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You Can Never Go Home Again: Nostalgia, the Uncanny, and Staging Home on the Front Lines

By Victoria Scrimmer

Abstract

A strange thing happened in the first half of the twentieth century: while many avant-garde artists obsessively resisted dramatic realism and its increasingly popular staging of the domestic *mis en scène*, allied military forces, for-profit companies and charitable service organizations were busy staging their own scenes of domestic comfort on the front lines. Starting in World War I, groups like the Salvation Army and the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) constructed a simulacrum of home away from home for soldiers fighting in Europe, providing home-cooked meals, familiar brands of cigarettes and candy, and friendly faces at "huts" furnished with radios, games, rocking chairs, pianos, and even kindly matrons and "lassies" carefully cast to play the roles of mom and sis. In this essay, I suggest the fervent rejection of the domestic in the arts, characteristic of the theatrical avant-garde, and the calculated re-staging of the domestic on the battlefield constitute an overlooked frame through which to view modern drama's fraught relationship with ideas of home and nostalgic longing.

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In *The Struggle of the Modern*, Stephen Spender tentatively suggests "nostalgia has been one of the most productive and even progressive forces in modern literature" (212). It is unsettled, however, as Tammy Clewell points out in her introduction to the anthology, *Modernism and Nostalgia*, whether "the modernist longing for the past fuels a reactionary agenda resistant to social change or promotes a progressive politics for the future" (1). In terms of modern drama, the politics of nostalgia tend to fall along genre lines with dramatic realism commonly understood as formally nostalgic and therefore conservative

while avant-garde experiments in theatrical estrangement are often assumed to be politically progressive. Looking, however, at these genres through the lens of military efforts to repress nostalgia has the potential to disrupt dominant assumptions not only about the value of nostalgia but about the ethics and efficacy of both styles of theatre.

In this essay, I use Georg Büchner's *Woyzeck* (1913), often cited as the first modern drama, and Wolfgang Borchert's *The Man Outside* (1947) as apt examples of this complicated engagement with nostalgic longing.¹ The tension between the narrative critique of post-war alienation and the avant-garde techniques of audience estrangement espoused by both plays vividly illustrates the fact that the repression of nostalgia is politically ambivalent at best. In these plays, the stage is populated by humans altered and made strange by war. The protagonists are experimental subjects, the "metamorphosed human being" (Büchner 115) whose nostalgic longing to return home is met with tragic and insurmountable alienation. The homes they long to return to no longer exist. Instead, they are confronted only with the uncanny – what Freud called *unheimlich* or the un-homelike home – a reminder of the irreparable breach between the pre-war past and post-war present. In both plays, this sense of estrangement is heightened and extended to the audience not only through their dramatic narratives, but through new forms of theatre, which resisted the sentimentality and realism of the 18th and 19th century in favor of the alienating effects of modern theatrical innovations.

I. Modern Drama and Nostalgia

¹ *Woyzeck* was left unfinished at the time of Büchner's death in 1837, so there is no definitive text of the play and multiple competing arrangements of the manuscript's four fragments. For a brief textual history of *Woyzeck* see John Guthrie's essay in *Lenz and Büchner: Studies in Dramatic Form* (1984). It is likely that Büchner began writing the play in the winter of 1836 before falling ill. Karl Emil Franzos first published a much-critiqued version in 1878, but it was not until 1913 in Munich that the play was first performed. This paper draws from Mueller's 1963 English translation of the play.

In many ways, modernism is characterized by the tension between nostalgia's longing backwards glance and the desire to shuttle headlong into the future. In the appendix to *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), Jean-Francois Lyotard attempts to define the postmodern against the modern, and in doing so he makes a suspect, but much repeated, assertion about the nature of modern artistic sensibilities: "modern aesthetics is an aesthetics of the sublime though a nostalgic one. ...the form, because of its recognizable consistency, continues to offer to the reader or viewer matter for solace and pleasure" (81). Postmodern artists, he argues on the other hand – presumably wiser and less likely to be taken in by the illusion of false comforts – resist this naïve temptation of nostalgic longing. Postmodernism "denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable" (81). Lyotard goes so far as to suggest that modernist "nostalgia for the whole and the one...transparent and communicable experience" is on some level responsible for the "terror" of the two world wars (81). Arguably there was, however, no such consensus of taste when it came to aesthetic forms. Artists in the first half of the twentieth century were always in flux somewhere between the desire to shore the fragments of the past against their ruin and the urge to sweep the past away— to, in the influential words of Ezra Pound, "Make it new."

