

Modern British Drama: Anger and the centralization of the marginal

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1. DRAMA AND THE ANGRY YOUNG MEN

The anthropologist Gehlen called drama «the human wish for stability» and the «attempt of a world which could not be represented by any other means» to represent itself¹. As a matter of fact, the basic impulse underlying all drama can be traced in this «uprooting of time», whereby a fleeting moment of varying duration, like so many in a lifetime, is given a form, a structure comprising a beginning and an end, and can be repeated countless times, contrarily to what is customary in ordinary, everyday, passing reality.

As Siegfried Melchinger says, the works of the theatre are created in opposition to time, and while occurring within it, they produce a different *counter-reality*, momentarily stronger and truer. The element which transforms the material of reality into this bogus reality, into *appearance*, is the so-called *elementary form* of drama. For this appearance is like an unnatural segment of time which repeats itself from beginning to end every day, for a certain period until it suddenly ceases to exist, and remains in the memories of those who saw it as a living scene they were allowed to spy on. Or else, if lucky, it can eventually be revived and restaged again, to repeat the same sequence to the end. However, what is remarkable about this is that every performance, every evening, is unique in that it is authentic, as if it happened for the first time. Macbeth kills and is killed every day, but that does not sooth one bit the pain inflicted by him to others and to himself, or the effect it causes on the audience. Every day Macbeth dies genuinely, proudly, bravely, inevitably, and every time it happens it is a brand new experience, strong and impressive as if he had died for the first and last time, like the rest of humans.

To attempt an analysis of the full import of a particular generation of authors in the realm of drama is as tricky a task as trying to do so in any other literary genre, perhaps even more difficult, as theatre involves much more than the purchasing and reading of a book. Theatre is more than literature; it is a show, a social act, a business in more ways than one, for alongside the publishing companies, it involves the acting and the whole showbusiness guild. So, if one were to tackle the predicament of having to define drama, this fact would complicate things further still. Since we are only interested in a functional

1. See S. MELCHINGER, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Modern Drama*. New York: Horizon Press, 1966, p. 65.

sketch of the defining elements of drama for argumentative purposes; it suffices to say that the essence of drama depends on the purpose, place and role of theatre in our existence and in society. Seeing as how these have greatly changed throughout time (Realism, Naturalism, Symbolism, Expressionism, Theatre of the Absurd, etc), it follows that the concept of theatre varies too. We may say that it basically comes down to two pivotal elements, the preponderance of each of them determining the kind of theatre prevailing at a given time. These elements are the slogan and the festive event. The slogan defines the thesis theatre in its broadest sense, and the playfulness characterizes the work derived from the functioning of the two most basic play-impulses: Eros and Mask.

So we have the plays of the Naturalism and the Impressionism gathering around the slogans «A play must be like reality, like nature, like life»: in fact «Life» was the great watchword. The slogans of Expressionism were «Theatre as Pulpit», and «Burn the Louvre!», that is, «Down with models and tradition» and «To the devil with the classics». The dramatic arena immediately prior to the apparition of *Look Back in Anger* claimed on the contrary to have no slogans, to actually mistrust them, and so to go beyond them. Thus the playwrights before the angry period sustained that the theatre had been brought back to its proper time and place: the festive space where people gather on one evening in order «to play and be played to»². Also, these playwrights boasted that they had become more broad-minded in their attitude towards tradition and the classics. In this sense, adherence to one particular author or «thesis» (in the wider sense of the word) would not entail refusing to consider others placed in opposite positions.

Indeed, the true adoption of such a perspective would gain us a fairly good insight into the worth of a specific play, and ultimately, into the essence of drama. As in other genres, the key to their potential of development and enrichment lies in their capacity to generate a fruitful dialogue (in the Bakhtinian sense)³ between their inner elements (genre conventions, characters, voices, etc.) and also a dialogue with the existing literary tradition. In the modern era immediately precedent, the relation literary work – literary tradition was tantamount to that of the realistic discourse between a work and the so-called «reality» or «real life»: literary tradition would come then to replace the extra-literary world as material for literary creation. However, despite their alleged simplicity of forms, the angry bunch and other authors not distant in time, like Tom Stoppard, did retain in a way a somewhat modernist motivation, in the intertextual sense stated above. At any rate, the new generations would alter the current relation between playwrights and tradition, and take a very specific attitude regarding the latter, as we shall see presently.

