre productions that accrue meaning in the performance, that are performative in the sense that they give up some authorial hold on meaning” (58). Parks interestingly resists this idea of authorial relinquishment (59).
12 Parks does prudently adjust this analogy in the following sentence, bringing writing down to the size of “the thing we all play with”; but the initial aggrandizing impulse is there, and I think it is significant.
13 In this sense Parks’s vision recalls the poetics of auteur director Richard Foreman, a formidable presence in the downtown New York scene where Parks found a home in the late eighties and nineeties. Foreman conceives of staging as “a series of problem solving tasks which ‘re-concretizes’ the text. It’s a matter of finding equivalencies for the densities and special ‘auras’ established by the graphics—typological as well as drawn—of the original manuscript” (Foreman 13; qtd. in Davy 120). Foreman directed the premiere production of Parks’s Venus at Yale Rep; for an analysis of this collaboration, see Garrett, “ ‘For the Love of the Venus’: Suzan-Lori Parks, Richard Foreman, and the Premiere of Venus.”
14 Coining the term “(w)righting history” to analyze the plays of August Wilson, Harry J. Elam, Jr. activates the same conflation. "Just as a wheelwright makes wheels, a playwright functions not simply as writer but as a play maker,” Elam writes; “… ‘(W)righting history’ implies that Wilson, through his three-dimensional constructions of the past, his meditations on black experiences in each decade of the twentieth century, is making history” (xvi). Directors, designers or performers might well object that the “three-dimensional constructions” involved are not, in fact, so clearly “his” (Wilson’s); but the strange viability of Elam’s apparent illogic is just what I want to focus on here. (Elam is also a prominent Parks scholar.) In Contemporary Latina/o Theater: Wrihting Ethnicity, Jon D. Rossini similarly adopts “wrighting” as a key term for what the playwrights he studies are doing: “Their is not merely an act of writing, of giving voice to the issues, or of righting, of correcting assumptions and revising limited models of identity and history. It is an act of wrighting, of creating something new in the process of correction and revision that moves beyond cultural assumptions that limit thinking and place Latinos in demarcated cultural spaces” (25). By insisting that their respective artists are “not simply” or “not merely” writing, when in fact that is exactly what the playwrights in question are doing, both scholars seem to me to elide the fascinating inflation of text (of what words on the page can be and do) that takes place in the writing-as-wrighting paradigm.
appropriate embodiment in it?” Worthen asks, observing: “This tension animates many of Parks’s formal innovations as a playwright” (Drama 165). I agree that Parks’s formal innovations revolve around the question of what the text is and does, but I think her remarks cited here suggest a third alternative to text-as-instrument or text-as-representation: text-as-performance-onto-uo itself. There is certainly nothing revolutionary about this formulation on its own, especially in an age where few literary works have escaped being read as “performative”; J.L. Austin himself, shortly after coining the term, questioned its usefulness since all words constitute some kind of performance, or doing (91ff). But in the vicinity (say, the lobby) of actual theatrical production, a text that “performs” in a specifically theatrical sense will be erecting itself as an alternative stage, thus taking a position towards theater as practiced that must be, at some level, a challenge. This need not entail procedures for sabotaging performance, or features that “work better on the page than the stage” (Muse 227). Indeed, critics have often claimed that Parks’s work is at its most “difficult” in print. Shawn-Marie Garrett comments that “When reading Parks’ plays, one is frequently reminded that it is much more fulfilling to see them performed,” even as she acknowledges that Parks “privileges the reader” in various ways (“Figure” 15). The two remarks are not contradictory: the logic of “playwrighting” privileges a reader most fundamentally by including the prospect of performance within her purview. We might even pause over the indicative mood of the “reminder” Garrett describes: the play reminds us that “it is” not “would be,” more fulfilling to watch it in performance, as if the text could simply summon its live counterpart into our experience. Parks’s plays contest production not by standing in its way but, on the contrary, by behaving as if they left little for production to do.

Like Beckett, then, Parks discovers in theater the opportunity to test out writing’s place in, or purchase upon, the actual. But whereas Waiting for Godot exacerbates dramatic unity by making writing achingly complicit with the dramatic present of its performance, Parks’s plays invest writing with the force of a rival performance, one that must “pull focus” from the present and presence of the stage. What writing undermines is not presence as such, as in the deconstructive theater described by Elinor Fuchs. Rather, it is by appropriating the phenomenal quality of presence for the alternative site of writing that these plays inscribe a structure of alterity within the actual. The performance event is both here and there, so reality presents itself as inherently multiform and malleable—the opposite of Beckett’s tautological “muckheap.”

The rest of this chapter will trace that logic as Parks develops it in her remarkable early play The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World (1990). Throughout this script, Parks’s work for theatrical performance positions writing both as a medium distinct from that performance and as performance’s vanishing point, its utopian end. After introducing the play’s

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15 Despite Austin’s conclusion, more recent scholars have attempted to specify a category of “performative writing.” Peggy Phelan, foremost among these theorists, writes: “The challenge raised by the ontological claims of performance for writing is to re-mark again the performative possibilities of writing itself. The act of writing toward disappearance, rather than... toward preservation, must remember that the after-effect of disappearance is the experience of subjectivity itself” (Unmarked 148). See also Della Pollock’s essay “Performativıh Writing,” in which she writes: “For me, performative writing is not a genre or fixed form... but a way of describing what some good writing does” (75). On the need to establish a relation between the theoretical discourse of performativity and the properties of theatrical performance, see Parker and Sedgwick. Worthen himself adopts performativity as a key lens for reading Parks in Drama (see also “Citing History”), as does Dixon; they both use the term to triangulate text and performance, although I would argue that neither scholar ultimately dismantles the text/performance binary.

16 See also Malkin 159-172 and Dixon 49-50. For an argument that Parks’s sprawling 365 Days/365 Plays is actually a closet drama, see Muse 225-231.

17 Fuchs writes: “In a motion that parallels Derrida’s deconstruction of speech and writing, theatre practitioners have begun to expose the normally ‘occulted’ textuality behind the phonocentric fabric of performance. Textuality has emerged in a number of new roles... one can question whether the long-cherished Presence of the theatrical art can fully survive this intrusion by its formerly banished term” (“Presence” 166-7). See Chapter One above.
explicit thematic of writing, I’ll examine the way Parks uses repetition and other devices to displace the audience’s investment from more traditional surfaces of engagement towards the shadowy, not-quite-present site of composition. Next, I’ll focus on a figure that emerges at the end of the play—the burning page—and suggest that this figure emblemizes the ethical and aesthetic complexities Parks discovers in the question of writing, particularly in the play’s brilliantly disturbing central monologue. Finally, this analysis will return to Adorno, arguing that Parks’s “playwrighting” reveals surprising theatrical possibilities latent in his theory—and, like Godot, excavates the utopian dimensions of writing for the stage.

Writing the Death of the Last Black Man

Practically any of Parks’s plays could serve as a point of departure for exploring her theatrical poetics of writing. Her use of footnotes in several plays—sometimes spoken aloud by performers, sometimes left on the page for the reader—has drawn much attention, as have her various adjustments to the orthographic conventions of dramatic form. While her later works, such as The Red Letter Plays (1999-2000), and 365 Days/365 Plays (2006-7), tend not to feature the same difficulty, poetic language that she develops in her early texts, they foreground writing in other ways. For example, the two Red Letter protagonists are, respectively, learning to write (In the Blood) and branded with an alphabetic wound (Fucking A); in Fucking A, several passages are spoken in a made-up foreign language, to be accompanied by “a nonaudible simultaneous English translation” (115); and the entire premise of 365 Days/365 Plays is Parks’s ambitious commitment to writing a play a day for a year, a vision that has been read as the piece’s “central focus” (Muse 224). Nevertheless, of all her plays, The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World (1990) works and re-works the question of writing in the most formally and ideologically complex ways, and I will focus on that piece here.

In a series of seven scenes (an “Overture,” five “Panels,” and a “Final Chorus”), the play presents the ambiguous homecoming of a man designated “Black Man With Watermelon.” Black Man has been killed in the electric chair (in Panel I) and has been hanged from a tree (in Panel III), but continues to show up in the home he shares with “Black Woman With Fried Drumstick.” Before, between, and after the three domestic scenes that rehearse this story, there are choral sections in which a cast of other “figures” joins the couple in riffing poetically on themes of what we might provisionally call black experience—and on the titular death itself. In the course of

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18 Scholars who write about Parks’s work rarely fail to engage with these features, even where this is not their explicit focus. Harvey Young claims that “the bulk of the popular and academic studies of the playwright emphasize Parks’s use of ‘spells’, non-verbal meaningful moments; her use of repetition; her tendency to spell phonetically and the deliberateness of the typographical layout of her pages” (29). Jennifer Johung’s article on Parks’s “spells” and Elizabeth Dyrud Lyman’s analysis of her scripts’ page layouts, both of which focus on Venus, are particularly sustained examples of this kind of attention. Kurt Bullock analyzes Parks’s use of footnotes in The America Play, arguing that they serve “in undermining traditional historic-narrative” (82); Dixon discusses them as a “valorization of textual performativity over o(au)ral performativity” (62-63); Malkin interprets them in terms of intertextuality (156-7). See also Geis, Sizan 19-22. For treatments that focus on the thematization of writing as such in Parks’s plays (the current chapter does), see—in addition to Worthen’s Drama—Johung, Malkin (155-182), Sullivan (242-267), and Dixon.

19 All references to the script refer to the version published in The America Play and Other Works (1995). This version significantly revises an earlier script, published in Theater in 1990, before the play had been produced.

20 This phrase, and its variants, circulate uneasily throughout Parks criticism. Parks has said she finds it “insulting to say my plays are only about what it’s about to be Black—as if that’s all we think about, as if our life is about that” (qtd. Solomon, “Signifying” 74); this and other remarks echo the Introduction to Henry Louis Gates’s Figures in Black (xxv-xxxii), a work Parks cites elsewhere, in which “the Black Experience” appears repeatedly in scare quotes. Most critics acknowledge the danger of pigeonholing Parks (often quoting her on the subject) but proceed to read her plays in terms of something like “black experience”—rightly, I think, especially for the early plays. See e.g. Solomon, “Signifying”; Robert Brustein’s prickly review of The Death in The New Republic (“What Do Women Playwrights Want?”); Malkin 156-7; and Rayner and Elam, who write: “the
these passages, several refrains emerge, and one of the most striking and insistent refrains is about writing:

**YES AND GREENS BLACK-EYED PEAS CORNBREAD:** You should write that down and you should hide it under a rock. This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world. (102)

[...]

Mmmm. Yes. You should write this down. You should hide this under a rock. (103)

[...]

You should write it down because if you don’t write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You should write it down and you should hide it under a rock. You should write down the past and you should write down the present and in what in the future you should write it down. It will be of us but you should mention them from time to time so that in the future when they come along and know that they exist. You should hide it all under a rock so that in the future when they come along they will say that the rock did not exist. (104)

[...]

You will write it down because if you don’t write it down then we will come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You will write it down and you will carve it out of a rock. [...] You will carve it all out of a rock so that in the future when we come along we will know that the rock does yes exist. (130-1)

These lines convey, in fairly clear fashion, the stakes of writing within the play’s universe, and of Parks’s ongoing “interest in the artifact” (Geis, Suzan 34). As Alice Rayner and Harry J. Elam argue, the play labors to present “evidence of both the reality of the African American experience and, more importantly, of its absence in written Western history…. The effect of excluding written stories in a writing culture is for that culture to be haunted by an unsymbolized loss,” whereas “To place the past symbolically by telling stories, writing it down, securing it under a rock, is to end the haunting” (455-8). Yes And Greens’s refrain sounds the need for a written record and legacy, a longing for what Parks calls “inclusion in the canon of history” (“Possession” 5). In the context of this piece, lack of access to writing threatens a *final* death sentence, clinching the mandate of official and unofficial white “justice” and making the Black Man’s death valid for all time. This is the terrifying prospect not only of existing no longer, but of never having existed at all.

Parks herself has repeatedly said that she writes against a “fabricated absence” of blacks in the dominant historical record, “the story that you’re told that goes… You weren’t here and you didn’t do shit!” (Drukman 67). Critics have understandably seized upon this straightforwardly political pursuit within Parks’s project, and Yes And Greens’s refrain is one of its most explicit articulation within the plays. 21 But it should be clear by now that the injunction

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21 “In short,” Robert Brustein summarizes in his brief review of The Death, “Parks deconstructs language as a means of establishing the place of blacks in recorded history” (“What” 30). This sense of historiographic restitution as the heart of Parks’s project reappears throughout the scholarship on her work, as when Haike Frank argues that Parks is “reworking events that have only received a thorough documentation from the white perspective” in order to “destabiliz[e] and deconstruct[ the] content of this documentation” (5), or when Kolin notes that “Parks inscribes African American truths otherwise lost, discredited, or denied in the white world” (“You” 60). Mary F. Brewer similarly writes that “The America Play aims to displace the White subject that
to “write it down” is not just a synecdoche for representation in general; amidst the larger project of “re-membering” occluded black histories (“Possession” 5), the desire for writing in particular emerges as a distinct formal issue apart from the overriding ethics of historical recognition. I think the resistant force of “write it down” needs to be read not only in relation to the obliterating effects of dominant historiography (“You weren’t there”), but also in relation to the performance medium—the site at which, constitutively, you are. In the context of theatrical performance, that is, “You will write it down” is not simply a demand for manifestation, for presence where there has been absence. Rather, the refrain articulates a double demand for remediation: it insists on the need for a political “action of remedying or correcting something” (“remediation”), but imagines this action as a formal transposition whereby what happens in the medium of performance gets taken up into an alternate medium.22 As the future tense of “You will” makes clear, this transcription does not take place within the thing we are watching, here and now: writing is represented as a moment yet to come.

At the same time, the temporal span of the play as a whole is structured by what we might, bending Adorno’s famous “wrong life” to our own purposes, call wrong liveness (see Minima 38-39). Black Man outlives his own deaths through a corporeal persistence that tortures both himself and his partner. His perpetual resurrection is not a blessed immortality, but a prolonged twilight of pain and disorientation: “Couldnt find us. Think I got lost. Saw us on up uhhead but I flew over thuh yard. Couldnt stop. Think I overshot…. Overshot. Overshot. I would like tuh move my hands” (109).23 In the play’s premiere production, Black Man’s inability to stay dead became darkly comic as a torment for Black Woman, who repeatedly greeted his returns to consciousness with annoyance bordering on rage (in Panel III); her line “Dont move” (119) was delivered as an earnest plea. On the other hand, the play also suggests that Black Woman herself is complicit in keeping her man monstrously alive after his time, and revisions that took place between the play’s premiere and its publication emphasize the necessity of Black Woman’s coming to accept his death. The other Figures take part in this transformation: thus in the First Chorus, Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut recites a litany that begins “Yesterday tuhday next summer tuhmorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317 dieded thuh last black man in thuh whole entire world...” as Black Woman repeatedly interjects: “No”; in the Final Chorus, Black Woman herself speaks the litany, while the entire cast repeats the word “Yes” (111, 129).24 For his part, Black Man begs to be released from his undead state. “Make me uh space 6 feet by 6 feet by 6,” he implores, “... I would like tuh get up and go” (109). So if, as Alisa Solomon has resides at the heart of dominant U.S. discourse in order to afford African Americans the novel possibility of writing into being their contributions to the making of the nation” (165). Heidi J. Holder usefully points out, however, that this “corrective” function whereby black playwrights “attempted to fill a perceived void in their history” actually belongs to an earlier dramaturgy, from which she differentiates Parks: “In the plays of Parks, in particular, this business of staring into an absence and attempting to see it clearly has involved not a simple filling of a blank spot, but an intensification of and obsession with absence” (19). Rayner and Elam argue that The Death “takes stories and figures that have been excluded from history, not simply for their usefulness in writing a more comprehensive truth, but to put those images together in a theatrical, performative ‘body,’” (456).

22 As Louise Bernard observes, Yes And Greens’s refrain “speaks not only to the urgency of History and the need to reclaim experiences and traditions, but also to the complex creative process of transcribing the oral... into the scribal and then into the theatrical space of performance” (690). I agree, but I want to focus on the scribal as much more, for Parks and for this play, than a midpoint between the oral and the theatrical. On remediation, see n. 45 below.

23 Here I would question Marc Robinson’s claim that the play’s characters “take great pride in eluding finality” (Other 190)—although, as I discuss below, I do think they take pride in elusiveness more generally.

24 In the play’s Overture, too, Black Woman With Fried Drumstick speaks these lines, anticipating the acknowledgment she will arrive at in the last scene. Parks thus bends the dramatic “character arc” into a full circle, a geometric move she discusses in "From Elements" (8-11). In the premiere, however (and in the version of the play published earlier in Theater), Black Woman spoke these lines also in the First Chorus; that is, she never didn’t speak them, so the lines didn’t carry this particular “arc” at all, circular or otherwise.
written, “the play implies [that] the greatest death of the Black Man is his being written out of history” (80), death itself is not the unambiguous evil we might expect it to be. Rather, Parks creates a certain productive tension between the aim of forestalling “the death of the last black man” by inscribing black life into the record, on the one hand, and the aim of completing that death, burying the dead and acknowledging his passing, on the other. The play thus articulates two very different needs at once: the need to end the denial, and deferral, of death by ratifying and thus completing it (“Yes”), and the almost opposite need to fend off cultural oblivion by inaugurating and maintaining a textual trace.

This double desire—to lay the Black Man to rest on the one hand, to protest his genocidal obliteration on the other—has been described as a “paradox” that animates the play (Carpio 221-2). While this is certainly a powerful tension within the work, I am less inclined to view it as a paradox strictly speaking than as the program for a particular imaginative shift. The major task the play outlines is that of converting one form of persistence into another: the fantasmatic afterlife of the scene into the objective endurance of the text. Parks positions writing at and as the end of performance—“You should write this down,” the deictic gesture sweeping performance along into the textualizing mandate. This is not to say that Parks’s logic disdains or devalues live enactment; on the contrary, the repetition and revision of Yes And Greens’s words emphasizes the ongoing and differential way in which the successive moments of performance generate significance. “[O]nce before you die try dancing around as you write,” Parks advises in “From Elements” (15). Like the image of the dancing playwright, Yes And Greens’s refrain advocates a writing that has moved through performance—in this play, an elaborate, collective, emphatically embodied performance of mourning. But Parks also suggests that performance lives on borrowed time. It arises like a “ghost” from the closure to which it will ultimately be summoned once again:

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Thuh page.
ALL: 6 BY 6 BY 6.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Thats right. (130)

The pull of this trajectory, I think, explains the logic of a line that becomes a motif in the play’s Final Chorus: “Somethins turnin. Thuh page” (128-131). The line only appears within the final scene, a choice that runs counter to the play’s prevalent patterns of repetition. Positioned thus, it announces the imminent end of the play: the turning of the page, it implies, can impart finality when even “death” could not. It is because the page can be turned, the book can be shut, that the presence of performance can be captured into history. By emerging when it does, this line asks a theatrical audience to envision the script as the enclosing frame—the monumental tomb—of the live event.

It would probably be inappropriate, here, to recall the Disney device where we zoom out from a story’s final image to see it as the last page of a hefty-looking book, “The End” scrawled beneath it. In fact, however, Parks herself will later appropriate this image for the last segment of 365 Days/365 Plays, which reads: “Lights bump back up to white-hot. / Zoom. / Onstage, the manuscript of 365 Days/365 Plays” (376). The ending of The Death anticipates this move, which asserts the completed and enduring artifact of the text—what Adorno calls its “objectivation”—as the culmination of performance. We might speculate that the Disney device, born long before the VCR, was designed to reassure the viewer that the ephemeral experience of movie-watching could nonetheless still be hers to keep, that she could slip it into her pocket or place it by her bed—and perhaps also to remind her that the experience was, after all, repeatable (for a small

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25 Yvette Louis suggests that The Death posits writing as as a means of “incorporat[ing] oneself” (148).
fee). The ending of 365 may share, to some extent, in this cozy commodification; but in The Death, the affective weight of textual recapture falls less on the promise of future re-playing than on the promise of respite from re-playing—the prospect of a closure, if not an absolute end, to mourning. We see this prospect in the relation between the play’s opening and closing lines:

BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: The black man moves his hands.

(A bell sounds twice) (101)

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Thuh black man he move. He move. He hans.

(A bell sounds once)


On the one hand, the penultimate line’s doubling of the first announces the survival of repetition, the continued pertinence of an experience that has emphatically not been laid to rest. This could go on forever—or, in the endlessly re-citable words of Beckett’s Unnamable, “I can’t go on, I’ll go on.” Parks points up the transmissibility of language, and indeed of body language, across different bodies; buried or not, Black Man seems to possess Black Woman and to speak through her, just as—we infer—other Figures must have been speaking through him. The play’s very last line, though, is new, and I think we are asked to hear it as both a confirmation and a restriction of Black Woman’s repetition. “Hold it” is a command to keep something, to maintain its existence; and as Deborah R. Geis writes, “‘Hold it’ also means an order to stop, to put an end to what they are doing; in a play that in some ways (like Godot) is condemned to endless repetition, there is also a request to stop destructive versions of history, to wait and think. The play itself is ultimately the final container to ‘hold’ the re-membering of the Black Man” (Suzan-Lori 73-74). But Parks, in a remark Geis quotes, makes it clear that “the play itself” functions this way only as a piece of writing: Black Man’s “last resting place,” Parks says, “is within the pages of the play—it’s a grave” (Ibid 74, my emphases). The different meanings of “Hold it” coalesce in this figure of the specifically textual tomb, which cradles, keeps, and preserves its bodies even as it fixes them in place and limits their obsessive circulation, their performance in the present. The line is seven beats long, which means that the ear adds a final, silent beat at the end to make eight: the play thus ends by silently observing its own conclusion, as if with a breath of relief at having finally passed on. The injunction to “Hold it” participates in precisely the kind of “survival” that Rebecca Schneider has recently theorized as performance’s ongoing relation to textual and corporeal remains: “a critical mode of remaining, as well as a mode of remaining critical: passing on, staying alive, in order to pass on the past as past, not, indeed, as (only) present” (7). For Parks, too, survival means holding “the past as past,” attending to the page/grave which alone might contain mourning’s painful presentness. Like all the postdramatic works we’ve read, The Death treats presentness as a problem; here, the problem is the unmanageable and wildly painful still-going-on of things that happened long ago, the way “suffering inheres in the world we live in now” (Carpio 198). The play immerses us in the fact that slavery and lynching, for example, are still operating right now.

Marc Robinson makes a similar observation (Other 189), which Geis quotes; see n. 53 below.

The fact that people rise from the grave throughout Parks’s work (see Geis, Suzan 12) does not invalidate the search for a final resting place; on the contrary, this motif suggests that the “true” grave has yet to be found, and sets up writing as that sought-after, decisive entombment. Thus I would question Kurt Bullock’s contention that “Parks illustrates in The America Play that the grave can never be a site of rest” because “the artifacts that remain, including the ‘last words’ of the individual, retain permeable and diachronic meaning” (84). While The Death also presents the grave—and the page—as an ambiguous resting place, I believe that in both plays the promise of textual ar-rest is less as a myth to be debunked than a site of keen longing.

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108
whereas they exist only insufficiently in the “canon of history.” The last form given to Yes And Greens’s refrain begins with a threat that expresses this sense of a wrong liveness: “You will write it down because if you dont write it down then we will come along and tell the future that we did not exist” (130, my emphasis). Earlier it was “they” who would “tell the future that we did not exist” (104); what the play seems to discover in this shift is that, murderous as the dominant culture’s historiography may be, there is something equally terrifying in the prospect of letting performance have the last word. The ghost, the performer who will “come along and tell,” threatens to obliterate the past and commandeer the future through her own emphatic presence—unless that presence is transfigured as writing.

“Grave departures”: A Postdramatic Poetics of Mourning

Throughout her work, Parks pursues a strategy she refers to in “From Elements” as “Rep & Rev” or “repetition and revision”: “a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic in which the composer or performer will write or play a musical phrase once and again and again; etc.—with each revisit the phrase is slightly revised” (8-9). “I’m working to create a dramatic text that departs from the traditional linear narrative style to look and sound more like a musical score,” Parks explains, suggesting that the ‘climax’ could be the accumulated weight of the repetition” and asking: “What does it mean for characters to say the same thing twice? 3 times? Over and over and over and o-vah…. How does this Rep & Rev—a literal incorporation of the past—impact on the creation of a theatrical experience?” (9-10) While Rep & Rev appears, to different degrees, in all of Parks’s plays, The Death is her fullest exploration of its compositional and affective resources. Not only the choral sections but the three scenes featuring Black Man and Black Woman cycle through repeated phrases and actions. As Parks’s exposition of Rep & Rev suggests, this layering not only produces a musical consistency but also conveys a psychological content—mourning tinged with obsession:

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: You comed back.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: —Not exactly.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: They comed for you tuh take you.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Turned on thuh juice on me in me in I started runnin. First just runnin then runnin towards home. Couldnt find us. Think I got lost. Saw us on up uhhead but I flew over thuh yard. Couldnt stop. Think I overshot.

