Chapter VII

Entertainer: The Body as Symptom

In spite of the proliferation of literary theories in recent years, modern theatre has received little attention. The majority of the critics approach the text of the drama under the illusion that drama holds a mirror up to life. What they look for in the theatre is the full-blooded reality that they find outside. Banking on Aristotle’s theory of imitation they try to paraphrase the life represented on stage in terms of the life outside. For these critics, the text of the drama has a final signified—life outside. In addition they proceed under the assumption that there is an author who is in ultimate control of the meanings in the text. Modern literary theories have abandoned these views. One valid lesson taught by post-modern critical theories is that there is more than one way of reading a drama. Meaning is precipitated during reading or witnessing the stage-spectacle. Barthes unswervingly follows such a line through his announcement of the death of the author. Note his words: “We know now that the text is not a line of words releasing a single ‘theological’ meaning, but a multi-dimensional space in which a variety of writings, none of them original, blend and clash.”

Martin Esslin means the same thing when he says in The Field of Drama that “drama can hardly ever be reduced to a clear cut statement by an individual creator, fully in control of the exact meaning of every element sign contained in the message emitted.” Drama thus lends itself to a
plurality of reading. The following is an attempt to read the play
*Entertainer* in a figural and not in a literal way.

Any explication of drama inevitably falls under two texts:
(1) drama as text; (2) drama as performance (theatre as text). There is
no one to one correspondence between the text and the stage spectacle.
The stage spectacle is another text in itself. The theatrical rendering
may be an entirely new reading of the text of drama. The shift from
verbal language to theatrical language is a very complex affair.

The present study of *Entertainer* focuses itself on drama as
performance rather than on drama as text. To be more precise, we are
concerned with the process of enunciation on the stage—how reality is
constructed on the stage. This study of *Entertainer* aims at evolving a
critical strategy that will help us to read stage performance as a text.
The study attempts to explore the central character metaphorically.
Some of the insights in Lacanian psychoanalytic criticism, semiotics and
Brechtian theory are made use of in this study.

Psychoanalytic criticism lends itself as a natural critical tool in the
study of drama because there is an umbilical connection between
psychoanalysis and theatre. Freud’s own works abound in theatrical
metaphors. The patient’s ‘inner world of imagination’ is his ‘private’
theatre. The unconscious is described as a stage setting. Freud regards
the child who is barred from secret sexual knowledge in the familial
circle and who is eager to be initiated into the mysterious world of
sexuality as the ‘audience’.
An exploration of the complex dynamics of stage reality and its conflictual nature is particularly relevant in the case of *Entertainer* because this is a play in which the actor as character takes the centre-stage. In this context it is particularly noteworthy that Osborne himself is considered an actor-writer. As Banham puts it, "he writes with the instincts of the actor who does not merely relay the text of a play but also, through his emotions and human responses absorbs and attempts to communicate." Many of Osborne's central characters are actors. George Dillon and Archie Rice are some of them. Jimmy in *Look Back in Anger* is a theatrical personality who considers his life itself a performance. The fact that an actor thrives on display makes him especially amenable to critical study. This gives Osborne an occasion to express theatrical ideas theatrically. Michael Anderson highlights this factor in this perceptive analysis. He comments: "In *The Entertainer* the central character is an actor through and through . . . ." For Osborne, actor as character serves as a metaphor for staging theatrical reality.

The main theme of Osborne's *The Entertainer* hinges on Archie's failure as an actor. He fails on the public stage as he cuts a sorry figure as a music hall comedian. He can neither identify himself with the character that he is to bring to life on the stage nor communicate his feelings to the audience. Archie cannot act his role as a member of the family creditably as his relationship with his family is only an extension of that with his audience. He fails to live up to their expectations thereby eliciting sharp reprimands from them. He becomes a misfit,
rejected by his audience and repudiated by his family. He ceases to be an entertainer and pales into a tragic figure. The audience do not empathize with Archie and he is nonplussed by his experience on the stage. George Dillon in Epitaph for George Dillon seems to sum up Archie's dismal experience in the theatre when he voices his own. George says:

Listen; all I ever got—inside and outside of the theatre—is the raves of a microscopic minority, and the open hostility of the rest. I attract hostility. I seem to be on heat for it. Whenever I step on to those boards—immediately, from the very first moment I show my face—I know I've got to fight almost everyone of those people in the auditorium.\(^5\)