For these artists, the tension between the comforts of the past (idealized as they might be) and the promise of an uncertain future often seemed to coalesce around ideas of domesticity. In particular, the home functioned as an emblem of structure, tradition, and bourgeois family values. Take, by way of example, the poet and performance artist the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, whose work is emblematic of the historical avant-garde's hostility towards the domestic sphere. Little-known today, the Baroness was something of a modernist luminary,

heralded by critics as the “Mother of Dada” itself (Harding 37). As James Harding notes, the Baroness’s unconventional West Eighteenth Street basement apartment – filthy and full to bursting with found art objects – constituted a “counterdomestic installation or performance site where the blurring of art and life challenges the social order” (48). More explicitly, the Baroness’s strident rejection of hearth and home is perhaps best articulated in her long poem “Thee I call ‘Hamlet of Wedding-Ring’” published in 1920 in *The Little Review*.

Writing in response to the publication of William Carlos Williams’s long poem *Kora in Hell*,² the Baroness rails against Williams’s commitment to family values or what she disparagingly characterizes as the “familycave” (54). To her mind, backward-looking nostalgia (particularly a longing for home) is anathema to art. Williams, she argues, can never make radical art because he is too weak and effeminate. She calls him “sentimental,” “cowardly” (54), a mama’s boy “cherished against the chill of mediocrity in boism [sic] folds secrecy” (109). The Baroness’s rejection of the domestic is inextricably intertwined, however, with a troubling ideology: she attacks Williams’s reputed Jewishness³ on the grounds that he is “handicapped by Jewish family tradition” (108). Her suggestion in the poem that “Winter: summer’s logical successor-killer by necessity—for advancement-new bloom” (58) is reminiscent of Filippo Marinetti’s claim in the 1909 Futurist manifesto that war is the “world’s only hygiene.” And like the Futurist manifesto, there is more than just a hint of proto-fascism in the Baroness’s hatred for the “familycave” and her insistence on violent progress. The historical avant-garde is not monolithic and, of course, not all avant-garde artists interested in disrupting traditional social structures espoused the Baroness’s fascist-leaning politics (often it was quite the

²In his book *Cutting Performances*, James Harding points out that her attack on Williams was apparently precipitated, in part, by his refusal to engage in an extra-marital affair with the Baroness (46).

³ Williams’s mother was of Jewish ancestry.

opposite), but her work is an apt illustration of the ideological razor's edge of cultural vanguardism's fervent rejection of home.

Insofar as we accept this avant-garde notion of the home as a site of old-fashioned values, staid structure, tradition, safety, and often femininity, it is little wonder dramatic realism has been the target of artistic criticism since its inception. The introduction of gas lighting in the 1820s and the growing popularity of the box set sometime in the mid to late 19th century created the conditions under which detailed simulacra of middle-class living rooms and kitchens would eventually come to dominate European and especially American stages. In addition to set design, the narrative content of dramatic realism, as Dorothy Chansky points out, is more often than not "relentlessly marshaled to reveal relationships and problems in the domestic realm" (2). Dealing, then, as it does, with the oft-maligned domestic sphere, dramatic realism has often faced critique as a "structurally unambitious, homogenous, tunnel-visioned form, its every product churning out the same fundamental message and denying creations of a more open, pluralistic theatre" (Demastes ix). In other words, despite its radical beginnings in Andre Antoine's Théâtre Libre, the realist stage quickly earned a reputation as aesthetically conservative, rather than "modern" or avant-garde.

The short lifespan of the Théâtre Libre,⁴ Lugne-Poe's break with Antoine, and his defiant founding of the surrealist Théâtre de l'Œuvre in 1893, were just the earliest inklings of an avant-garde hostility towards the formal limitations of realism. Something like the Théâtre de l'Œuvre's 1896 production of Alfred Jarry's *Ubu Roi*, with its crude sets and cardboard costumes, is a highly stylized, absurdist, burlesque of bourgeois traditions, thumbing its nose at Antoine's suddenly quaint commitment to

⁴ The theatre closed less than ten years after its founding in 1887.

realistic staging practices.⁵ Surrealism, however, was just the first in a general trend of disparate avant-garde, anti-realist movements in the theatre that sought to disrupt, through various means of estrangement, the stage as a “place of mimetic illusions divided from reality by the proscenium arch” and position the stage rather as a “space where reality was made strange in order to be seen better” (Jestrovic 9). This trend perhaps reached its apogee in Erwin Piscator and Bertolt Brecht’s epic theatre style, which sought to disrupt the illusion of reality Antoine had once so minutely crafted.

