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THE PROBLEM OF VIOLENCE: WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENS IN A FEW PLAYS BY J. WHITING, H. PINTER AND S. BECKETT

1. Topical Kind of Violence

Every age produces its special neurotic flavour, its own modes of apprehending violence, terror, insecurity. Art, in turn, is prone to modify its fibre in order to absorb and express the new tensions; hence new "aesthetics of violence" becomes a common property of artists in a given time. In our times of general spiritual crisis the writers look for ways of communicating the existential fear which lingers in the mind of man confronted with the modern world on the brink of self-destruction. In his fascinating study of human self-destructiveness Alvarez reminds us of Yeats' judgement upon the 20th century art: "After us the Savage God". "In a sense, the whole of twentieth-century art has been dedicated to the service of this earthbound Savage God who, like the rest of his kind, has thrived on blood-sacrifice. As with modern warfare, enormous sophistication of theory and technique has gone into producing an art which is more extreme, more violent, and, finally, more self-destructive than ever before"[1].

In other words, the twentieth century artist faces up a pervasive theme - or obsession - of violence, both of unlimited technological resources of destruction and of the newly redisco-

[1] A. A l v a r e z, The Savage God: A Study of Suicide, London 1975, p. 245.

vered innate violent capacities. "There is in fact no one thing", John Fraser states in "Violence in the Arts", "no chemically insolatable and analysable substance that is violence"[2].

My concern here while dealing with a few plays by Whiting, Pinter, and Beckett will be with violence as self-destruction, which need not preclude me from pinning up violence as play; it must be stressed, a very disquieting kind of play[3].

It is not out of place to remind here that the theme of violence has not been at all given up by the subsequent ranks of British dramatists of the sixties and seventies; on the contrary, it has been pursued with quite a new explicitness and directness by playwrights such as John Arden, Edward Bond, Joe Orton, Tom Stoppard, Howard Brenton, David Hare, to name but few.

There are, roughly, two possibilities of coping with this theme, for writers of whatever persuasion: either in explicit, clear-cut terms- as may be found, for instance, in Arden's "Sergeant Musgrave's Dance" or Bond's sensational "Saved" or "Lear" - or indirectly, the latter constituting one of the most remarkable phenomena of modern literature. The three dramatists in question are those who conceive of violence as emblematic of moral, spiritual and metaphysical chaos, negation of order, purpose and creativity, and who take up the exploration of it utilizing the resources of grotesque distortion, irony and silence. They are all the disciples of Henry James in "The Turn of the Screw", for whom evil is never credible in literature if it is presented in "weak specifications", and who claims that the best thing is to make the reader's general vision of evil intense enough, make the reader "think the evil for himself"[4]. Thus in the case of Whiting, Pinter and Beckett it is that while continually posing the questions about the general contours of action, we remain uncertain about the very texture of evocative innuendoes which invade our minds with their hints of meaning

[2] J. F r a s e r, Violence in the Arts Cambridge 1974, p. 9

[3] Ibid., p. 9. Both of these functions of violence are, among others, recognized by Fraser in this notable codification of the working of the theme of violence in the arts.

[4] H. J a m e s, The Turn of the Screw and The Aspern Papers, New York 1973, Introduction, p. X.

simultaneously suggested and withdrawn, causing the incessant reorientation of attention, and finally leaving us "to think" the meaning for ourselves.

John Whiting, the playwright who may be said to have unknowingly initiated the perpetration of the impalpable, hair-raising terror on stage, writes: "A dramatist, like any artist, draws his material from his time. And what is often misunderstood is that it cannot be other people's time [...]. The questions are continually posed. What effect does the atom bomb have on writers today? [...] Well, of course, anyone writing today is aware that these things happened and are happening. But it is the blind spot of the journalistic mind, so pre-eminent and so preoccupied with art today, that it thinks the problems should be directly involved. In other words, the play must be set <u>in</u> a concentration camp, beneath an imminent explosion"[5].

Whiting, Pinter and Beckett (the names of the three playwrights are not arranged chronologically) do not place the actions of their plays <u>in</u> a concentration camp. The atrocities are never directly invoked, as they are, for instance, in Bond's plays. Still, they do, implicitly, write about the problems which refer to the most appalling atrocities and violence of our era. There is no need for them to be over-explicit about this, since a play is a poetic image of human predicament, an image which projects violence as inseparable from and expressive of the inherent mystery of this predicament.