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: You comed back.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Overshot. Overshot. I would like tuh move my hands. (108-9)

While Parks’s use of repetition does break with the dramatic economy of progressive action, this repetition does not—as it can, for instance, in Stein—work to disable psychological identification. On the contrary, passages like these provide a kind of affective grounding for other, more free-floating and formalistic moments of repetition, drawing them into the orbit of heartbreak: the formal refusal of dramatic progression becomes identified with the emotional state of not being able to “get past” what has happened, and the danger of not getting through it. When, near the end of the play, Black Woman finally seems to accept the reality of her Man’s death, the intensity of the moment certainly brings “the accumulated weight of the repetition” to bear, creating a powerful experience of accomplished mourning. It is difficult to convey this
experience by quoting an individual passage, although lines like the following suggest how forcefully repetition functions as both form and theme:

BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: I got uhway?
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Miss me.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Miss me.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Re-member me.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Re-member me.

[...]
Call on me sometime. Hear? Hear?
Thuh dirt itself turns itself. So many melons. From one tuh 3 tuh many. Look at um all. Ssuh garden. Awe on that. Winter pro-cessin back tuh back with spring-time. They roll on by us that way. Uh whole line gone roun.... (128)

As Rayner and Elam observe, this scene “relies on traditional senti mentality and induces radical change—the catharsis as a wife kneels at the coffin of her dead husband. Yet the coded and loaded dialogue complicates the purely visceral response of an audience, requiring not only emotional but aural and intellectual recognition” (459). The text is nothing if not complicated; I would suggest, though, that rather than undermini ng the scene’s “visceral” force, its “aural and intellectual” reverberations themselves become viscerally charged. This interpenetration takes place by way of a particular doubleness within repetition itself, a doubleness Parks exploits with great effectiveness in this play. Repetition, that is, can operate both as an invitation to emotional sympathy and as a sign of aesthetic structure, and Parks weds these functions almost seamlessly.

To see how this works, we might start by turning very briefly to Freud’s account of mourning in the essay “Mourning and Melancholia.”

While Freud does not explicitly theorize repetition here (as he famously does in “Beyond the Pleasure Principle”), his description of mourning is suggestive for The Death’s resurrective repetitions:

Reality-testing has shown that the loved object no longer exists, and it proceeds to demand that all libido shall be withdrawn from its attachments to that object. This demand arouses understandable opposition…. Normally, respect for reality gains the day. Nevertheless its orders cannot be obeyed at once. They are carried out bit by bit, at great expense of time and cathetic energy, and in the meantime the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged. Each single one of the memories and expectations in which the libido is bound to the object is brought up [eingestellt] and hyper-cathected, and detachment of the libido is accomplished in respect of it. (243–4, my emphases)

Although Freud’s “eingestellt” does not connote the raising of the dead the way the English “brought up” does, the translator’s choice seems attuned to the supernatural tenor of this process of recalling, in which “the existence of the lost object is psychically prolonged.” Freud’s account resonates with The Death not only through this description of mourning as a kind of recalcitrant afterlife, which he twice calls “painful” (243), but also through his emphasis on mourning’s durational character. As a task that cannot be accomplished “at once [sofort]” but requires “great expense of a time,” mourning corresponds to Parks’s interest in subjecting dramatic “climax” (her quotes) to a kind of temporal distension. To return to the register of our James reading, we

28 Malkin suggests this intertext, observing: “In a metaphoric sense, Last Black Man is clearly a play of mourning, approximating Freud’s description of actively ‘working through’ the trauma of loss by remembering, repeating, and ‘re-experiencing’ that loss” (172). Carpio also argues that Parks’s early plays (including The Death) should be understood as “staging the work of mourning,” in part by creating a “metadiscourse on mourning” that refuses the sensationalism of black suffering (194-5).
might say that a Rep & Rev “climax” is not, as in drama, something that happens “at once” but rather something that has been happening, much like the “accomplish[ment]” of mourning. And we might further suggest that a dramaturgy of mourning is distinctively appropriate to a play that takes persistence itself as its problem; a play that wants to deal with ongoing historical suffering not by excising a single representative moment (as in naturalism’s loaded day-in-the-life) but by grappling directly with ongoingness as such. The durational dimension of theater thus glows, in The Death, with a peculiar thematic significance. The phrase “Not yet,” spoken seven times throughout the play (but not in its final scene), signals this recasting of theater’s constitutive “expense of time” as a mourning mode.

The expensive re-playing of life as afterlife is one way, for Freud, in which repetition structures mourning; but he also draws attention to another axis of repetition in mourning, if not exactly in these terms. “It is also well worth notice,” he writes, “that, although mourning involves grave departures from the normal attitude to life, it never occurs to us to regard it as a pathological condition and to refer it to medical treatment” (242-3). After further description, he adds: “It is really only because we know so well how to explain it that this attitude does not seem to us pathological” (243). Freud is, in effect, critiquing the fact that we naturalize one kind of response to loss when another, similar response (melancholia) strikes us as pathological, and as usual, he works to defamiliarize the phenomenon we “know so well.” But in the process, he repeatedly points out a fundamental social fact about mourning, namely, its remarkable (“bemerkenswert”) familiarity—the fact that we always seem to know it when we see it, that seeing it always feels like seeing it again. Freud suggests that mourning is a site at which the patterning of the social fabric stretches to accommodate a maximum of difference within the pattern: mourning’s resurrective repetitions are “grave departures” and yet they are departures we can expect to see again and again, departures everyone is supposed to make—ourselves presumably included. Mourning is repetition, that is, not only within the individual psyche of the mourner but also interpersonally, in that we recognize each mourner’s extravagance as one more manifestation of a common experience.

Enacting the structure of mourning, Parks’s Rep & Rev activates this empathetic circuit. At the same time, however, she also deploys repetition’s deeply defamiliarizing force. Within a literary context, Steven Connor argues, “It is repetition more than any other trope which draws the attention of the reader to the medium of language. ‘Natural,’ non-literary language is characterized by its flowing irreversibility.... It is at the moment when we recognize that a repetition has taken place that language begins to bulk in our apprehension as arbitrary, systematic, and material” (15). Repetition functions to denaturalize language, reminding us that what we are reading or hearing is something other than the spontaneous expression of someone’s soul—is, in fact, an effect produced through labor in the linguistic medium. In repetitive moments, we suddenly find ourselves watching a writer—or watching writing—work. And when Parks turns the defamiliarizing technique of repetition toward the fundamentally familiar and affectively accessible phenomenon of mourning, she is not exactly reclaiming repetition for the dramatics of “natural” motivation. As Rayner and Elam’s comment suggests, repetition in The Death always exceeds the immediacy of emotional identification that it also grounds, as in this passage from Panel III:

BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Sweetheart.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: SPRING-TIME.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Sweetheart.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: SPRING-TIME.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: This could go on forever.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: —Sweetheart.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: SPRING-TIME.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: Sweetheart.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: SPRING-TIME.
BLACK WOMAN WITH FRIED DRUMSTICK: This could go on forever.
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Lets. Hope. Not. (127)

Like any text spoken onstage, these lines can be accounted for with actorly objectives; in the play’s premiere, Black Woman’s repeated “Sweetheart” became an urgent appeal as she tried to get Black Man to swallow feathers. On the page, though, the passage suggests nothing so much as a musical explosion, and its assertion of form over content ultimately resists complete “domestication” even in performance. The insistent repetition of “SPRING-TIME,” at a level of emphasis deliberately disproportionate to its relevance, makes this feel like a scene of possession: the characters are not simply articulating what they feel, but lending their voices to the establishment of a visual, aural, and conceptual composition. If we identify emotionally with the passage’s evocation of mourning, as I think we are likely to do, this happens less through our identification with the characters individually than by letting the play work on us as a composition, a poetic complex. “This could go on forever” thematizes this difference: while the sentence might be said to condense the whole play, it refers more locally to the external imposition of these lines, which have their purpose and function apart from the individuals who speak them. The sentence is strikingly Beckettian, recalling Vladimir’s “This is becoming really insignificant” (Waiting 243) or Hamm’s “This is deadly” (Endgame 28): as in these moments, the character takes on a measure of autonomy from the play as such, only to cast responsibility for “This” back on the playwright. Of course, while the prospect that this could go on forever is an outright torment for Beckett’s characters, there is more room for ambiguity on Parks’s stage of mourning; mourning’s repetitions are, after all, attempts to keep the lost one in play. But whether Black Woman’s “This could go on forever” is weary or wistful (in the premiere it was both by turns), this particular line does seem at first to be hers in a way that points up the alien provenance of the “Sweetheart/SPRING-TIME” alternation—until the line, and Black Man’s rejoinder, are themselves drawn into the estranging circuit of repetition.

What is remarkable about Parks’s work here is not so much her departure from empathetic, character-centered identification as her determination to make such departures while retaining the mechanism of identification within an emphatically mediated structure: to make us mourn with a play, not just with the characters in it. Kimberly D. Dixon has observed that Parks heightens the way in which “reader and audience member are able to recognize the play’s overall structure” (56). By drawing out both the psychological familiarity and the defamiliarizing force of repetition, Parks keeps the dramatic circuit of identification activated but distorts this circuit, stretching it out past what we can see to include the inaccessible totality of the work itself. Through what we might call an affective structuralism, Parks appropriates the felt presence of concrete enactment on behalf of a poetic organization whose principle (and principal) is felt as elsewhere. The displacement of character in these moments is a synecdoche of the displacement that befalls the live as such: its con-scription into the alternate site of composition itself (i.e., Watch Me Work). Jennifer Johung writes that in Venus, the title character’s “subjecthood is a

29 Dixon links the audience’s heightened sense of structure to Parks’s use of “audible cue[s] such as a gunshot or a ringing bell” (56), a feature that again connects Parks with Richard Foreman (see n. 13 above and Geis, Suzan 59).
figuration that is formally displaced through the imprint of her name on the page—an imprint that... instantiates her presence as a figurative presence that must then approach subjecthood by way of a relational construct between subject, figure, and name” (45). Through devices that emphasize the character’s name as a mark of something that is not simply there, that is, Parks turns the question of who and what we are seeing into a process of constant relay, amidst which the performer’s present body—like her name—only serves as one glancing point of contact.

In fact, Parks has famously established her own preference for using terms other than “characters” to refer to the people in her plays. She discusses this point in a much-cited passage of “From Elements,” under the heading “ghost.” Here is the passage in full:

A person from, say, time immemorial, from, say, PastLand, from somewhere back there, walks into my house. She or he is always alone and will almost always take up residence in a corner. Why they’re alone I don’t know. Perhaps they’re coming missionary style—there are always more to follow. Why they choose a corner to stand in I don’t know either—maybe because it’s the intersection of 2 directions—maybe because it’s safe. They are not characters. To call them so could be an injustice. They are figures, figments, ghosts, roles, lovers maybe, speakers maybe, shadows, slips, players maybe, maybe someone else’s pulse. (12)

This insistence that her figures are “not characters” has struck many readers as an expression of Parks’s departure from naturalism. Garrett, for example, writes that Parks’s figure “connects the actor to her characters in a manner different from traditional mimesis: The actor does not represent a fictional individual but rather manifests many voices through her own... Parks’s use of the term figures emphasizes that her dramatis personae are only words, words, words” (“Figure” 8).

It seems to me, however, that in the passage above Parks is not really interested in distinguishing, say, deconstructive from humanist representations. More urgent is her insistence on the irreducibly mysterious nature of the entities she describes; itself a piece of poetic dramaturgy, the passage works as a demonstration of how to enact that mystery, producing a scene that continually asserts the partial nature of its own presentation. Saidiya V. Hartman has argued for the high political stakes of such “opacity” in black American cultural history: “the subterranean and veiled character of the slave song must be considered in relation to the dominative imposition of transparency and the degrading hypervisibility of the enslaved, and therefore, by the same token, such concealment should be considered a form of resistance” (36).

In Parks, this resistance produces a distinctive, postdramatic theatricality, which Marc Robinson captures when he characterizes her work as “a theater in perpetual retreat from visual, verbal, and physical presence, recoiling as readers and viewers reach toward it” (“Remarks”).

Robinson also asserts that “writing itself slowly recoils from our attention, as characters burrow into private, coded modes of expression” (Ibid). I find, however, that the passage above suggests a different logic. In its first sentence, the shadowy alterity of the “ghost” becomes an opportunity for the writer to assert herself as such. She writes and re-writes the scene through salvos of language (“say, time immemorial... say, PastLand... somewhere back there”) that take

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30 Linda Ben-Zvi similarly observes that “Parks offers figures who seem to exist solely through the words they speak” (“‘Aroun’” 191). Geis writes: “A ‘character’ in Parks is not grounded in psychological realism, Stanislavskian biographical motivation, or emotional affect” (Suzan 18). Quoting Garrett, however, Worthen points out that this kind of distinction may be overhasty: “I don’t think we can distinguish Parks’s figures from characters merely in terms of what they represent, as though characters must represent self-present psychological beings,” he writes, noting that “Parks’s roles are difficult to assimilate to Stanislavskian acting, but perhaps no more so than Sophocles’ or Shakespeare’s” (Drama 169).

31 Opacity is crucial to Adorno’s philosophy as well; as Asha Varadharajan writes, his negative dialectic “is animated by the opacity of the object” (74).
up the blank space of the ghost’s unknown provenance. The image of the “corner” that becomes so prominent here emphasizes the geometry of this productive partial occlusion—the opposite, incidentally, of the 360-degree visibility murderously imposed upon the Venus Hottentot in Venus. And the rich proliferation of preferable alternatives to the term “characters” likewise asserts a kind of conspiracy between partial access and poetic possibility, both of which are contained in the unexpected (and easily elided) word “could” in Parks’s “to call them characters could be an injustice” (my emphasis). If figures are not characters, this distinction is meant to protect them less from the depths of psychology than from the surfaces of spectacle: Parks wants to create theatrical beings capable of withholding themselves, whose reticence becomes an opportunity for virtuosic verbal speculation. Her refusal of conventional terminology is meant to disrupt our readerly confidence, our sense that we know what to make of these people; more objectionable than the humanist inflections of the word “character,” I think, is the simple fact that it’s a term we know our way around.32

“The Figures” listed at the beginning of The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World have names that mark, more aggressively than those in any other Parks play, how writing sets up shop amidst aporias or recesses of character:

- Black Man With Watermelon
- Black Woman With Fried Drumstick
- Lots Of Grease And Lots Of Pork
- Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread
- Queen-Then-Pharaoh Hatshepsut, Before Columbus
- Old Man River Jordan
- Ham
- And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger
- Prunes And Prisms
- Voice On Thuh Tee V (100)

Needless to say, many critics have observed the prominence of stereotype in creating these names. Linda Ben-Zvi, for instance, comments that “The man and woman… have been stripped of meaning by a white society and re figured as racial stereotypes. In the course of the play, Parks restores them to their place within the lives of the figures” (“ ‘Aroun’ 200-1). Similarly, Malkin writes that the food-words “peg them from the start as defiant caricatures of racist stereotyping. By the end of the play, these same foods become lyrical badges of a defiant identity re-created through theatrical performance” (167). Andrea J. Goto claims that Parks “intends her audiences to recognize that culture constructs stereotypes as a means of supporting absurd and racist assumptions” (114). The stereotypes of watermelon, chicken, and grease certainly operate as signifiers of racism; but beyond correcting that typology, Parks uses the ideological weakness of stereotypes to explode the principle of dramatic exposition itself. What she “caricatures” is not just ham-handed stereotyping, but the basic dramatic expectation that a play will present the whole truth of its characters.

In refusing to meet this expectation, Parks harks back to both Stein and James; her dramatis personae pointedly rejects the “bold strokes, black and firm” that James was faulted for withholding (Edel 212-213). As we begin reading down her list of Figures, or as we hear the

32 Thus the front matter of Venus distinguishes between “The Roles”—the main figures of the play—and “The Characters,” participants in a parodic play-within-a-play called “For the Love of the Venus” who speak such lines as “Aaahh me: / Unloved” (27). Modeled on an actual 1814 French farce (Worthen, Drama 183), the playlet’s “characters” are obviously not designated this way as products of psychological realism; rather, I think this label emphasizes the theatrics of visibility and easy access that Venus as a whole wants to challenge.
performers present their names in turn, we start off with a readerly confidence: “yup, stereotypes are wrong,” we say, patting ourselves on the back for getting it. But the third name begins to complicate things: “Lots Of Grease And Lots Of Pork” continues the “soul food” association, but doesn’t look much like the name of a person (if it were the last entry, it might seem to refer to a group or chorus). “Lots of Grease and Lots of Pork” can, however, still function at least grammatically as a subject; it is also a rhythmically simple phrase, easy on the inner (or outer) ear. The next entry, “Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread” tumbles from even this degree of clarity into a Stein-type syntax, and the tongue trips over its challenging scansion. By this point, we’ve become aware that there is something other than straightforward political parody going on, just as there is something other than the presentation of character. And this something other—which clouds both surfaces of presentation, the characterological and the political—is an irruption of writing. Language thus “begins to bulk in our apprehension,” to repeat Connor’s phrase, precisely where the presentation of character becomes narratively and ideologically murky. It is no accident that the figure with the weirdest name becomes the mouthpiece for textual longing, as we saw above; Yes And Greens Black-Eyed Peas Cornbread marks a writerly spot at which the pleasure of verbal elaboration outweighs the exigency of dramatic manifestation, a place where the question of who is here now (on the page, on the stage) becomes a trace of the absent poet. Through the rest of the list—and the rest of the play—we remain aware of a scriptive dimension by which the compositional project itself exceeds the sum of its parts, and the sum of its participants.

The Burnin Page

Despite these assertions of textuality, some readers have found The Death profoundly critical of writing as such. Malkin argues that the play “posits and develops two sets of images: images of orality, loose, unstructured, flowing, with its closeness to memory; and images of textuality, recorded, annotated, grammatically correct, with its affinity to history” (166). After quoting a passage from the play, Malkin remarks:

Note the difficulty in reading this transcription of a form of black language. It comes alive, however, and becomes transparent when read aloud, when performed as an oral text. The obscure written form attests to a conscious rejection of standardized scripture as itself a form of control. The reader’s difficulty in scanning Parks’s texts is increased by her transcription of… the visceral soundings of her figures. Nonsemiotic noises are often written onto her page as musical moans that evoke an uninscribed—perhaps uninscribable—preliterate world. (159)

As we will see in the final section of this chapter, Malkin is absolutely right to identify a longing for a “preliterate world” in this play; she is also careful to note that the play “charts [the] intersections” between “the recorded and the experienced,” rather than positioning these terms in a rigid logical binary (166). But readings that emphasize the “oral” orientation of Parks’s texts risk obscuring the ways in which Parks actively appropriates orality for writing. Far from

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33 Similarly, Kimberly D. Dixon argues that Parks’s plays actively explore “the tension between (a)ural and textual performativity” (55), concluding that “Parks does not favor either (a)ural or written textuality, but explores each side’s capacity for the performative, even as she underscores their inadequacies” (62). But Dixon, like Malkin, tends to assume that orality and textuality are at odds in moments where, I would argue, Parks is in fact asking us to imagine that the oral can be textually rendered and specified to an unforeseen degree. For example, Dixon points out that Parks “uses numerals instead of the full word, even for smaller numbers, a distinction only readers will see” (63); but I think that by making a choice like that within a play, Parks is actually insisting that such distinctions can be rendered in performance—and offering the textual surface as a model of that performance.
asserting the realm of the “uninscribed—perhaps uninscribable,” transcriptions like “thup,” “uuh!” and “gaw” claim the visceral as inscribable, writing the body into the scansion of the textual line. And while Parks certainly wields her right to depart from the grammar and “standardized scripture” of a dominant “standard” English, her ongoing practice has demonstrated that she is quite interested in developing a standardized grammar of her own. In naming her poetic statement “From Elements of Style” after Strunk and White’s ubiquitous manual, she playfully cops to this ambition; and she has included excerpts of “From Elements” in the front matter of all her subsequent plays, where it functions precisely as a guarantee of consistent, if deviant, grammaticality in her writing. Her poetics are less about “(Un)Grammar” (Malkin 166) than about defamiliarizing and hence emphasizing—and enjoying—the operations of grammar itself.

Nevertheless, it would be wrong to claim that The Death straightforwardly or univocally validates writing. Writing in itself is not the solution to the problems the play explores; rather, it is the field where that solution might be discovered. To that end, Parks’s figures are continually testing out different conceptions and strategies of writing—and in particular, different modes of relation between writing and the problematic present of performance. The question of what writing is for, or how it should function, arises strikingly in a passage in the Overture:

QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATSHEPSUT: I saw Columbus comin./I saw Columbus comin goin over tuh visit you. [...] I ain’t seen you since.

LOTS OF GREASE AND LOTS OF PORK: In the future when they came along I meeting them. On thuh coast. Uh! Thuh Coast! I—was—so—polite. But in thuh dirt I wrote: “Ha. Ha. Ha.”


The passage is so unsettling because it tells a story whose import is at once tremendously urgent and violently uncertain. On the one hand, it describes one of those “acts of defiance conducted under the cover of… seeming acquiescence” that we have learned to look for in the aesthetic traditions of oppressed peoples (Hartman 8). The sly writing “in thuh dirt” certainly invokes such traditions, suggesting an imaginative victory over the enslavers. And yet there is also something horribly insufficient about this gesture in the face of atrocity, a sense that the joke wasn’t really on “them” at all. 34 Neatly marked off in punctuation, the scribal “‘Ha. Ha. Ha.’” wears the face of an enigmatic artifact, an address to some future reader who might recognize its import. But the collective performance it authorizes feels like a burden, not a liberation: a numbingly complete set of sixteen uniform beats, fading into a sigh. At the very end of the play, this passage recurs in revised form:

HAM: In thuh future when they came along I meeting them. On thuh coast. Uuuuuh! My coast! I—was—so—po-lite! But. In thuh rock. I wrote: ha ha ha.


This time a more idiosyncratic fourteen beats of “Ha” fall short of the rote sixteen, as if the collective desire to sigh can now interrupt the ritual rule. The sigh is shorter than before, though, and followed by the new, ferociously powerful “HA!” 35 In its last moments, the play seems to

34 Carpio interprets this passage using Beckett’s ironical doctrine of “the risus purus, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs—silence please—at that which is unhappy” (Watt 48, qtd. in Carpio 210).

35 The premiere production lacked some of this specificity, since performers broke into actual laughing both times, rather than upholding a precise number of articulated “Ha”s. As noted above (see n. 24), that version of the play did not develop the “arc”
have found a writing that can enter the urgency of the present—and thus empower mourning to conclude. This is the text not just written in the dirt but “carve[d] out of a rock,” just as Yes And Greens also demands in her final refrain. Such a text would be distinguished by its endurance, of course—it is written in stone, there for the ages, part of the “canon of history”—but also by the work required for its production, effort we can literally hear in the heaving caesurae of Ham’s “But. In thuh rock. I wrote.” The now-unpunctuated and unquoted “ha ha ha” becomes part of the rhythm of his lithographic labor, a text that bears the action of its emergence as it completes that action. The increased pain of “Uuuuhh! My coast!” (compared to “Uh! Thuh coast!” in the earlier passage), the extra strain of being “po-lite” (not just “polite”), seem to fuel the hard work of carving. The play suggests, here, that the only writing worth doing—the only writing that will “Hold” a people’s suffering—is one that makes us Watch It Work. If this work is the working-through of mourning, it is also the enactment of writing as theatrical performance, at once emphatically corporeal and inherently reiterative, addressed to an audience of viewers from the unrecuperable site of the present’s prehistory. Imagining “thuh rock” as the medium of such performance, Parks offers the ultimate artifactuality as the acme of lived process, the deadest letter as the repository of the livest art.

At the same time, given that the rock gets carved precisely on the eve of transatlantic slavery, we might suspect that the work ethic involved is more complex than this reading suggests. Behind the labor of writing so keenly evoked lies the specter of forced labor, and capitalism’s reduction of human value to labor’s quantifiable “performance.” Might not writing—and particularly writing so strongly imaged as work—be just another kind of participation in that economy? This question could return us to Parks’s invocation of stereotypes, discussed above; in this connection, the discourse of stereotype in The Death signals not only the violence of prior representations but the underlying fact that writing, indeed any representational practice, can easily “work” in the service of domination. As Worthen rightly observes, writing appears here as “both an antidote to historical erasure and the compromised instrument of historical oppression” (“Citing” 8). Despite the play’s historiographical imperative, Worthing remarks, “Writing it down is... problem as well as solution in The Death of the Last Black Man, for writing... has also framed African American identity in history, as (for example) the stereotypes registered by the names of the characters themselves. Writing cannot undo the repetitive structure of history in Parks’s plays” (Ibid). 36 We have discussed how Parks’s use of repetition invokes both its defamiliarizing literary force and its affective intensity as mourning; but Worthen here alludes to a third face of repetition that the play presents. Repetition is also, for Parks, the violent pedagogical device whereby an official discourse is gradually inscribed, through forced reiteration, into the pupil’s “word hoard” (Parks, Death 121).