It seems scholarship on realism most often approaches its subject in terms of recuperation on these grounds. Studies like Dorothy Chansky’s *Kitchen Sink Realisms* and Fred Miller Robinson’s *Rooms in Dramatic Realism* emerge, in part, in response to critics who would “roll their eyes at [realism’s] mimetic naïveté” (Chansky 1). While realism can be understood as formally nostalgic—a continual return to the familiar, comforting illusion of a non-existent reality— both Chansky and Robinson propose it is not necessarily the staid structure of the domestic space, but the attendant suggestion of what lies beyond its walls that salvages the more radical possibilities of dramatic realism. Chansky is interested “in the daily realities repressed by realism” such as who is watching the children? Where did the roast come from? (3). Similarly, Robinson suggests the illusionistic domestic interior is haunted by that which lies outside the room. Like Nora and Torvald’s living room in Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, the staged room “is at once a room of relief and anxiety” (5). So, while epic theatre seeks to uncover that which is hidden to increase social and political awareness, realism *relies* for its effect on the unseen, the threat of

⁵ Antoine’s commitment to making his sets as real as possible was the stuff of legend. He would reportedly recreate the entirety of a room in detail before deciding which wall to remove. Oscar Brockett and Robert Findlay note that he once went so far as to use real beef carcasses as props in his production of Ibsen’s *The Butchers* (91).

the alien lurking just outside the door, simultaneously evoked and repressed by the theatrical illusion of the staged room. In this sense, I propose the tension between the nostalgic illusion of domestic comforts and the frightening, often destructive, newness that characterized theatre in the first half of the twentieth century is most usefully illustrated, somewhat unexpectedly, by looking not to the theatre itself but rather to staging practices that emerged in the theatre of war.

II. Staging Home on the Front Lines

People used to die of nostalgia, and this was a particular problem for the military. The term “nostalgia” is today at best associated with treachery sentimentalism, and at worst it is the hallmark of politically conservative propaganda, a dangerous delusion of an idealized past that lurks behind slogans like, “Make America Great Again!” The term, however, was originally coined by Swiss medical student Johannes Hofer in his 1688 dissertation describing acute homesickness. Hofer coined the term, combining the Greek *nostos* meaning a return to home and *algos* meaning grief or suffering, to classify “certain youth thus afflicted, that unless they had been brought back to their native land, whether in a fever or consumed by the ‘Wasting Disease,’ they had met their last day on foreign shores” (380). Although Hofer’s clinical examples run the gamut of homesick youth, the disease was most often associated with soldiers who found themselves far from home under emotionally trying circumstances. Arthur G. Nikelly in a 2004 article for *International Journal of Applied Psychoanalytic Studies* observes, “Nostalgia was conspicuously noted among uprooted migrants from rural regions, among unwilling seamen in the British navy, and among conscripts in the Napoleonic and Civil wars” (183). So, why then the semantic change?

Susan J. Matt, in *Homesickness: An American History*, suggests our shifting view of nostalgia constitutes a re-branding of sorts, the fruits of a concerted nationalist and capitalist agenda in the United States to create a citizenry willing and able to be interchangeably relocated and repurposed (either by the military or corporate employers) without the messy inconvenience of human emotion. Significantly, nostalgia tended to “spread havoc among the armed forces” (Nikelly184), and this havoc posed a serious problem for all military powers across Europe and North America as the geographic, technological, and demographic scale of war increased at the beginning of the 20th century. WWI posed new challenges in this respect. Extended trench warfare and the horrific consequences of new military technologies (machine guns, poison gas, and flamethrowers) that could kill entire battalions in a single day meant not only that soldiers suffered some of the most inhospitable conditions imaginable, but that the emergent military-industrial complex needed every body it could wrangle and lacked a smoothly running pipeline to provide well-trained, capable soldiers at the rate they were being slaughtered. It was costly and impractical in many respects to provide beds and treatment for soldiers suffering from homesickness. Ultimately, the only treatment for nostalgia – shuttling men home from the front lines – was an insupportable option for national militaries that depended on active troops on the front lines.