The word "mystery" is of essential significance here. It denotes the limitations of knowledge about the nature of things which for these playwrights have become a philosophical reality. The motivations of violence are never explained. We do not know why the retired grocer is so ruthlessly persecuted in Whiting's "Conditions of Agreement", nor do we understand what actually happens at the end of the play. We do not know where from and why the two men come to claim the pianist Stanley in Pinter's "The Birthday Party", why he should be afraid of them and where they eventually take him. No more do we know what

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[5] J. Whiting, The Art of the Dramatist, London 1970, p. 125.

makes Procathren, a timid literary critic in Whiting's "Saint's Day", become violent all of a sudden than we realize why and whether at all Dan Rooney pushed a child out of the train in Beckett's "All That Fall". The tensions of submerged aggression make the atmosphere of "Endgame" even more uncanny, not clarifying the insistent question about the presumable general violence brooding over the indefinable confinement where Hamm and Clov spend their time. We embark upon a phantom-like land of unanswered questions. Having crossed the threshold the first thing we tread upon is an inexplicable, absurd violence.

2. Meanings in the Making

One may claim that "Conditions of Agreement", Whiting's first full-length play, written in 1948-1949, ten years before Pinter's "The Birthday Party", and eight years before "Endgame", is the first rendering in the English language - in terms of theatrical experience - of the incomprehensible, absurd violence of our times, and the first stage evocation of the atmosphere of poetic terror (with the possible exception of Eliot's "Sweeney Agonistes"), which was later to become so all-pervasive in the theatre of Pinter and Beckett. The play gives account of a ludicrous battering of a random and helpless victim into inarticulacy - this sentence might as well stand for a brief summary of Pinter's "The Birthday Party", with which Whiting's play has striking affinities. In both plays two men without any sound reason contrive a series of threatening mental tricks in order to ridicule, humiliate, and finally destroy another man. In the second act "Conditions of Agreement" becomes a riot of rapid changes and interactions during which Nicholas Doon, a crippled young man with a wooden leg and Peter Bembo, a retired circus clown without the left eye, taunt, accuse and torture the old grocer, known in the play as A. G., into a condition of mental stalemate. Like in "The Birthday Party", this act resembles a grotesque birthday celebration, during which the main guest is victimized. The day is the birthday of A. G.'s dead wife. The process of mental assassination achieves its climax in the scene

of verbal bullying with Peter and Nicholas sharing their lines as they attack their victim. This cross-talk dialogue of cohesive, suggestive rhythms sounds strikingly Pinteresque[6]:

> Nicholas: This situation calls -
> Peter: You must not - must not betray the slightest anxiety or fear.
> Nicholas: I agree.
> Peter: You must laugh. Be - be -
> Nicholas: Devil-may-care.
> Peter: But I do not.
> (Peter and Nicholas laugh)
> Yes. That is how you must behave.
> Nicholas: Better?
> Peter: Feel better, A. G.?
> Nicholas: Well enough to discuss our plans? For we have plans to help you. Haven't we, Peter?
> Peter: We have.
> Nicholas: Yes, you look better. Listen to me. Can you hear me? (to Peter) Do you think he can hear me?
> Peter: (shouting at A. G.): Can you hear us?
> A. G. gives no indication.
> Yes, he can hear us[7].

In "The Birthday Party" Goldberg and Mccann keep the ball rolling round the same circuit:

> Mccann: You're in a rut
> Goldberg: You look anaemic.
> Mccann: Rheumatic.
> Goldberg: Myopic.
> Mccann: Epileptic.
> Goldberg: You're on the verge.
> Mccann: You're a dead duck.
> Goldberg: But we can save you.
> Mccann: From a worse fate.
> Goldberg: True.
> Mccann: Undeniable[8].

Again, in "Saint's Day" Whiting conceives the scene of Paul and Charles, instructing Robert Procathren about handling a pistol, in a similar way:

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[6] The affinities between the two plays have already been noted by R. H a y m a n in: Contemporary Playwrights: John Whiting, London 1970, p. 5.

[7] The Collected Plays by John Whiting, ed. R. H a y m a n, London 1969, Vol. One, Act II, p. 58. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

[8] H. P i n t e r, The Birthday Party, London 1976, Act III, p. 82. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

Paul: Have you never been moved -
Charles: Bravo!
Paul: - moved by hate or persecution -
Charles: Or love?
Paul: - to contemplate physical violence?
Robert: Never.
Charles: It has always been unemotional, calm force -
Paul: - in boxing rings -
Charles: - with rules -
Paul: - and referees -
Charles: - against harmless little boys.
Paul: Do you think you could use this?
He holds out the pistol to Robert[9].

All these dialogues are directed to a mute receiver, and communicate much, but subtextually, ironically. The circuit of communication is completed by the audience. Through the repetitive, nervous pace of the seemingly meaningless patter the effect of a very dramatic discrepancy is achieved: in all the scenes, what actually happens on the stage transcends the bare words uttered by the characters. This is the language of which Jean Genet must have been dreaming - "a language in which nothing is said but everything is portended"[10]. It ideally complies with H. James' fascination of the unspeakable, impalpable and with his superb artistic calculation upon human image-evoking faculty. What actually happens is concealed behind the words, in silence.