The figure named Prunes And Prisms is the most explicit embodiment of this mode of repetition: “Say ‘prunes and prisms’ 40 times each day and youll cure your big lips. Prunes and prisms prunes and prisms prunes and prisms: 19” (113; Cf 111, 116, 128). While this figuration of a deforming pedagogical repetition is emphatically oral, the phrase is taken from a passage in Joyce’s Ulysses (Geis, Suzan 70-71) and thus attests to the textual transmission of such reformatory echoes. The figure And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger, meanwhile, articulates a more obviously literary version of this recursive incorporation: derived from Bigger Thomas, a

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36 In his reading of Venus, Worthen focuses on the ways the play treats both writing and performance as “complicit” in the exploitation of its subject (Drama 178-191).
character in Richard Wright’s *Native Son*, he “represents literary history’s portrayal of the black man as both murderer and martyr” (Ibid 69-70; Cf. Rayner and Elam 453). This figure’s very name enacts the shaping force of a text that returns obsessively, as he himself suggests: “Rise up out of uh made-up story in grown Bigger and Bigger. Too big for my own name” (115). Like Prunes And Prisms, he bears racist discourse on his body: “Nostrils: flarin. Width: thickly. Breath: fire-laden and smellin badly” (Ibid). While Parks’s citation of Wright is not squarely a critique, it seems fair to say that Bigger Thomas haunts the play as a particularly painful representation of blackness—more seriously disturbing than the watermelon-and-chicken cartoons. And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger’s name enacts the basic principle of Parks’s composition whereby repetition achieves “accumulated weight,” since a word like “bigger” grows each time it repeats—perhaps not unlike the slur it rhymes with. He thus stands doubly for a violence incipient in writing: in Wright’s (and in “the canon” as such), but also in Parks’s own. The fact that And Bigger’s lines repeatedly double those of Black Man With Watermelon suggests a parallel between supernatural and textual bedevilment, a lingering doubt about whether the page really does lay to rest. It also intimates the prospect that the playwright herself could be creating a literary monster. Indeed, And Bigger And Bigger And Bigger seems to articulate a specifically theatrical danger of writing when he says “I am grown too big for thuh word thats me” (116). To author a Figure, this suggests, is to authorize its corporeal burgeoning beyond the page; but this burgeoning—an analog, perhaps, for performance—is imagined as a kind of torture, since the strictures of the script remain: “WILL SOMEBODY TAKE THESE STRAPS OFF UH ME PLEASE?” (110, 111).

In such moments, Parks does seem to envision writing as “scor[ing] its performers” (Worthen, *Drama* 165), in the most painful possible sense. Repetition, here, is not separable from the kind of discipline that enforces the official (broken) record. By embracing repetition as a formal principle, Parks acknowledges the danger that the writer—and particularly the playwright—might be complicit in such regimes. One source of the play’s powerful complexity is the way its refrains incorporate dominant narratives. For instance:

**BEFORE COLUMBUS:** The popular thinking of the day back in them days was that the world was flat. They thought the world was flat. Back then when they thought the world was flat they were afeared and stayed home. They wanted to go out back then when they thought the world was flat but the water had in it dragons of which meaning these dragons they were afeared back then when they thought the world was flat. They stayed at home. Them thinking the world was flat kept it roun. Them thinking the sun revolved around the earth kept them satellite-like. They figured out the truth and scurried out. Figuring out the truth put them in their place and they scurried out to put u in ours. (103, Cf. 115)

The story about people “thinking the world was flat” before Columbus is less a piece of history than a signifier of “history”—a pop-cultural cliché that evokes the elementary school classroom. The illogical interpolation of dragons (why would the world being round make them any less frightening?) suggests a kind of compression, a compulsion to force the facts into a repeatable narrative whether or not the story makes sense. That repeatable narrative is the old one heroizing Europe’s global depredation as a matter of having “figured out the truth.” The speech itself undermines this spurious narrative, particularly in the sentences “Them thinking the world was

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37 On the nature of Parks’s citation of Wright, see Goto 113-5.
38 Of *The America Play*, whose protagonist is described as “a Digger by trade. From a family of Diggers” (160), Parks has said: “The relationship between ‘digger’ and ‘nigger’ was the whole play for me” (Ong 48).
flat kept it roun” and “Them thinking the sun revolved around the earth kept them satellite-like,” which leaps into a poetic register with its quasi-neologism. The disdain implicit in the word “scurried” also suggests a revisionist impulse. But the last sentence reasserts fundamental categories of the old story, even if it also questions them: “their place” and “ours.” Parks thus subjects her figures—and performers, and audience—to a painful process of re-inscription, painful precisely because the vital poetic work of revision is bound up with the belaboring of tyrannical old scripts.

When, near the play’s end, “Somethins turnin. Thuh page” morphs temporarily into “Somethins burnin. Thuh page” (130), there is thus a double urgency to this second phrase. On the one hand, the burning of the page is something that must be stopped, or repaired, insofar as it represents the extermination of the black record—an ultimate lynching. In this sense, the phrase sounds a note of peril, which motivates Yes And Greens’s last lines about “writ[ing] it down”. On the other hand, though, “Thuh page” also names a technology of oppression that needs to burn, and the refrain can also be hopeful, triumphant. But both of these readings are to some extent subsumed in a third, which I want to advance here. I think we need to take “burnin” as, so to speak, strongly intransitive: the page is not being burnt (à la Hedda Gabler) but burning like a torch, or like the bush through which God spoke to Moses. This association is hardly a stretch, given the impending Mosaic image “you will carve it out of a rock” (131) as well as the ongoing question of whether Black Man can find “words for partin” the river across which he might escape (129, Cf 112-3, 116). If “thuh page” is burning in this sense, then we are being asked to consider the page as a site of both violence and victory, an ongoing and inexhaustible spectacle in itself.

If I am right, then the burning page is a key figure for Parks’s theatrical poetics. To see more concretely what this means, we can turn to the play’s most sustained exploration of what a burning page might look like in performance: Ham’s monologue in the Second Chorus (121-4). The monologue is a “showstopper” (Geis, Suzan 64) that might well remind us, in its central placement and disruptive copia, of Lucky’s monologue in Godot. Itself a mock genealogy (announced as “Ham’s Begotten Tree,” 121), the speech also makes explicit the troubling genealogical ties between explosive monologue, as a staple of postdramatic playwriting, and the American minstrel tradition—in particular the “stump speech” of minstrelsy upon which Ham’s speech is modeled (Rayner and Elam 459). 40 “... Wassername she finally gave intuh It and together they broughted forth uh wildish one called simply Yo. Yo gone be wentin much too long without hisself uh comb in from thuh frizzly that resulted comed one called You (polite"

39 The sense of writing as an instrument of violence recurs throughout Parks’s work, but is most pronounced in the third section of her first full-length play, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom. In this dreamlike scene, a dying slave is bullied, cajoled, and robbed of her teeth on the eve of Emancipation by the sinister Miss Faith, who continually refers these proceedings to “the book”: “Mrs. Saxon, book says you are due for an extraction... Find solace in the book and—bid your teeth goodbye” (44); “Think of it as getting yourself chronicled, Mrs. Saxon. You are becoming a full part of the great chronicle!” (46). Both Worthen (“Citing” 7-8) and Malkin (161-6) cite this play as evidence of Parks’s suspicion of the textual; while I agree, it seems to me that in The Death Parks produces a more complex and ultimately celebratory account of writing, as this chapter attempts to show.

40 A hallmark segment of the minstrel show, the stump speech was a long, comically malapropist blackface monologue, “a species of inflated Barnum-speak” that, according to Eric Lott’s Love and Theft, “appear[s] to have grown out of white observation of black churches and black street oratory” (77, 247 n. 9). When blackness “came to represent laziness and license, the determining factor in white men’s dread of miscegenation,” Lott writes, “these fantasies were partly represented by a vexing and unmeaning linguistic creativity, a proliferation of huge, ungainly, and onomatopoeic words that were meant to ridicule the speaker but which also called attention to the grain of voices, the wagging of tongues, the fatness of painted lips” (122; Cf. Carpio 216). My reading of Ham’s monologue in The Death is indebted to Lott’s groundbreaking study of the erotics of minstrelsy.
form). You (polite) birthed herself Mister, Miss, Maam and Sir who in his later years with That brought forth Yuh Fathuh...” (121). The “shame” echoed by the other figures after the first half of this monologue invokes the racial shaming inherent in minstrelsy, linking this to the shame imputed to Black people as the descendants of the biblical Ham:

HAM: [...] Yo in Yes Missy begottin ThissunRightHere, Us, ThatOne, She (thuh 3rd) and one called Uncle (who from birth was gifted with great singin and dancin capabilities which helped him make his way in life but tended tuh bring shame on his family)

BEFORE COLUMBUS/BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: Shame on his family.
LOTS OF GREASE AND LOTS OF PORK/BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON:
Shame on his family.

AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER/BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON:
Shame on his family gaw.

YES AND GREENS BLACK EYED PEAS CORNBREAD: Write that down.
OLD MAN RIVER JORDAN: (Ham seed his daddy Noah neckked. From that seed, came Allyall.) (122)

In the context of this play’s emergence, this “shame” of family ties might also infect the downtown New York theater audience, who would need to recognize their own susceptibility to the pleasures of a minstrel form, as well as experimental theater’s ongoing indebtedness to that form, from Godot onward. Parks will explore the theatricalization of blackness in Venus; Ham’s monologue anticipates the later play’s simultaneous offer of and attack on such spectacular enjoyments. When the Second Chorus ends with Lots Of Grease repeating the play’s signature line—“This is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world” (124)—“This” seems to refer to Ham’s speech itself, as if to position death by minstrelsy alongside electrocution and hanging. And indeed, the “burnin” that would round out the play’s collection of deaths takes place nowhere if not here, in the burn of shame—which, like the play’s other murders, is centered on Black Man—and, at the same time, the hot spectacle of Ham’s energy and virtuosity.

If Beckett’s Lucky begins his tirade by describing those “plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast heaven to hell” (Waiting 141), Parks too unleashes the fiery force of monologue, feeding the flames with a mixture of political and libidinal kindling. But whereas Lucky’s speech is framed as a horrifying interruption, Ham’s seems more like par for the course: “Thuh list goes on in on,” other figures respond (122, Cf. 124). Ham’s performance, more than Lucky’s, is woven into the social fabric of its world; it already has a place, just as its content both describes and re-inscribes the logic meant to “put us in ours.” Although the speech does not repeat in the play, it partakes of the pedagogical mode of repetition, a narrative that “scores” as it excoriates. Just as the play as a whole contemplates the uncanny inclusion of atrocity within the cycles of the everyday (“This could go on forever”), Ham’s monologue combines a maximum of dissonance with an obvious

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41 Beckett’s Stories and Texts for Nothing contains an oddly wistful reference to minstrelsy, when the narrator imagines “great clusters of bones, dangling and knocking with a clatter of castanets, it’s clean and gay like coons, I’d join them with a will if it could be here and now…” (102).

42 In the premiere, the chorus of figures actually seemed outraged at Ham’s speech, a choice I find to be in tension with the script’s suggestion that his performance is a familiar occasion within its world. For instance, the speech is ushered in by Old Man River Jordan’s advice: “For that you must ask Ham” and immediately preceded by the sound of a bell; Ham himself beings his speech with the parenthetical phrase “catchin up to um in medias res that is we takin off from where we stopped up last time)” (121). In general, director Beth Schachter seems to have approached this scene with a desire to limit its comic appeal—an understandable choice, but one that I think curbed its most disturbing ambiguities.
and ironic sustainability. It can thus figure the economy of American slavery, which becomes the explicit subject of its second half:

HAM: SOLD! allyall⁹ not tuh be confused w/allus¹² joined w/allthem³ in from that union comed forth washisname²¹ SOLD wassersname⁹ still by thuh reputation uh thistree one uh thuh 2 twins loses her sight through fiddlin n falls w/ugly old yuhfathuh⁹ given she⁸ SOLD [...] let us not forgetyessuhmassuhsuh³⁸ w/thou⁸ who gived up memines³⁰ SOLD we are now rollin through thuh long division [...] (124)

On one level, this turn literalizes the notion that minstrelsy perpetuates slavery’s objectification, and the threat that black artists might extend this legacy by selling out (the “great singin and dancin capabilities which helped him make his way in life but tended tuh bring shame on his family”). As Ham becomes an auctioneer, his discourse shifts from recording to enacting “thuh long division” which is not only slavery’s systematic breaking-up of families, but also the world-rending violence of the Middle Passage itself. By weaving this catastrophic division into the overt theatricality of the stump speech, a form of repertory entertainment and a virtuosic feat of memorization, Parks creates an analog for the Mosaic fire that burns furiously without actually consuming its medium—this time as a disaster that could “go on forever,” blaze anew every evening, plus matinees. Lucky has lost his powers of speech in the second act of Godot; Ham, however, never gives us cause to doubt that he can go on reciting his litany nightly. In other words, Ham’s speech lets Parks emphasize the theatrical structure of historical suffering: maximally live, but given to prescription, repetition, and institution. As always, it is the “showstopper” that best serves the mandate that the show must go on.

Locating the play’s negotiations of minstrelsy within a tradition of late-twentieth-century black writers, Glenda Carpio points out that Parks’s evocations of the minstrel show “underscore the ways that the very medium in which she works has been complicit in making black suffering into spectacle” (206). Not only theater, but the writing that prescribes this debacle is thereby implicated in the perpetual motion machine of suffering. Yet Carpio argues that Parks, even while invoking minstrelsy, “makes those minstrel features abstract and unfamiliar and turns them into vehicles for remembering and honoring the dead”; “Ham delivers his speech in a mode that so expertly signifies on the language of the minstrel stage that it turns that language inside out… [and] creates a laughter that mocks the laughter of minstrelsy” (206, 211). I agree, and I would add that Parks’s outdoing of minstrelsy in this speech occurs as an emphatically textual intervention. Writing is more than just the score for, or prehistory of, Ham’s painfully live performance; rather his speech becomes an opportunity for Parks to explore the theatrical and political force of writing at grips with scenic enactment.

The sense that Ham’s speech is centrally concerned with writing is voiced by Rayner and Elam, who remark that in Ham’s monologue “Parks is signifying(g) on the construct of writing” (459). The authors refer to Parks’s statement, quoted by Alisa Solomon, that she is trying to represent “the patterns of a people whose language use… not only Signifies on the non-vernacular language forms, but on the construct of writing as well. If language is a construct and writing is a construct and Signifyin(g) on the double construct is the daily use, then I have chosen to Signify on the Signifyin(g)” (75-76). Parks, in turn, refers to the concept of “signifyin(g)” as theorized by Henry Louis Gates: “the Signifying Monkey... is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed our trope of chiasmus itself, repeating and reversing
simultaneously as he does in one deft discursive act” (Gates 236). To signify on “the construct of writing,” then, would be to assert or present writing in a way that changes what writing is, what “writing” means.

Rayner and Elam seem to locate this operation in the way Ham’s monologue, on the page, seems to be available for reading but is actually the code for an aural and vocal experience: they explain that “the speech is very difficult to read. It is meant for an audience to hear and for an actor to perform” (459). But this duplicity inheres in the logic of playwriting generally, and I don’t believe Parks’s major thrust in Ham’s speech is to undermine the textual. On the contrary, Parks’s “signifying on writing” means—true to Gates’s theory—playing with writing, or keeping it in play. This task becomes especially pointed for playwriting, since as we saw in the Introduction, the performance of dramatic work has traditionally entailed the disavowal of pre-existing text. Parks reverses this orientation by placing writing center-stage. Thus, for example, the exponents that appear in the last part of Ham’s speech play with and on writing as “scientific notation,” suggesting that there is no purely quantitative transcription (Cf. Malkin 172): this is a thesis about writing, whether we see the text or hear it. If “allyall” is easily naturalized in performance as “allyall the ninth,” the same doesn’t apply to “memines,” forcing the issue of notation onto the stage (in the premiere, figures like “3-0” got pronounced “to the three-oh,” revising our understanding of the earlier ordinals). Similarly, parentheticals like “You (polite)” invoke the orthographic experience of the phrasebook; carrying them off means keeping this specifically textual rhythm alive in performance.

More fundamentally throughout the speech, the comic use of pronouns and interjections as names—a device which should remind us of Stein—teases out the consistency of print. By turning “She,” “That,” and “Themuhns” into names (121-2), Parks transposes the reification that freezes an act of speech into a piece of text, and parodies the standardizing force of Record. But it seems no less significant that these names lose their capital letters in the slave auction: orthography may be reifying, but as such it implies the legitimate desire to claim a permanent place, to “carve it out of a rock.” As long as the makeshift names are names they can appropriate a history; losing their capitals in the “long division” of slavery, they get swept away in the indifference of capitalist exchange. As Carpio observes, the pronouns ultimately “emphasize rather than fill the gaps of history” (212); between the heroic genealogical effort of “She (thuh 3rd)” and the bitter statistic of “she SOLD” there is a difference of writing, a trajectory that cannot be drawn without reference to the page. Parks signifies on writing, that is, precisely by flipping its position from the means (“agency”) of performance to what performance means—from the signifier to the (still signifying) signified.

Parks re-appropriates minstrelsy’s “theft” of blackness (Lott), critiquing a seminal form of American theater. The metatheatricality of this move—wherein a piece of theater identifies theater’s own complicity with oppressive structures—will receive its fullest development in Venus. Already in Ham’s speech, however, Parks asks us to consider her metatheater as, specifically, a remediation: inscribing the minstrel show into her own play, she also re-presents

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43 Almost all scholarly treatments of Parks invoke Gates’s theory of “Signifyin(g)” at some point in their analysis. See e.g. Frank (especially 3-10), Bernard (693ff), and Geis, Suzan (15-17). Malkin writes that Gates “is clearly a theoretical source for Parks’s magical but precise use of language” (160).

44 Carpio also remarks that “The fact that the numbers in superscript are apparent only typographically… suggests that the number of ancestors who perished can be ignored depending on the kind of representation, oral or textual, in which their fate is represented” (216), though she doesn’t pursue this suggestion.

45 I am taking this term from Philip Auslander, who borrows it from Jay Bolter and Richard Grusin (Liveness 6). When used this way in reference to what happens in one artist’s work, the term no longer names a “historical logic” as it does for Auslander; but
it as emphatically textual. This is not just theater that critiques the theatrics of racism, but theater that does so as writing. It would, again, be a gross misrepresentation of Parks’s aesthetic to read the remark about “great singin and dancin capabilities” that “tended tuh bring shame on his family” as a slight against music and movement, both of which inform her work tremendously. But it seems clear that what prevents this scene from being minstrelsy, from collapsing into complicity with the complicity it shows, is its irreducible textual dimension—the script as that which cannot resolve into the performance’s song and dance. “Shame on his family gaw. / Write that down”: writing offers the transcendence, or re-medial leap, that gets us to the “meta” in the first place; writing the shame down means no longer being consumed by it, even as it rages. Even if, as we’ve seen, writing has its own propensities for violence, Parks shows that the capture of embodied experience into text is crucial for emancipation.

This need for textual capture is why, in the next scene, Black Man With Watermelon launches into a kind of Cartesian meditation: “We sittin on this porch right now aint we. Uh huhn. Aaah. Sittin right here right now on it in ainthuh first time either iduhnt it. Yep. Nope. Once we was here once wuhduhnt we. Yep. Yep. Once we being here. Uh huhn. Huh” (126). Passages like these share the postdramatic tendency to “speculation” that I will examine in Mac Wellman’s work in the following chapter. More specifically here, though, Parks seems to literalize and almost parody her own rule that “The action goes in the line of dialogue instead of always in a pissy set of parentheses” (“From Elements” 15). From a playwriting point of view, the advantage of stage directions is that they can reduce the need for exposition within the line, allowing for more “natural” speech—so that, for example, characters can be made to refer to elements of their environment without having to name them. We’ve already seen the critical use Beckett makes of this convention; in foreswearing it altogether, Parks challenges herself to incorporate the sphere of performance within her figures’ speech. But while “pissy” parentheses might themselves sound like neurotic authorial power-grabs (“the first thing you do is cross them out,” an actor once told me), the fact is that stage directions mark the site at which the text can occlude itself as such, a moment when language trains its own replacement. In quite a literal sense, stage directions authorize the substitution of their own verbiage by nonverbal means. But by insisting that the necessary information—indeed “the action” itself—should fit within the spoken text, Parks preempts this moment. Instead of giving way to a corporeal reality, language sticks around to double the physical. In this passage, Black Man enacts precisely this superfluity by saying how things are: “We sittin on this porch right now aint we.” This is just the kind of redundancy that “good” playwriting seeks to avoid, and yet the play positions it as an attempt to arrest the dizzying cycles of murder and domesticity that constitute Black Man’s life onstage: he tries, in this passage, to put his present into words in order to transcend it. What his speech represents is thus not only the scene it describes, but the poetics that govern the play as a whole: a desire to contest the tyranny of the (still) here and (always) now by re-posing that present as writing.

I would suggest that Parks’s appropriations of performance for writing bear some relevance to the “incursion… into the live event” that Auslander analyzes throughout his book (7).

46 As Martin Puchner writes: “All stage directions are descriptions or prescriptions of the mimetic space on the stage, but traditionally the doubling inherent in this projection disappears because stage directions are considered dispensable technical appendices that do not appear in the end product, the performance” (Stage 26).

47 Recently, while visiting an undergraduate playwriting class, I gave the students an exercise of Mac Wellman’s in which they had to write the worst play they possibly could; several of them responded by making their characters say what they were doing, much as Parks has Black Man do here.
“Land:/HO!”: Textual Performance and Theatrical Utopia

Parks’s burning page, then, would be a piece of text that leaps up in a life of its own, but also a text that burns with the live suffering it captures—and exceeds. By incorporating performance, such a text both perpetually explodes and perpetually re-asserts its own fixed form, in Adorno’s terms its “objectivation.” This ethos of playwriting takes seriously the fundamental, unreasonable logic of “the play” that we began this chapter by revisiting, and brings that logic to bear on concrete poetic choices. In so doing, it also offers a model for re-thinking the “primacy of the text” (Adorno, Aesthetic 100) as a theatrical construction, rather than a musty myth of literary academia. Returning to Adorno in light of Parks’s work, we can begin to see how a writing that emphatically embraces embodied performance—a writing that is exuberantly theatrical—can still seek the resistant, critical “foreignness” of text as a form apart. As in Beckett, Parks’s complex interworkings of text and scene will turn out to make theater a utopian site. But Beckett converges with Adorno historically and affectively, and Adorno’s intense identification with Beckett’s work is well known; Parks belongs to a later moment and, it should be clear, manifests a sensibility sharply divergent from either of these men. Her work’s surprising resonance with Adorno’s theory can therefore suggest the breadth of that theory’s relevance to postdramatic playwriting, in a way Beckett’s cannot. Parks extends Adornian poetics into realms—and theaters—where Adorno himself could not have set foot.

As we saw, Adorno locates a problem with live performance in the way performance remains emphatically enmeshed in the real: only through its fixation as a textual object does a work of art “become autonomous from its genesis” (Aesthetic 100), asserting the “foreignness to the world” that is fundamental to the aesthetic (183). In readings of James, Stein, and Beckett, I tried to show how these writers create theaters that undermine the present, conceived as the violently unifying field of “the world” in Adorno’s sense—the world into which, as he suggests, performance is perpetually being born. If Parks aims to appropriate performance’s embodied reality for writing itself, this too describes a postdramatic orientation: a conviction that there is something insufficient, even monstrous, about the life that happens here and now, and a corresponding desire to refer us beyond the present by means of a text that engulfs and exceeds it.

In fact, the very ethos that might seem to separate Parks most sharply from Adorno—her insistence that “Language is a physical act” (“From Elements” 11), her enthusiasm for writing as performance—actually represents a profound convergence. As we saw, Adorno’s aesthetics also continually emphasize that an artwork must be understood as a dynamic process. “Artworks have the immanent character of being an act, even if they are carved in stone, and this endows them with the quality of being something momentary and sudden.... Under patient contemplation, artworks begin to move” (Aesthetic 79). Or again: “Whatever in the artifact may be called the unity of its meaning is not static but processual, the enactment of antagonisms that each work necessarily has in itself” (176). This notion of a work “carved in stone” that nonetheless harbors enactment, movement, and struggle not only in its past history but in its very form is precisely the intuition Parks explores in her theatrics of the page, and it resonates with the themes of writing we have been tracing through The Death.

One might object, however, that Adorno’s understanding of all artworks as action and motion is precisely what allows him to claim the phenomenal values of live performance for art in general while dismissing actual performance as “usually regressive” (Aesthetic 100). Indeed, when he discusses plays, Adorno insists that their inherent reference to actual performance must not be given too much attention—an argument that, as he is well aware, assimilates plays to non-
theater-texts. He writes: “each artwork is the recapitulation [Wiederholung] of itself.... Dramatic or musical texts should be regarded exclusively in this fashion and not as the quintessence of instructions for the performers.... Whether or not they are performed is for them a matter of indifference” (125-126/190). Such a statement would seem to be glaringly at variance with any truly theatrical project—although it is worth noticing the “for them” that distinguishes the texts’ own “indifference” from, say, our own. More specifically, Adorno’s claim would seem to negate the playwriting gospel that Parks articulates with characteristic verve in “From Elements of Style”: “Jesus. Right from the jump, ask yourself: ‘Why does this thing I’m writing have to be a play?’” (7).

We might at first think that Parks wants us to consider how a text can be a good instrument (in Worthen’s terms, “agency”) for use in an embodied onstage performance; and certainly, Adorno’s remark de-prioritizes any such question. But is this, in fact, what Parks is asking? I think we are now in a position to understand Parks’s question more aptly as: What about this text makes it a play—a piece of theater—as I write it? How does this text hold my experience of being a body among bodies in a catastrophic present—or, for that matter, of “the marvel of live bodies onstage” (Ibid 6)? This does not mean that actual performance is “a matter of indifference” to the writer; on the contrary, Parks is demanding that playwrights write this way, that this kind of writing be applied to texts for theatrical production: “The last thing American theatre needs is another lame play” (7). Parks is encouraging writers to confront the theater with an other theater, the theater of the page. The playwright thus divides the space and time of performance from itself, activating the profound theatrical heterogeneity we discussed in Chapter Two, and giving the lie to any unifying dramatic present. It is through self-sufficiency, not instrumentality, that the text can revolutionize the stage. In order to do so, the play must rehearse—wiederholen, “recapitulate” or repeat—itself, trace and re-trace the contours of the textual entombment that keeps it differently (a-)live.