Archie suffers from emotional atrophy and his failure is brought into sharp relief by contrast with Billy Rice who had been a roaring success both as an actor and as a man. Choudhary traces Archie's failure to "a kind of dichotomy in his personality."\(^6\) Archie himself refers to a split in his own personality in the following words:

You see this face, you see this face, this face can split open with warmth and humanity. It can sing, and tell the worst, unfunniest stories in the world to a great mass of dead, drab, erks and it doesn't matter, it doesn't matter. It doesn't matter because look at my eyes. I'm dead behind these eyes. I'm dead, just like the whole inert, shoddy lot out there. It doesn't matter because I don't feel a thing,
and neither do they. We are just as dead as each other. *(E72)*

Archie’s failure is symptomatic of a mismatch between the actor (person) and character. This can be explicated only in a theatrical language because Archie fails to manipulate his body as an actor for representing a character. Archie Rice, a pathetic shadowy figure who fails to complete the narrative which he is compelled to utter under the searching stare of the theatrical spotlight stages the ruins of representation. This is why Banham calls Archie “an empty shell of a man.” Osborne employs many strategies to frame as well as disrupt stage representation. We are able to glimpse the real Archie beneath the grinning facade. The play shows the failure of the actor’s body to write out the text of the character on the stage.

The present study attempts to highlight the process whereby reality is constructed on the stage rather than reality itself. The character is taken as a paradigm for dramatic representation. The illusionist theatre induces in the audience an illusion of reality making them oblivious of the process by which reality is constructed on the stage. The audience have to temporarily ‘suspend their disbelief’ to give credence to what happens on the stage. The audience read the text of dramatic performance rather naively and their gaze frames the stage spectacle as the mirror-image of a pre-existing world. On the other hand, in *Entertainer* what we see on the stage is the process of the construction of reality and not reality itself.
In the study of *The Entertainer* we propose to explain Archie’s failure by making critical use of some of the insights handed down to us by Lacanian psychoanalysis and semiotics. An actor on the stage is treated as a symptom. Brechtian theory of drama is also made a point of reference. Lacanian formulation of the mirror-stage has something valid to say about the dynamics of constructing reality on the stage. Lacanian formulation reads like an exercise in semiotics because it hinges on how the subject becomes a sign. During the Lacanian mirror-stage the subject identifies with its own image that is reflected back to it from the mirror. The mirror-image *represents* its own body to the subject. The image frames the body. The subject identifies with the image of its body, thereby constructing reality fictively. This is how the subject becomes the Other.

What is important about the mirror-stage is that it results in a disjunction between body as image and body as body. There is a disjunction between the subject’s own felt experiences of its own body and the visual image that is incorporated into the subject’s organization of its experience of its own body. There is an unmediated tension between the body as body and body as image. In other words body as image has a precarious existence. It may be subverted by the intrusion of the real—the body’s plenitude and fulness which resists representation. The body can’t be represented as such. It is what is ‘unassimilable’ in representation, the impossible—the ‘Real’. “The Real has no boundaries, borders, divisions or oppositions; it is a continuum of raw materials.”

8
We have to translate the Lacanian formulation into the theatrical idiom to grasp what happens in the play *The Entertainer*. An actor on stage can succeed only if he submits his body to the other—the character. Just as in the mirror-stage, he has to annihilate his body—obliterate the reality of his body—to become the Other. The actor makes his body absent so that the character who is absent is made present. This is why an actor who becomes a character on stage is put within quotation marks. As Keir Elam puts it, “in traditional dramatic performance the actor’s body acquires its mimetic and representational power by becoming something other than itself, more and less than individual.” Archie’s dismal failure as an actor is due to his inability in taking the place of the Other by obliterating his own body. It is evidenced in the drama in the form of a potential conflict between the person (actor) and character. Archie’s experiences as a man sneaks through his life on the stage as a character. Listen to one such personal eruptions:

But if ever I saw any hope or strength in the human race, it was in the face of the old fat Negress getting up to sing about Jesus or something like that. She was poor and lonely and oppressed like nobody you’ve ever known; or me for that matter. I never liked that kind of music, but to see that old black whore singing her heart out to the whole world, you knew somehow in your heart that it didn’t matter how much you kick people, the real people, how much you despise them, if they can stand up and make a
pure, just natural noise like that, there's nothing wrong with them, only with everybody else. (E70, 71)

The tension between the symbolic and the body is referred to by Randy Martin in *Performance as Political Act: The Embodied Self.* He argues that the performing body, by its very nature, is involved in resistance to the symbolic. The overflowing, desiring body, resists any attempt to enforce a stable meaning on it on both the personal and the public levels, the symbolic attempts to limit the meanings of actions and the body to channel the flows of desire, but such limitation is inevitably in conflict with the symbolic-defying carnivalesque potential of the desiring body. The same kind of conflict is foreshadowed in the writings of Julia Kristeva in the form of an eternal tension between the semiotic and the semantic.

She sees the semiotic as a realm which is not linguistic, but a pre-Oedipal erotic stage in which energy is expressed through bodily rhythms, gestures, non-sense syllables, laughter—like the Freudian unconscious, erupting into symbolic language and disrupting its semantic system. The split nature of the speaking/writing subject, can be accounted for in part by her/his belonging to both the semiotic and the symbolic realm.
This inner tension is palpable not only between the actor's body and character, but permeates to stage and audience also. This is how the play becomes a paradigm of dramatic representation.

Let us turn to semiotics to get greater insight into dramatic representation and how *The Entertainer* deconstructs the illusionist or mimetic view of stage representation.\(^{12}\)

When the actor impersonates a character, he becomes a sign. "The actor is the iconic sign *par excellence*, a real human being who has become a sign for a human being."\(^{13}\) The actor's body is purloined and made a signifying material. While turning into a character he has to forgo the 'Real' of his body to represent the idea of the character. He represses his body so that his body becomes an image as in the mirror stage. The actor while impersonating a character becomes a symptom because his own body falls to the level occulted signifier.\(^{14}\) There is a kind of de-'real'izing where the body has to forgo itself to signify something else. A word is also a sign, but the word does not conceal its sign quality. But in the theatre, the body of the actor, first recognized as a real object, is assumed to be a sign to refer back to another object that is absent. Martin Esslin underscores this fact:

A human body, along with its conventionally recognizable properties, surrounded by or supplied with a set of objects, inserted within a physical space, stands for something else to a reacting audience. In order to do so, it has been
framed within a sort of performative situation that establishes that it has been taken as a sign.15

So the actor becomes a metaphor in the process of becoming a character. There is a 'metaphorisation' of his body. The actor's body is used figuratively—to say something other than what it really says. The actor's body is 'blotted out' or 'annihilated'. This insight is implied in Lacanian concept of metaphor. The actor's body has to negate itself to become a signifying material. As Audrey McMullan puts it, "the imposed-upon body is captured and framed in representation. Representation is a coded scene, a framing and fetishing of the body as a whole (an image-pose) or a part."16 There is a doubling of the body, a separation and co-existence of self and an another.

This is how the conjoining of the two disciplines—Lacanian psychoanalysis and semiotics helps to explain the character of Archie Rice. We have to read his failure as an actor figuratively—as resulting from the unmediated tension between his own body and the symbolic place that it has to assume. This conflict taken in a wider perspective, shows the tension between 'thing' and language. A thing loses its 'thingness' when catapulted into the world of language. By lending his body to represent a character, the actor is placed in the world of the symbolic. The symbolic order can be supported only by itself. It never can be referred back to the real. There is a 'lack' in the symbolic structure because it is only a representation. Represented in the symbolic the subject is lost to himself (His body signifies something
else). This is why in the symbolic structure of theatrical language the subject (his body) becomes an elusive non-presence. There is a rupture between the self and the Other. Miller refers to this loss of the subject in the discourse. "The suture names the subject's relationship within the chain of his own discourse; we shall see that he figures there as a missing element, in the form of a stand in for it." The subject becomes signifier in which he himself is absent.