By way of a solution, the US military, in the midst of WWI, went about delegitimizing homesickness as a serious medical condition, gradually redefining nostalgia not as a crippling physical ailment, but a type of psychological weakness or “maladaptation...that threatened to destabilize military and economic operations” (Nikelly 184). Where once it was a masculine virtue to love one’s mother and be loyal to your hometown, on the battle front, nostalgic feelings for home were reframed as an individual’s failure of strength and masculinity – merely an emotion

to be mastered and overcome. In this we are reminded of the Baroness's critique of Williams, hiding in his mother's skirts, refusing to venture forth bravely from the "familycave." In this sense, it seems both the artistic and militaristic avant-garde demanded men repress their longing for home.

Rather than indulging soldiers' longing for hearth and home, the military sought to redirect those feelings of longing and belonging back towards the military itself by creating a surrogate family – a band of brothers – that would supersede the family they had left behind. This approach first required active suppression of nostalgic feelings. Matt documents a litany of efforts designed to alienate soldiers from their families and hometowns. For instance, the American Expeditionary Forces began publishing a military newspaper in 1918, the *Stars and Stripes*, which would supplant the many local newspapers bearing the news of home soldiers eagerly awaited, replacing them instead with a news of their new *shared* military community (180-81). The newly created Morale Division helped script the dialog between soldiers and their families by coaching parents on exactly what to write in letters to their sons to avoid evoking homesickness (180). And later, by the start of WWII, standardized recruit training systemically isolated soldiers from contact with their families and other soldiers from their hometowns for a lengthy training period that involved publicly shaming recruits for feelings of homesickness (200).

War, however, does its own work making familiar landscapes seem other-worldly and the resulting alienation from domestic life proved just as disruptive to smooth military order as rampant homesickness. In the absence of family and home structures, soldiers often sought escape and solace in bars and brothels. Excessive drinking and venereal disease were rampant among bored, lonely, and traumatized soldiers. Raymond B. Fosdick, who served as a civilian aid to General "Black Jack" Pershing at the

end of WWI, spent extended time in the field with allied soldiers and was commissioned to write a detailed report on troop morale. In his autobiography, he recounts the French landscape north of Verdun in 1919:

It makes one think of the surface of the moon...The only figure that comes to my mind is that of a gigantic spoon furiously stirring a liquid earth until it becomes frozen or rigid, and then sprinkling over the top of it bits of wood, steel, bones, rags, and other debris. (*Chronicle* 176-177)

The men who populated this alien landscape were themselves made strange by the conditions of war. In his 1918 report on the fitness of the troops, Fosdick describes the men in military training camps as constituting an “abnormal” community, living a “strange, new life” (*Fighters* 8). As Chairman of the Commission on Training Camp activities, it was Fosdick’s great belief that, “as far as it can be done,” recreating in war camps the familiar, domestic *mise-en-scène* – dens, clubs, dances, libraries, and athletic fields – constituted “an attempt to increase the efficiency of the troops” (*Fighters* 8).

To this end, Fosdick influentially recommended a type of theatrical staging of home in training locales, and was subsequently impressed by the “spectacular performance” of war camp service communities that organized...club houses where the soldiers and sailors could write letters, play cards or read, billiards and pool places, gymnasiums, shower-baths, informal dances, and, above all, an opportunity to visit in friendly homes. “Take a soldier home for dinner” became a national slogan... (*Chronicle* 151)

In an effort to mollify homesick soldiers during WWI, a number of family-minded, often religious organizations had already stepped in to effectively re-stage home near the front lines. Gimbels department stores shipped familiar brands from home to the front lines, and YMCA or Salvation Army

“huts” set up near the front were staffed by matronly women. Apparently this domestic scene was so powerful, the soldiers themselves were sometimes drawn into the illusion. Matt cites a Salvation Army newspaper that boasted, “The Salvation Army lassies, together with the older women, were the touch of home which comforted the soldier on the front line...Stories have come back to our headquarters of great husky lads who called nineteen year old girls ‘Ma’” (181). By the start of WWII, Franklin D. Roosevelt saw to it that these different service organizations were united under one non-profit umbrella, resulting in the United Service Organizations (USO) that continues to serve US troops today.