Parks’s poetics thus reveal a theatrical possibility latent in Adorno’s discussion of performance. The reference to performance enables Adorno to distinguish the mode of re-enactment proper to the textual object, theorizing this process in part through its difference from performance’s concrete re-playings. The prospect of actual, embodied enactment, that is, offers to define the space of the text as elsewhere than the world where performance happens. As Adorno relies on the conceptual efficacy of this opposition, Parks activates its theatrical force. In The Death, she elaborates with great affective intensity the need to transmute a tormenting liveness into an objectivated form which will preserve but transcend that liveness. Whereas Adorno invokes the figure of performance in order to bracket its literal occurrence, Parks’s playwriting moves the text’s Wiederholung beyond a merely conceptual dependence on the figure of the stage and into an ongoing, dialectical relation with the actuality of performance. In other words, Parks shows how the intuition that written text already has “the character of being an act” can motivate work for theater: the prospect of theatrical production offers to shape the playwright’s achievement, both negatively—the text will emerge as that which exceeds and differs from the live event—and positively, the text deriving its own performance from the stage it strangely doubles. The question “Why does this thing I’m writing have to be a play?” both insists on the specificity of the theater medium and insists that this specificity can be mounted within the textual moment, that the urgency of the theatrical event must be cultivated on a stage internal to “this thing I’m writing.” The page becomes, emphatically, the site of a rehearsal.

As we’ve seen, Parks’s work is remarkable in its commitment to exploring the rehearsal or “recapitulation” that for Adorno is fundamental to the artwork. The power of The Death lies in
its vivid manifestation of that recursiveness that makes all aesthetic experience a re-playing. The topos of discovery—as in, Columbus discovered America—is a major site at which Parks works this out, suggesting that a poetics of recovery might have distinctly political stakes. What if, instead of setting out to claim new territory, we determined to (re-)cover the same ground again (and again)?

BEFORE COLUMBUS: Land:
AND BIGGER AND BIGGER AND BIGGER: HO!
QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATYHETP: I saw Columbus comin Before Columbus coming/goin over tuh meet you—
BEFORE COLUMBUS: Thuh first time I saw it. It was huge. Thuh green sea becomes uh hillside. Uh hillside populated with some peoples I will name. Thuh first time I saw it it was uh was-huge once one. Huh. It has been gettin smaller ever since.
QUEEN-THEN-PHARAOH HATYHETP: Land:
BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: HO! (116-117)

Here as elsewhere, the play thematizes the disastrous consequences of European “exploration” for African people. The cry “Land: HO!” ends the First Chorus and reappears in the Final Chorus (130); it marks a radical event, the discovery of the New World, and hence emblematizes a dramatic trajectory, pushing forward into the unknown and thus reducing the unknown’s scope: “It has been gettin smaller ever since.” By turning the dramatic hinge “Land: HO!” into a refrain, however, Parks rewrites the colonial achievement as repetition. This means several things: first, the thesis that African expeditions had already traveled to America long before Europeans, as Before Columbus’s name records (Geis, Susan 66-68), so that the revisionist-historiographical imperative is precisely to re-view a putative “first sight” as a citation. Second, the repetition of the phrase “Land: HO!” and its circulation between figures suggests the psychologically and socially traumatic quality of this history, as a wound that must be constituted as memory (see Malkin 163-4). Third, however, the almost unbearable poignancy of these lines comes from the irresistible upsweep of glimpsing a new world, a desire the play cannot cite without evoking. The discovery that has happened again and again still compels us to pursue it, drawn into the mimesis of history’s text. “It has been gettin smaller ever since” registers both the experience of passing through this history and the sense of still having yet to do so: the Land has been getting smaller as I’ve been imprisoned here, growing more and more claustrophobic (“when he walks his thoughts dont got room” [102, 111, 129])—and it has been getting smaller as its promise has receded, as if I hadn’t yet landed at all. In returning repeatedly to the cusp, or horizon, of discovery, Parks rewrites not only the loss of a native land, but the unfulfilled project of utopia. Paradoxically, she locates hope within the moment already traversed, already betrayed.

This is, of course, a theatrical structure familiar to us from any replaying; as Schneider puts it, “attending the theatre at all is engaging in a repetitive event” (113). And yet the power of drama, Szondi tells us, depends on its ability to suspend that familiarity—suspend, that is, both our familiarity with the institutional reality of theater as rehearsed and repeated, and the familiarity of the play itself as a story we already know. In the “absolute present” of dramatic performance, there should be no past, hence no citation, no repetition, no text. Brecht saw this condition as infantilizing, and his “literarized” theater is one that finally ceases to disavow its repetitive structure (43, 139). But where Brecht’s explicit repetitions were famously designed to free the spectator from empathetic identification, Parks—as we’ve seen—adopts a poetics of mourning to make her audience feel the repetitive structure itself. By dissociating affective investment from the pretense of the “first time,” Parks makes an argument for theater’s value as
lying in something it shares with reading (if not with reading as Brecht tends to imagine it): the possibility of urgently tracing and re-tracing a fixed form, an already-was. As in Adorno, the “act” in Parks is a moment when what has been settled suddenly flares up anew or “begins to move,” not because performance has steered it to new shores, but because the text of the past—the page/grave—harbors that movement in itself.

The vision that thus emerges is, in a sense, less optimistic than the one Worthen ascribes to Parks in *The America Play*: “performance as an act of difference—from history, from writing—that creates revision, change” (*Drama* 176). The fraught “recapitulation” that Parks and Adorno both describe may well be an “act of difference,” in a sense that remains to be specified here, but that difference is not exactly “change.” On the contrary, a great deal of its force derives from the pathos of change unrealized: “I got uhway? / Nope. Yep. Nope. Nope” (Parks, *Death* 128). Still, Worthen is right to emphasize *revision*, the crucial partner to repetition in Parks’s system of “Rep & Rev,” and a term which my analysis has up to now largely ignored. Parks’s poetics of repetition avow theater’s perpetual indebtedness to and entanglement with a past; her revisions, it seems to me, do not so much outstrip that past as demonstrate the past’s paradoxical liveliness, its currency as artifact, or text. The repeated cry “Land: HO!” expresses the reification, as cliché, of a moment of radical possibility, and as such expresses the betrayal of that possibility. But the same repetition also conveys a compulsive desire that the reification preserves, an uncertainty that draws us back to the horizon again and again, with re-visionary longing.

Plainly, Parks’s work challenges any clean binary opposition between the dead letter and the living stage. But neither are these categories entirely disabled: it is as a repository of the dead, as the form of a pastness, that the “6 by 6 by 6” of the page burns on, searing us with a different kind of presence. In fact, the distinctiveness of the past as such, and the written text as the site of access to that past from a seriously fucked-up present⁴⁸, becomes explicit in *The Death*’s First Chorus:

"VOICE ON THUH TEE V: Good evening. Broad Caster. Headlinin tonight: thuh news. OLD MAN RIVER JORDAN: Tell you of uh news. Last news. Last news of thuh last man... Last news leads tuh thuh first news. He is dead he crosses thuh river. […] YES AND GREENS BLACK-EYED PEAS CORNBREAD: Did you write it down? On uh little slip uh paper stick thuh slip in thuh river afore you slip in that way you keep your clothes dry, man. […] BLACK MAN WITH WATERMELON: […] I jumped in thuh water without uh word. I jumped in thuh water without uh smell. I am in thuh river and in my skin is soppin wet. I would like tuh stay afloat now. I would like tuh move my hands. […] YES AND GREENS BLACK-EYED PEAS CORNBREAD: Back tuh when thuh worl ust be roun. OLD MAN RIVER JORDAN: Uhcross thuh river in back tuh that. Yes. (112-114)

The device of the “news” broadcast which repeatedly, throughout the play, announces the Death of the Last Black Man may be an indictment of the media, as Geis observes (*Suzan* 71-72, Cf.

⁴⁸ In Parks’s performative essay “New Black Math” (2005), someone named “Black Playwright” says: “Audiences still ask, ‘what do black people think about such and such?’ Black people think the world is fucked. That’s what black people think” (581).
Persley 71); but it also serves to emphasize the presentness of the play’s action, the live present in which the Death is both announced and kept painfully incomplete. The time of death is reported as “Yesterday today next summer tomorrow just uh moment uhgoh in 1317” (102, 129, Cf. 111), and yet the repeated reminder that “This is the news” (123) suggests a condition in which the past and future have become subsumed within a catastrophic experience of the now, have lost their difference from that “now” within a structure “forcing the pasts [and futures!] to reappear as presented in the present” (Malkin 169). 49

As Rayner and Elam note (451), the temporality announced here recalls Pozzo’s declaration that there has only ever been “one day… the same day, the same second” (Beckett, Waiting 333). Indeed, Parks’s stipulation of “The Present” as the setting of her play (100) should at this point seem deeply Beckettian. For Parks’s figures, however, the monstrous present does not extend quite so far back as it does for Pozzo and his audience. Rather, there is now a prospect of crossing over to a radically different moment, “when thuh worl usta be roun,” before European predation. To rest in peace, to cross the river, would be to escape the impacted and overdetermined present by moving “back” to that time—and significantly, Parks imagines the vessel of this crossing as a piece of written text. What keeps Black Man sopping “in thuh river”—keeps him, much more horribly than James’s Lewis Lambert Strether, “in midstream of his drama” (Ambassadors 458)—is a lack of access to the page, conceived as a lack of access to the space of what was. And accordingly, the Final Chorus envisions his escape into burial as an achievement of text: “He jumps in thuh river. These words for partin. / And you will write them down” (129). As the future tense of this last phrase suggests, writing’s constitution of a radically distinct past is also its promise, that is, its gesture towards a future beyond the indifferent “today next summer tomorrow” in which the Last Black Man goes on dying. We have already come across the play’s concern for literary posterity in Yes And Greens’s insistent “write it down” refrain; what we haven’t yet discussed is the unexpected turn with which her last iteration concludes: “You will carve it out of a rock so that in the future when we come along we will know that the rock does yes exist” (131, my emphasis). Since “the rock” has just been identified as the medium of writing, it is tempting to read these last words as an assertion of black literary tradition. But there is also a certain willful lack of reference at play, a refusal inherent in the turn to tautology (there’s a rock, so there’s a rock). 50 Declining to bait “the future” with a legible message, this refusal imagines a future so radically other that between then and now there would be nothing to communicate.

In either direction, then—backwards or forwards in time—writing navigates a radical break. A medium of crucial preservation, it nonetheless propels itself forward and back into its own disintegration, as the figures’ ecstatic vision shows:

OLD MAN RIVER JORDAN: Skirtin back tuh that. Come up back flip take uhway like thuh waves do. Far uhway. Uhway tuh where they don’t speak thuh language and where they dont want tuh. Huh. Go on back tuh that.

YES AND GREENS BLACK-EYED PEAS CORNBREAD: Awe on uh interior before uh demarcation made it mapped. Awe on uh interior with out uh road-word called macadam. Awe onin uh interior that was uh whole was once. [...] (114)

49 Similarly, Elinor Fuchs writes: “Temporality is less an organizing principle of Parks’s dramatic method than it is a memory… within her spatial world, one more element in a timeless present” (“Reading” 37; see also Fuchs, Death 103-4).

50 At the same time, this line also (to my mind) recalls Viktor Shklovsky’s famous statement that “art… exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony” (16). Parks’s final refusal to focus on what the rock says also echoes Shklovsky’s provocative insistence that “the process of perception is an aesthetic end in itself and must be prolonged… the object is not important” (Ibid).
This vision recalls, quite strikingly, Derrida’s account of the metaphysical vision wherein an inherently whole native landscape is imagined as being riven by the introduction of writing: “writing as the possibility of the road and of difference... the path that is broken, beaten... the violent spacing of nature” (Grammatology 107-8). Parks may not be as confident as Derrida that the unbroken “interior” is a conceptual trap in need of deconstruction, but neither does the play as a whole exactly assert the Edenic vision of the motherland described here. The lines that repeatedly image lost wholeness inscribe a disturbing Nachträglichkeit at the heart of the fantasy: “Before Columbus thuh worl usta be round they put uh /d/ on thuh end of round makin round. Thusly they set in motion thuh end. Without that /d/ we coulda gone on spinnin forever. Thuh /d/ thing ended things ended” (102, slashes in original; Cf. 115). These lines emphasize the paradox inherent in trying to work back through writing to a moment before writing: before experience was “mapped” into standardization. By casting “roun” as the original version of “round,” Parks is mounting a serious challenge to the commonsense assumption that the language of conquest belongs to the colonist; the refrain is a “call and respon[se] to the need to take control of one’s history and representation,” as Louise Bernard notes (695), a moment where “Language serves to critique paradigms of domination” (Louis 151). Here again, though, we also need to recognize not only the discernible sense of the lines, but also their active resistance to sense-making, a resistance that spikes in the parodic rationality of “Thusly.” The wholeness of the pre-Columbian “worl” is figured as a construction of post-Columbian language, rendering the referent essentially elusive. Significantly, we approach this referent only through a kind of orthographicization of speech: the re-lettering of an oral unit. By insisting that “roun” is rigorously distinct from “round,” sonically and semantically, Parks reorganizes an aural continuum into a scriptive determinacy. She thus suggests that writing, marked through its incursions into phonic performance, is the medium that best preserves the utopian prospect of its own disappearance: a worl(d) with no need for inscription. True to the theatrics of utopia, Parks intimates this vision only by withholding it from view.

To the repeated question “Where he gonna go now that he done dieded?” (102, 111, Cf. 129), the play answers: the grave, the page. If there is a triumph at the end, it is the play’s own discovery of itself as this shelter, its realization as a structure that can “Hold it.” Although Parks has said that she consider Venus her “black belt in playwriting” (Wetmore 133), it is tempting to imagine the twenty-seven-year old author of The Death reveling in a newfound sense of writerly capacity. And yet, as I hope my reading has registered, the Death of the Last Black Man is hardly an open-and-shut case. The text’s ability to “Hold” the life-after-life of its performance is also, after all, a mechanism in suspense: freeze, hold that pose, hold it right there. The strain of this effort betrays the knowledge that Worthen rightly brings to bear on Parks: the certainty that performance will disrupt the longed-for closure, raise the dead again and anew. When Parks seizes on the mad logic of the play as a form and imagines that writing can

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51 For Malkin, the play’s language “speaks its historical deformity while reaching back to a time before historical inscription,” a “doubleness” which “gives shape to a unique form of spoken/written language” (159). I agree, but am less convinced that the play’s orality undermines or counters its writtenness. In fact, the possibility of positing the oral as written and the written as oral is, as I’ve argued, fundamental to “the play” as a form.
52 Fuchs refers to this line as “geو-orthography” (“Reading” 38).
53 Geis notes that in The Cutting Ball Theater’s San Francisco production, “Hold it” referred to Black Man’s watermelon, “placed in his hands one last time” (Suzan 73). She also quotes Marc Robinson’s observation that the play’s ending “capture[s] the contradiction between fixity and flux that gives the play such energy” (Other 189, qtd. in Ibid). Robinson continues: “Her characters always try to mark the sensations and perceptions of their lives, but know too that nothing holds for more than a moment. The play is a portrait of the ensuing desperation” (Other 189).
hold performance, what she imagines is finally an impossible writing, a text whose rightful scene is neither page nor stage. This writing would take place neither as scoring scar nor as instrumental grist for “thuh news” of the day, but as the passage to a realm where “nothin is familiar” (Death 107)—which also means, if we remember Freud, to a world without mourning. The performance “of” this utopian writing does not lie up ahead of it, in its enactment, but in the unmapped pre- or post-history towards which it offers, outrageously, to conduct us: “back tuh that.” For all the emphatic presence of Parks’s text, her most powerful “re-membering” is not an act of realization here and now, but a technique of remembrance in Adorno’s sense: “the not-yet-existing has been dreamed of in remembrance [Eingedenken],” he writes, “which alone concretizes utopia without betraying it into existence” (Aesthetic 132/200). Such remembrance is not realistic; by the same token, the future anterior implied by the play as a form, its promise that a text will turn out to have been a live event, is a promise always broken. The prospect that we glimpse amidst the vault-work of Parks’s playwrighting, though—haunting the corners—is exactly that of a life written into being, a life other than this one. It is the theatrical life of promise itself.
Chapter Five

“Small, fierce creatures”: Mac Wellman’s Auratic Theater

SUSANNAH: … I am not among my kind, and do not even know what my kind are.
(Mac Wellman, A Murder of Crows)

… only what does not fit into this world is true.
(Theodor W. Adorno, Aesthetic Theory)

Over the past three decades, Mac Wellman’s name has become shorthand for a growing subculture of intense verbal experimentation in American theater. Parks, whose early work Wellman championed (Imperceptible Mutabilities, The Death), has since largely transitioned out of that subculture, winning wide audiences for straightforward if meticulous melodramas like In the Blood and the Pulitzer-winning Broadway hit Top Dog Underdog. Wellman’s work has never gained the same level of mainstream appeal; nor has it provoked reams of critical response like those that comprise Parks’s daunting academic paper trail. But he has built a reputation as “the cynosure in a heaven full of experimental playwrights” (H. Shaw vii); and his playwriting program at Brooklyn College continues to act as a centripetal focus for New York’s avant-garde theater scene, boasting such graduates as Young Jean Lee, Thomas Bradshaw, Sibyl Kempson, Normandy Sherwood (NTUSA), and Kelly Copper (Nature Theater of Oklahoma). These artists are not all known primarily as playwrights; their theater work is widely diverse, and yet, as the artist and scholar (and their co-alumna) Karinne Keithley Syers observes, Wellman’s influence throughout the scene is clear: “not as a ‘school of Mac Wellman,’ but as a broadly cast license to think of plays in terms of language, and to value wrongness, ceremony, and a bit of demonism in the theatrical project” (n. pag.).

I won’t try to trace out the far-flung contemporary manifestations of this “license” here. For one thing, that would be a project unto itself. For another, as Syers registers, there is the risk that gathering all these artists’ work under the name of a single Master would subsume their highly particular inventions. This chapter will accordingly confine itself to Wellman’s own work, rather than tracking his influence on others. But his well-attested position at the heart of today’s formally innovative American theater scene should lend the readings that follow a particular point: namely, that no account of “the new theatre” (Lehmann 37) can afford to define that theater in terms of its distance from the literary—or from playwriting. By the same token, in placing Wellman’s work within the lineage of theatrical negativity that includes James, Stein, and Beckett as well as Parks, I mean to argue for that tradition’s continued relevance to a broader field of contemporary theatrical endeavor.

One of the hallmarks of Wellman-influenced theater is its extended use of monologue—a form whose significance in Beckett and Parks we have already considered. In this chapter, I will argue that Wellman’s monologues are part of his broader interest in turning theater’s “co-presence” against itself. Somewhat ironically, since he has been a powerful force of community for downtown artists, his work relentlessly destabilizes community in the moment of reception. In the face of the present-tense assembly that helps constitute the theatrical, his plays insist that our present ways of coming together are inadequate. The words of this chapter’s first epigraph, spoken by the young heroine of Wellman’s 1992 play A Murder of Crows, capture the tenor of

1 I will follow Syers’s example by noting, in a first footnote, that I am also one of Mac’s students. His writings and the conversations I’ve had with him have been very important for me in conceptualizing this dissertation.
what we might call Wellman’s own characteristic alienation effect: a negative sense of “among”-ness that arises with particular power in the theatrical situation, and puts our own belonging into question. In this way, Wellman explores theater as a medium specially suited for the cultivation of what, in Adorno’s words, “does not fit into this world.” Perhaps more profoundly than any other artist examined here, he pursues Adorno’s insight that “Only strangeness is the antidote to estrangement” (Minima 94/105).

Negating the actual community in the theater, Wellman’s work partakes of the utopian project we traced in Waiting for Godot. For Wellman, as for Beckett, writing is the privileged vehicle of theater’s utopian logic. But whereas Beckett writes an absolute present into his text, exacerbating language’s “presence on the stage” (Robbe-Grillet) to the point of a dialectical reversal, Wellman elaborates moments of resistance to the present that, for him, inhere in the space and time of theater. The sense of imprisonment in the present that anchors Beckett’s stage recedes, for Wellman, in favor of a model of theater more akin to that of James and Stein: a dispersed, differential, deeply dis-tracting space. The urgency of negation remains, however; for Wellman, it is incited by the social mechanics that theater’s audience both instantiates and figures. More specifically, Wellman takes theater’s assembled community as an opportunity to break the discursive rules of that community: to make the theater operate against functional communication.

To claim that Wellman’s plays actively interfere with communication is not to claim that they have nothing to say to us; the readings that follow would obviously contradict this claim. While his language is sometimes intensely cryptic, and always luxuriously playful, it can also be quite straightforward, like Susannah’s line in the epigraph above. Nevertheless, the overall effect of his compositions is to undermine communication as an ideal of language, a standard that determines speech’s right to exist. This ideal promotes what Adorno calls a “mendacious positivity of meaning” (“Commitment” 91) or “the universal law of clichés” (“Trying” 139). As a “law,” communication demands the maximally efficient delivery of information from sender to receiver, with minimal ambiguity or waste. That is, it’s a law of economy: “communication [Kommunikation] is the adaptation of spirit to utility, with the result that spirit is made one commodity among the rest” (Aesthetic 74/115). Its model could be the advertisement, which needs to maximize the uptake of unambiguous content (Pepsi will make you feel better) per unit of time or space purchased.

Adorno’s yoking of communication with cliché might at first seem somewhat odd, given that a cliché is a piece of language that notably fails to convey anything new. But what distinguishes communication from other modes of language is not that it yields new knowledge. More fundamentally, communication in Adorno’s sense offers information, new or not, with which we already know what to do (buy a Pepsi; commiserate); it accommodates itself absolutely to the matrix of existing procedures for establishing meaning and consequences. Communication is therefore useful (an “adaptation… to utility”): it serves practical imperatives that preexist it. So in A Murder of Crows, when Susannah’s mother finds herself wondering, after one of her daughter’s speeches, “What in the name of Sam Hill do you do / with a child who talks like that?” (14, my emphasis), what her response emphasizes is precisely a default in communication. By levelling this question at the audience, Wellman suggests that this default is not only diegetic: our own ability to integrate Susannah’s language is also being challenged.

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2 I have modified Jephcott’s translation: “Retention of strangeness is the only antidote to estrangement.” The original text reads: “Nur Fremdheit ist das Gegengift gegen Entfremdung.”
The sense that Wellman is working negatively, against a dominant norm, is one his own critical writings have encouraged. In his 1984 essay “The Theatre of Good Intentions,” Wellman argues that something very much like Adorno’s “adaptation of spirit to utility”—that is, the communicative ideal as such—is an institutionally enforced expectation in American theater. As the title suggests, Wellman’s essay is largely a critique of the dominance of intention in American plays. He attacks the norm that places character motivation at the center of representational practice. “Why is it so inconceivable to our dramatists that some people do not know, or care, how they feel all the time? That some people act without a detachable motive, or from a myriad of contradictory ones?” Wellman asks (63). An intolerance of mystery or irreducible complexity means that every event onstage must be exhaustively accounted for, every action transparent to intentions with which the spectator can immediately identify: Adorno’s “positivity of meaning.” Well in line with this Frankfurt School resonance, Wellman links the orthodoxy of transparency to the wider cultural context of a society “obsessed with images of well-being” (61), a nation of “professional children” presided over by Reagan the “Great Communicator” (69).

In his rejection of the communicative ideal, Wellman would seem to place himself at odds with Lehmann’s account of the postdramatic; for Lehmann, postdramatic theater highlights the communicative nature of theatrical exchange more than ever (136-7). Lehmann makes this claim by distinguishing between two “axes” of communication:

It is possible to differentiate in theatre an intra-scenic axis of communication [Kommunikation] from an orthogonal axis of communication between the stage and the (really or structurally) distinct place of the spectators. Mindful of the fact that the Greek word ‘theatron’ originally designated the space of the spectators, not the whole theatre, we call the latter axis the ‘theatron axis’…. [T]heatrical discourse has always been doubly addressed: it is at the same time directed intra-scenically (i.e. at the interlocutors in the play) and extra-scenically at the theatron. Proceeding from this well-known duality of all theatre, postdramatic theatre has drawn the conclusion that it has to be possible in principle to make the first dimension almost disappear in order to reinforce the second dimension and to raise it to a new quality of theatre. (127/230)

In its attempt to “reinforce” the theatron dimension, postdramatic theater still winds up aiming primarily for “communicative success”; Lehmann acknowledges that “an unavoidable proximity to the criteria of mass communication” is the “downside” of this emphasis (136-7, original emphasis). But Lehmann’s account seems to me to elide the very possibility that Wellman’s essay energetically, if negatively, implies: the possibility of a theater that would transcend drama by rejecting the communicative norm altogether. Adapting Lehmann’s geometric vocabulary, we might say that if his version of the postdramatic has rotated theater’s focus by ninety degrees, from the intra-scenic relations hip out onto the “orthogonal” towards the audience, Wellman’s theater would rotate in another direction: not out towards us, but somehow off, away. To truly exceed a “theater of good intentions,” that is, we would have to shake off not only the

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3 Adjacent to the critique of communication, Wellman’s attack on “intention” also recalls Adorno’s insistence that an object’s truth always lies outside the intention of its creators; see Buck-Morss 76-78.

