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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Dramatic inquiry into the relationship between man and his language is hardly a uniquely contemporary (post-World War II) phenomenon. Jarry's *King Ubu* (1896), Shaw's *Pygmalion* (1913), Hofmannsthal's *The Difficult Man* (*Der Schwierige*, 1921), some Dada theater evenings, the *Volksstücke* of Ödön von Horváth and Marieluise Fleisser all suggest, in varying ways, a concern with this issue. The group of postwar plays studied here differ, however, in their elevation of language to the central action, and actor; in their pessimistic vision of man's ability to remain free and humane in the face of verbal coercion; and in their warning that man has become a prisoner of his speech. The violent action of language is directed both against the audience and against the characters. In either case language is on trial: it stands accused of usurping and molding reality, of replacing critical thought with fossilized and automatic verbiage, of violating man's autonomy, of destroying his individuality.

The plays that animate these views are varied; they vary in genre, in idiom, and in subject matter. However, they all answer to the double criterion according to which I chose my texts; *thematically*, they are all concerned with man's subjugation or victimization through imposed or inherited verbal structures; *dramatically*, they all demonstrate concrete actions of language which are violent, coercive, and domineering. Language is either metamorphosed into a dramatic antagonist which destroys the characters or forces them into conformity with its pre-given structures and precepts; or it is portrayed as an inescapable prison which determines the characters' fate

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[More information](#)

and defines the limits of their world – conceptual and moral. This double axis, thematic concern and dramatic demonstration, is translated into a multiplicity of dramatic forms in the more than a dozen postwar plays studied here. There is, for example, the abstract thesis drama of Handke’s *Kaspar* (alternate title “Sprachfolterung”: language torture) – in which language is demonstrated to be the antagonist, the force which shapes and reduces man into mindless obedience; the absurdity of Ionesco’s *The Lesson* – in which language is a tyrannical weapon of dominance and destruction; the hyper-realism of Mamet’s *American Buffalo* or Kroetz’s *Farmyard* – in which a painfully limited, obscene and cliché-ridden language imprisons and brutalizes. There is the menacing torture/interrogation of Pinter’s *The Birthday Party* – in which clichés of speech and thought brainwash a social outcast into clean-shaven conformity; the exposure of dogma and jargon in Havel’s *The Garden Party* – in which language is shown to embody and control political power; the unceasing vituperation and reality-replacement of Albee’s *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* – in which verbal cruelty defines human relationships; the postmodern language-battles of Shepard’s *The Tooth of Crime* – in which power and identity depend on the possession of the more potent verbal style. The reason that these and other related plays need to be studied together is that each focuses on the relationship between man and his language, and all contain a distinctive usage of language as a form of aggression. Moreover, they illuminate a new connection between dramatic language and dramatic violence.

Thus, the plays discussed here focus on the action of language. Language is either the explicit subject, or it is implicit to a degree which makes it impossible to analyze the play’s thematics without dealing explicitly with its language. In this sense I am dealing with a theater of language.

In 1956 Jean Vannier published an article in *Théâtre populaire* titled “Langages de l’avant-garde.” It was translated and printed in 1963 in the *Tulane Drama Review* as “A Theatre of Language.”¹ In this influential article Vannier distinguishes three different types of dramatic languages: “traditional”

Introduction

3

dramatic language which represents the passions and thoughts of its characters, their “‘psychological’ relationships which language only translates.” This language is always close to that of the public for whom it was written and therefore does not call unusual attention to itself. The second type of dramatic language is one that acts physically upon its audience, “disturbing (its) rapport with the world” by provoking it and forcing it to enter the exaggerated world of the theater. Vannier places this language within the “poetic avant-garde” of the period between the wars, under the aegis of Artaud, through whom language becomes “a vocal form of gesture.” This language, Vannier claims, revolutionized the *nature* of dramatic language but not its function, for “this language always remains absorbed in its theatrical finality.” That is: the language functions as an element of the theatrical event, not as the focal subject at which the drama is aimed. The third type of dramatic language emerged after the second World War and is what Vannier terms “a theatre of language,” in which the *function* of language is radically altered, effecting a “revolution in the *relationship* between theatre and language” (my emphasis). Language which till now had functioned to translate psychological states, or as theatrical gesture, here becomes “the very content of the drama itself” existing before us “as a dramatic reality.” Language is thus moved to the forefront of the stage, reflecting not the world of the drama, but itself. For the first time language finds itself “literally *exposed* upon the stage, promoted to the dignity of a theatrical object” (Vannier’s emphasis). Language has become the very subject and object of the drama and with it comes “a dramaturgy of human relations at the level of language itself.”