The efforts of corporations and service organizations, under the aegis of the US military, to re-stage home-like conditions for nostalgic soldiers on the front lines and in training camps had the veneer of a healthful intervention, but this re-staging also contained the subliminal revelation that home is not where the heart is, but rather where the material trappings of a home might be found and arranged in familiar ways. Home was refigured not as something geographic, communal, or relational, but as something aesthetic, something that merely *appears* familiar. Thus is born what I would call “the uncanny family” – the brother who is not your brother, the mother who is not your mother, the sitting room that looks like but is, upon further inspection, not your home. While we often think of the uncanny as something supernatural or eerie, for Freud the uncanny or *unheimlich* (which translates as the un-homelike) is “in reality nothing new or foreign but something familiar and old – established in the mind that has been estranged only by the process of repression...a hidden, familiar thing that has undergone repression and then emerged from it” (14). Like the box set rooms of dramatic realism which are haunted by the external realities they repress, we can look at military efforts to repress soldiers’ longing for home and the subsequent

re-staging of surrogate homes and families on the front lines as illustrative of this cycle of repression and re-emergence.

The uncanny is not a matter, necessarily, of the supernatural, but of the unsettling intermingling of the alien and the familiar. This is why the uncanny most often emerges within the architecture of the domestic space. In the haunted home, the very symbol of comfort and shelter feels strange, somehow “off” despite its familiarity. In his introduction to *The Architectural Uncanny*, Anthony Vidler suggests the uncanny’s:

favorite motif was precisely the contrast between a secure and homely interior and the fearful invasion of an alien presence; on a psychological level, its play was one of doubling, where the other is, strangely enough, experienced as a replica of the self, all the more fearsome because apparently the same. (3)

Like Robinson’s observation of the staged room in dramatic realism, “it is at once a room of relief and anxiety” (5), the uncanniness of the artificial domestic interior was likewise at work in the service huts – a living room amidst the alien landscape of Verdun. If the uncanny occurs in the decontextualization of the recognizable, the familiar made strange, we can reasonably say that the uncanny is a woman who resembles your sister, serving you homemade donuts under the shadow of a bomber, five-thousand miles away from home.⁶

In the moment, these efforts to provide familiar domestic scenes may have soothed soldiers, entertaining and distracting them from the immediate threats of war. I would argue, however, that they suffered a delayed reaction, an incipient sense of alienation that would not fully manifest until they returned to their real homes and found themselves unable to readjust, strangers in an all too familiar land. Take for instance

⁶ Images of the Salvation Army “Lassies” serving donuts to soldiers on the front lines are a popular remembrance of WWI.

the following correspondence from Private Hubert J. Wesselman to his future-wife, dated 24 Feb 1919. Wesselman recounts “Last Friday night I was at the Y and heard a Scotchman sing ‘My little grey home in the West.’ It sure reminded me of the west out near the Rockies. Say they will sure look to Yours Truly” (Wesselman Transcript 24). Even then, despite his express desire to return home, Wesselman worried that the effects of war – lying “in them darned dugouts day after day” – would haunt him. “I don’t feel much effect yet but am afraid I will in the future” (Wesselman Transcript 27). Wesselman is discomfited by the uncanny mingling of the familiar and the foreign staged by the service organization, and is haunted by the looming anxiety that the alien landscape of war would somehow invade the idealized familiar home space. Sadly, Private Wesselman, who served in France and Germany, was not wrong about the endurance of these ghosts; eventually the farmer, who never spoke of the war to his family, took his own life in 1953. Unfortunately, Wesselman’s is just one of countless similar stories.

Ultimately, the staging of realistic home-like spaces in training camps and battle grounds served not to remedy soldiers’ nostalgic longing for home, but only to temporarily defray the cost of its repression while soldiers were needed on the front lines. The service huts participated in a larger project of experimental alienation and emotional repression that eventually bore strange fruit. If there is one thing we have learned from Freud’s theories of psychoanalysis, it is that whatever is repressed comes bubbling back to the surface in strange and sometimes self-destructive ways. Soldiers returning home from the front lines, after having been forced to sublimate their nostalgic longing for home and community, often experienced significant difficulty readjusting to the realities of the domestic life, behaving in a way that is strangely detached. In attempting to achieve the mimetic illusion characteristic of dramatic realism, service

organizations, in fact, revealed to soldiers the very constructed nature of “home,” forever altering, on some level, soldiers’ perspective on the homes to which they had to return.