All this density and richness of dramatic texture satisfies the urgent need for intensity and concentration, characteristic of our times of extreme and appalling experiences. In his essays "Language and Silence" George Steiner states that certain experiences of our age compel us to "the retreat from the word"[11]. This is what the Polish writer Tadeusz Borowski must have had in mind when describing his attempts to give account of his experiences in Auschwitz: "I wished to describe what I have experienced, but who in the world will believe a writer using an unknown language? It's like trying to persuade trees or stones"[12].

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[9] J. Whiting, Saint's Day, London 1963, Act II, p. 61. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

[10] R. Brustain, The Theatre of Revolt, Boston 1964, p. 378.

[11] Literatura na świecie, Warsaw 1973, nb 11(31), p. 267-269.

[12] Alvarez, op. cit., p. 273.

It is that "unknown language" that the playwrights concerned seem to be struggling for.

By utilizing the resources of savage subtextual irony and silence, both Whiting and Pinter give expression to the most astounding menace which modern man must face up to. The controlled, calculated innuendoes assume dimensions of pure grotesque in their dissection of the process of mental terrorising. The words we hear are only a smokescreen behind which one dares not plunge unless taking up the risk of facing the hidden violence lying in wait deep down in the human subconsciousness.

The idea of an ambiguous, unformulatable nature of reality is conveyed by showing the characters whose behaviour is complex, incomprehensible. Such is the reality conjured up by Beckett in "All That Fall", where the miserable old couple, one of them blind, the other lame, with pain and difficulty drag their feet along a mysterious road of life, meeting senseless, petty obstacles and indulging in portentous fantasies of violence:

> Mrs. Rooney: The Lynch twins jeering at us.
> (Cries.)
> Mr. Rooney: Will they pelt us with mud today,
> do you suppose?
> Mrs. Rooney: Let us turn and face them. (Cries. They turn. Silence.) Threaten them with your stick. (Silence.) They have run away.
> (Pause.)
> Mr. Rooney: Did you ever wish to kill a child?
> (Pause.) Nip some young doom in the bud.
> (Pause.) Many a time at night, in winter, on the black road home, I nearly attacked the boy. (Pause.) Poor Jerry! (Pause.) What restrained me then? (Pause.) Not fear of man. (Pause.) Shall we go on backwards now a little?[13]

As in Whiting and Pinter, we are confronted with an ominous, obscene universe, where any feeling or purpose manifests itself in trivial acts of aggression towards others. Human life is deprived of direction. Aimless, man flutters pointlessly, inconsequentially. This grim, ridiculous malaise of existence is

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[13] S. Beckett, All That Fall, London 1975, p. 31. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

conceived dramatically with naturalistic suggestiveness in the scene with a hen accidentally killed by the truck:

> Mrs. Rooney: (in anguish). Mind the hen! (Scream of brakes. Squawk of hen.) Oh, mother, you have squashed her, drive on, drive on! (The car accelerates. Pause.) What a death! One minute picking happy at the dung, on the road, in the sun, with now and then a dust bath, and then - bang? - all her troubles over. (Pause.) All the laying and the hatching. (Pause.) Just one great squawk and then [...] peace.
>
> (p. 15-16)

Through the "radio-image" of hen, a creature fluttering aimlessly around only to be accidentally butchered by a passing truck, the realm of casual, incomprehensible violence is embarked upon.

The playwrights set our senses on alert by exposing the incongruous, the odd, the bizarre - "l'insolite", to use the French term employed by J. Fraser[14]. Thus we have the butchered hen in "All That Fall", the crippled toy-dog in "Endgame", the real dog mysteriously murdered in "Saint's Day", the wheelbarrow which Stanley suddenly imagines to be stocked in his oppressors' van in "The Birthday Party":

> Stanley: (advancing). They are coming today,
> Stanley: They are coming in a van.
> Meg: Who?
> Stanley: And do you know what they've got in that van?
> Meg: What?
> Stanley: They've got a wheelbarrow in that van.
> Meg: (breathlessly). They haven't.
> Stanley: Oh yes, they have.
> Meg: You're a liar.
> Stanley: (advancing upon her). A big wheelbarrow. And when the van stops they wheel it out, and they wheel it up the garden path, and they knock at the front door.
>
> (Act I, p. 24)

Such disquieting details intensify our sense of violence lurking behind, omnipresent.

Another unexpected conjunction comes with building up the complex polyphonic imagery of the plays, when the visual and the

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[14] Fraser, op. cit., p. 74.

verbal is counterpointed with a specially treated effect of sound. It is the sound of the soldiers' trumpet in "Saint's Day", mysteriously disturbing until we begin to realize that this cheerful sound announces the forces of doom and destruction to come (Act I, p. 36). The musical ironies of a funny sound to a nightmarish situation are also contrived by Pinter in "The Birthday Party" where the jolly sound of drums is a harbinger of menace and violence (Act I, p. 36). The same is true of the dancing which in "Saint's Day" takes place in the midst of most uncanny situations, e.g. Paul's dancing just before his execution (Act III, p. 84), little Stella's dancing to the sound of trumpet which announces the final catastrophe. All these incongruously jolly elements intensify, in a grotesque way, the effect of an almost unbearable nightmare.