Vannier limits his study of this new function of language to the plays of Beckett, Adamov, and Ionesco and thus claims that this language creates a “drama of absurdity,” an anti-theater. Most of the plays which I will show to partake of this dramaturgy “at the level of language itself” were written after Vannier’s article; thus, his limited scope becomes understandable. While I accept this analysis of a postwar drama in which language reflects back upon itself, becomes the central

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

action of the play and the focus of its content, I will expand this idea to demonstrate that critical language-consciousness functions far beyond mere dramatic absurdity. The problem with such a limited definition is its implicit claim to an equally limited philosophical conclusion. Martin Esslin, whose analysis of language in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) concurs with many of Vannier's insights, draws our attention to the fact that the nonsensical, devalued language of the Absurd assumes and reveals an experienced "insufficiency" of speech, a metaphysical gap between man's need to *mean* and the incapacity of inauthentic, mechanical language to bear or convey the anguish of reality. Alienation from language and its "failure to communicate" is depicted in much of Absurdist drama, according to Esslin, as an expression of both social and existential isolation.² As Ionesco paradigmatically shows in his *The Bald Soprano* (*La Cantatrice chauve*, 1948), we stand outside of the words we speak, words which have a life and logic of their own and which inhibit integrity or authentic communication. For Ionesco: "Words are only noise stripped of all meaning. These houses, the sky are only facades of nothingness; people seem to evaporate, everything is threatened, including myself by an imminent, silent sinking into I know not what abyss."³ This Absurdist perspective develops the intuitions of a turn-of-the-century language *malaise* which was especially strong in central Europe. From Kafka through Hofmannsthal, Broch, Kraus, and up to Ionesco a sense of verbal despair, of "a crisis experienced by many a serious writer of the period," according to Erich Heller,⁴ is apparent. In 1904 Yeats wondered whether it was any longer possible to create a play that would live, "out of a dying, or at any rate a very ailing language."⁵ Hofmannsthal gave this crisis especially cogent expression in his famous "Lord Chandos Letter" (*Ein Brief*, 1902). Not unlike Sartre's Roquentin, Lord Chandos suffers nausea when faced with words which once had flowed "as through never-congested conduits" with "deep, true, inner form," and had now turned into "whirlpools which gave me vertigo and...led into the void."⁶ Sickened by the fluid abstraction of words and their slippery inadequacy, Lord Chandos chooses silence. Hof-

Cambridge University Press

0521383358 - Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama: From Handke to Shepard

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Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

mannsthal later translated this pessimistic view of language into dramatic form in his play *The Difficult Man*. The “difficult man” of the title is Hans Karl Bühl who, momentarily buried alive in the trenches of World War I, realizes the impossibility of describing experience – that “essentially inexpressible” – through “wohlgesetzte Wörter.”

It’s rather ridiculous, I admit, for a man to imagine that by stringing words together skilfully he can exert God knows how great an influence in this life of ours, where in the long run everything depends on what is essentially inexpressible. Speech is based on an indecent excess of self-esteem.⁷

Surrounded by the trivial social banter of his friends and servants, watching meaning recede with each attempt to put it into words – Bühl concludes that speech is an *indecenty*, a profanation of the final “inexpressible” truth of Experience. Like Lord Chandos, he rejects language. This separation from meaning, the gap felt between language and experience, is one of the essential themes of Absurdist drama (and will be discussed in the context of chapter 3). It is however *not* the theme of this book. Alienation has, in the plays I will discuss, transmuted into aggression. Language is no longer depicted as absurd or isolated; rather it is shown to be actively domineering and dangerous, a force which controls and manipulates man, becoming the essence of his being and the limit of his world. Thus my focus will be rather different from Vannier’s; the verbal activity which I will identify functions not only to elevate language into focal attention, but also as a comment on its nature: language as an aggression. This aggression which, in many of the plays under consideration, culminates in acts of language-motivated violence, signals a disturbed and threatening relationship between contemporary man and his language. One of the questions which these plays implicitly pose is: do we control language, or does it control us? Does language speak *for* us – or *through* us.