It is generally agreed that there emerged something new in Britain's intellectual life with the appearance in the early fifties of these three novels: John Wain's *Hurry on Down* (1953), Iris Murdoch's *Under the Net* and Kingsley Amis's *Lucky Jim* (both in 1954). They embodied the first genuine reaction to the new order of things engendered after the war. They marked the beginning of the new intellectual and artistic environment long foretold and expected by the critics of the time, as an inevitable consequence of Britain's struggles to redefine itself in the aftermath of World War II and the subsequent social and political

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 71-85.

3. See M. M. BAKHTIN, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1986.

turmoil. But the coming of the writers of the emergent postwar society took its time; some critics had already given up hope of the appearance of a new literary generation, and claimed that the novel as a literary form was probably dead. The oncoming literary events of the fifties and after would prove them wrong. On the one hand, the novel was far from being dead; authors like those above and others such as Colin Wilson, Alan Sillitoe, John Braine and Doris Lessing would contribute to a new emergence of British fiction. On the other hand, drama, a genre which had been traditionally the authors' second best choice after the novel for telling their stories, would step into the literary scene with unexpected success. Indeed, the impact of Osborne's *Look Back in Anger* in 1956 motivated the younger authors of the Sixties to write for the stage. The effect of this did not wear out soon: confirmed novelists like Amis himself, or such as the contemporary Malcolm Bradbury and David Lodge, have also written drama: *The After Dinner Game*, *Love on a Gunboat*, *Standing in for Henry* (M. Bradbury)⁴ and *The Writing Game* (D. Lodge)⁵.

As is well-known, the event which marked this change was the performance of John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, on 8 May 1956 at the Royal Court Theatre. This play is not only a landmark inasmuch as it prompts a new emergence for the British Theatre, but also epitomizes the spirit of the writers rising to public recognition at the time, so that it lends its name to the «movement» that had been missing from literature for several years: the «Angry Young Men». This point nevertheless may require further qualification, in the way of briefly revising which common features they shared and how Osborne's play fitted into them⁶. The writers that were to be called «Angry Young Men» partook from an initial similitude: they had nothing to do with prewar reputed authors such as Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh, C.P. Snow, etc., who came from upper- or upper-middle-class homes, had been educated in public schools, then at Oxbridge universities, and whose novels were set against the fashionable background of London or some country state and revolved around the intellectual, cultural and social predicaments of the upper-middle class. As regards their *positive* similarities, we know that the «Angry Young Men» shared for the most part a lower-middle-class background, a secondary and higher education in statesupported schools, and most important of all, a very specific attitude: an anti-establishment bent which was expressed, as we will see, in a number of ways. These writers attempted to articulate several relevant concerns: the social frustrations of many people of the time, specially focusing on those of the working- and lower-middle-classes; a disillusionment with the faded promise of the Welfare State; a criticism of the British class system; a distaste for the highly competitive economic system and its social implications; a loathing of all forms of pretentiousness and a mockery of the old bases of morality. These writers, of unsophisticated extraction and upwardly mobile through education, not quite finding their place in a no-man's-land between class and class, introduced heroes (or anti-heroes, as it became fashionable to call them) who were apt spokesmen for their age. Having witnessed an economic depression and the biggest war in history, they had realized that there are limits to what a man can do about his and others' lives, regardless of good intentions, and all sorts of philosophical ideas about the

4. M. BRADBURY, *The After Dinner Game. Three Plays*. London: Penguin, 1977.

5. D. LODGE, *The Writing Game*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1991.

6. J. R. TAYLOR, *Anger and After. A Guide to the New British Drama*. London, Penguin, 1962.

world. The «Angries» were the product of new times, problems and manners. In their writing they spoke plainly from overtly recognised social positions, with few formal distractions from the content, returning the literary arts to the accessible ways that prevailed before the coming of modernism⁷. There started a new tone in British young literature with a new critical instinct, determined to dispense with the experimentalism of the 1920s and 1930s, with the romanticism and apocalypticism of the 1940s, the neutral contentment of the 1950s and the Beckettian despairs emanating from Paris⁸.