Still another way in which "l'insolite" operates is through dwelling on human physical oddity, deformity. In the plays of Beckett, Pinter, and Whiting we behold a whole stock of crippled, deformed, blind, deaf, mute, or otherwise incapacitated creatures. Physical deformity[15] is there to point the more sharply to the monstrous spiritual degeneration with which the characters are afflicted, and hence we get the sense of ubiquitous violence that engulfs all the layers of their world.

The violation of our sense of security comes with the imposition of the atmosphere of menace and unresolved horror upon the world of typical middle-class mediocrity. The retired grocer as a victim, the good-humoured retired clown and the crippled young man with shameful mental and sexual inefficiencies as oppressors in "Conditions of Agreement" - these are from top to bottom the common run of people, whose operations as objects and agents of violence produce an effect of strikingly grotesque incongruity. The same happens in "The Birthday Party" where the inconspicuous pianist Stanley in the quiet seaside boarding house is thrust into his savage "dance of death". "All That Fall" projects a vision of a most ordinary country road along which two

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[15] Ibid., p. 112. Fraser claims that "even when no human violator is involved the artist himself has to become a species of violator in such invasions of the body's sanctity".

most ordinary old crippled creatures are staggering forwards and backwards, creatures with unknowable and terrifying feelings, locked up inside their souls.

The effect of "l'insolite" thus conceived is that of insidiously working empathy: we get an impression of a certain wholesale irrationality not only of the characters' lives, but also of our own world in which we have safely entrenched ourselves. The more normal and ordinary the settings of violence are the more disturbed and uneasy we tend to feel. We cease to be sure of violence as something which may happen merely to others, and begin to sense it just round the corner. Thus the plays set to explore the illusoriness of human sense of security, the elusiveness and ambiguity of human contacts, and - what is acknowledged to be the insistent theme of both Whiting and Pinter - the inexplicable danger which may come with any "kind-hearted" newcomer.

3. What Actually Happens in the Plays Concerned

Resonant as they are with surreal ambiguities, the plays continue to puzzle us, their horror being fully apprehended only in the subconscious. The retreat from meaning explicitly encoded, from clear-cut message signals the crumbling of humanistic culture safely structured upon the base of meanings and significances. As a critic has observed, "Hamlet" posed questions whereas "The Birthday Party" is a charade[16]. We may try to decode meanings using various keys, letting in any of the possible lines of association[17].

Freudian pattern applied to the plays may be revealing insofar as it helps to unveil the insistent theme of human self-destructiveness. Psychoanalysis defines it in terms of the

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[16] M. V a l e n c y, Kilka uwag o formie i znaczeniach w dramacie współczesnym, "Dialog" 1976, No 7, p. 103.

[17] In "The Making of Modern Drama", New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, Richard Gilman observes that "Endgame" may be interpreted equally well along Freudian or Marxist lines or as a vision of the world after nuclear holocaust.

death instinct - a "primary aggression", present from the very beginning of human life and ceaselessly working to destroy and annihilate it. "The nihilism and destructiveness of the self - of which psychoanalysis has made us sharply and progressively more aware - turns out to be an accurate reflection of the nihilism of our own violent societies"[18] - writes Alvarez. According to psycho-analytic theories of human personality, all the insoluble tensions inside human soul may be traced back to the death instinct. "My hatred is the only active thing within me" - declares Nicholas in "Conditions of Agreement", entering upon his destructive and self-destructive course (Act I, p. 25). Mysterious loathing of - we do not know what - drives Dan Rooney in "All That Fall" to dream of killing a child, or, which we have no means of testing, to actually kill it. In "The Birthday Party", Stanley, the victim, and Goldberg, the executioner, are interchangeable and mutually annihilating. There is always the wish to annihilate life, the death wish at the bottom of these inexpressible, nihilistic drives and tensions.

In "Saint's Day", one of the most interesting plays written in this century, it is Robert Procathren, the Oxford poet and critic, who all of a sudden learns about human innate violence which is there in himself and in others. When he first enters the scene he is "full of passionate desire for life [...]. He looks on life as an adventure and upon death as an enemy to be fought, [...], a man clean, temperate, respectable, responsible" (Act I, p. 29). He is a self-proclaimed humanist. It is after his accidental shooting of Stella, which deprived him of his "innocence" (Act III, p. 88), and into which he was indirectly driven by the irresponsible, violent pranks of others, that his shock is brought about. The death instinct comes to the fore, and Robert strikes out into the unknowable realms of the subconscious, a wild creature in the grip of irrational impulse. He acts with ruthless aggressiveness towards the world which cheated him and towards himself.