4 In the Epilogue to Postdramatic Theatre, Lehmann differentiates between postdramatic-theatrical and “media” modes of communication, in a way that would seem to qualify his claim about “proximity to… mass communication”: the media present “communication as (an exchange of) information,” an economy from which “postdramatic theatre tries to withdraw” (154). I agree, but it seems ironic that the statement Lehmann offers as an example of the kind of speech not available to “mass” communication—“The statement ‘I love you’ is not a piece of information but an act, an engagement” (Ibid)—is perhaps the culture industry’s most reliable discursive staple. Those three little words will come up again in the following section of this chapter.
requirement of characters who pursue intelligible aims amongst each other, but also, more radically, the requirement that performance present itself as a gesture meant for us.

In this chapter, I explore the way Wellman’s work revokes the communicative imperative, developing the theatrics of a resistantly foreign language. Marjorie Perloff has written that Wellman “is our latter-day Brecht, providing the Verfremdung, the ‘making strange’ that makes us see what has been before us all along” (“Foreword” xvii). Wellman’s dogged wordplay, and his anarchic and often agrammatical juxtapositions of wildly different language registers, certainly achieve the kind of defamiliarization Perloff describes. But as her reference to Brecht suggests, Wellman puts a specifically theatrical twist on “making strange”—which is in itself, after all, a fairly textbook poetic goal. Responding to Perloff’s account, Syers cautions against the kind of reading that would place Wellman’s work squarely in the tradition of experimental poetry, or that of canonical literary “defamiliarization.” “Wellman, though described in relation to mainstream playwrights as a poet- or language-playwright, is making theater”; Syers specifies that “it is not the strange surface of the ordinary that Wellman would have us encounter in his theater, but rather something more dimensionally strange—where things are strange because we have become strangers” (n. pag.). Syers emphasizes that Wellman’s writing seizes on theater as a spatio-temporal and interpersonal event, and interferes with its functioning on this level. She contends that Wellmanian strangeness infects the beholder: it is not just the “things” that are strange in his theater, but also ourselves. What if we take this insight further, and posit that Wellman’s strangeness operates not only within us but between us? Below, I explore how this work attacks communicative connection as we sit in the theater together, helping us “become strangers” to each other.

It is perhaps not surprising that monologue—a mode of speech defined by solitude—should be a privileged form for this project. And yet the critical discourse on contemporary stage monologue tends overwhelmingly to emphasize its interpersonally bonding, communicative power. These accounts often assume that a connection with the audience—a heavily trafficked “theatron axis,” as it were—defines monologue’s theatrical potential, or distinguishes stage monologue from other kinds. Perloff, for example, after observing the poem-like qualities of Wellman’s monologue pieces *Terminal Hip* (1984-9) and *Cellophane* (1986), concludes that “these monologues are not, in fact, lyric but insistently dramatic and curiously theatrical in their address to the audience… consistently posit[ing] one or more interlocutors to be questioned, bullied, or cajoled” (“Foreword” xvi). Accounts like this comprehend the theatrical force of stage monologue by re-describing it as a fundamentally presentational, communicative or “dialogical” mode.

In the following section, I discuss this critical tendency, including Lehmann’s own account of postdramatic “monology,” and offer my own account of how monologue works in Wellman; specifically, in *A Murder of Crows*. Here I argue that monologue, as a profoundly unsociable form, takes part in Wellman’s larger project of negating the community present in the theater and demanding a utopian alternative. The next, more heavily theoretical section argues that this mode of theatre can usefully be understood via the Frankfurt School concept of *aura*, which sets a phenomenological emphasis on presence in dialectical tension with a critical allegiance to distance and alterity. Reading Wellman’s sprawling essay-manifesto *Speculations*, I

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5 For a detailed discussion of Wellman as a “fellow traveller of the Language poets” (72) see Appler. Perloff makes this association earlier in her Foreword to *Cellophane* (xi).

6 Of course, as I’ll discuss below, this emphasis also returns us to the vicinity of Brecht: “Non-Aristotelian drama… divides its audience” (60).
suggest that he re-imagines aura as something that fights back, quite viciously, against the violating intimacies of the communicative norm. The chapter ends by briefly considering Wellman’s 1998 play *Girl Gone*, a piece committed to imagining theater as the site of disobedient departures from the present—departures both within and from the “directly connected world” (254) where performance takes place.

**Mouthing Off: *A Murder of Crows***

Roughly speaking, *A Murder of Crows* tells the story of an American family. That story might be summarized as follows: Susannah, her war-vet brother Andy, and their mother Nella have lost Raymond, the children’s father, in a fatal “avalanche by the… / grease pit” (14, ellipsis in original). They have therefore moved in with Nella’s bigoted and materialistic brother and sister-in-law, Howard and Georgia. Resentful of this situation and especially of her aunt’s meanness, Susannah obsessively watches the sky, convinced that an apocalyptic weather change is on the horizon. Eventually, Raymond shows up, disguised as “the weatherman” (28), and explains to Susannah that he faked his death and has been living “among the crows”—a refuge he’s had to give up due to a feather allergy (40-41). Raymond presses Susannah for her predictions about the weather, but she decides to give crow life a try herself, and in the last scene we see her among the crows, “trying to pass” for one of them (56).

The play is one of Wellman’s most traditional, recognizably “dramatic” pieces. It constructs a plot, if an offbeat one; it offers pro- and antagonists, conflict and (provisional) resolution, and even a classic recognition scene: “Dad, it’s you” (30). It would be false to deny that some of the play’s delight lies in its “pleasurable narrativity” (Diamond 84); as we saw, this is also true of Parks’s *The Death*, in which the story of a woman undergoing genocidal and personal loss loans great affective force to poetic structure. In fact, *A Murder of Crows* hews closer to dramatic conventions than Parks’s early work does. It does so, however, primarily in order to disturb those conventions again and again. Focusing on this text rather than on one of Wellman’s more obviously postdramatic works—such as *Cellophane*, *Terminal Hip*, or *Antigone* (2001)⁷—offers the chance to analyze exactly how Wellman works against drama, since this critical engagement occurs “locally” throughout the play. The point is not just to show that Wellman’s writing breaks the rules of conventional dramaturgy; rather I want to consider how his “intra-scenic” ruptures trouble the “theatron” relation as well.

Monologues are the primary vehicle of this disturbance in *A Murder of Crows*. These long speeches occur throughout the play, and yet they retain a sense of uneasy verbal excess. The play’s opening tableau anticipates their outbreak:

**SCENE ONE**

* A front porch of an American-type house. Only: no house. A woman, NELLA, stands on the porch looking out. Her daughter, SUSANNAH, stands a few yards down stage with an enraptured look on her face, also looking out. (Wellman, Murder 9)

Both of the characters we meet at the start of the play are “looking out”; that is, they are looking towards the audience, and not at each other. Their placement seems to correspond perfectly to Lehmann’s postdramatic geometry: the women’s gazes highlight the theatron axis, while the stipulation that Susannah stands “a few yards down” from her mother fractures the intra-scenic

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⁷ *Antigone* is discussed at length in Syers, and in Martin Puchner’s 2011 article “Drama and Performance: Toward a Theory of Adaptation.” Marc Robinson’s brief treatment of *A Murder of Crows* alongside a handful of other Wellman plays in *The Other American Drama* (192-6) is the only scholarly reading of this play that I have found; but see also Douglas Messerli’s thoughtful recent blog post, “A Linguistic Fantasia.” Messerli published the play in 1994 (Sun & Moon Press) and 2000 (Green Integer).
line. That the characters are introduced separately, one “looking out” and the other “also looking out,” creates a sense of presentationally-directed composition, a parallel that does not derive from any experience the characters share. In this context, the “enraptured look” on Susannah’s face suggests the kind of revelation we associate with soliloquy—“the verbalization of the speaker’s interior feelings or thoughts” (Geis, *Postmodern* 9). We seem to be set up for a theatrical communication that will proceed directly from actor to audience, eschewing the mediation of dramatic dialogue. This is precisely what several accounts of contemporary stage monologue would lead us to expect; and yet, as I will suggest, the postdramatic force of Wellman’s monologues operates quite differently.

Monologue has often stood in tension with conventional dramatic requirements. As Ruby Cohn notes drily, “The respectable middle-class protagonist does not stand alone in the middle of his carpeted living room to ponder aloud on his problems or to debate with himself” (“Outward” 17). It would be a mistake, however, to conclude that the prominence of monologue always signals a postdramatic or experimental orientation. “To a striking and perhaps unprecedented degree,” observes Deborah R. Geis in her 1993 book on monologue, “contemporary American playwrights have been inclined to draw upon the myriad dramatic and narrative opportunities to be found in monologic language. Virtually all of the established and emerging voices of the current American theater, from Arthur Miller to Spalding Gray, employ monologues as a fundamental component of their dramatic creations” (*Postmodern* 2). Although Geis does go on to make a strong argument for monologue’s efficacy in engaging “the complicated fragmentation and continual reformation of subjectivity suggested by a postmodern world” (151; see also 29-44), the remarkable ubiquity she describes should in itself discourage any blanket identification of monologue as inherently “subversive” or difficult, modernist or postmodern.

Similarly, in an article published the same year, Paul Castagno notes that “most writers of contemporary realistic drama utilize the monologue to service the requirements of both actors and audience towards explication and clarification of subtext” and “to clarify inner objectives” (135). He delineates three main functions of monologue within this framework: “exposition or anecdotal diversion in the early scenes, metaphoric or thematic analogy to emphasize or clarify points of conflict in the rising action, [and] character discovery, epiphany, or reversals located near the major crisis of the play” (Ibid). As this dramaturgical vocabulary suggests, such uses of monologue fall squarely in line with traditional dramatic aims and organization.

Castagno describes this tendency, however, in order to show how Wellman (as well as another playwright, Len Jenkin) departs from it. Adapting terminology developed by Mikhail Bakhtin, Castagno argues that Wellman’s and Jenkin’s use of monologue differs not only from dramatic use but from the “authoritative gleam” of monologic language as such (134). In a development that would parallel the innovation Bakhtin famously ascribed to the novel, Castagno sees these playwrights as “dialogizing” monologue, effectively undermining the univocal sovereignty of the speaking One. Although Castagno traces multiple “dialogic” currents in Wellman’s monologues, he emphasizes the cognitive back-and-forth these speeches establish with their audience. “[R]ather than denying the existence of the ‘other’ or pretending to be the ‘final word’, as was traditionally the case [in monologic speech],” he writes, “it is now the ‘other’ who becomes the site for the production of the ‘final word’” (143). The “other” in Castagno’s reading is the spectator: the “barrage” of Wellman’s verbiage “focuses the observer on the immediacy of the language,” and she is thereby “invited into the creative process… to dialogize in the middle of [Wellman’s] monologic ‘playing field’” (144).
We might wonder: if dialogic interrelation really determines these writers’ poetic ideal, why approach it through solo speech in the first place? Castagno does not introduce passages of dialogue into his analysis for comparison, but we might posit that the profound dialogization he describes belongs preferentially, if paradoxically, to monologue because monologue is language for which no response is already given. In other words, perhaps monologue can interpelate the audience “into the creative process” through the very absence of onstage rejoinder—if it’s not for any other character, it must be for our benefit. Bearing Lehmann’s account of the two “axes” in mind, it becomes easy to imagine that monologue, as speech liberated from conversational convention between characters, could therefore function as a kind of “dialogue” with the audience, especially when the language being spoken is as provocative as Wellman’s often is. And it seems instinctively obvious that this kind of interaction would be more profoundly or truly or really dialogical than the back-and-forth between characters—a dialogue which is, after all, only staged.

This conceptual turn, whereby monologue turns out to be a privileged form not of solitude, but instead of heightened theatrical sociability, appears in several critical accounts. In addition to Perloff’s remark, quoted earlier, Geis writes that although monologue can be defined as

a speech for one or a dialogue with oneself... this sense of monologue is complicated by the presence, in the theater, of the audience. Since the status of a play presupposes that even a speech performed in the imagined solitude of a character will always include the audience as acknowledged or implicit witness, the inevitable status of the spectators as recipients foregrounds the ‘telling,’ or ‘narrating,’ function of the monologue.”

(Postmodern 7)

Similarly, Lehmann argues that monologue can only be considered a “disruption of communication” as long as we regard it outside the theatrical context (128-9). The idea of monologue as non-communication, he suggests, depends upon a narrowly dramatic framework: “only in the system of dialogue does the failure of speaking as communication between people [i.e. characters] become visible, while a monologue as a speech that has the audience as its addressee intensifies communication—namely the communication taking place in the here and now of theatre” (128). Because drama seeks to establish a unified fictional world, dramatic analysis will tend to evaluate what is happening in a play along the intra-scenic axis, describing relations among characters; the dramatic “system of dialogue” thus allows monologue to register as “failure” since characters are not engaging conversationally with each other. But such analysis, Lehmann suggests, cannot see the communicative success that can occur between the performer and her audience in such moments. Along the theatron axis, monologue becomes an emphatic experience of the shared “here and now.” “[T]he monologue of figures on stage reinforces the certainty of our perception of the dramatic events as a reality in the now, authenticated through the implication of the audience,” Lehmann writes, claiming that monologue’s “transgression of the border of the imaginary dramatic universe to the real theatrical situation” accounts for its appeal to postdramatic artists (Ibid).

Lehmann coins a new word, “monology,” in order to emphasize the importance of the theatron relationship: theatrical monologue, and especially its postdramatic adaptation, is not

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8 Lehmann does qualify this argument: “This analysis does not mean to imply that monologues or ‘soliloquys’ can under no circumstances represent the absence of communication”; he then gives the example of a production to which “the loneliness of monologizing” is central (129). I would claim that such examples deserve a more central position in an analysis of postdramatic monologue than Lehmann suggests.
“simply a matter of a continuation of the monologue as a textual form” (128). As Geis suggests, however, even a written play is defined as such by its orientation towards the posited “presence” of an audience, implying that a theatron axis can structure the “textual form” more profoundly than Lehmann’s neologism seems to acknowledge. I argued in Chapter Three that Waiting for Godot, and Lucky’s monologue in particular, structures itself through a rigorously determinate but negative relation to what Lehmann calls theater’s “reality in the now”—and that The Unnamable creates an entirely textual simulation of the theatrical “monology” Lehmann would like to distinguish from text. In Chapter Four, we saw that Parks’s The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World uses monologue to elaborate a poetics of the “burning page” in which writing both provides for the theatrical present and promises itself as a spectacular alternative to that present. These works trouble any neat distinction between “monologue as a textual form” and “monology” as a feature of “the real theatrical situation.”

At the same time, they also display an interest in monologue that deviates from monologue’s supposed tendency to heighten “communication taking place in the here and now.” For these writers, monologue is not primarily a means of anchoring a play in its performance present. More crucially, their monologues bring the relationship between text and scene into crisis, and help establish the need for an alternative to present reality—an alternative of which writing itself becomes the sign. As much as they rupture the intra-scenic consistency of their (already fairly attenuated) fictions, that is, these monologues also declaim the insufficiency of the theatron transaction. Returning to Castagno, then, we might question whether the innovation of Wellman’s monologues is really best described as a “dialogic” engagement with the audience. Does the audience, and hence the theatron itself, really “becom[e] the site for the production of the ‘final word’” (143)? There is no disputing that Wellman’s work is cognitively challenging; seeing or reading his plays can feel like an aerobic activity, and it is a short step from there to the heightened sense of participation that seems to me to ground such accounts. But it is at least as essential to these speeches that they elude our attempts to make meaning. In so doing, they hold open the dimension of a content ungrasped and unrealized, a referent that refuses to materialize here and now, for us.

Coming back to the beginning of A Murder of Crows, we might notice that its opening monologue subtly undermines the presentational expectation set up by the performers’ frontality: the first speech comes from the upstage Nella, not the “down stage” Susannah, a fact which gently troubles the association of monologue with communicative proximity. For a reader, moreover, the women’s posture of “looking out” retroactively loses some of its determinacy two pages later, when Wellman begins using the word “out” instead of “off” to denote an exit: “They go up the porch steps, and out,” “She goes out,” etc. (11, 14, 18, 25). This usage is so consistent that we might well wonder where exactly Nella and Susannah are looking when the play begins. Is their “looking out” really a looking off? Are we, the audience, simply being traversed on the way to some other discursive destination?

Of course, dramatic soliloquy often takes advantage of the dreamily raised eye-line, looking off into space rather than honing in on the audience. To some degree, Wellman’s soliloquys derive from this tradition, which seeks to reconcile the frontality of long speeches with the ostensibly enclosed world of a dramatic fiction. But the attempt to naturalize long, solitary speeches by giving them the facial cast of thought is fundamentally an attempt to ameliorate the tension they produce within a realistic frame—and here Wellman’s aesthetic makes a solid departure. Geis observes that “the soliloquy historically has faced charges of implausibility” (Postmodern 9); Cohn’s reference earlier to the “carpeted living room” invokes
the sense that solo speech threatens modern theater conventions. If Wellman’s characters avoid eye contact with us, however, this is precisely not in order to help them fit into the naturalistic scene. “Living room! A place I / loathe and look down upon,” Susannah declares (23). Far from evading the potential outrageousness of soliloquy, Wellman’s characters embrace it. If their “looking out” is a looking off, this is not meant to diffuse the tension Cohn describes, but to compound it. Consider the beginning of Nella’s speech at the top of the play:

NELLA: My husband was of ordinary size and
so was the house. This part of the
country presents a problem. It don’t
fit on the map right. That’s because
we’re downwind of the big reactor.
Not to mention the county dump, where
that hellacious grease pit is. (9)
The first sentence describes a propriety that has been lost, a measured life that submits to “ordinary” measuring, that fits on the map. This is also an appeal to a particular poetics—specifically, Aristotle’s famous requirement that the plot of a drama maintain “a definite size,” neither too big nor too small. A “very tiny creature” cannot be beautiful, Aristotle writes:

nor an excessively huge one (for then it cannot all be perceived at once and so its unity and wholeness are lost), if for example there were a creature a thousand miles long—so, just as in the case of living creatures they must have some size, but one that can be taken in in a single view, so with plots: they should have length, but such that they are easy to remember. (30-31; 51a1)
The missing “husband… of ordinary size” would be precisely this beautiful Aristotelian animal, and the absent house is the structure that would accommodate him—and us. (Nella later imagines that in heaven, “None of the houses / are unusual houses, with respect to / size and shape” [48]). What Nella’s first sentence lays out, therefore, is a kind of ideal drama, or at least its empty shell: empty because just as the husband and house are gone, there is no longer any “beautiful” content to this image, only the placeholder “ordinary” where particular description might have been.

The play as a whole, like much of Wellman’s work, will end up denouncing the spuriousness of the supposedly ordinary or normal. Nella seems to enact this discovery as the speech progresses, and anything that might have seemed ordinary (“the county dump”) turns out to be shot through with sublime horror (the “hellacious grease pit”). But the obtrusion of unsurveyable, unmappable magnitudes is not only the speech’s subject matter; it also determines the form of the speech itself, as it burgeons beyond any deference to the requirements of plot. As Nella’s monologue continues, her frank exposition repeatedly dissolves into what we might call speculation, drifting from an informative mode that “sets the stage” to a more theoretical tone that grasps at ideas and images for their own sake. This begins to happen in the first sentences, in the shift from narrative content (loss of the husband and the house) to enigmatic questioning (the paradoxical “problem”). Similar shifts occur throughout Nella’s speech:

When the kids were kids the sea was normal. Of the logic of the sea my younger one, Susannah, said: It's lucky the shallow end is near the beach. (9-10)
Here Nella has just described “the local ocean” as “a big / bowl of custard, wiggly custard” (9); in the first sentence above, she seems to rein in this riot of imagery, binding it into the service of
a solid, indeed classical nature metaphor: things were fine once, and now they’re out of whack, hence the drama that is about to unfold. But the bare-faced tautology implanted within this remark (“when the kids were kids”) already suggests the precariousness of such stage-setting, and indeed, the second sentence abandons expository clarity, turning into an odd little koan with no clear narrative function. As Nella swerves from dramatically useful information, she also moves suddenly and briefly into a more exalted, theoretical register (“Of the logic of the sea…”). This is a defamiliarization technique Wellman inherits from high modernism, and one of its effects is to dignify Nella as a speaker. As Marc Robinson observes, “Wellman’s most engaging characters are visionaries. They fix on an idea and launch themselves into lyrical flight.” (192). In a speech like this one, such “flights” function to distract both the speaker and the audience from the story at hand.

At the same time, Nella is also quoting the words of the daughter who stands right there, closer to us than Nella herself is. That is, she talks about her daughter instead of talking with her. In this way the discourse positively flaunts its monological nature, summoning the prospect of dialogue and rejecting it in favor of solo speech. From the start, monologue’s departure from the sociality—one might say, from the family ties—of dialogue becomes identified with its departure from the function of grounding the audience. This happens in other ways too throughout the first scene. After explaining that they lost their house, Nella goes on:

… So we lived in various
places, with various relations who lived
variably in various places. All of them
downwind of something. It’s peculiar how
no matter where you are you’re always
downwind of something peculiar.

Pause.
Those relations were called Howard
and Georgia…

**HOWARD and GEORGIA** enter with shopping bags full of money. *They go up the porch steps, and out, happy.* (11)
The first sentence, with its comical repetitions of “various,” suggests a push to sum up, to be done with explaining, even at the cost of sense; abstracting vehemently, it makes a show of how much it doesn’t tell. In place of this missing information, the speech wanders into speculation once again (“It’s peculiar…”). In a new twist, though, Nella then makes the baffling and hilarious claim that “Those relations,” emphatically various though they were, “were called Howard / and Georgia,” the names of the two very particular characters we subsequently see. The effect is to further divorce Nella’s talking from the aim of grounding the action, as if the play has lost track of the “relations” between discourse and event, and also lost hold of the logic of “relation”—telling something—itself.

As these ruptured relations play out, family emerges as a shifting field of values, alternately concrete and abstract. The play presents a decidedly nebulous sense of one’s responsibilities towards one’s “various relations,” including the cognitive and narrative responsibility of knowing exactly who they are. It may be worth recalling, here, that the importance of that particular knowledge was the obsession of classical Western theater’s founding story; and while we soon learn that Howard and Georgia are Nella’s brother and sister-

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9 Messerli evinces a similar sense that monologue attenuates family in *Murder*: he suggests that the play’s family members are only “slightly related,” in that “it might be best to think of their interrelationships more as a series of monologues” (n. pag.).
in-law, her first speech waves this fact aside for the pleasure of running off its own rails. Similarly, after Susannah finally interrupts her mother, Nella introduces her as “Susie, the middle one” (12)—having previously referred to her as “my / younger one, Susannah.” Family relations in themselves seem to produce, or at least attract, a kind of interference with exposition. In a play that proclaims its loathing of the living room, the dramatic imperative to tell the truth about (a) family hangs around awkwardly like an ancient curiosity, a front porch without a house to support it. The long monologue, with its many opportunities for vagary, provides a structure within which “relation” gets invoked, then gets lost.

Considered topically, these procedures are the poetic equivalent of a political retort: *A Murder of Crows* opened the same year “family values” became a rallying cry of the Republican campaign. Indeed, the play’s opening description of “A front porch of an American-type house. Only: no house” literalizes Wellman’s ongoing interest in exposing the standard “American-type house” as a false front. Uncle Howard and Aunt Georgia obsessively disparage “Foreigners,” “Arabs,” and “other Asiatic filths” throughout the play (17, 33, 38), their home precariously constituted through violent exclusion. The play’s sense of domesticity as an ideal at once vacuous and vicious echoes a remark from Horkheimer and Adorno’s “The Culture Industry”: “The citizens whose lives are split between business and private life, their private life between ostentation and intimacy, their intimacy between the sullen community of marriage and the bitter solace of being entirely alone, at odds with themselves and with everyone, are virtually already Nazis” (125). Wellman literalizes this notion that conventional social and familial bonds are in fact sustained by violent division. “[M]an I wish / I could’ve run him through a roaring buzz saw,” says Howard of his brother-in-law. “… But don’t get me wrong, I loved the guy” (36).

Monologue serves Wellman’s cultural-critical impulse, since the largesse of long speeches allows cruelty or bigotry to talk itself blue in the face. Monologue is a natural vehicle for hyperbole, and its gathering momentum can carry apparently innocuous clichés almost effortlessly to hysterical, violent conclusions—not entirely unlike the escalation Horkheimer and Adorno themselves build into the long sentence just cited. For instance, in the play’s second scene, Georgia has been complaining about Howard’s family, but acknowledges it would be wrong to kick them out;

> Only Howard, I have a vision of how good America could be, if only it weren’t for your family, particularly that part of it currently residing in our house, because America deserves better than this, I mean this overcrowded, down-in-the-dumps, small-time depression atmosphere, it just doesn’t hit the nail on the head, it’s not up to snuff, furthermore it’s bothersome and a crying shame. And I know we’ve got to be hospitable even when we don’t give a crap, but why oh why must they smell so bad, Jesus, Howard, it drives me crazy, the way they stink… Howard, could they be THAT INSANE that they would only pretend to bathe, but secretly not bathe? (20)
All the characters in this play go on and on, but in speeches like this—as opposed to Nella’s, for example—the prattling becomes a kind of hectoring whose lengthiness (“… furthermore …”) consumes its own last shred of reliability. Yet the speech ends by swerving into a rather creative, idiosyncratic and funny fantasy. Even while it bears its speaker along towards a species of manic breakdown, this language continues producing a quotient of surprise, a pleasure never reducible to our sense of superiority over the character.