What happens on the stage is the semiotization of an object. Like the mirror-image in Lacan, the body of the actor acquires a representational status in the theatrical space. This is how "on the stage things that play the part of theatrical signs . . . acquire special features, qualities and attributes that they do not have in real life." The body of the actor becomes a text—language—on the stage. At the same time an actor's body on the stage becomes a double in which there is a persistent tension between body as language and body as 'Real', thus bringing about a disjunction between representation and felt experiences. Archie's own words to the audience seem to echo the ambivalence of his role. He is sceptical about his own reality. "Look at me—it's all real, you know. Me—all real, nothing shoddy. You don't think I'm real, do you? Well, I'm not" (E 59).

This is why the play seems to address itself to greater questions than what appears on the surface. The play may be taken as a post-structuralist critique of representation and how subjectivity is shaped and withheld through discourse. Jossette Feral's critical comment is
worthy of note: “As long as performance rejects narrativity and representation in this way, it also rejects the symbolic organization dominating theatre, and exposes the conditions of theatricality as they are.”

It is due to this conflict between language and body (symbolic and the Real) that there is an unmediated tension between two narratives within the text. One is the personal narrative while the other is that of the stage-figure. The personal narrative is couched in the form of Archie’s life outside the symbolic mould of the stage figure. As a person, he is a man of about fifty, his hair brushed flat, almost grey. He wears glasses and has a slight stoop. “Ladies adore him and cosset him because he is so friendly, and obviously such a gentleman. Some of his professors call him ‘Professor’ occasionally, as they might call a retired army captain ‘Colonel’” (E 34). He is kind and compassionate, with a deep love for his father. He pities his wife. He is a womaniser with perennial affairs with women—real and fictitious.

The Other—the impersonal narrative—sketches Archie as a stage figure who represses this personal narrative and assumes a symbolic role. This is the narrative of an entertainer whose mission is to entertain others. As Archie tells the audience, “I’m not going to deprive you of the treat you’ve all been waiting for. Yes I’m going to sing for you” (E 60).

The conflict between the person and the stage figure is hinted at in the stage direction itself. “Archie rises, his face held open by a grin,
and dead behind the eyes. Just now and then, for a second or two, he gives the tiniest indication that he is almost surprised to find himself where he is" (59). The stage narrative is often interrupted by the intrusion of the personal narrative. Archie slips back from the role as stage figure to his own person when he tells the audience about his own wife. "Did I tell you about the wife? Did I? My wife—not only is the stupid, not only may look sweet, but she is a very cold woman, my wife. Very cold" (59). Alan Carter underscores the presence of two parallel narratives in the play when he writes: "The real life story of Archie and his family is portrayed in scenes enclosed by a framework of Archie’s music-hall acts." Anderson also favours the view that the voice of the man himself is dimly audible behind that of the stage figure. "... filtered through the nervy exhibitionism of the entertainer's dialogue is the coarsened but deficient personality of the man himself."21

This conflict between the symbolic and the Real extends to all the aspects of stage representation in *The Entertainer* comprising the stage and the audience. In the theatre, the stage gives us an illusion of reality only insofar as it forgoes its own reality as the stage and represents a symbolic space. Everything on the stage including the stage itself has a representational and not an ontological status. Nothing in the traditional stage stands for itself, but slips into a kind of textuality by becoming something other than itself. The stage has to repress its 'Real' to become another space—to become the Other. In the play many are the occasions when the stage slips away from the symbolic to the 'Real'. There is a shattering of the illusion of reality so that we are
reminded that the stage is only a stage. Osborne uses many theatrical devices to 'real'ize the theatrical space. The use of music hall techniques is one such device. By bringing the stage back to its 'body'—this technique establishes 'immediate, vital and direct contact with the audience. The scores are notified by turn numbers and the characters are announced just before they appear on the stage. During the intermissions, an advertising sheet is lowered. Music also subverts the illusion on the stage because it is 'the latest, the loudest, the worst' (E12). Even when he sings, Archie strives, not to bring out the emotional content of his song, but to show gestures that speak the habits and usage of the body. He uses common everyday phrases which remind one of the crude everyday language. Through his singing, Archie seems to be speaking against music. The awful irony of the slogans that herald the acts like—"Frank Rice—singing for you"—also look like the eruptions of the 'real' into the symbolic space of the stage. There is thus, not only the 'death of the character' but the 'death of the stage' as well when the stage may lose its contours of projected symbolic reality and may slip back to the 'Real'.