The pattern of Robert's transformation follows the Shakespearian pattern of "Timon of Athens": Robert, like Timon, watches

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[18] A l v a r e z, op. cit., p. 278.

appalled while his godlike image of man is shattered to pieces and, like Timon, he is overpowered by an irresistible yearning for nothingness, an eternal "nostalgie du néant". Both Timon and Robert are in love with death. For Timon living is just sickness and "nothing brings him all things"[19]; for Robert, the "flower of death" is the sign of freedom (Act III, p. 93). He had lost his faith in God long ago, but now his belief in humanity proved to be a delusion, and he stands there with his stripped-to-the-bone awareness of death as the only remaining thing to stick to:

> Robert: Southman - I thought the power invested was for good. I believed we were here to do well by each other. It isn't so. We are here - all of us - to die. [...] (he turns to speak to the child). Afraid of the dark? But it is more than the dark. It is that which lies beyond, not within the dark - the fear of the revelation by light. We are told by our fairy-tale books that we should not fear but the darkness is around us, and our fear is that the unknown hand is already at the switch. I tell you, do not fear, for there is no light and the way is from darkness to darkness to darkness.
>
> (Act III, p. 92)

The unknown hand of death turns the switch, but the light does not come. The human pattern, the three stations - from birth through life, into death - is just the way "from darkness to darkness to darkness". This is the vision that his death instinct has driven Robert to contemplate, in fear and tremor - a grim image set up to express nothingness. Being an untamed, non-reasoning subject to the death instinct, a primary aggression unbinding links and destroying life, Robert is also a subject to what Alvarez calls the "primary pessimism"[20], from which the death instinct is said to have drawn. This is the pessimism which afflicts a supremely civilized man, a humanist, confronted with the broken images of human civilization, the civilization that used to give passionate motivation to all his life and faith. Such a man, a Timon, a Robert, appalled and desperate, reaches the point of extreme self-destructive melancholia. Thus

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[19] W. Shakespeare,, The Complete Works, London-Glasgow 1971, p. 966.

[20] Alvarez, op. cit., p. 137.

Timon builds his "everlasting mansion" upon a sea of eternal silence, and Robert joins his acts with the soldiers - the agents of violence, blind irresponsibility and moral chaos. The deserted soldier Christian Melrose - the ultimate consequence of the process of annihilation of identity, his identity being an impersonal serial number - becomes a tool in Robert's hands, an instrument of aggression and crime. This irredeemable modern "Christian", who knows neither faith nor hope, blind destructiveness being his sole distinction, is an embodiment of pure death instinct.

Robert takes his absurd revenge upon the world which deprived him of his innocence by sentencing two other men to death. Nicholas Doon in "Conditions of Agreement" takes his revenge by plotting against a harmless, old man, and in his mad warfare he lets loose the irrational, piercingly intense emotions of childhood:

> Peter: What do you want to do, Saint Nicholas?
> Nicholas: I don't know, Peter, I don't know. (He is terribly distressed.) I want some kind of revenge.
> Peter: Now we're getting down to elementals. Revenge for what?
> Nicholas: For my weakness.
> Peter: Good. And on whom?
> Nicholas: A. G.
> Peter: I see. But why A. G.?
> Nicholas: Because he is weaker than I am.
> Peter: Should I kill him?
> (Nicholas does not answer.)
> Should we dress up as ghosts?
>
> (Act II, p. 40)

The psycho-analytic motif of hideously inverted childhood, the images referring to pathologically prolonged state of childishness reveal human destructiveness present from the very beginning of life. The child is an instrument of the death instinct. In the chapter devoted to the theories of human self--destructiveness Alvarez writes: "The infant derives its primitive notion of death from those periods when its defences against the »bad« fail and it feels itself overwhelmed by its own destructive anger and pain. Thus its inner world is felt to be fragmented, murderous and desolate"[21].

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[21] Ibid., p. 136.

In Whiting's unpublished novel "Not a Foot of Land" the main character remembers the fear he felt after a childhood fall:

> I looked up at the sky and was overcome with unreasoning terror [...]. All acts of violence were inexplicable to me [...]. Revenge, premeditated revenge of the bloodiest kind was the answer![22]

This horrifying, murderous infancy is the attitude with which Whiting's characters respond to the world of inexplicable violence. Nicholas Doon cannot bear the shock of adulthood, of love and confronting another human being. He says about his young wife, Patience:

> Nicholas: The girl has degraded me beyond expectation. (He turns away from Peter.) I was prepared as a necessity of marriage to give myself to a degree but she has made me debase myself until - I don't - sucking at - in the violence of-look at her hands, you look - Before, I'd only limited knowledge - walking home through the park at night I had seen couples linked on benches, lying among bushes, plucking at each other's clothing in an aimless passion like dying people. Even the sight of this attacked my--my-yes, innocence. Yes, my innocence. Now this girl, my wife, has made me - My bedroom which we share has been my refuge for many years. The shelves still hold my childhood books, the cupboard beside the bed still contains my toys. The decorations and furnishing have remained unchanged within my memory.
>
> (Act II, p. 39)