This is not to say that the efforts of these service organizations single-handedly caused the pervasive sense of alienation that is arguably common to all soldiers fighting on both sides of all wars. Rather, the staging of home on the battlefield during WWI serves as a specific example of a general principle, an illustration of the ways in which nostalgia, when repressed, can re-emerge as the uncanny, the familiar made strange. Given the manifest, unpleasant, and often tragic consequences of this cycle of repressed nostalgia and alienation, it seems important to question the role of an artistic avant-garde which, like the military, was hostile to nostalgic illusion and aesthetically committed to strategies of estrangement.

III. Alienation in the Theatre

As it did in real life, repressed nostalgic longing for home emerged in the uncanny and grotesque on the stage. Georg Büchner’s *Woyzeck* and Wolfgang Borchert’s *The Man Outside* are two modern dramas that vividly illustrate the disintegration of the domestic idyll and the tragedy of alienation caused by war. But both plays, associated as they are with avant-garde tactics of aesthetic estrangement, run the risk of enacting on their audiences the precise type of militant, experimental disillusionment and alienation their narratives lament as tragedy.

Woyzeck, a play that is often hailed as the first truly modern drama, was fragmented and incomplete at the time of Büchner’s death in 1837. It was not staged until 1913, after which time it experienced near continuous popularity both in Germany and beyond. So, while Büchner wrote the play before the events of WWI, its delayed appearance on the

page and stage has made it arguably more historically resonant in the decades after Büchner's death. Having been subsequently claimed by realist, naturalist, surrealist, expressionist, and Epic theatre practitioners alike, Büchner's play, in some sense, transcends the stylistic vicissitudes of the early 20th century. But in its episodic structure, elements of bricolage, and musical punctuations, *Woyzeck* predicts many elements of the Epic theatre, and it was indeed eventually produced by Erwin Piscator⁷ for the New School in 1941.

Woyzeck tells the story of the eponymous soldier and the unmarried mother of his child, Marie. *Woyzeck*, in thrall to the sadistic military Captain and subjected to bizarre military experiments, is forced to eat a diet consisting solely of peas. In the process of his service to the military, he loses his mind. *Woyzeck* is a rather ordinary man, so fundamentally altered by modernity that he teeters on the edge of humanity, eventually murdering Marie in a psychotic fit. *Woyzeck* has been read alternately as a critique of class struggle, sexual politics, and newly emergent scientific and medical practices.⁸ In light, however, of the cycle of nostalgic repression and subsequent emergence of the uncanny discussed above, I suggest *Woyzeck* is a parable about the ghastly consequences for a human being for whom the only remaining structures that gave life meaning are forcibly revealed to be an illusion.

The psychological turning point for *Woyzeck*, the last assault on his sanity, as it were, is the destruction of his domestic illusions. When the Captain playfully gestures towards Marie's infidelities, insinuating *Woyzeck's* home life may not be as he thinks, *Woyzeck* begs to be spared the revelation. He pleads, "There's nothing else I've got in the world but

⁷ While Brecht is most often credited with the development of Epic theatre, it was Piscator in *The Political Theatre* who first theorized the term.

⁸ For a full account of *Woyzeck's* critical history see David Richards' *Georg Büchner's Woyzeck: A History of Its Criticism*.

[my wife],” to which the Captain dubiously responds, “I’m only trying to help” (123). We know the Captain isn’t *wrong* about Marie, but one certainly gets the sense that Woyzeck’s home-life, though flawed, is a valuable coping mechanism in a world otherwise hostile to his existence. In his efforts to “help” by shattering Woyzeck’s domestic illusions, the Captain glibly sends him over a psychological precipice from which he cannot return, prompting Woyzeck to change into something “Grotesque! Grotesque!” (122). Woyzeck is denied the solace and stability of his own domestic *mis en scène*, and it is in its absence, in the moment of alienation, when he must bury his feelings of longing for home and family that Woyzeck becomes less than human – the uncanny “shadow running away from its own spider” (121). Disabused of his naiveté, he finds himself standing on the edge of a meaningless void: “Every man’s a chasm. It makes you dizzy when you look down in” (123).