Like the character and the stage the spectator also is subject to a kind of doubling. The spectator in the theatre is a split person. In the act of gazing at the things that happen on the stage he is split from himself. In Entertainer Archie's own self-observation and self-alienation prevent the audience from empathising with the character on the stage. The audience keeps a distance from the character and the events
represented on the stage. This is a permanent feature of Brechtian theatre also.

The performer's self-observation, an artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely to the point of giving up his own identity, and lent a splendid remoteness to the events. . . . the audience 'identifies itself with the actor as being an observer.'

In one way, the audience in the theatre are and are not the 'real' people in the world outside. They are 'Real' but at the same time they have a symbolic status because it is their gaze that frames reality on the stage. The audience is the reader of the theatrical text and in the theatre the reader 'writes' the text by gazing at it. The theatre can work its illusion only when the audience are unconscious of the role that they have to play—i.e. subjection of the actor's body. In the play Catastrophe Beckett himself emphasizes the fact that the spectacle itself is a kind of subjection. As John Pilling puts it, "the audience are manipulated by the director into a position of consuming the image of the protagonist, and therefore collaborate in his subjection." But in the play The Entertainer the audience are never allowed to identify with the role and to occupy a symbolic space permanently. They have an ambiguous role to play and are made conscious of their own role in the subjection of the actor's body. This differing gaze of the audience disrupts the narrative on the stage so that reality on the stage loses its
representational status. Osborne uses many theatrical devices to pull the spectator back from the symbolic to the real. The words of Archie: "Don't clap too hard... It's a very cold building" or "you've been a good audience. Very good. A very good audience. Let me know where you're working tomorrow night—and I'll come and see you" (E89) make the audience conscious of their own 'reality' and thereby subvert their representational status as fictional audience who author the spectacle they are watching on the stage.

In this respect The Entertainer invites comparison with the plays of Samuel Beckett. Beckett in many of his plays shifts attention from the represented to the process of representation. In his plays, the character, the stage and the audience are subject to a doubling. This is particularly noteworthy in the play Not I where there is a disruption of the authoritative framework of the symbolic. In Not I the audience sees an elevated red mouth, picked out by faint light from the rest of the face, voicing disjointed words and phrases. In the play the metonymic mouth stands for the body of the actor which is present by its absence. The dramatic performance consists in the repetition of a text that is doomed to repeat itself endlessly in the consciousness that belongs to the mouth. The body's experience as 'Real' is severed from the symbolic (the speech of the subject)—the dramatic performance itself. This is why the character cannot bear to identify herself as 'I' and has to represent herself through a 'she'. In the text of dramatic performance that 'I' is obliterated to represent a 'she'. Mouth seems to be re-living
the trauma of every dramatic performance when there is a split from the
Real.

When suddenly . . . gradually . . . all went out . . . all that early April morning light . . . and she found herself in what? Who? . . . no! . . . she . . . found herself in the dark . . . and if nor exactly . . . insentient . . . for she could still hear the buzzing . . . so-called . . . in the ears . . . and a ray of light . . . came and went . . . came and went . . . Such as the moon might cast . . . drifting . . . in and out of cloud . . . but so dulled . . . feeling . . . feeling . . . so dulled . . . she did not know . . . what position she was in . . . imagine!

What position she was in.24

_Not I_ is also a narrative of a subject that is potentially annihilated by being caught in a net of signifiers. Due to the severance from the body, there is a hectic search for sensory experience. _Not I_ as in _The Entertainer_ stages the disjunction between the character and the self.

In _Not I_ it is the audience that frames reality on the stage. From the metonymic mouth the audience has to visualise and frame the absent character. "In _Not I_ Beckett presents only the text; the consciousness that perceives is absent, but the audience must not only create a sense of narrative through implication but construct an image of character as well."25 The gaze of the spectator frames the reality on the stage by reading his own meanings into it. "Thus the mouth, detached from its bodily context and so from its codified meaning (as
‘mouth’) becomes a corporeal and semantic (black) hole onto or into which the spectator may project any number of literally organic senses.”

In the plays of Antonin Artaud also there is a non-coincidence of body and language. Artaud was for designing a new theatrical language based not on words, but signs in which actors would be changed to moving hieroglyphs. As Elizabeth Wright puts it, “conversely, the theatre of Antonin Artaud assaults us with images of the body’s violent refusal to become entrapped in language.”