When Patience (Act II, p. 47-48), in her naivety and ignorance but with good and kind intentions, removes his old toys and books from the room they now both share - to send them to an orphanage - Nicholas smacks her face. He stands there, stripped of his protective shell, his ill, quavering, childish self mercilessly revealed. Rejecting love as precarious and sinful he chooses the self of hatred, deprived of dependencies on love and sane relationships which stain his childish elemental "innocence". He fans his infantile subjectivity with a perverted, self--destructive malice, and thus generates his own destiny by se-

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[22] Introductory Note to Noman, [in:] The Collected Plays of..., p. 223.

lecting the irrational, the id - instinctual drives of his nature as a weapon not only against A. G., but also against the world and himself. His life is designed so as to make a psycho-analytic image of an angry child screaming with fear and frustration.

The "tortures" invented by Nicholas and Peter to persecute A. G. are infantile and absurd, e.g. they write an anonymous letter accusing A. G. of having murdered his wife, or they trip him up; they would not mind, though, burning his house, dressing up as ghosts, or sending him poisoned chocolates. Finally, accused of having brought about both his wife's suicide in the past and Nicholas' suicide presently, A. G. is reduced to a scared, crawling creature. The play ends with a scene of grotesque violence:

> Peter: He is dead or dying.
> (Peter, who is carrying Nicholas' stick, stands staring at A. G. A. G. falls forward on to his hands and knees and begins to crawl across the room. Peter comes into the room.)
> Peter: Vile: treacherous: insensate fellow.
> Evil: unkind: monstrous toad.
> (He pushes A. G. with the stick. A. G. rolls over.)
>
> (Act III, p. 79-80)

It turns out, however, that Nicholas appears, alive and kicking, and says "Goodnight, A. G., my dear" - in this anticlimactic, embarrassing moment everything: death, suicide, suffering, the whole plot against A. G., in fact the whole action of the play is reduced to a practical joke - such as might appear in a child's game. The meaning of the play is implicit in this scene, and we are left bewildered and uncertain, unable to comprehend what has really happened. By leaving the surprising situation unresolved, Whiting, similarly to Beckett and Pinter, admits the limited possibility for man to comprehend the essence of his life and nature.

The motif of inverted childhood recurs in other Whiting's plays, among others in "Saint's Day" with its theme of horrifying senile childishness of the aged protagonist Paul Southman, who becomes the agent of violence and self-destruction. This motif is dominant in his one-acter "No Why", which projects a puzzling image of a child, a small boy, who receives attacks and

accusations from the adult world with mysterious indifference and muteness only to hang himself finally.

The implications of prolonged childhood reverberate in Pinter's "The Birthday Party" and Beckett's "Endgame". The proceedings in these plays, comparably to the events in "Conditions of Agreement", take shape of child's games based on a series of preposterous and unresolved practical jokes. "We all remember our childhood" - says Peter in "The Birthday Party" (Act II, p. 43), and, indeed, they do remember it as they have never managed to get out of it. The mother-child relation between Meg and Stanley has been pointed out by critics. Goldberg and McCann continually refer to their boyhood, and it is when Lulu suddenly exclaims: "Let's play a game" that the real violent game played out by beings cradled in a psychopathic constancy of childhood is precipitated:

> Lulu (jumping up): Yes, lets play a game.
> Goldberg: What game?
> McCann: Hide and seek.
> Lulu: Blind man's buff.
> Meg: Yes!
> Goldberg: You want to play blind man's buff?
> Lulu and Meg: Yes!
> Goldberg: All right. Blind man's buff. Come on! Everyone up! (Rising.) McCann. Stanley - Stanley!
>
> (Act II, p. 61)

What follows is a riot of practical jokes such as tripping the victim up, strangling, mad giggling, sudden blackout with the blinding flash of torchlight on the victim's face - a flock of psychotic children raving in the dark.

This painful reality of childlike fears is embarked upon by blind, immobile Hamm in "Endgame":

> Hamm: [...]
> (Pause. Very agitated.) All kinds of fantasies! That I'm being watched! A rat (Steps) Breath held and then [...] (he breathes out). Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark[23].
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> (p. 45)

[23] S. Beckett, Endgame, London 1976, p. 45. All the references in the text will be to this edition.

The desolate, frustrated inner world of a child is suggested when Nagg, the legless father stuck in his dustbin, recalls the time of Hamm being an infant and screaming in the dark in fear (p. 38). But nobody ever came to help him. The inverted pattern of father and son, Hamm and Clov, who are interchangeable, interdependant and mutually annihilating, is hence duplicated to infinity. They are insane children who play their strange game of nothingness, the end of the world, who act out roles of father and son and keep their childlike parents in dustbins; children afraid of another child out there, who might come and spoil their game[24] - their endgame.