Georgia’s deficient family feeling is, after all, something the play as a whole shares. In another instance of satirical monologue, Wellman makes merry with that TV hallmark, the serious, intergenerational let’s-sit-down-and-talk scene. Interrupting Susannah’s vigil by the porch, Uncle Howard engages her on the subject of Aunt Georgia. They agree that Georgia is “a hideous, rotten cunt,” but then the conversation takes a turn for the normal: “It’s / true,” says Howard, “but she’s got her feelings too. Life / hasn’t been too easy on her” (24). If his speech stopped there, we might be at the start of a dramatically effective (and affecting) dialogue, a turning point in the characters’ relations and our own sense of them. Indeed, responding to signals that have become second nature, we may already find our attitudes towards these people starting to soften. But instead Howard keeps talking, and as he talks, his own speech conveys him irresistibly beyond the bounds of our empathy. “We old folks / don’t have enough to do,” he continues,

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most of the people
we hate are dead… and since all we believe
in is murder and hatred and envy of anyone
who has more fun than we do, it’s rough.
You’re lucky you can still get excited by
the idea of causing someone pain, particularly
if they’re colored, or an Arab, or look funny.
I know it’s hard for you to imagine, but
Georgia was beautiful once, god, when she
put on her robes, at the big Klonvocations,
she was beautiful, and her bigotry was beautiful
too. Breathtaking bigotry. (24)
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Besides disabling any identification with the character, two aspects are salient in Howard’s speech: first, the way this leap into the despicable works specifically against the generic expectation the scene begins by evoking (the meaningful heart-to-heart), and second, the way a related dissonance arises from the swerve into another linguistic register, particularly with the word “bigotry” and its alliterations. Utterly failing as a pitch for sympathy, the speech meanders into a weirdly objective excursus on the speaker’s own run-of-the-mill depravity. Together with its wildly incriminating content, the speech’s comically detached tone—for instance, packing “murder and hatred and envy” into a subordinate clause—gives the impression that the character himself doesn’t know what he’s saying. Or perhaps more accurately: the impression that no character is saying this at all. Alliteration together with abstraction (“her bigotry was beautiful… Breathtaking bigotry”) operate here as means of “literarization,” making us aware that someone other than the speaker is having fun with these words.

The logic of Howard’s language, that is, exceeds both its intra-scenic context and its efficacy as a political signal to the audience. This latter point is important: approaching this moment purely as satire, one might feel that Wellman is overdoing his politics, making his
critique too obvious and even setting up straw men. Isn’t a character who frankly enjoys “causing someone pain, particularly / if they’re colored, or an Arab” just a modern-day, moustache-twirling Simon Legree? Isn’t this the kind of clubby, lazy liberalism that gives its audience the satisfaction of denouncing cartoon racism without engaging its real complexities? There is undoubtedly a measure of self-congratulation to be had here, as there is in recognizing and denouncing the stereotypes that give Parks’s characters their names in The Death. But as I suggested in the previous chapter, such devices can also work to undermine the moral clarity they seem at first to promote. In Howard’s speech, and in other monologues throughout the play, Wellman goes far too precisely in order to begin eviscerating our confidence in the play’s political clarity. Once we have recognized Howard and Georgia as bigots, the speeches—for instance, Howard’s rhapsody on Georgia’s Klan persona—no longer heighten our sense of moral meaning. It would be truer to say that they indulge in ethical and political detritus which they refuse to redeem as valuable information. The play’s discourse goes on above the heads of the character, while the excessiveness of this discourse tends to swamp our own grasp of any message being conveyed.

I do not mean to imply that because Wellman’s speeches undermine their own political communication with the audience, they must necessarily withhold “theatron” communication altogether. After all, when Lehmann describes postdramatic monologue as “communication taking place in the here and now of theatre” he hardly has in mind the communication of a straightforward political message. But I do think that by introducing this kind of message and then veering off-topic, Wellman points up a more general dynamic of interference, a strong sense that the play has been guided by aims other than our reception. He expresses this alterity provocatively in a 1997 interview with David Savran: “these plays are somehow the subtext for some absent realistic play. I just dispense with writing the text altogether and write the subtext because it’s more interesting” (in Savran 330). A reader encountering this remark might imagine something on the order of Eugene O’Neill’s Strange Interlude. But Wellman never says he writes subtext as text, that he puts inner turmoil on display. Rather, he pictures himself writing, in relation to an “absent” text, something which is also not given, something still “sub-.” To propose, paradoxically, that what he has written is a form of the unwritten (which subtext is, by definition) is to promote its constitutive inaccessibility. If the subtext of a text functions to

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10 Jon Erickson makes this critique of Wellman’s 1990 play Sincerity Forever: “The impression the entire play leaves me with is the immense self-satisfaction of Mac Wellman in producing this fundamentally straw-man argument of a play, with the easiest of polarities and targets,” namely, white Southern racists and their senators. Erickson, who locates theater’s political value in its ability to “communicate” across difference, sees an ethical problem in Wellman’s espousal of fundamentally opaque characterization: a “character, whose intentionless acts that allow one to couch them within the mystery of ‘pure evil,’ is in fact a mystification which prevents us from trying to understand the nature of that evil and thereby disarming it” (“Mise” n. pag.). Of course Wellman, like Adorno, would dispute Erickson’s assumption that “understand[ing] the nature… of evil” through psychologically legible portraiture can really lead to “disarming it.”

11 These speeches offer a verbal equivalent to the costumes stipulated in Sincerity Forever, whose teenage characters wear Klan outfits throughout the play without any explicit contextual justification. While this obviously “sends a message” about the play’s critical program, the very persistence of the robes and hoods beyond the moment of their political legibility ultimately loosens our grasp on these signifiers.

12 For Lehmann, a theater of the straightforward political “message” would likely be too representational, and insufficiently presentational, to count as truly postdramatic. In this vein he critiques Andrzej Wirth’s model of post-Brechtian theater as fundamentally replacing dialogue with a “discourse” aimed directly at the audience from the director. He posits that postdramatic theater “often breaks away from such an order centred on one logos… Rather, it is often a matter of the authentic presence of individual performers, who appear not as mere carriers of an intention external to them” (31-32). I am obviously skeptical about the criterion of “authentic presence,” but I want to acknowledge Lehmann’s awareness that “The model of an ‘address’… requires further specification to apply to the new forms of theatre” (32)—that at least some modes of intense theatron transaction are themselves dramatic.
guarantee the latter’s meaningfulness, a subtext *without* a text suggests language wasting its breath in an elaboration without a referent—without anything to deliver.

If monologue is especially well suited for such extravagance, it is so in part because of the tension it can create within the framework of dramatic dialogue, however bare this framework has become. We saw this tension at its height in Lucky’s speech in *Godot*, where monologue’s strain on the intra-scenic system becomes palpable as a kind of physical agony. Even without a speaker who “struggles and shouts his text” amidst a hail of beatings, long speeches can build up a disturbing lack of fit with their fictional surroundings. This ill-fittingness can then model the performance’s relationship to *us*, implying that we are the locus of monologue’s inappropriateness—that the characters are going on and on, not just in spite of each other’s presence, but in spite of ours. We may have come together to watch the play, but the play mocks our assembly; its strangeness insists that we are all still strangers. After Nella has asked Susannah to explain what she means by saying that “The weather is changing,” Susannah responds:

SUSANNAH: No. The time is not ripe. The moment will come. Everything that is vertical will become horizontal. Seven feet, with unusual shoes on them, will emerge from seven open doors, doors previous locked tight shut. X will lead Y into the night, which will blaze up bright as day. A big pink passle of wind will stream out of a billowy, purple cloud and ask each and every one of us a thing or two he’d like to know.

*She goes out.* (13-14)

Nella responds with the line I quoted earlier: “What in the name of Sam Hill do you do / with a child who talks like that?” (14). Now, Susannah is delightful, and I think most of the audience will find itself in sympathy with her ecstatic hopes throughout the play. But her mother’s appeal to us has its point too: we *don’t* know what to “do / with a child who talks like that.” When Nella spoke the line in a recent production of the play at Brooklyn College, it seemed as if the audience had been longing for some acknowledgement of this very fact: there had been scattered giggles throughout the opening scene, but this line drew the evening’s first big laugh. It’s as if we can’t quite handle the play’s wilder language, can’t quite process, for instance, the assertion that “X will lead Y into the night.” However much pleasure we may take in such speeches, they are still in some sense going over our heads. Their logic, their economy is not our own. The big laugh that confirms this implies that when we come together (laugh *together*, and not in scattered chuckles), it’s in order to ratify the exclusionary standards of “this part of the country.”*¹³* As a collective, we are woven into a fabric that has no place for Susannah’s verbal meandering—or for any one speaker’s idiosyncratic voice.

This implication comes to a head in a device Wellman uses frequently in his monologues: overlapping speech. In the flashback to Raymond’s funeral, Nella, Howard, and Georgia stand

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¹³ Wolfgang Iser has argued that Beckett’s plays disable “the liberating communal laugh by means of which members of an audience confirm one another’s reactions” (203); I think moments like this one in *A Murder of Crows* help demonstrate why such a shift continues to feel necessary.
around the coffin, “quarreling, all at the top of their voices” (33). They all speak at length so that, for example, the following three chunks are roughly simultaneous:

GEORGIA: Absurd. He looked like a god damned foreigner in them shoes. What kind of standard-average person would go and put on shoes like that, and him being an American! and go and pretend he was like one of us, decent and normal? (33)

HOWARD: … like Raymond here, a total fizzle, a colossal existential dud, a complete and laughable failure at all he ever attempted in all his clownish, dipshit, clutzy life… (35)

NELLA: … I know, please forgive me for being such a fool; I know I’ve been a total fool with my life, all of it, including getting poor and homeless after his death and having to impose like this… (37)

As the speeches get more and more extreme, Georgia’s paranoia, Howard’s sadism, and Nella’s self-loathing meld into a cacophony; no audience member will be able to take it all in. Monologue’s unsociability is thus brought to a climax. This is language that doesn’t care who receives it; it is, we might say, the bald renunciation of dialogue, not only on the part of the characters but, more profoundly, on the part of the play itself with respect to its audience. There is great pleasure to be had in the exuberant sonic chaos that results. But much of that pleasure comes from a sense of how outrageously the play is outstripping us. The shared present of performance becomes the medium of our insufficiency; our simultaneous attendance begins to feel like an obstacle to reception, since we know we could only access all this text by reading it. But of course, reading this scene (or even just the excerpts above) comes with its own sense of insufficiency, since there we know we are not “hearing” the lines simultaneously in our mind’s ear as we would in performance. This is writing that demands enactment, not in order to be more “directly and immediately perceived” (Ryan 37) but in order to exploit and expose the present as a site of dissonance and interference. Invaded by these monologues, theater’s live happening becomes vital—as, precisely, the medium in which communication can most powerfully fail to occur.

The three overlapping speeches are similar in both content and structure to the characters’ other monologues throughout the play. Their long-winded spiraling into hyperbole, renunciation of communicative efficiency and indulgence in extravagant turns of phrase—together with their hilariously flagrant inappropriateness in the context of the funeral—make them seem like perfect candidates for mutual cancelation, implying that the same could be true of the play’s other monologues. That is, this scene offers something like a theory of monologue, suggesting that its shameless proliferations are fundamentally extraneous, its words out of place to the point that, as far as anyone else is concerned, they may as well be wasted. The characters are not speaking to each other or to us; they are mouthing off, their language oriented by some polestar that neither “intra-scenic” nor “theatron” parameters can comprehend.

The resulting chaos is very funny, but it has a serious side too. A few minutes later, as Susannah and the resurrected Raymond regard the frozen flashback, Raymond’s monologue brings the scene to a close with only a few words from Susannah (the asterisk indicates overlap):

RAYMOND: But, hell, that’s all history, and I’m like
you. I get this kink in my side that tells
me the weather’s changing, and that makes
an optimist of me. Even if I am homeless,
and have lived with crows and the common people
think I died buried in chicken shit right up
to the butt end of my boot.
SUSANNAH: Dad,* I love you.
RAYMOND: Hell yes, I’d still be living with crows
if I weren’t allergic to feathers. (41)

More than any other speech in the play, Susannah’s words here go straight for the gut. In itself, the line’s communicative legibility and urgency produce a dramatic sense of immediacy, hailing us into an empathetic identification. And yet the pathos of Susannah’s line comes not only from what it says, but more profoundly from the fact that what it says cannot be fully heard within the structure of the play. Wellman uses Raymond’s monologue, his talking-too-much, to muddy the waters of emotional transmission and interfere with the response we feel ourselves wanting to have. This is a gesture that raises the prospect of a fulfilling and straightforward communication and, at the same time, withholds it. Once again, the overlap circulates between performance and text: in print, the asterisk simulates the interference of simultaneous performance. In fact, by adopting asterisks for this purpose instead of the slashes other writers use, Wellman heightens the sense of his presentation as incomplete. Following an asterisk like a footnote, Susannah’s “I love you” is “subtext” in the Wellmanian sense, discourse that is not fully here for our consumption.

There is something cruel about this moment, in which monologue shows its claws: not merely a variation on dialogical intercourse, Raymond’s monologue becomes a discourse of utter selfishness in order to renounce the possibility of communicating love. “In our time only bad artists name what they cherish,” Wellman writes in “The Theatre of Good Intentions,” “because what is cherished, or revered, or loved, will immediately be used as a tool by the powers that be” (66). Resisting what Adorno calls the “mendacious positivity of meaning,” Wellman makes theater a space where communication is held at bay: where we can flout the societal imperative to know and be known by each other, and the corresponding economy of exchange. Such theater, we might say, recuperates the value of loneliness.

As we saw above, critics have often claimed that the solitary quality of literary monologue vanishes in work for the stage. Wellman’s speeches should make us ask if “the inevitable status of the spectators as recipients” (Geis 7) is really so inevitable. On the contrary, he seems to maintain the “deviant” nature of literary monologue, theorized by Ken Frieden as a discourse of “counternormative swerves” (190):

deviation from convention always threatens meaning, for how can an individual invent new forms and still be understood? By asserting an individual style or a deviant form of expression, monologue borders on meaninglessness. Literary monologues provide the basis for inquiry into semantic solitude, associated with idiolects that strive to preserve their autonomy while reaching for an elusive otherness. (194)

Wellman puts this deviance to work along the theatron axis, using monologue as a kind of verbal fog machine. If we recall Parks’s depiction of the ghostly figure who “will almost always take up residence in a corner” (“From Elements” 12), we can see that these writers share a desire for theater that does something other than present itself to us—a desire we can trace back to James and Stein. In A Murder of Crows, Wellman’s use of monologue works in tandem with his
cheerful thematization of the dysfunctional family and the literally broken home to emphasize the (anti-)social dimension of this project. Withholding, exceeding, or blocking the communicative speech that would unite us in confidently sympathetic understanding, the play enacts an energetic denial of our togetherness in the theater. This impulse comes from a utopian conviction that the longing for a radically different community needs to be cultivated as longing, not bought off with the unifying affirmation of a dramatic “so ist es.” Theater can neither constitute nor present such a community “in our time” without assimilating it to the structures of the present world. To that end, as we saw earlier, theater has to avoid the kind of presentation that would accomplish a collectivity within the terms of the present—an “adaptation of spirit to utility” (Adorno) that would channel our discontent into the satisfying payoff of a lesson learned, a “good intention” well met. Unless theater finds a way to defer communication, it will end up as one more variant of the same old murderous meet-and-greet, sold out, as Wellman puts it, to “the powers that be.”

Wellman allegorizes this concern through the eponymous crows. Per his descriptions, the crows appear at the beginning of the fourth scene: “Three big, evil-looking CROWS on a tree-limb in the distance. SUSANNAH alone, throwing rocks at frogs” (26). Later, at the start of the funeral flashback, the crows “begin a softshoe” (32). They are deliciously ominous; as if drawn by the violence of Susannah’s pastime, they offer a muted visual correlative to her visions of global destruction. Their position “in the distance” (in the premiere at Primary Stages, they stood up above the action, on a catwalk) marks them as an alternate form of life. Recalling Beckett, we might say that such a figure is precisely what Godot resolutely refuses; the crows embody the prospect of being somewhere else, an outside perspective from which “this muckheap” could become one landscape among others. It is significant that the crows appear when Susannah is “alone,” as if they can only be summoned by solitude. They seem to figure the “foreignness to the world” that Adorno sees as crucial to the aesthetic.

For Adorno, as we know, that foreignness appears through the objectivated, “script”-like character of the artwork; and Wellman’s crows might be described as specifically textual figures. The color of ink, their alternative perspective effects a Brechtian “literarization” in the sense we have been tracing: their positioning creates an internal distance that breaks up the stage. The birds also, as already noted, furnish the play with a title that announces, more than anything, a peculiarity of language, the improbable and oddly exciting term “murder of crows.” Given the title’s wordplay, the crows instance a figure of speech first of all. This figural, textual quality compounds a sense that the crows are not quite here. Before Susannah has even noticed them, they seem to promise the possibility of an escape from the “bubble of / sham, pure sham” (13) in which she feels trapped:

I’m tired of this boring weather, I want
some other, more interesting weather than
this… when we emerge from the other
end we may not even be “people” any more, we’ll
be something else, something finer, harder,

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14 See the production photograph at the front of Marc Robinson’s The Other American Drama (page not numbered).
15 This is true also in the sense that they are intertextual figures. Crows are a motif throughout Wellman’s work, and hence they act as a kind of signature: Green Integer has published two “Crowtets” of his plays, and the cover photo of his first major collection, The Bad Infinity (1994), looks a lot like a crow’s head. But crows have also haunted earlier twentieth-century theater artists. In “Van Gogh, the Man Suicided by Society” (1947), Artaud suggests that Van Gogh’s painted crows have “opened the door… to an enigmatic and sinister beyond” (489)—a description Wellman would appreciate. Crows also appear in Sam Shepard’s Cowboy Mouth (1971) and The Tooth of Crime (1972). My thanks to Shannon Jackson for pointing out these echoes.
cleaner, more murderous but much more spiritual. (27-28)

Through the mischievous polyvalence of language, the prospect of becoming “something… more murderous” than human crystallizes into the possibility of joining the murder of crows.

When Susannah does join them, however, this vision undergoes a rather sad banalization. Swapping murder as ecstatic vision for “murder” as social structure, Susannah ends up in a family distressingly like the one she has fled. The crows turn out to have their own repressive ideology: “The basic order of things has long been established,” Crow 3 rebukes Crow 2. “… Face it: anything else smacks of heresy” (58). Susannah is mute now, “trying to pass for a crow by imitating Crow 1” (56). As a positivity, as an achieved community and no longer a shadowy prospect, the crows cannot sustain the thrilling alterity they previously figured. To actually join the crows, the play suggests, is to rob them of the “distance” that was their promise, reducing them to a kind of taxidermy—that is, murdering them. When the crows begin to speak at the end, with Susannah among them, the stage directions reveal for the first time that “they look more like minahs or parrots than real crows: i.e., they’re fake crows” (56). And the “Crow’s Song” they sing pointedly contrasts with the breathtaking virtuosity of Susannah’s earlier speeches:

Boom-boom, boom-boom, boom-boom,
boom-boom, boom-boom, boom-boom,
boom-boom…
One potato, two potato, three potato, four potato, five potato, six potato,
seven potato, eight!

And repeat, etc. (56-57)

In this way, the play suggests that the community we can “have” here and now is not worth having. The disappointment this turn of events cultivates is not Susannah’s—nothing in the scene indicates that she is unhappy—but, rather, ours. The crows’ pedestrian song is a kind of interference, trumpeting the play’s refusal to offer us a model or a theatrical site of triumphant community. Frustrating our desires for an image of crow utopia, Wellman constructs theater as the perpetual displacement, not the enactment, of a fulfilling togetherness.

Nevertheless, the last scene does bring its own zany satisfactions. In a startling and funny genre shift, Crows 2 and 3 begin engaging in something like a miniature conversation play:

CROW 2: Did it ever occur to you that we
don’t have to talk about things
the way we do? … I mean “caw caw” does not
shed much light on the basic
issues of Being, nor of where
we come from, nor of whither
we are headed. Not to mention
the problem of who we are… [ellipsis in original]

CROW 3: I don’t know what you’re
talking about. Everyone
knows god created our people
out of marsh gas….

CROW 2: What about the problem of other minds?
CROW 3: Heresy. Errant heresy. (57-59)

This conversation seems to distill, or formalize, the play’s ongoing conflict between the forces of normality and a defiant strangeness that manifests as wild speech. Crow 2’s insistence that we
“don’t have to talk about things / the way we do” could be a central statement of Wellman’s poetics—at least where “we” stands for people making theater.16

Crow 2 thus becomes a final avatar for the monologic voice of the play; but that voice has changed significantly from previous scenes. Susannah’s lyrical wildness, Nella’s meandering curiosity, and Howard and Georgia’s vicious hyperbole all seem to have been sublimated into a mélange of philosophical jargon: “Being,” “the problem of other minds,” and later, “Type A entities,” “infinite regress” (60). On one level, of course, this is just another of Wellman’s characteristic “swerves,” a change of register that combats dramatic closure and keeps us on our toes. But in its sustained reference (however garbled) to an existing discursive practice—that is, to philosophy as a field of intellectual endeavor—I think Crow 2’s speech articulates a desire on the part of the play to join some conversation, some community, whose locus is decidedly somewhere else. Throughout Wellman’s work, theoretical reference functions as a check on dramatic “immediacy”; here, the hilarious inappropriateness of Crow 2’s scholastic efforts seems to me to suggest a voice aimed over the heads of anyone who can hear it, reaching for a linguistic relationship at long distance. At the same time, however, unlike most of the play’s speculative monologues, Crow 2’s lines are spoken to another character, Crow 3. They are not solitary musings, but urgent appeals for conversational engagement. “Think / about it! That’s all I’m asking,” he begs (59). The emphatically addressed quality of this last monologue, even or especially in the face of its present addressee’s rejection—(“I don’t know what you’re / talking about,” says Crow 3)—leaves us with a sense that all the play’s crazy talk does strive for some form of contact:

*CROW 1, 3, and 4 start up the song* as *CROW 2 rambles on during a slow blackout.*

[CROW 2:] I mean, really fellas, what if we are
the fly in god’s ointment and not
the apple of his eye. I mean, REALLY.
I mean you gotta think about these things… (60)

Monologue “rambles on” extravagantly, uselessly. Its irrelevance isn’t limited to the fictional scene, within which the other characters elaborately ignore it, but extends to the theater itself: the very building demonstrates a similar indifference by fading to black, as if the rambling were literally putting us all to sleep. And yet, as the play’s last speech, Crow 2’s rant implies that there has always been a “really fellas!” concealed in the deviant voice of monologue—an appeal to fellowship that no given community, including the theatrical one, can satisfy.

Combining the discourse of the university seminar with those of the street corner and the pop song in its manic invitation, this speech in fact performs its own vision of fellowship: a vision not based in the co-presence of bodies in a theatrical here-and-now—crows on a branch—but in the constellation of languages referring to multiple, incommensurable sites. Applying Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, Castagno perceptively describes this multiplicity in Wellman as “an internal dialogism among various language systems” (137). But it is also important that here, the “internal dialogism” occurs within a speech theatrically marked as a mode of solitude, a discourse positioned as failing to reach anybody, which hence remains outrageously “mono-”. That is: the meeting of voices within Wellman’s monologue is a writerly tendency offset by its

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16 Wellman has repeatedly remarked that the languages of everyday American life are fascinatingly bizarre—particularly in comparison with the language of mainstream American theater. This conviction lies behind plays like Cellophane and Terminal Hip, pieces “full of clumsy constructions, double (and triple) negatives, demented neologisms, and every conceivable combination of out of fashion, dated, or wholly artificial slang. Not to mention argot, cant, the tortured language of the workplace and the pitchman. I explored verbal detritus of every kind” (Cellophane 152). He is also a great admirer of Wittgenstein’s later philosophy, which like his own work both embraces and interrogates “ordinary language.” See Perloff, “Foreword.”
defiant unsociability in the scene of performance. As the play is realized, brought forward into our world as someone’s pointless act of speech, dialogism lingers as the trace of poetic composition. Which means that one of the theatrical functions of Wellman’s monologue is to make us sense a dialogue that isn’t happening here and now: a coming-together that does not happen at all, but haunts the intercourse of “our time” the way the shadow of a rapturous violence haunts the pedestrian “murder of crows”—or the way a script haunts a stage. By squandering theater’s power to communicate, these speeches speculate on a form of togetherness yet unheard-of, a communion still radically strange.