In *Look Back in Anger*⁹ the protesting hero is not a character in a book but a walking, and endlessly talking figure on stage. Jimmy Porter is the archetype of a dissatisfied, unpleasant but articulate young man. He is enraged by the numbness and the paralysis of society, and refuses to be a *respectable* (my italics) middle-class member of it. It is this attitude, akin to that of the new heroes as outsiders, that earned the movement the name «Angry Young Men», as journalists in the *New Statesman* first, and then in the *Daily Mirror*, the *London Times* (substituting «angry» for «cross») and *The Observer* referred to these writers picking up the phrase, ironically enough, from the title of the autobiography of a Christian apologist, Leslie Paul, which differed from every «angry» principle, except in showing disillusionment with earlier artistic movements. It must be reminded though that most writers resented being so labelled, that many were not even personally acquainted, and that they all refused to be pigeonholed in such an artificial way, possibly for fear that it might constrain their future development, as indeed it did in certain cases.

2. OSBORNE, WESKER, STOPPARD, ORTON AND PINTER: THE MARGINS CENTRED

In agreement with the allegedly arbitrary assignment of such a name, the Angry Young Men have moved so far from one another since the 1950s that few general features can be said to truly apply to them. Others never formally linked with them, like Stoppard, once seen in connection with the Theatre of the Absurd, somehow shared some of their concerns and stances, as we will see. However, the term still remains, and is used for purposes like this, broadly characterize the cultural and intellectual atmosphere of the time. In this sense, the essential feature of those heroes - their *outsiderness* as alienated young men, their marginality with respect to the established canon, was present in the characters of John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Joe Orton, and Arnold Wesker, as well as in a way, those of Tom Stoppard. These playwrights are five of the major names in modern British drama, and we intend to use some of their most famous plays to illustrate our discussion of what we think is one the main features defining the theatre of their time.

As was stated above, *Look Back in Anger* represents a cross rejection of the established order. Jimmy Porter, though holding a college degree, prefers to maintain a market stall in a provincial town rather than having to conform to the values of the stale middle class which could procure him a *better* job. From this position he can vent his anger

7. D. SALWAK, *Kingsley Amis, Modern Novelist*. London: Prentice Hall, 1991.

8. J. R. TAYLOR, *Modern British Dramatists. A Collection of Critical Essays*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1968.

9. J. OSBORNE, *Look Back in Anger*, 1957; rpt. London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1980. We also used the film version directed by Tony Richardson (Warner Bros.).

against the Bomb, the government, Sunday newspapers, education, love, marriage, T.S. Eliot, the Church, bourgeois values, his political family and even his wife. Jimmy, feeling cheated and suffocated by the world around him, projects his anger against every item that is a part of it, and creates his own order at home with his whimsical, alternatively sullen, savage and tender mood. Only occasionally do we have glimpses of normal people with normal behaviours; the central characters are all ill at ease, and suffer for it. Emotionally speaking, and one might add that socially too, these characters are marginal in that they stand off the canon, either because they reject it or because they have been dragged away to the margins. Of all the characters, it seems that only Jimmy has willingly marked himself as an outsider; Cliff rather gives the impression of being absorbed by Jimmy's powerful personality, and of following suit. However, he appears to develop a certain amount of initiative when Jimmy's fits of rage against his wife Alison go too far. As for the women, Alison and Helena, they come from *posh* against environments and have (or used to have) bourgeois values, but their attraction to Jimmy drives them towards his marginal world, marking them temporarily abide by his rules.