Human destructiveness in the above plays is depicted in terms of the phantasmagories and terrors of childhood. "The child who is aware of nothing except himself and his mental image and to whom time means nothing because childishness has not been broken and forced into the sober give-and-take of the adult world"[25] - this description of a fascist mentality in relation to de Sade's work, holds strikingly good for the perverted characters of the plays in question. They rotate in a world where all subconscious desires and phantasies of aggression can be made real, where the mysterious impulses driving one to harm and violate one's fellow human being hold full sway. These figures, intent on reaching the subterranean area of destructiveness, reveal the capacities of childlike sociopathic or psychopathic thinking[26]. Thus, while attempting to strip the hidden face of violence of its hideous mask of inverted childhood, one may suddenly behold a lurid face of fascism, or, at any rate, its budding surrogate, peeping out from the "murderous and desolate" inner world of a child.

The romantic tradition regarding child as the most cherished holder of all human goodness and sensitivity clashes with the new image evoked in our minds - that of a child as perpetrator

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[24] This remark refers to the small boy whom Hamm and Clov seem to notice from the window, in the very end of the play.

[25] E. N o l t e, Three Faces of Fascism, [in:] F r a s e r, op. cit., p. 102.

[26] Ibid., p. 102. The very capacities ascribed to de Sade and Hitler.

of violence, through whom the death instinct gropes its ominous way. Still, this is the unifying imaginative pattern holding together the liquid realities, the realities which present their own, self-contained logic, gripping us at a level below consciousness. Puzzled, groping for understanding, we grasp at every hint of meaning, at any pattern discernible here, in order to get initiated into these baffling worlds, to reveal them. Such is the pattern of rightness upon which the violence is done, the fragile pattern of the good and the violable which is exposed to violation[27].

If the artist lets his vision be engulfed by the destructive element alone, without at least suggesting its counterpart, the essential human balance is likely to be endangered. In Whiting's "Conditions of Agreement" and "Saint's Day" as well as in Pinter's "The Birthday Party" the role of the counterpart to violence is fulfilled by the feminine figures. It is young Patience in "Conditions of Agreement" who is most positively childlike and who most closely approaches real innocence - a simple child who does not know death and hatred. In this landscape of violence she may have no chance at all. Still, she is there, a frail, dainty figure serving the others and challenging the futility of their lives by the mere example of living in a different way.

It is Stella in "Saint's Day" who rests in our minds as a profoundly unhappy being, veiled in incurable sadness. Her appeal for tenderness, and emotional fulfilment (Act I, p. 34-36) finds no other response than the accidental bullet shot by Robert, which brings death to her. Her outcry hangs heavily in the air, and leaves us with the piercing sense of violation of something infinitely delicate, vulnerable and important.

Meg in "The Birthday Party", the jolly motherlike figure arouses a similar degree of emotional tension through her silly but mostly warm and kind-hearted ignorance of the general monstrosity and cruelty which surrounds her. There is an irresistible

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[27] Ibid., p. 116. Fraser observes that "the true mental daring and hardihood are those displayed when the artist simultaneously acknowledges the worth of what is being violated and yet presents unflichingly its violation".

irony rising to the surface during her birthday speech for Stanley (Act II, p. 55). The speech, full of warmth and true feeling, is delivered in darkness, with only the executioner's torch flashing right on Stanley's face. The savage irony of this moment becomes a component of a complex dramatic image, which makes us feel the violence being done upon Meg herself, upon her innocence and certain kind of vulnerable beauty that shines in the dark together with the oppressor's torchlight.

The pattern of rightness at which we might grasp is less discernible in Beckett's "Endgame". This play, an amazing structure stripped of all traces of moral evaluations, reflects an abyss at the verge of which children, one of them blind, are playing with broken images of meaning and scattered splinters of human attitudes, functions and significances. Sometimes they bend down and look into the abyss, oblivious of anything else. Still, there is a brief moment when Hamm seems to be acting out the role of one grasping at a derelict sense of good which lingers somewhere at the fringes of his mind: "All those I might have helped. (Pause.) Helped! (Pause.) Saved. (Pause.) Saved! (Pause.) The place was crawling with them!" (p. 44). He seems to act out a role of a creator, an inscrutable god who disposes of the lives of millions, and, recognizing the pattern of good and evil, is momentarily driven by a wish to "save". Yet, in an instant he exclaims violently: "Use your head, can't you, use your head, you're on earth, there's no cure for that!" (p. 44).

Being on earth, being human means having no help and reaching no salvation. Hamm resumes his strange role of being on earth, and, as one is forced to say, of "partly living", a role for which there is no cure. Has he witnessed an apocalypse, as Beckett seems in places to be suggesting? - we have no means of knowing; any definitive reading of what is going on is obviously impossible, and we are eventually left to seek understanding in ourselves.

In Beckett's play an apocalypse is just hinted at; we are haunted by a strange <u>sense</u> of an End. It is Whiting in "Saint's Day" who does project a vision of modern apocalypse; he does so, however, by means of an image of disturbing complexity.