One cannot be blind to the Brechtian strategy employed by Osborne in de-constructing stage representation in The Entertainer. Brecht was no unfamiliar name to Osborne and Osborne always flirted with Brecht’s anti-naturalistic ideas even though he was reluctant to acknowledge Brechtian influence. The influence of Brecht is evident not only in Entertainer but also in The World of Paul Slickey and also a A Subject of Scandal and Concern. A Subject of Scandal and Concern is presented in a documentary manner and introduced by a narrator. Brecht de-mystifies representation and shows the illusory nature of the reality that is presented on the stage. Just as in Brecht, Osborne disrupts the representation on the stage so that the spectator is never allowed to become one with the character. Osborne makes use of many devices to disrupt representation on the stage. Archie’s direct words to the audience about his own personal life is one such strategy which disrupts the actor’s identification with the character. In acting, the actor
alienates rather than impersonates a character. Due to alienation, there is no transfer of emotion to the spectator, or any kind of emotional infection. Alienation effect manifests itself, not in the absence of emotion, but in the form of emotion which need not correspond to that of the character portrayed. A representation which alienates is one which allows us to recognize the object. We are always made conscious of the actor in the representation. As Brecht himself puts it, "the actor doesn't have to be the man he portrays. He has to describe his character as it would be described in a book." Brecht theorizes that if the performer (actor) remains outside the character, the audience may remain free to analyze the character. In Brechtian theory, the body on the stage is not a fixed essence but the site of a struggle. By alienating iconicity, the doubling inherent in the character is thrown back to the spectator. It is worthy to be mentioned in this context that in Chinese theatre also the performer resists complete conversion. He limits himself to quoting the character that he impersonates. Some Derridean insights, which are encrypted in Brechtian theory, are also seen to be operative in the actor-character in Entertainer. The character of Archie is a signifier that bears trace of another signifier—the subjectivity of the character as a person. This is why the character of Archie is not only different from other characters but different from itself. This dichotomy between the person/character is preserved throughout. "This performer-subject neither disappears into a representation of the character nor into a representation of the actor; each remains processual, historical, incomplete."
As in Brechtian dramas, the gaze of the audience is subject to a split in *Entertainer* also. There are moments of identification with the character and moments of alienation, so that the character on the stage becomes a complete and ever-changing text. Alienation is a spectatorial state that puts temporary brakes upon identification with the character. “As noted earlier, the historical subject playing an actor, playing a character, splits the gaze of the spectator, who, as a reader of a complex sign system, cannot consume or reduce the object of her vision to the monolithic projection of the self.”30
Notes

1 Barthes, qtd. in Adrian Page, Introd., The Death of the Playwright 1.


3 Banham 4.

4 Anderson 37.


6 Choudhary 35.

7 Banham 56.

8 Grosz, Jacques Lacan 34.


12 The term ‘semiotic’ was coined in the late nineteenth century by the American philosopher C. S. Pierce (1839-1914) to mean the theory of signs. Ferdinand de Saussure in Cours de Linguistique Generale (1915) argued that linguistics was only a part of a general science of signs. The basis of semiotics is the sign. Language also comes within the ambit of semiotics being a sign-system. Semiotics is
particularly relevant in the study of theatre, the theatre itself being constituted by a constellation of signs. Contemporary semioticians like Roland Barthes and Umberto Eco have also given an impetus to reading literature using semiotic principles. Semiotics explores signifiers in their role of constructing rather than reproducing meaning.


14 Note Lacan’s definition of a symptom. According to Lacan, symptom is a metaphor in which one signifier is repressed and the repressed signifier is substituted by another signifier in the signifying chain. He defines metaphor as the implantation in a signifying chain of another signifier whereby the supplanted signifier falls to the level of a signified. In the theatrical discourse, the actor’s body is repressed, so that the character as a signifier becomes a substitute.


20 Carter 69.

21 Anderson 38.


27 Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism* 5.

28 Willet, *Brecht on Theatre* 68.

29 Abraham, *Feminist Theory and Modern Drama* 139.

30 Abraham, *Feminist Theory and Modern Drama* 143.