This dynamic of central / marginal positions (be they social, literary or sexual, or all of them at once) also characterizes many of the most important plays in modern British drama. Two playwrights like Arnold Wesker and Tom Stoppard build two of their works on this principle, so that they thematize this reversal of focus. In Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead* and in Wesker's *The Merchant*, which reenact two plays by Shakespeare, *Hamlet* and *The Merchant of Venice* respectively, there is a shift from background to foreground, from secondary to central position. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern¹⁰ are two potentially rich characters for whom Shakespeare had taken the trouble of making up such splendid names and education. Nonetheless this comes to nothing when they are condemned to a secondary role and an untimely death in *Hamlet*. In response to the arbitrariness of this decision, regardless of the audience's possible interest in them, Stoppard chooses to «centralize» them and flesh them out from mere sketches to fully round, leading characters. Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are now real people, who find themselves in *Hamlet* the play. They too, like most heroes studied here, are «outsiders in the world of *Hamlet*, confused by its premises, and with an identifiably modern sensibility»¹¹. But they face the problem that the existence of a character depends on what the writer has said in paper about them. As everything which may happen to them in the play is already written, the world they live in is all preordained. So they have no chances, they are doomed, (the coin they toss invariably turns up «heads») and this frightens them. They demand freedom to do what they want, and hope for the future (are they so different from *real* people?). They have now their own philosophical thoughts, but Shakespeare never gave them these thoughts, only Hamlet had this privilege. Their maker is the playwright, he is their God, he decides everything for each character, and sets the conventions to be obeyed.

What Stoppard did in this play, as a modern dramatist, was to question these conventions. He decided that what had been the rule for ages –that such potentially rich charac-

10. Regarding *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*; the author of the present work wishes to acknowledge here Mr. Mervyn Smale for the ideas (some of which have been used here) he poured in «The work of the British Dramatist Tom Stoppard», a lecture delivered at the British Council on March 16th, 1993.

11. C. INNES, *Modern British Drama*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992, p. 330.

ters were never exploited, died stupidly, and passed undistinguished— was no good for a modern audience any more. There is the feeling that we no longer accept blindly such conventions, so something which in the play is merely instrumental can be seen in a different light by the modern public. It is the traditional tragic vision, justifying human sacrifice for the sake of drama, which is questioned here. And the traditional elitist focus on the sufferings of the powerful, obliterating those of the common people, whose deaths are mostly irrelevant. In Stoppard's view, the death of Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, for example, is not just another event: it is important, because it matters to them, and the possibility of such a critical reception of the conventions cannot fail to be perceived by the author. Thus Stoppard decides to show explicitly that everything is questionable and liable to be changed, even stiff old traditions (literary, metaphysical or otherwise). At least, we infer, it is healthy to allow room for a subversion of the established order, so if we must create a canon, a centre (contrarily to deconstructivist proposals), let us permit every piece of the system the possibility of becoming central for a while.

Dismantling a hierarchy usually leads to the construction of a new order, with its own centres, subsidiary elements, rules and conventions, subject to further deconstructions. This is the case with these plays by Stoppard and Wesker. They both de-emphasize and re-emphasize Shakespeare's plays, thus showing their respect to tradition (the classics), but allowing the introduction of some new conditions. *The Merchant*¹², for example, provides a new treatment of the original plot elements, proper of a new, 20th century attitude:

a) the role of women in society is put into question, by means of characters as Portia and Jessica, who make their own decisions regarding love, business and the best way to live their lives. They see themselves as independent individuals, and are aware of their worth as such, as can be seen when in one occasion Portia openly arrogated herself the merits for the outcome of the resolution, instead of showing deference for Bassanio, who was also involved;

b) the relations parents-children are also undertaken from a modern point of view, questioning the parents' right to determine the lives of their offspring, and asserting the latter's right to have a certain amount of freedom, though living in the family home. There even appears the prototypical while-living-under-my-roof-you'll-stick-to-my-rules attitude;

c) the play also portrays the current concern nowadays about the neglect of culture (and other items of the private sphere) by excessive devotion to work. It is embodied by Antonio, who complains of the routine and unfulfillment it produces. This seems a rather modern consideration, in that jobs are presented not just as a means to survive, but to develop oneself in every possible way. So if they fail to provide that, they produce a certain frustration like the one momentarily shown by Antonio when he moaned that despite all his hard work and the variety of goods and places he traded with, «I hardly ever see my trade»;

d) The element of travel as Wesker uses it strikes us as a modern concern as well: a rather usual activity seen as a means to widen one's mind. We have here modern middle-class mores and needs transferred onto Renaissance people of non-aristocratic stock. One