Robert: [...] The flowers in the sky, the sound of their blossoming too acute for our ears leaving us to hear nothing but the clamour of voices protesting, crying out against the end - "It's not fair!" - as they fasten to the walls of life - and the storm is of their own making - it is the howling appeal for tenderness, for love. Only now I see the thing's played out and compassion - arid as an hourglass - run through. Such matters need not concern us here in this place. For we have our own flowers to give us understanding. (He points to Stella.) The rose she wears beneath her heart. There, released, is the flower within us all - the bloom that will leap from the breast or drop from the mouth. It shall be my conceit that a flower is our last passport. Who wears it shall go free. Free, Southman!

(Act III, p. 93)

"The flowers in the sky", envisioned against the sky red with fire of the burning village, the evacuated women and dead Stella with the "rose" of wound beneath her heart, haunting in their evocative integration of the visual and the verbal, combine together to make an impressive dramatic image of self-destruction for which human beings are destined on their way "from darkness to darkness to darkness". Robert does not reveal explicitly what "the flowers" stand for. Still, it is not difficult for us, living in the times of appalling crimes, to make a guess.

Beckett's "Endgame" makes as if the next step on the way "from darkness to darkness to darkness". It evokes an image of something which is possible, which may come only AFTER the total self-destruction envisioned by Robert in Whiting's play took place. We only know that in "Endgame" there is a certain Big End involved - it may be the end of meaning, order and coherence, it may be the very end of life. It may be conceived as a vision of the death instinct triumphant, all having been reduced to a null and void state of half-being or not being at all.

Heaven fashion'd us of nothing and we strive
To bring ourselves to nothing[28].

These words from "The Duchess of Malfi" by John Webster could form a paradigm for the kind of art which is dedicated to

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[28] J. W e b s t e r, The Duchess of Malfi, New York 1959, p. 70.

the service of Yeats' "Savage God" - an art of which both "Saint's Day" and "Endgame", as well as Pinter's "The Birthday Party" or "The Dumb Waiter" may be taken as examples. In these plays their authors seem to retreat both from explicit meaning and from the well-ordered word into inarticulacy and silence. Yet, strangely enough, it is because of these particular qualities that, against the explosion of violence directly invoked onstage which comes on the British scene in the sixties and seventies, these three playwrights stand back quietly, serenely, one is tempted to say, with classic poise and Jamesian discretion.

The plays under consideration reveal, to use Whiting's words, "that moment of intense life which is often disturbing, horrifying and pure"[29]. They point to the impossibility of ever knowing the real truth about the world, of ever knowing what actually happens around us and within us. Being the specimens of modern agnostic art, they reveal a quality of a certain ambiguous intensity underlying the ambiguity of existance. Their disturbing, violent visions fulfill the wish of Franz Kafka for a book to "serve as an axe for the frozen sea within us." They make us come back, from the violence and bustle of the world, to the innermost reality where meanings are being born in silence.

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PROBLEM PRZEMOCY: CO NAPRAWDĘ DZIEJE SIĘ W KILKU SZTUKACH J. WHITINGA, H. PINTERA I S. BECKETTA

Sztuki omawiane w artykule to: "Conditions of Agreement" i "Saint's Day" Johna Whitinga, "The Birthday Party" Harolda Pintera, oraz "All That Fall" i "Endgame" Samuela Becketta. Artykuł dzieli się na trzy części; w pierwszej z nich tytułowa przemoc zostaje określona jako wyraz ludzkiego dążenia do samozagłady, dążenia szczególnie niepokojąco "obecnego" w naszych czasach.

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[29] W h i t i n g, The Art of The Dramatist, p. 193.

Druga część artykułu poświęcona jest sposobom w jaki wyżej wymienieni dramaturdzy preparują znaczenia. Środki użyte przy ewokowaniu wizji świata przemocy to przede wszystkim groteska, deformacja, ironia, cisza - l'insolite - stwarzające efekt surrealistycznej wieloznaczności. U podstaw owej specyficznej "poetyki przemocy" leży intensywnie odczuta świadomość grozy i tajemnicy istnienia - i to właśnie stanowi punkt wyjścia dla rozważań w trzeciej części artykułu, która kieruje uwagę czytelnika ku tytułowemu pytaniu: "co naprawdę dzieje się w tych sztukach-szaradach?"

Swoista autonomiczna logika freudowskiego "instynktu śmierci" wydaje się kształtować apokaliptyczną wizję współczesnego świata i losu człowieka w wyżej wymienionych sztukach; w tym pejzażu rolę szczególną odgrywa motyw dziecka jako tajemniczego, groźnego nosiciela "pierwotnej agresji". Tytułowe pytanie pozostaje bez odpowiedzi, albowiem wyżej wymienione utwory wyrażają instynkt samozagłady także poprzez swoje wycofanie się ze sfery wyraźnych znaczeń w stronę wieloznaczności graniczącej niekiedy z milczeniem - jakże jednak intensywnym, niepokojącym, stymulującym.