The Difficult Man was published in book form in 1921. That same year another Viennese, Ludwig Wittgenstein, published his *Tractatus Logico-philosophicus*, a work which confronted

similar questions in a rather different form. Wittgenstein was concerned with the logical limits of the “sayable,” the boundaries of philosophically legitimate and thus logically truth-bearing utterances. Through a strict, almost mathematical procedure Wittgenstein attempted to combat “the bewitchment of our intelligence by means of language.”⁸ Seeking the relationship between the word and the fact, Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus* finds reality eternally clouded by the infinite regression of words. Language, he claims, can only truthfully picture a narrow portion of reality: for the rest, its validity is questionable. Wittgenstein believed that if we could only learn to use language correctly and not burden words with “meanings” – metaphysical, aesthetic, ethical – which they cannot support, then clarity would replace chaos. Wittgenstein (who will be discussed in chapter 2) was fighting “word superstition,” as had a fellow Viennese, Fritz Mauthner, twenty years earlier. Mauthner’s epistemological scepticism was born of a deep distrust of words which, he argued (and Hans Karl Bühl would agree), are always at a remove from experience and thus can never really speak about reality – but only about themselves. In his *Contributions toward a Critique of Language* (*Beiträge zu einer Kritik der Sprache*, 1902), Mauthner argues that language cannot convey truth but only emotive equivalencies, imprecisions, and ambiguities. Like Leibnitz, Herder, or Humboldt before him, Sapir or Whorf after him, Mauthner makes a case for the inevitable relativity and deterministic power of language which traps us each within our individual linguistic skin, determining our view of the world and of ourselves (this will be discussed in chapter 4). Both Mauthner and Wittgenstein were practicing *Sprachkritik* – a critique of language. Motivated by the same awareness of a “crisis” of language which had paralyzed Hofmannsthal, they hoped to make us more critical in our attitude toward language and more aware of the danger which uncontrolled and unconscious use posed. They thus join a long row of philosophers, linguists, and critics who through language scepticism sought to escape the threatening spiral of language, and to encourage a critical reassessment of our means of speech. Thus, from Leibnitz to Whorf there runs a common theme of the “tyranny” of words and man’s subjugation

Cambridge University Press

0521383358 - Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama: From Handke to Shepard

Jeanette R. Malkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

through that which is supposed to be the crowning achievement of his humanity: language.

The “subjugation” of man through language and language-systems is also an implicit element in the influential contemporary linguistic/philosophic movement, Structuralism; although here this subjugation is not necessarily critiqued. Centered in linguistic theory, Structuralism studies the internal functioning of systems by divorcing them from their historical context, and by “bracketing off” both the real (historical) object of its analysis and the human subject through whom the systems operate.⁹ Inverting the humanist perspective which finds the source of meaning in the individual, structural analysis focuses on systems of conventions, generative rules which function *through* the individual but neither originate in, nor are controlled by him. As Jonathan Culler puts it in his study of *Structuralist Poetics*:

...once the conscious subject is deprived of its role as source of meaning – once meaning is explained in terms of conventional systems which may escape the grasp of the conscious subject – the self can no longer be identified with consciousness. It is “dissolved” as its functions are taken up by a variety of interpersonal systems that operate through it. The human sciences, which begin by making man an object of knowledge, find, as their work advances, that “man” disappears under structural analysis.¹⁰

Whatever its philosophic value, or its importance as a tool for cultural analysis, Structuralism in its various forms has certainly deprived the functioning self of free will and thus reaffirmed the deterministic hold of sign-systems – foremost among which is language – over man. This point of view and cultural context are reflected, or questioned, in some of the plays under discussion.

The “aggression” which this study addresses centers to a great extent on the dramatization of man’s loss of autonomy and selfhood through the normative pressures, reductive tendencies, or pre-determination of language. Thus, the above mentioned philosophers and linguists, among others, often underlie, and sometimes directly inform, the substance of the following plays.