12. A. WESKER, *The Merchant*. London: Methuen, 1983.

perceives that this notion is more likely to be articulated as such in our time, in which travelling and tourism are recognized, common cultural activities, than in the historic period used as a setting in Wesker's and Shakespeare's plays.

e) Above all, there is the question of antisemitism. Indeed, his whole work (*Roots, Chicken Soup with Barley, I'm Talking about Jerusalem*, etc.)¹³ is more than an answer to antisemitic positions. Wesker, himself a Jew, peoples his plays with Jews mostly, which on the other hand basically means more centralization of the marginal. However, this is done *without anger* but *with passion* (my italics); Wesker rather goes to the opposite extreme and takes a passionate pro-semitic position, so that he builds his works around a new centre: the intellectual and moral excellence of his coreligionists. This is quite patent in *The Merchant*, where, attempting to undermine the convention that portrayed Jews as mean and selfish people, he establishes a new one, just as exaggerated. Wesker creates over-the-top characterizations and situations, over-emphasizing the magnificence of character of the Jews –embodied by Shylock chiefly–. To this end, he uses equally over-explicit means: self-definitory speeches presenting the epitome of good-naturedness, with only a few feeble flaws that are in fact perceived as semi-virtues (stubbornness, too much protection to his daughter, etc.) Shylock is exceedingly eager to lend whatever money with no conditions, so brave as to mock the law, witty to devise a trick / joke to do so, principled to risk everything for his people's sake, etc. In fact, in this play almost everything is just about too expedient; let us just remember how characterization is rendered neatly and easily through self-explanatory speeches, which are reinforced by factual evidence at the same time. One instance of this is to be found on the occasion when Graziano, describing himself as an academic failure, conveniently enough makes a grammatical mistake, and right away shows an ostensibly flimsy memory. The final point we are trying to make here is that in the case of this play, it isn't so much the undermining of conventions (of a particular convention which assigns women, and especially Jews, very specific roles) as the imposition of a new one, which takes over the former; it is just a shift of focus. As Christopher Innes points out in *Modern British Drama*, this play meant «the sacrifice of character and plot to a thesis»¹⁴. Nevertheless it is only fair to point out that this massive pro-semitic deference is less so in his other works, though Wesker's passion for his thesis always predominates.

Other authors had wider concerns, of a social, cultural, moral, and even sexual nature. Joe Orton, for example, ridicules in *Loot*¹⁵ every possible aspect of society. In this play there is a subversion of the established order and a mockery of authority, family bonds, religion, death, crime and even of women. They are presented as a sheepish crowd, or as murdered and murderer. This is better understood in view of Orton's sexual inclinations, whereby he again brought the marginal to the centre, making two gays the main characters, and the disrupters of everything. This left little room for the role of women as an essential part of an orderly society and family. These two young men are marginal not only by being homosexuals; they are crooks who use the funeral of the mother of one of them

13. J. CAPE, ed., *The Wesker Trilogy*. Harmondsworth Middlesex: Penguin, 1960.

14. See C. INNES, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

15. J. ORTON, *Loot*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1977. Also, the film version by Silvio Narizzano was used.

to perform their raid to a bank, and later will use her body to hide the loot. They show a savage lack of respect towards her body and her memory, towards the father, the authority, the funeral company, the nurse, etc., but the final twist is, to complete the satire, that none of them except the parents deserved such respect in the least. It might be said that here the playwright's dissatisfaction goes beyond an anti-establishment bent, and is vented by way of a hyperbolic sarcasm, rather than anger. This time, humour is used as a way of providing comic relief and thus entertainment, but also to allow the occurrence of such carnivalesque and often wild events. The two protagonists clearly do not fit in society, so they mock it and vex it in every possible segment of it: family, law, order, death, rituals, religion, marriage, etc.