Herbert Blau has argued that “the enduring gravity of theater is not collective but solitary” (Audience 90). As anyone who has felt miserably alone in an audience can attest, theater often brings us together to set us apart—to show us how little we share. For Brecht, this possibility is crucial to theater’s revolutionary potential, a potential traditional theater has suppressed. “It is a common truism… that the audience, once it is in the theatre, is not a number of individuals but a collective individual, a mob,” he writes (79). Brecht acknowledges that in dramatic theater, “A collective entity is created in the auditorium for the duration of the entertainment, on the basis of the ‘common humanity’ shared by all spectators alike”; but his own theater “is not interested in the establishment of such an entity. It divides its audience” (60). Brecht values theater as a site where seamless collectivity can spectacularly fail to happen. And as Lehmann himself suggests, postdramatic theater has continued to embrace this possibility:

The ‘community’ that arises is not one of similar people, i.e. a community of spectators who have been made similar through commonly shared motifs (the human being in general), but instead a common contact of different singularities who do not melt their respective perspectives into a whole…. Some critics may see in this only a socially dangerous or at least artistically questionable tendency towards an arbitrary and solipsistic reception, but perhaps this suspension of the laws of sense formation heralds a more liberal sphere of sharing and communicating that inherits the utopias of modernism. (83–84)

This kind of theater courts utopia by refusing its audience the immediate community produced through drama. Lehmann’s description applies to a wide range of contemporary theatrical practice; but it should be remembered that Brecht conceived such division as a corollary of literarization, that is, as something produced in part by bringing writing forward within the theatrical scene. Wellman’s monologues work this way, straining against the unifying force of the here-and-now through the excess of his verbiage over any communicative aim. By refusing to let the present comprehend its content, his writerly theater “heralds,” as Lehmann writes, “a more liberal sphere” than the one that brings us together, under this roof, now.

In Spite of Intimacy: Aura as Phenomenological Rebellion

When Wellman writes that “in our time, only bad artists name what they cherish, because what is cherished, or revered, or loved, will immediately be used as a tool by the powers that be,” he echoes Adorno’s complaint that “The concrete serves for nothing better than that something, by being in some way distinct, can be identified, possessed, and sold” (Aesthetic 31). For Adorno, Beckett’s “abstractness” exemplifies effective response to this situation, withholding the particularity that would otherwise be “possessed, and sold”: “In the act of omission,” Adorno

17 As Rebecca Schneider writes, in theater “the live is a troubling trace of a precedent text and so… comes afterward, even arguably remains afterward, as a record of the text set in play” (90).
writes, “that which is omitted survives through its exclusion, as consonance survives in atonal harmony” (“Trying” 124-5). Although Wellman’s procedures are very different from Beckett’s, we have begun to see how his writing also withholds what it seeks to preserve— withholds the prospect of love, or coming-together, from the communicative economy that would “sell” us those experiences now. Reading A Murder of Crows, apparently one of Wellman’s most conventional works, I have tried to show how its language works to defer both intra-scenic and theatrical communication, launching an idiosyncratic and fundamentally extraneous discourse that is never quite “for” its audience.

According to J. M. Bernstein, the cultivation of language beyond communication is central to Adorno’s theoretical project. Like Lehmann, Bernstein adopts the terminology of “axes” to elucidate his claim. For Adorno, he writes, the “communicative axis of language” represents “the striving for transparent, intersubjective communication without loss or remainder, the complete fitting of language to the demand for intersubjective consensus” (283). This ideal represses language’s other axis, its “expressive, sensible, truth-oriented relation to the world” (Ibid); the “expressive” axis is what Adorno wants to restore. Now, Bernstein’s reference to a “sensible… relation to the world” might at first make us think that the “expressive axis” has its analog in Lehmann’s “theatron axis,” as a link between the speaker and the actual present of her situation. On this understanding, the goal (for both Adornian dialectics and postdramatic theater) would be to shift from an act of representation to an act of presence: really being here now. But Bernstein makes it clear that the expressive for Adorno cannot be reduced to a moment of straightforward presence, or presentation. On the contrary, the expressive relation concerns an “excess beyond phenomenal appearing” that “relates to what has powers of resistance to the subject and its own ends, possesses a ‘life’ of its own (and thus, so to speak, turns away from the subject as its mode of appearing to the subject)” (193). In other words, the problem with “communicative” language is not just that it abandons the concrete reality of its object, a problem we could try to solve by facing into what is “really” present. More distressingly, communication denies the object’s ability to execute a turning-away of its own; in this sense, it is an imposition of presence. Locating everything on the same plane of commensurability, communication seeks to fill in the cracks and crevasses, closing off any hollows into which meaning might retreat.

What communication denies, then, is not presence, but distance. In the context of theater, we might say: the dramaturgy Wellman wants to counter is one that would reduce performance to an ideal of total givenness, presence for us. If we consider drama’s totalizing “so ist es” an attempt to found just such an “intersubjective communication without loss or remainder,” then we can see how theater’s collective structure brings the Adornian problem of communication to a head. The model of postdramatic theater as a shift from fictional representation to immediate presentation, moreover, offers no resistance to the communicative norm. On the contrary, in identifying such theater with the “criterion of communicative success,” Lehmann himself acknowledges this norm’s affinity with the “theatron” axis.

Bernstein’s “expressive axis” would therefore be a third axis, one which does not describe a relation of immediate connection. Asha Varadharajan observes that Adorno pursues “a philosophy whose very proximity to its object ironically confirms its distance from that object” (60-61). And this dialectical endeavor has its theatrical counterpart in the strand of postdramatic

18 In fact, Lehmann seems to approach a similar ideal when he describes the “coolness” of many postdramatic productions as an “attitude of deviating and turning away” (119).
work that Wellman’s writing exemplifies. Combining Lehmann’s and Bernstein’s geometric models, then, we would get a structure like this:

Displacing the intra-scenic dynamics of drama’s fiction (A), Lehmann’s “communicative success” along the theatron axis (B) nevertheless still potentially seeks the “intersubjective communication without loss or remainder” that both Adorno and Wellman repudiate. Syers registers this demand for a third axis when she recommends that “Stagings of Wellman’s work… create an environment for the play to happen that shrugs off the habit of either the model (traditional realism) or the spectacle (which traffics in the commerce of desire and pleasure between the stage and the audience)” (n. pag.). Wellman himself lampoons such “commerce” when he characterizes the “theatre of good intentions” as a theater desperate to cut out waste. All the elements of its plays, he writes, are meant to be “cunningly interconnected in such a way that nothing is wasted. Waste is a great obsession of the writer of the American well-made” (64). Dramaturgically speaking, “waste” occurs when the audience does not “get” anything in particular, when—for instance—the people onstage are just talking on and on. When such extravagance occurs, we are in mode (C): an expression that cannot be subsumed in the economy of the present, but orients itself toward an eventual, utopian reception which cannot take place here and now.

By embracing this kind of excess, Wellman’s theater rejects the sound economic calculus of cause and effect, communication and uptake. Obviously, this is not to claim that his plays escape capitalism; in fact, they have often “pretty much sold out for the whole run,” as Wellman himself is not above crowing (Cellophane 284, Cf. 244). Whether through ticket sales or as lining for hipster bookshelves, this work certainly offers to confer cultural capital. But in the midst of doing so, it simultaneously gestures towards the possibility of an alternative reckoning, an expenditure without return. In much the same way, plays like A Murder of Crows maintain the outlines of a communicative dramatic apparatus; like the front porch of the missing house, these remnants keep the negation of drama’s home economics palpable as such. They acknowledge the play’s participation in the communicative world, even as they reject that world: “Dad,* I love you.” The sense that a different world is possible, and with it a different mode of collectivity, is one Wellman’s writing preserves as utopia. This world cannot be realized in the theater, mapped onto the actual collective. By declaring this impossibility, his work challenges not only the conventional expectations of realist drama, but also the notion that postdramatic theater is a theater “of the present” in any simple sense.
Nevertheless, an excited sense of phenomenal presence does animate Wellman’s work for the stage, and its relationship to his utopian ethos bears examining. As we saw in Chapter One, the perception of theater’s presence has provoked a range of responses, from the fundamentally positive affirmation of the present in drama, to the deconstructive works described by Elinor Fuchs. Throughout the intervening chapters, we have explored another kind of response to theatrical actuality: the negativity active in James, Stein, Beckett, and Parks. These postdramatic artists participate in the Derridean insight that theater’s presentness can never be “full” or complete. But they also retain a phenomenological awareness of the present as a horizon of theatrical activity—even or especially where their maneuvers focus on transcending that horizon. For Beckett and Parks in particular, I have argued, it is only on in relation to a sense of theater’s presentness that the assertion of text takes on a negative, critical function. In this sense, we might say that these artists inhabit the “intestine difference” that, for Derrida, always mediates the presence of performance; and yet this inhabitation perpetually re-registers, and responds to, the very presence it corrupts. As Stanton Garner argues, theater “maintains its inherence in a field of embodied utterance, even when it subjects this field to transformation, substitution, or dispersal” (123). In my own readings, I have emphasized the “transformation, substitution, or dispersal” active in these works, the various ways in which they are able to cast their own actuality—that is, ours—as insufficient. But these works are not thereby antitheatrical: on the contrary, they make this critique precisely by sounding theater’s phenomenal field, finding the weak points and gaps in its presence. Their phenomenological practice not only incorporates poststructuralist insights, incarnating a dynamic elaborated by Garner throughout Bodied Spaces; it also, and I would argue more fundamentally, grounds an Adornian project of faulting the real.

This confluence of phenomenological and Adornian tendencies might be surprising, given that phenomenology constitutes a “central… target” of Adorno’s writing (Dallmeyr 379). As a “philosophy of givenness” (Garner 13), phenomenology arouses from Adorno a critique that in some ways anticipates Derrida’s. “For Adorno,” Susan Buck-Morss explains, “‘concreteness’ necessitated grounding the particular in the dialectical, mediated relationship to the totality. The object was thus more than itself… But only by the mediation of conceptual reflection could this relationship be understood, precisely because it was not immediately ‘given’ in experience” (73). And yet Adorno’s own work also contains phenomenological moments—one of which offers a profound insight into the postdramatic project I have been tracing, and into Wellman’s work in particular. In Minima Moralia, Adorno argues for the importance of “subject[ing] the intimate sphere to critical scrutiny because intimacies estrange, violate the imponderably delicate aura of the other which is his condition as a subject. Only by the recognition of distance in our neighbor is strangeness alleviated: accepted into consciousness” (182). Reading this passage, Bernstein observes that it gives Kantian ethics “a perceptual and phenomenological slant” (71); elsewhere he expands the latter term as a concern with “how things affect and appear to embodied, sensuous subjects” (88). Bernstein is pointing out that for Adorno in this moment, ethical responsibility to the other is rooted in a particular phenomenal quality of the other’s presence, which Adorno calls her “aura.” But significantly, this vision arises negatively, as a problem within the “embodied, sensuous” field of intimacy itself: the other’s co-presence with my own corporeal, subjective existence is precisely what threatens to destroy her as other (and conversely, to destroy my otherness for her). In other words, the recognition of alterity as aura depends on registering a threat within the fact of our being here together. To respond to co-presence this way is to read a latent violence in the phenomenal situation; to hear a sinister undertone, for example, in Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenological
observation that “the paths of my own [experiences] and other people’s intersect and engage each other like gears” (xxii). From Adorno’s point of view, this image would harbor the threat of grinding the other down. What’s more, the machinic simile suggests that my very openness to the other, and hers to me, may subsume both of us within an instrumental process whose ideal is immanently continuous functioning.

What I want to suggest, here, is that a sensibility like Wellman’s is attuned to this sense that intimacy endangers alterity—not only the alterity of the other person, but the alterity of the different world which cannot emerge so long as the gears of societal maintenance keep turning. In failing to recognize what is unengageable in the other, I conscript her into the familiar. “The presumption of undiminished nearness present from the first… does the other supreme wrong, virtually negates him as a particular human being and therefore the humanity in him, ‘counts him in,’ incorporates him [‘rechnet ihn dazu’, verleibt ihn… ein] in the inventory of property,” Adorno writes (Minima 182/207). The term “presumption” might encourage us to regard the issue here as essentially epistemological: on this reading, the problem would arise from our confidence that we know the other, that we’ve got her number. Certainly, Wellman’s sharp disdain for the theater of the “Already Known” (Speculations 7ff) operates along these lines; he protests against characters “reduced to a formula” (“Theatre” 63) and dramatic structure conceived “as a kind of boiler-plate (or theoretical template)” (Speculations 20). The special pertinence to theater of Adorno’s concerns, however, has less to do with what we think we know about the other, and more to do with the phenomenal manifestation of our “nearness” to her: the fact that “intimacy” in theater is not just a state of our knowledge, but a state of corporeal co-presence that can place audience members and performers right next to each other.

States summarizes this datum, and emphasizes its phenomenological nature, by observing that “in theater there is always a possibility that an act of sexual congress between two so-called signs will produce a real pregnancy” (Great 20). States’s swerve into X-rated territory is startling, not least because the “possibility” he names seems so remote that it almost ends up reaffirming the semiological bias he wants to contest. Indeed for most of us, I think, this “possibility” will have been much more palpable in certain private experiences of film-watching than it ever has in theater. But by articulating theater’s heightened quotient of reality in this way, States suggests two things about the phenomenon of theatrical performance that are directly relevant for reading both Wellman and Adorno. First, that the actual proximity of bodies in theater forces the issue of “real” physical intimacy, such that contiguity “always” implies at least the “possibility” of intercourse. And second, that the intercourse implied here is the same kind that seems to lurk in Merleau-Ponty’s “gears”: that is, a reproductive labor, fundamentally oriented towards maintaining the world as we know it, extending this world into the future by replicating it. In this vision, theater’s co-presence comes to look like—indeed, to feel like—a reproductive conspiracy.

I suggest that Wellman’s suspicion of the family, and his attraction to a dramaturgy that unmakes it, proceed in part from a similar sense that theater is itself potentially a situation of reproductive intimacy, a machine that brings us together in order to “count us in” to the project of keeping things going. As Susannah knows in A Murder of Crows, family represents the deferral of radical transformation; in order to nourish even the most slender prospect of true alterity, Wellman has to break up the family (the reproductive unit) that always threatens to form in the theater. This desire explains Wellman’s tendency to place strange young girls at the center of his plays: the virgin, here, is not a figure of moral purity in the familiar sense, but a figure who stands on the brink of a choice against perpetuating the same old species. This iconography is at
its most sustained in Wellman’s 1998 play *Girl Gone*, as we’ll see in the following section. In 2000’s *Cat’s-Paw*, a “nasty little girl” named Lindsay holds out against pubescence:

  **LINDSAY:** I am not other children, mother.
  **JO:** Oh?
  **LINDSAY:** No, Mother, I am a genius. A genius of childhood and I will not be denied.
  **JO:** [Suddenly bitter:] Your time will come.
  **LINDSAY:** No, Mother, not in the way you imagine. (368)

Looking out over New York from the Statue of Liberty, Lindsay declares, “Someday all of this will be mine… I shall know exactedally what is to be done”; her mother responds, “What must be done? You sound like Lenin” (365). Like other children who “are our future,” these girls figure that which is yet to come; but they defy any sentimental confidence in intergenerational continuity. The future they “are” is one no intimacy can secure, and no present proximity can conceive. It is nonreproductive, and will not arise in—from—our presence together.

Wellman’s most profound theatrical insight is that this resistance to “real” intimacy is a capacity of theater, just as much as States’s pregnancy is. But this resistance is by no means a matter of trying to perfect an illusionistic machinery that would take us out of the room and into a faraway fiction, abstracting the bodies before us into “signs.” Against the conscriptive push of theater’s intimate co-presence, Wellman deploys not simple absence, but an auratic alterity that can itself only emerge as a heightened phenomenal presence—though this is the presence of what is only unquietly present. As Bernstein’s reading of Adorno suggests, aura—that in the other that chastens intimacy—depends upon our presence together, just as it thwarts the totalization of that presence or togetherness. This is why theater, as a field where co-presence is at once acute and susceptible to fissuring, can offer the phenomenological adventure of auratic experience.

The idea of theater as an auratic medium appears in Walter Benjamin’s canonical 1936 essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” no doubt the most widely-read theorization of aura. In the essay, Benjamin describes aura as a phenomenon of the artwork’s “presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be”: this uniqueness constitutes the work’s “authenticity” and thus, ultimately, its cultic “authority,” all of which are nullified by technical reproducibility (220-222). One of the paradigms of auratic art, for Benjamin, is that of the theatrical performer, whose compelling role (e.g. Macbeth) is further suffused with the commanding force of his own live presence (229-30). But Benjamin’s conception of aura is not simply that of proximity, of an immediately shared space and time; on the contrary, auratic presence implies distance, a dimension within which the object is fundamentally inaccessible (222). Hence aura is not enhanced but destroyed by “the desire of contemporary masses to bring things ‘closer’ spatially and humanly” (223): paradoxically, technological reproduction disables auratic presence by making the object maximally available. For Benjamin, then, theater’s phenomenal “presence in time and space,” far from being simply synonymous with co-presence, actually implies the limits of that “co-.” Theater’s definitive presence is not the presence of the “spatially and humanly” “close,” or in Adorno’s terms the “intimate”; rather, its actuality becomes the medium of something that eludes our grasp, and chastens our grasping.

Although “The Work of Art” largely associates aura with mystification and celebrates its decline, in other essays Benjamin writes more mournfully about the loss of aura. When Adorno

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19 See for example “Little History of Photography” (1931) and “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1940). Miriam Bratu Hansen traces the shifting meanings of “aura” in this philosopher’s work in “Benjamin’s Aura”: “Anything but a clearly delimited, stable
returns to the concept, he faults the “Work of Art” essay for devaluing aura—precisely, Adorno suggests, by granting insufficient emphasis to its quality of distance:

What slips through the wide mesh of this theory… is the element opposed to cultic contexts that motivated Benjamin to introduce the concept of aura in the first place, that is, that which moves into the distance and is critical of the ideological superficies of life. The condemnation of aura easily becomes the dismissal of qualitatively modern art that distances itself from the logic of familiar things…. (Aesthetic 56)

Aura cannot, Adorno suggests, be written off as mystification; rather, it needs to be understood as a dimension of resistance to the existing world. Aura “is whatever goes beyond [the work’s] factual givenness,” he writes; “…one cannot abolish it and still want art” (Aesthetic 45).

Returning this idea to Wellman, we can see that the problem with the “theatre of good intentions” is that its presence is all “givenness”: it holds nothing back, producing only what can be subsumed into “the logic of familiar things.” The auratic presence that, for Wellman, constitutes the theatrical is a presence produced as distance—which is also to say, a particularity that resists being grasped or “brought closer” in the way Benjamin describes. This particularity is also theater’s phenomenal resistance to reproduction.20

I think it is for the sake of this resistance that Wellman’s poetic statements tend to include language of the kind this dissertation has largely been questioning: language that values the performance here and now against an “elsewhere” that supposedly dominates conventional theater. In the introductory paragraph of “The Theatre of Good Intentions,” for example, Wellman complains of American theater’s emphasis on “content” in these terms: “What is shown annihilates the showing. The true play comes to take place somewhere else, and the physical and spiritual being of theatre vanishes in a cloud of hermeneutical epiphenomena… This is also why American drama, for the most part, lacks theatrical presence” (59). Wellman goes on to bemoan a “loss of theatrical presence, there-ness, or actuality” (61), complaining that characters in the “theatre of good intentions” are “merely theoretical” (62). Such statements can fit in all too well with the familiar discourse identifying theatrical innovation with emphatic actuality—a discourse that, as I argued in Chapter One, fails to observe its own extension of a dramatic norm. But we should ask: if “there-ness, or actuality” is something Wellman wants, what does he want it for? We have seen that Beckett strives for maximum actuality in order to suggest, dialectically, its opposite; and that Parks devises a writerly presence alternative to that of the stage. Neither of these projects is entirely foreign to Wellman. He adds to them a desire to root or burrow into actuality, a conviction not only that the present is always already internally discontinuous (as in Stein) but also that the here and now is a wildly precarious system harboring its own destruction:

The whole, entire fabric
of the heavens will burst open, like a ripe fig,
and a whole new sky we never dreamt was there,

concept, aura describes a cluster of meanings and relations that appear in Benjamin’s writings in various configurations and not always under its own name; it is this conceptual fluidity that allows aura to become such a productive nodal point in Benjamin’s thinking” (339). Among the meanings Hansen identifies, one that would be relevant to Wellman is “the ominous aspect of aura [which] belongs to the realm of the daemonic” (342). Like Bernstein, Hansen emphasizes the phenomenological nature of aura, noting that it “pertains to the medium of perception” and “implies a phenomenal structure” (Ibid). 20 Peggy Phelan has famously argued that performance inherently resists reproduction because of its ephemerality (Unmarked 146-166). I am reading Wellman’s texts, which—as scripts—authorize a repetitive enactment, and thus would not fit the terms of Phelan’s argument; it seems to me that “reproduction” and “repetition” mean much the same thing in her essay. I think Wellman is interested in depriving theater, an essentially repetitive form, of its specifically reproductive agency. Nevertheless, my understanding of reproductive sexuality as cognate with socio-economic reproduction here relies on Phelan’s work.
will appear. Only it has been there all along, only we humans haven’t been able to see it, on account of being chronically short-sighted. (Murder 32)

“Theatrical presence” is valuable, for Wellman, precisely as the dimension of actuality that includes (“all along”) the undoing, not the reproduction, of what actually is. To the confident “so ist es” of drama’s absolute present, Wellman opposes a present already constituted by its own imminent negation: this is how it is but already almost not. The “there-ness” Wellman wants theater to attain is just this precariousness. It is neither the robust embodiment of people and things in three-dimensional space, nor the pure ephemerality of performance’s passing-away. Rather, it is the densely phenomenal arena within which the fault lines of the real become visible. Its “there,” we might say, will never redouble into a comforting “there, there.”

“This will kill that”: Speculations

Speculations is Wellman’s most sustained attempt to articulate this auratic ideal of theater. A long aphoristic essay periodically interrupted by enigmatic symbols and other forms of typographic play, Speculations was published in Wellman’s 2008 collection The Difficulty of Crossing a Field, but has evolved through new drafts available on his web site; I will cite “Draft six,” dated to 2010. The piece is full of allusions to philosophy, theoretical physics, and literature, from which Wellman assembles an arsenal of terms and ideas about the nature and value of theater. These terms, including “Scatter,” “repression,” “Hoole space,” and “wild time,” seem to constellate rather than define an inherently elusive object. For example:

Scatter conceals the theatrical as well; becomes a felt presence, the enabler of what is termed the “uncanny”. This presence is a kind of theatrical presence in the absence of what is not…

Scatter shows us only the outlines, as a kind of event, but also as a species of presence. But as we do not know what it is, we do not know what to do about the matter.

This not knowing about the matter is intrinsic and inescapable.” (13)

Wellman’s notion of theatrical presence as “presence in the absence of what is not” recalls the utopian negation we saw in Godot, while his description of theater as a showing that provides for neither recognition nor action might well remind us of May Bartram’s performance in “The Beast in the Jungle.” Wellman suggests that theater is worth caring about exactly insofar as it “turns away from the subject as its mode of appearing to the subject” (Bernstein). This would be a radically unsettling experience, in which we are forced to acknowledge a reality not fully available to us.

“Because the hidden parts of the sleeping cat are hidden,” Wellman writes, “does not mean that the hidden parts are not there” (20). This theater, like those we have encountered in previous chapters, is a theater of “other parts” (Bersani). But Wellman gives theatrical alterity a new, menacing twist: as any mouse knows, the most salient “hidden parts” of a “sleeping cat” are the sharp ones. In “turn[ing] away” from its beholders, this theater also threatens to turn against us; it is “alive with surprises, as the GOOSE discovered when she fell down the wrong hole… and was devoured by small, fierce creatures with wicked claws” (25). Speculations is populated throughout by these “small, fierce creatures.” Beyond defying the mid-size respectability of the beautiful Aristotelian animal, these imps embody the negativity at the heart of Wellman’s conception of theater: at once unknowable and destructive. A sentence like the following demonstrates the way that auratic “turning away” becomes, in Wellman’s hands, a mode of malevolent threat: “[T]he What You Will of theater will always go another way; go another way,
as though she were a small, dangerous creature, chittering and snarling. Perhaps venomous” (13-14). These descriptions, like the apocalyptic fantasy that takes wing in *A Murder of Crows*, reflect the degree to which theatrical aura in Wellman has come to depend on the prospect of rebellious violence, however humorously presented. It is as if theater, hounded by the “good intentions” that would press it into communicative service, had to cover its retreat from these exigencies with tooth and nail—or as if such “snarling” had become the only meaningful sign of the object’s “‘life’ of its own” in Bernstein’s sense.21

For James, as we saw, theatricality emerges as both the spatializing distraction of temporal stream and the temporalizing disruption of pictorial space. In *Speculations*, Wellman returns explicitly to that dynamic, both literalizing and enlivening the violence it implies:

This is how theater works. Time and space move slowly and silently but the animosity between is of an unimaginable intensity.

Profusion devours one; then the other….

Space thinks, Something something something. Time thinks, This will kill that. (28-29)

Finally, the special value of the theater medium depends on the potential antagonism between its spatial and temporal dimensions, the way temporal movement in space or spatial persistence in time can boil up into a campaign of each against the other. In the midst of this unthinkable contest, something else arises—a “Profusion” that might make us think equally of James’s “innumerable and wonderful things” (*Ambassadors* 468) and of Stein’s “blue sky of different colors” (*Paisieu* 159). More explicitly than either of these writers, however, Wellman imagines theatrical Profusion as a kind of demonic possession. Theater’s “scattering” of time and space in his vision not only diffracts both dimensions, but alienates them from each other, as if the consistency of time and space in everyday life were merely the result of a tenuous inter-dimensional accord that could be broken at any moment. For Wellman, theater takes up residence within the present as the present’s liability to tear itself apart: this simmering antagonism, this palpable non-cooperation, is now the condition of its aura.