In one sense, then, avant-garde theatre artists like Piscator and Brecht sought to play the role of Büchner’s disaffected military Captain who takes a sort of paternal pleasure in crushing Woyzeck’s domestic illusions by exposing his wife’s infidelities. Piscator saw theatre, particularly technical innovations in staging, as a tool for laying bare harsh realities. The very idea for the Epic theatre emerges from Piscator’s war experience. Shells falling overhead, he realized suddenly what a “false ecstasy and elusive life of dreams” theatre constituted. From that moment on, “something was shattered forever: illusion” and he sought to make theatre “an instrument to probe life and come to grips with reality” (Ley-Piscator 2). Piscator eschewed the illusion of the box set and pioneered experimental, technological interventions in staging that included the use of mixed-media, projections, and treadmills. Influenced by Piscator, Bertolt Brecht influentially imagined an Epic style of performance that would reveal to the audience theatre’s constructedness, exposing

naturalized ideologies to critical review. That which was previously hidden (costume changes, set pieces, the actors behind the characters) were revealed. Brecht, among many other avant-garde artists, sought to estrange the audience from their emotional response to the immersive world of the play.

Unlike the Baroness, Piscator and Brecht's disdain for traditional structure emerged not from fascistic ideology, but from Marxist ideals and a desire to educate the proletariat. All the same, we can see from military experiments to repress nostalgic tendencies in soldiers, estrangement and alienation outside of the theatre could have a traumatizing and destructive effect. To assume that theatrical estrangement transmits no vestige of the psychological trauma of historical estrangement is its own social experiment. The play offers its audiences no familiar comforts or utopian visions; it simply strips away standard forms of meaning, forcing the audience to struggle with the implications of Büchner's bleak vision. The audience is Woyzeck, the avant-garde director's experimental subject, and the critic, like the play's Doctor, sits back, detached, taking notes: "Facial muscles rigid, taut, occasionally twitches. Condition strained, excitable" (121).

Wolfgang Borchert's *The Man Outside* offers a particularly salient critique of the avant-garde theatre producer in this regard. The play, which in its narrative delivers a scathing critique of a callous, unfeeling world, follows Beckmann, a soldier who struggles against a gaping void of meaninglessness when confronted by the impossibility of returning home after WWII. The play's prologue reads, "A man comes to Germany. He's been away for a long time, this man. A very long time. Perhaps too long. And he returns quite different from what he was when he went away" (78). Borchert, who reluctantly served in the Wehrmacht in WWII, suggests that war so fundamentally altered men that they were no longer

recognizable even to themselves. Time and distance and experience had successfully alienated them from all that was once familiar.

At every turn, Beckmann's nostalgic longing for home is greeted by the uncanny, the terrible unhome-like home. Beckmann is just "one of the many who comes home – and then don't come home, because there's no home there for them any more" (78). Indeed, when Beckmann arrives at his parents' old house he finds a strange name on the familiar door. A strange woman, Frau Kramer, answers his knock. The stage directions indicate she speaks with "an indifferent, ghastly, smooth amiability, more frightful than any rudeness or brutality" (110). She informs him that his parents "denazified themselves once and for all" by running the gas on the kitchen stove with the windows closed (112). The house and Frau Kramer are all the more ghastly for their normal appearance, masking the gruesome, invisible truth that lies within the interior of the domestic space.

It is not just his home that is made strange and frightening, but Beckmann himself. Everywhere he goes, he gives people the creeps because, like Woyzeck, Beckman straddles the line between the human and the uncanny other. The play begins with Beckman at the bottom of the Elbe river, an apparent suicide rejected even by the river, which spits him back out. A nameless girl who first mistakes him for a corpse insists repeatedly that Beckmann is something otherworldly: "by degrees you'll be turning into a fish" (86). She's taken aback by the respirator glasses Beckmann wears, an unusual artifact of the war that gives Beckmann a "grey standardized face. A sort of leaden robot's face" (88). When he shows up at his former Colonel's house for help, the Colonel's wife repeatedly complains that "the creature" gives her the "shivers" (93-95). It is ultimately not just Beckmann's unusual appearance, but his uncontrollable, overflowing emotions that disturb and frighten those

around him. The Colonel commands Beckmann to stop talking “such unmanly non-sense” and “make [himself] human” again (93-95). His inability to set aside sentimentality and just get on with it, so to speak, causes door after door to be closed in his face.