*The Dumb Waiter*¹⁶, by Harold Pinter, also presents two marginal creatures at the centre of the play: the protagonists are –we gradually learn– two hired killers, confined in a basement, with the dumb waiter as the only element of contact with the outside world. The play presents the characters' total lack of communication with the external reality and between themselves. They speak of trivialities, fight over nonsense (like arguing whether you say «light the kettle», «light the gas» or «put the kettle») and utter disconnected sentences, with too many blanks to fill in. If on top of this we add the strangeness of the situation, we can understand that the audience should miss the exact significance of what is happening for a good chunk of the play. Only after a long while, after piecing everything together, it finally dawns on them: the characters are contract killers awaiting orders conducive to determine whom they must kill next, and are discussing the details of the *operation*. But before we come to realize this, we have been led into a claustrophobic atmosphere, with caged individuals who waste their time in a way which is exasperating and at the same time symbolic of the value of their lives. This procedure helps create an air of mystery and uncertainty, which is present in most of his works. In *The Room*, for example, the uncertainty of the situation is given by the awkward circumstances and the contradictory statements pronounced by the characters. Here again, there is a ring of claustrophobia in the air, as the protagonists (the Hudds) are also confined in the room referred, and look on the outside as a menace too, as it happened in *The Dumb Waiter*. This is true of most of Pinter's plays, so we see that his attitude towards the world is, rather than simple dissatisfaction and criticism, one of mistrust and insecurity. By means of this he manages to throw the outside world into question. His judgement on society comes by way of presenting it as something difficult to apprehend, as an impending menace, from which individuals hide in isolated shelters, though ironically, the threaten may come from within too, as is the case in *The Dumb Waiter*. The confusion, distortion and disruption of normal relations presented thus may lead us to derive wonder, very much in tune with poststructuralist positions, if we can ever get to know anything. We can wonder whether, if we get off our nice little niche in the system for a while, we shall have a disturbing vision: that the world resists a totalizing interpretation, for this is usually sanctioned from a position that, by so doing, considers itself the canon. Thus perhaps the author aims to present a world less absurd, by dint of showing it through a perspective resulting from dismantling, or at any rate, inverting the usual hierarchy.

16. H. PINTER, *Collected Works*. London: Eyre Methuen, 1978, including both *The Room* and *The Dumb Waiter*. We also used the latter's film version, with script by Pinter himself, directed by Robert Altman in 1987.

As we approach the end of this paper, one senses that there is something in common between these authors. What is the reason to the ever present fear in the characters in Pinter's plays? Complex though the answer may be, we perceive that underlying it there is a sense of guilt, stemming in turn from a sense of non-belonging, of ill-fitting in the world around them. So they lock themselves away from it, as Jimmy Porter did, creating a world of his own; as the crooks did in *Loot* by proving themselves different from *normal* society; as old Shylock in the ghetto tried to do by challenging the law and secluding himself away with his books and friends. Wesker and Stoppard also create, metafictionally, a *rebellion* against what is established: the arbitrary literary conventions, which used to remain unchallenged. Now they subvert them and give those less favoured by them the chance to be free and seek a better fate.

Finally, modern British theatre may offer a multiplicity of questions and meanings, but one that pervades the plays we chose as samples is the characters' awareness of themselves being the fringes of the world, for-different reasons and in different ways (with anger, mockery, fear, earnest reaffirmation of one's values as opposed to those sanctioned by society, etc.). Curiously enough, modern British drama focuses on the have-nots of society, on those who, for some reason, find themselves in the margins. And it is precisely by virtue of this, of giving them a voice and a body to express it, that they become the centre of the world—a fictional two-hour world built around them, and shared also by the audience.