It also defines the importance of writing in Wellman’s theatrical universe. *Speculations* as a whole—with its dizzying array of allusions, its startling and delectable imagery, its over-the-top declarative pomp—is a shameless display of writerly virtuosity, an invitation to the theatrical pleasures of the text. And yet those pleasures are also prickly, a flash of tooth and claw as the object ducks out of view:

Accordingly, the other (Force ) is called Pleasure; pleasure, the rubicund and starling-eyed Ramificator.

[…] (Here the manuscript breaks off apparently torn with great violence. The remaining pages, crumpled and wadded, were discovered in the nest of certain, evilish Emerald-hued Macaws, deep within the central regions of impenetrable, forest wilderness at Brooklyn College.) (83-84).

The text suddenly withdraws from its own presentation, as if the only kind of story worth showing is the story of a violent disruption of showing. At the same moment when Wellman insists on the materiality of the page (“crumpled and wadded”), he frames that page as the medium of an auratic turning away, a flight into “impenetrable” realms. We might recall here the “little slip uh paper” Parks imagines as the vessel of escape into utopian freedom (*Death* 112). Where Parks paradoxically and poignantly conceives writing as the medium of transit to a

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21 Marc Robinson notes that Wellman “writes with the conviction that plays are animate, and so the writing keeps changing voices, contexts, and rhythms as a reminder of the unpredictability of all mortal creatures” (192).
world without writing, however, Wellman can’t resist stamping his utopia with literacy: “Brooklyn College,” whose “forest wilderness” no doubt houses the English Department’s playwriting program.

These collegiate Macaws should remind us of Crow 2, the similarly “evil-looking” avian academic. Indeed, we might speculate that they are the very same “minahs or parrots” who have appeared in A Murder of Crows as “fake crows,” now glimpsed in their (un)natural habitat. I remarked earlier that the crows are “textual figures”; the macaws seem to literalize this association by appearing as both the guardians of text (demonic, winged librarians?) and the agents of a violent ambush wrought directly via text’s artifactual form. Here again, the work’s aura is simultaneously its retreat and its threat. The wilderness/College into which the text withdraws is a refuge from “the Already Known” (Speculations 7ff). Superimposing this wilderness onto Brooklyn College is more than a moment of whimsical autobiography on Wellman’s part; harking back to Crow 2, it also invokes the possibility of a radically re-figured community—a Murder, let’s say—of readers and writers.

Speculations thus suggests that for Wellman, the “literarization of theater” means the cultivation of a theatrical “axis” which extends neither between characters nor between the stage and the present audience; instead, it could be described as a dangerous line of flight, “opening paths into strange spaces” (Syers n. pag.). As some readers will have recognized, the phrase “This will kill that” comes from Book Five of Victor Hugo’s The Hunchback of Notre Dame:

The archdeacon contemplated the gigantic cathedral for a time in silence, then he sighed and stretched out his right hand towards the printed book lying open on his table and his left hand towards Notre-Dame, and looked sadly from the book to the church:

“Alas,” he said, “this will kill that.”… Then he added these mysterious words: “Alas and alack, small things overcome great ones! A tooth triumphs over a body. The Nile rat kills the crocodile, the swordfish kills the whale, the book will kill the building!” (187-8)

The archdeacon means, the narrator subsequently tells us, both that “The press will kill the church” and that “Printing will kill architecture” (189). If Hugo goes on to expound upon the world-historical significance of these revolutions, Wellman stays fixed on the “small things” with which the archdeacon identifies them: his “Nile rat” could be the first of Wellman’s “small, fierce creatures with wicked claws.” For Wellman as for Dom Claude, these creatures embody text’s almost occult capacity to fissure institutional reality: the “church” of theatrical and social convention, the present-day edifice of a communicative norm grounded in an economy of totalized exchange.

Of course, in appropriating the archdeacon’s famous phrase for a late-capitalist moment, Wellman also partly inverts its logic. Hugo’s murderous “this” is a vanguard of secularization. It is not writing per se but the printing press, a “particularly important… case” of the mechanical reproduction Benjamin would credit with the destruction of aura (“Work” 219). In Wellman’s hands, the subversive power of text—whether printed or spoken or “torn with great violence”—lies in its potential restitution of aura. As latter-day Nile Rats, the norm Wellmanian Macaws menace most is not hieratic mystery, but maximal accessibility: Adorno’s “mendacious positivity of meaning,” or Lehmann’s “communicative success.” “Wellman uses speech as a scourge,” Marc Robinson writes perceptively: “As his characters tear away at falseness, they clear space for other kinds of speech—the free-ranging hypothesis, the careful inquiry, the giddy lyric” (193). But the particular “falseness” Wellman’s language would scourge most aggressively is the

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22 In Hugo’s time, of course, that economy (capitalism) is the incoming, not the outgoing, institution: the killer, not the victim.
falseness of a truth we can simply tell, or show, in the present; a theater that tries to exhaust its content in what it presents to us, here and now.

**Coda: Girl Gone**

To end this chapter, and the dissertation, I’d like to turn to a production that has haunted my thinking about theater since I saw it as a teenager. Wellman wrote *Girl Gone* in 1998 for the New York company Big Dance Theater, who premiered the piece the same year.23 I should admit that, before I finally read the script much later, I remembered very little about the play’s content. Witchcraft, a garden party, spontaneous combustion—as far as that went, it could have been an episode of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. What stuck with me, however, was a sense of the piece’s crystalline precision: an absolutely specific choreography that seemed to move in a *pas de deux* with Wellman’s words; and the words themselves, peals of playful and mysterious philosophy, spoken with bell-like clarity by the company’s lithe performers. Friends who know my own work for theater might be surprised to hear me name an elaborate choreographic piece as a major influence—my stagings are sometimes described as “minimalist” or “austere.” But *Girl Gone* helped give me a new sense of the way language can exist in theater space. Its language could not be reduced to people telling each other things (character to character, performer to audience), nor could it be described as just one sensory “material” among others. Wellman’s language glistened, in that production, as something strange and precious, something my understanding could glimpse, but not exhaust. This “something” felt, to me, like writing: a verbal density that wouldn’t dissolve into the immediacy of passing time, a thing-like enigma whose logic lay beyond the present.

Over the years, as I continued to make, see, and think about theater, this sense of resistant literariness kept seeming like a crucial kind of theatrical experience. A decade later, when I began seriously studying theater scholarship, I was excited to find so many accounts of theater that resonated with the experimental work I loved, from Brecht’s call for “real alertness” (10) to Stein’s insistence that “anything that was not a story could be a play” (“Plays” 73) to Lehmann’s description of “events, exceptions, and moments of deviation” (105). But I was frustrated by a recurring theoretical gesture that tirelessly identified theatrical value with what happens outside the text, consigning writing to the prehistory of performance. *Girl Gone* was one of the pieces at the back of my mind when I began devising this dissertation’s argument about the theatrical force of writing. When I returned to the play, I realized it was also a source of my desire to locate a value in theater other than, indeed opposed to, presentness. The title alone should have been a tip-off. Perhaps more explicitly than any of his Wellman’s other plays, *Girl Gone* explores and theatricalizes the alternatives of being here, now, and escaping towards an elsewhere—or, in a phrase that repeats throughout the piece, “Going Away.”

As Elyssa, one of the play’s three “evil sisters” explains: “To go away is to experience, or cause to suffer, / a break in the continuum” (257). The play follows a group of girls at Saint Lulu’s prep school, including the sinister trio Lissa, Lisa, and Elyssa; the eager and ingenuous Buggins; and the “sweet, buttery smooth” Hope (248). The “evil sisters”—who, we learn within the play’s first two lines, are “not related” (245)—seem to have invented an alternative world called “Vadoo (or Vadu)” (244) and a system of dark practices, including the dematerialization of lovely Hope, a “darling” who “doesn’t complain about violin lessons, / and can do cube roots in her head” (248). After Hope’s disappearance, the girls’ teacher Madame Tomba and the

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23 My thanks to Annie-B Parson and Paul Lazar of Big Dance for making a videorecording of this production available to me. The recording is also on file at the New York Public Library.
frightening Headmistress confront the three sisters, who defeat them both; then Lissa and Lisa disappear themselves. During a sleepover at the one remaining sister’s house, Buggins receives a visitation from a strange man who calls himself “The Black Tulip” and claims to be “the Vademecum of Vadu… the Vademecum / of Vadoo” (275). He convinces the hesitant Buggins to cross over to that world with him, mostly by appealing to her jealousy:

THE VADEMECUM OF VADU: Your wicked nemesis, Hope Fleming, who you thought had been destroyed; yes, Hope, Hope has been reborn in Vadoo; bright, beaming, wide-eyed Hope, with all her solar radiance and golden beneficence.

[...] You must help us destroy her.

BUGGINS: Okay. I’m going. (276)

At the end of the piece, the vanished sisters return and lead the rest of the characters in the play’s final song:

ALL: All this could happen, only in Vadoo, only in Vadu.

[Softly, as lights dim.] All this could happen; all this could happen; all this could happen.

[Blackout.] (282)

This synopsis should already suggest how strongly this play resonates with the questions we have been pursuing throughout this chapter and the dissertation as a whole. To begin with, the play is oriented around the absent site of Vadu/oo. It might be a stretch to see the ambiguous “u-” of utopia in this shifting syllable—the way in which, since Thomas More, the “no-place” of “u-topia” has harbored its more positive homophone, “eu-topia” or “good place,” often in undecidable relation (see “eutopia”). But whether or not we make this connection, Wellman’s Vadu/oo is a place whose salient detail is its away-ness; it is a literal vanishing point, and beyond its status as a receptacle of those who have gone away, all the Vademecum can tell Buggins about it is that “In / Vadu we have a very fine time… a fine old time indeed. Not like here” (275-6). The shifting spelling not only emphasizes the shifting, ungraspable quality of the referent; it also grounds this elusiveness in Vadu/oo’s status as something written, a specifically literary creation. Once again, a textual element offers to harbor the “break in the continuum” of what is “here.”

The three sisters themselves extend this idea in various directions. First of all, as “sisters” who are emphatically “not related” they figure, once again, an alternative social structure or counter-family—a queer, non-reproductive unit. Chaz Boiardo Guthrie, the “cute” but sinister boy who woos Lissa unsuccessfully (249-250), serves the function of confirming the girls’ lack of interest in romantic pairings; in the Big Dance production, they steal his long, black cape and use it as a screen for their nefarious activities while he pitches woo. But also, as three weird sisters, they activate intertextual relations; most obviously to Macbeth, but also, and I think just as significantly, to Chekhov’s triad who are, like Wellman’s, obsessed with an imaginary elsewhere. The girls’ nearly-homophonous names intensify this sense that they are more than
anything a textual community. The play’s first lines, spoken by Buggins’ parents, emphasize this
ascendancy of the verbal over the filial:

FORREST: Look at them. The evil sisters.
DINAH: But they’re not related, Forrest.
FORREST: Evil is a bond stronger than flesh.
DINAH: Nothing is stronger than flesh.
FORREST: Oh yes there is. Oh yes there is, Dinah.

Sibilance constitutes a kind of sibleness. (245)

This “sibilance” refers at once to the esses in the girls’ names and to the serpentine quality of
their “evil.” Forrest is hardly a mouthpiece for the play’s value system, and yet his almost
unwitting wordplay demolishes his wife’s cliché on the strength of the words themselves,
reiterating the content of his claim at the level of form. We might say that the idea tested out in
these lines is the hypothesis of all Wellman’s theater: that the social ties of the flesh-and-blood
community can be broken and replaced with strange connections, deviant verbal bonds.

Such connections would transcend spatial and temporal contiguity. They would thus also
remain sites of disconnection, rather as Stein’s “continuous present” turned out to name a radical
discontinuity. This emerges in the scene where Madame Tomba tries to catechise the girls on the
subject of Going Away—a subject upon which the three sisters, at least, have their teacher
outmastered. When Tomba quizzes the students on Hypatia of Alexandria and other “women
who have… Gone away, and in so going, gone / astray,” Elyssa replies:

… it is possible to live in a period
without being of it….
For instance, to how many of us are the
conceptions on which the life of our time
is based—evidence, sequence, causality—
strange and unintelligible. These
people, those who have gone away, without
actually leaving, live fragmentary and,
as it were, piecemeal existences, in a
directly connected world. A world of cause
and connection. (253-4)

Where the teacher frames “going away” as a narrative of “brave, but / foolish” deviation from a
presumably stable present (253), Elyssa argues for a patently non-narrative concept of perpetual
and self-perpetuating disconnection, in which an inherent and internal discontinuity within
consciousness is redoubled as the discontinuity between consciousness and the “directly
connected world” from which it is necessarily alien. At the same time, Elyssa envisions this
condition as a connection across time: “The medieval mind / [that] survives among men and
women of today” (Ibid). So her analysis is itself a gesture of reaching out, as the faintly self-
helpish “how many of us…” playfully acknowledges. The “fragmentary,” disconnected lives
Elyssa describes are subject to a mode of connection that reaches past the present, into other
times. And these times are accessible, specifically, in the form of the “lesson” (252): from the
Latin, legère, to read (“lesson, n.”). Hypatia of Alexandria, a fifth-century philosopher and
mathematician, is also the subject of Wellman’s text Hypatia (written in the same year as Girl
Gone). She figures a scholarly lineage of anomalous reader/writers; a precarious fellowship that emerges in a dialectic of connection and disconnection. Elyssa continues:

In her time, Hypatia proved the riddle
of living connectedly in an unconnected,
and therefore fragmentary world. (254)
The “piecemeal” outsider of modernity’s “directly connected world” is mirrored in the medieval genius who could “liv[e] connectedly” in a world of disconnection: “living connectedly” is thus itself a feat of rupture and discontinuity, specifically in relation to one’s present. Hypatia’s fate dramatizes this ideal: “The mob… cut away her flesh with oyster shells. / She was torn limb from limb…” (257). Hypatia is a figure for “living connectedly” in, and as, a state of maximal fragmentation, and Elyssa’s odd, old-sounding phrase “proved the riddle” emphasizes the unfixed, riddled quality of such connectedness: the riddle is never solved, but proved—proved to be a riddle. The mode of community that Hypatia (dis-)embodies is precisely not one that can be mapped onto the assembly present in the theater. If we are present—if our co-presence is present—anywhere in this model, it is in the viciously intolerant image of “The mob.”

In the context of theater, the mob is a familiar antitheatrical trope, and I think we can legitimately read this reference as at least a provisional indictment of the audience, à la Godot. We might also, for that matter, reflect on the implied presence of the audience-as-mob in Parks’s juxtaposition of lynching and minstrelsy. Theater theorists since Plato have warned that bad things can happen when a lot of people come together, and from the Apology to Ibsen’s An Enemy of the People we have often been reminded that the centripetal force of theatrical gathering tends to crush exceptional individuals. There is no doubt that Wellman participates in the modern, perhaps especially modernist espousal of the singular hero at odds with her world. For him, this resistance to immediate community belongs to a larger postdramatic project of resisting the present. For Wellman as for Beckett, the audience offers a synecdoche for the real, and presence, in turn, becomes susceptible to personification:

THE HEADMISTRESS: And where do you imagine going away from?
ELYSSA: From the here and now.

[…] THE HEADMISTRESS: The here and now would not be flattered to hear you talk like this. (269)
The textual lesson of Hypatia and her “sisters” harbors the possibility of outpacing the wholesomely embodied “here and now.” In fact, the conditional tense of the Headmistress’s

24 There is also an argument to be made about the thematic role of television throughout the play. A TV motif runs through Girl Gone, from the girls’ fascination with “boxes” (271) to the “screen” behind which, as Fay reports, Hypatia gave her lectures (254). Early in the play, Lissa speculates that Chaz “has crossed over into the land / beyond television” (251). Near the end, the Vademecum reports to Buggins that the vanished characters have been dematerialized and electronically reassembled beyond the mystic borders of Vadoo (276)—a description that sounds provocatively like televisual transport. After Buggins vanishes from the sleepover along with him, Elyssa tells her mother: “She was just here. Maybe she went back / to the house. Is Cosby on yet?” (277). There is a sense in which the geographically dispersed constituents of TV Land might represent something very much like the connection-in-disconnection that Elyssa describes to her teacher. I suspect Wellman gets a kick out of suggestively identifying Vadoo with our most vilified cultural medium; but ultimately, as Elyssa’s “Cosby” reference suggests, TV seems to be a degraded, reality-principle version of Going Away, a kind of utopia lite. After all, its screens don’t conceal, like Hypatia’s; they just present. On this hyperaccessibility of electronic media, see Benjamin’s “The Work of Art” (discussed above) and Lehmann 170-1; see also Weber 97-120.

25 If Euripedes’ The Bacchae is one of our most classic warnings about the theatrical mob, I think it is significant that Wellman’s Hypatia narrative reverses the gender alignments of this story: the mindless mob is now male, its singular victim female.
response implies that the entire conversation has already been dislocated from our present, that its center of gravity is elsewhere—“in” our presence “without being of it.” But it is, once again, the rebellious engagement with the “here and now” that gives point, and content, to the fantasy of “going away.” The play refuses to be set elsewhere, in the vaporous Vadoo; instead, it sets about imagining a “here and now” whose very materiality shelters secret trails of departure:

[…] Only now do we see, along with CHAZ, that HOPE has spontaneously combusted. All that remains of her is a small pile of char, and her smoking shoes.

… where did they all go? Where did they go? Where? (250; second ellipsis in original)
The “small pile of char” is the sign of a departure, an absence, an escape. But it is also an eruption of materiality, and as such it emphasizes the present body’s resources of retreat: its capacity for phase change, here mapped on to the real feat (and feet) of the performer’s actual vanishing act. Staging this moment in the 1998 production, choreographer Annie-B Parson and director Paul Lazar made Hope’s disappearance happen just as magically as Wellman’s direction implies, using Chaz’s long cape to hide the performer’s withdrawal. The punch line is that theater’s physical reality is trickier than we might have thought. Presence is theatrical when it can reverse into away-ness; this devious instability is what defines the stage as an auratic site.

Hope’s smoking shoes might recall us to another tricky piece of theatrical footwear: the boots Estragon wrestles with in Waiting for Godot. The play’s emblematic opening line, “Nothing to be done,” refers to his inability to get them off his feet (9). Wellman’s empty shoes seem to offer a cheeky rejoinder to this predicament, as if to suggest that Estragon only had to take himself off, and leave the shoes behind, to find relief. But of course something like this (minus the relief) happens in Godot too: at the end of Act One, Estragon leaves his boots “at the edge of the stage,” and at the top of Act Two they are still there, “front center, heels together, toes splayed” (179, 189). The “trick” is only that, when Estragon returns, he doesn’t recognize them:

[Estragon goes towards the boots, inspects them closely.]

ESTRAGON: They’re not mine.

VLADIMIR: [stupefied] Not yours!

ESTRAGON: Mine were black. These are brown. (237)

Eventually Estragon puts them back on and acknowledges that they fit (245); by the end of the play, he has taken them off and placed them at the edge of the stage again. Mute witnesses to the play’s final acknowledgment of immobility (“Yes, let’s go. / They do not move,” 357), the boots stand for the impossibility of either difference or real departure. Their material abiding becomes the sardonic proof that alterity can only be a desperate illusion: of course they’re the same, they’ve been here in the room with us the whole time; this fact defines the rigor of theater. To Beckett, Hope’s smoking shoes (or, say, the smoking shoes of hope) would probably feel like a cute evasion, a disavowal of the terrible sense in which we can’t get away from our present. But to Wellman, Estragon’s doggedly consistent boots would feel like a premature surrender to the laws of common sense. Wellman’s theatrical present always harbors its own undoing; its laws, including the laws of “spatial and temporal continuity” (Puchner), really are made to be broken.

Wellman has accordingly sought out theatrical partners who share his faith in theater’s ability to attack its own givenness. Una Chaudhuri has observed, in a review of another Wellman/Big Dance Theater collaboration, that “Like Wellman, Lazar and Parson relish searching for the secret affinities among things, and they trust in theater’s power to contain the multiplicities from which connections might be made” (“Mac” n. pag.). That “trust in theater’s
power” to harbor “multiplicities” is what distinguishes Wellman from Beckett, and what connects him to James and Stein. Wellman’s theatrical aim is, like Hypatia, to “prove the riddle”: to let a network of irreducible alterity gleam out through the presence of the “here and now.” If this is a theater of “secret affinities” (“living connectedly”) it is also, just as profoundly, a theater of incongruities: “an unconnected… world.” Its self-displacing bodies warn us not to count on their availability, or—recurring to Adorno—to “count them in.” Instead, like James’s Madame de Vionnet or Stein’s Saint Therese, they cultivate a propensity to recede, to divide. Refusing the solidarity of a stifling co-presence, they rebuff our attempts, as Stein puts it, to “make acquaintance.” And in so doing, they reach out—like Hypatia and her evil sisters—towards a different kind of fellowship, a pact of deviation that spans temporal and geographical gaps without closing them. This same mode of connection-disconnection links Wellman to his students and peers: a commitment to fracturing the cohesion of any present, and making us attend to something else, something we can’t quite grasp in the here and now of our presence together.

The auratic distance that cuts through intimacy can serve as a model for Wellman’s relation to his fellow artists: as Syers says, not a “School of Mac Wellman” or reproductive family, but a “broadly cast license”—or what Wellman refers to in Speculations as “Scatter.” In fact, this principle has its counterpart in his collaboration with Big Dance for Girl Gone. Wellman writes in his prefatory note to the play that, when he asked Parson for advice on how to write for dance theater, she told him to “Write a lot of stage directions”; the “imaginary dances of Girl Gone were the result” (243–4). One might suppose, on reading this account, that Wellman provided instructions which Parson and Lazar dutifully followed. But the script’s dances do indeed remain “imaginary,” virtual in a sense the production does little to reduce. While the published directions make for terrific reading—“All do a strange thing with only / fingers and toes; nobody knows / what it is” (260)—they are rarely recognizable in the actual choreography. Smoking shoes notwithstanding, most of Parson and Lazar’s staging departs from Wellman’s notes altogether. It’s as if, in asking for “a lot of stage directions,” Parson was requesting concrete points in the text from which to differ—which Wellman was happy to provide. These moments would install a principle of discrepancy within the logic of the piece, keeping text and performance apart in the midst of the collaboration.26

I want to finish, therefore, by describing a particular sequence in the production that emerges through this process; it yields an image that seems to me to capture the utopian theater I have been tracing throughout this project. In fact, if I had to choose a single moment of performance to emblazon my own sense of the writerly postdramatic, it would probably be this one. The scene takes place early in the play, after Hope has vanished but before any mention of Vadoo. It is the end of recess; the three sisters are smoking, holding their schoolbooks, and Buggins sneaks a puff before setting up the tiny portable writing desk she carries with her. Lissa, lying on a nearby bench, muses:

LISSA: When I go away, I shall go terribly terribly far away. So far I shall leave no trace. So far… no trace at all.

BUGGINS: No one goes that far. That far

26 In Puchner’s discussion of Antigone, Wellman’s subsequent collaboration with Big Dance Theater, he rightly emphasizes the “autonomy” retained by both the text and the production. Puchner places Wellman’s script in a tradition of theater texts that have “claimed complete literary autonomy” (“Drama” 296), while “the autonomy of the stage production resides in the act of transforming a textual artwork into a theatrical one” (305). For Adorno, aura is a phenomenal manifestation of the other’s autonomy, which is to say, of “foreignness.”
is beyond heaven and... and...
LISSA: The Bad Place? Ha.
BUGGINS: No. A place beyond that. (252)²⁷

Wellman’s directions read simply:
[All become solemn and thoughtful.
Pause.
It becomes completely still for a time.]

At this point in the production, however, something else is happening. A simple, haunting tune has begun to play, and the lights are fading to black. Buggins, kneeling in front of her little escritoire, slowly raises its hinged lid; the opening faces upstage, but we see that a bright, white light is spilling out of it, illuminating her torso and, eventually, her face. The three sisters gather around in the dark, Lissa crouching behind Buggins, and they all peer intently at whatever it is that’s inside the desk. As in the script, the teacher’s voice booms out: “You have one minute, girls” (Ibid). Now the four girls lean in even closer; the teacher begins counting down from sixty, and Lisa, Lissa and Elyssa stand up and slowly file away. Buggins, however, remains kneeling at the desk a while longer, staring into its depths. Finally, about halfway through the minute, Buggins slowly closes the desk, picks it up, and carries it back to the “classroom.”

It is thus Buggins’s writing desk that opens the prospect of the “place beyond”—opens it, that is, for the four girls; not for us. In Buggins’s illuminated form we see only the reflection of something that is otherwise inaccessible; unlike the stage lights that would deliver her to us more fully, this light divides her from us, claiming her for a site where we cannot be. The desk becomes a metonym for writing as it functions in Wellman’s theatrical imagination, and—in different ways—in that of James, Stein, Beckett, and Parks: a fissure in the present, an axis reaching out to someplace where we’re not. It gleams with the artwork’s Adornian “foreignness to the world.”

And yet the occasion for this dislocation—as, Adorno says, for all aesthetic foreignness—is this world, the one where we jostle together, buying and selling each other and ourselves. As the three “evil sisters” cluster in the dark around Buggins, they body forth the darkness in which we cluster, staring just like them. In this conspiratorial tableau there is a kind of promise, a tenuous foreshadowing of the collective we could be.

Then the countdown begins, the stage lights rise; we shift in our seats and come back to the present.

²⁷ In the published text, there are two more lines of dialogue here: “FAY: There is no place beyond that. / LISSA: Yes there is” (252). The production cuts these lines, a choice that lets Buggins’s words (“No. A place beyond that”) reverberate throughout the ensuing action.