Most significant in this respect are Beckmann’s interactions with the Cabaret Producer, a caricature of the avant-garde artist who refuses to hire Beckmann. Echoing precepts of the Epic theatre, the Producer explains that art needs “an unromantic, realistic, sturdy youth, which steadfastly faces up to the dark side of life, unsentimentally, objectively, with detachment...someone to present the living grey suffering face of our times!” (102). This is, of course, all very ironic as the Cabaret Producer is horrified by Beckmann’s *real* “living grey suffering face,” stating, “It gives one the hiccups to look at you” (102). In what constitutes a metacommentary of the play itself, Beckman suggests, “these fantastically hideous glasses would probably be much be much more effective” on the stage, but the Producer assures him it will not work: “people want to enjoy Art, be taken out of themselves, edified – they don’t want to see cold, damp ghosts” (104). The Cabaret Producer’s treatment of Beckmann reveals theatrical estrangement to be both cruel and disingenuous in light of historical estrangement.

Beckmann’s interactions with the Cabaret Producer paint a picture of the avant-garde as phenomenally out of touch with post-war social realities and entirely unwilling to deliver anything with real feeling. Like the Colonel who represents the military’s rejection of Beckmann’s nostalgic, emotional sensitivity, the Cabaret Producer also wants to wash his hands of Beckmann’s feelings of sadness and longing. Despite the Producer’s self-proclaimed “courage” in the face of the bourgeoisie (102), he is a “coward” (124) when confronted by the grotesque, unsettling mess that is Beckmann. The Cabaret Producer gives lip service to shattering

illusions on the stage, but when he is confronted with the uncanny Beckman, when that which is hidden is revealed, he draws back, afraid the untowardness of it all will make “the entire public shy” on him (124).

One wonders what Piscator made of this critique of the avant-garde theatre producer when he produced the play with the Dramatic Workshop in New York in 1949. Was there ever the sense that the application of the techniques of estrangement he had pioneered compounded rather than remedied the type of suffering Beckmann faced in an unfamiliar world that insisted he repress his emotional longing for the familiar? In response to Beckmann’s heartfelt song, the producer scoffs, “A beginner’s ballad! It’s a pity the public doesn’t want that sort of thing” (125). In this way, Borchert’s *Cabaret Producer* is illustrative of the unexpected similarity between military efforts to repress feelings of nostalgia in soldiers, and an avant-garde impetus to do the same on the stage.

As much of the scholarship on dramatic realism suggests, there is a tendency in theatre to assume that avant-garde tactics of aesthetic estrangement occupy a type of progressive political high-ground, while mimetic realism is a naive and nostalgic affair, wedded to the illusion of restrictive social structures. The staging of home on the battlefield during WWI helps disrupt these assumptions in at least two respects. Firstly, the uncanny service huts demonstrate that the staging of the domestic *mis en scène*, no matter how realistic, is never truly illusionistic; it always contains within itself the revelation of its own artificiality in the looming suggestion of that which lies beyond the walls of the box set. Secondly, the self-interested attempts of the US military to delegitimize homesickness suggest nostalgic longing for familiar structures may serve some purpose, particularly in times of great emotional and social upheaval. As the Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven demonstrates, staunch resistance to nostalgia is not the sole purview of any particular political ideology, and

dogmatic commitment to innovation is not always socially progressive. The uncanny reemergence of repressed nostalgic feelings, both in the context of art and war, exposes the terrifying existential vacuum left behind when the structures that once gave life meaning are torn away. As Borchert's *Cabaret Producer* illustrates, some avant-garde experimental theatre, in its insistence on disillusionment and emotional detachment, can be as complicit as the military avant-garde in the crisis that plagues the tragic characters they stage. Perhaps indulgence in nostalgia is not artistic death, but critical for psychological healing. Perhaps theatre, instead of alienating in times of great alienation, should try to translate, amalgamate, and unify – even if the “whole and the one – unifiable experience” is forever out of reach.

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