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Excerpt

[More information](#)

This study consists of four central chapters, each of which examines one play or a group of plays. The axis of each chapter is different, suggesting four general contexts within which the various devices and implications of verbal aggression can be focused. The division is as follows:

In “Language torture” (chapter 2), Peter Handke’s *Kaspar* provides a theoretical or formal context, and a model, for the study of man’s *Versprachlichung*; his “speechification” or being rendered a speech object. Kaspar, who begins the play as a virtual *tabula rasa*, a puppet figure, is created and destroyed through disembodied “voices” which force him to assimilate an abstraction of public language – “model” sentences which induce “model” behavior – and thus become, like language itself, well-formed and orderly. Kaspar unfolds less as a person than as a process, the process of man’s forced incorporation into Procrustean language systems. These systems become the scaffolding of his consciousness, determine his thoughts and values, and thus the limits of his humanity. It is against this that Kaspar, and Handke, rebel.

“Gagged by language” (chapter 3) views language through a political, or power context. The plays which I discuss by Ionesco, Pinter, and Havel all demonstrate forms of man’s domination and subjugation through language. In them, characters are “overtaken” by language and are either destroyed (as in *The Lesson*), or “converted” (as in *The Birthday Party* or *The Garden Party*) – forced into pre-existing verbal molds which, implicitly or explicitly, implicate a ruling ideology. Coercion to conformity and uniformity operates through a number of recurring devices: verbal automatism; the ritualization of language into magical formulae; the use of extended clichés and jargon which control meaning and preclude its development. In each case, to control language is to control, and manipulate, power.

“Language as a prison” (chapter 4) centers on the social implications of verbal deprivation. Kroetz, Bond, and

Cambridge University Press

0521383358 - Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama: From Handke to Shepard

Jeanette R. Malkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

Mamet all recreate the fragmented and radically restricted language of fringe or debased social groups. Rooted in three different nationalities, their plays nevertheless share in uncommunicative banalities, “unowned” language, excessive obscenity; and demonstrate the relationship between inarticulacy and brutality. Deprived of free verbal options, their characters show an alarming lack of compassion and all seem pre-determined by the verbal poverty which shapes their limited desires, and informs their violent behavior. The seven plays discussed demonstrate and indict the deterministic relationship between verbal poverty and social immorality.

“Wrestling with language” (chapter 5) focuses on the inter-personal context of verbal aggression. Albee’s self-consciously obscene *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* and Shepard’s postmodern verbal style-battles in *The Tooth of Crime* provide models for the connection between language, identity, and relationship-struggles. Aggressive and subversive, language functions here both as a dangerous weapon and as a form of rebellion against deadening conformity. The abundant use of self-conscious and self-referential language alerts us to the centrality of language in the formation of personal identity and inter-personal responsibility.

Cambridge University Press

0521383358 - Verbal Violence in Contemporary Drama: From Handke to Shepard

Jeanette R. Malkin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

CHAPTER 2

Language torture: on Peter Handke's Kaspar

Die Sprache spricht, nicht der Mensch. Der Mensch spricht nur, indem er geschicklich der Sprache entspricht.
(Language speaks, not man. Man speaks only in so far as he skilfully conforms to language.)¹

This quote from Martin Heidegger might have been written by Peter Handke about his play *Kaspar*. It concisely sums up Handke's view, or rather critique, of language, and in a voice – controlled, aphoristic, sensitive to the texture and cadence of a well-formed sentence – which is an echo of Handke's own. *Kaspar* (1968), Handke's first full-length play, is about language and the ways in which the form of language shapes the lives of man. The “story” of the play is that of one speechless man – Kaspar – and how he is created and destroyed through his forced acquisition of language. “The play could also be called *speech torture*,” Handke writes,² thereby making explicit his view of the relationship between language and man: a relationship of torture, pain, and coercion. The play shows, Handke explains, “how someone can be made to speak through speaking.”³ This is, then, the central “action” of the play: Speech (represented by three disembodied voices, *Einsager*, i.e. Prompters) creating the Speechless (Kaspar) in its own image. These are also the two main “characters” of the play: Kaspar, a clown figure, a human abstraction whom Handke ironically calls “the HERO”⁴; and Speech, voices heard over loudspeakers, voices to which Kaspar reacts and with which he is in conflict, voices which teach and finally coerce Kaspar into becoming like speech itself: well-formed and orderly.

It is, of course, a misuse of dramatic terminology to speak, as I have, of “story,” “action,” and “character” in connection