WILL ENO: THE PAGE, THE STAGE, AND THE WORD

by

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ABSTRACT

Playwright Will Eno has been inseparably linked to the genre of Absurdism and to playwright Samuel Beckett due to New York Times reviewer Charles Isherwood's catchphrase heavy review of Eno's best known work, *Thom Pain (based on nothing)*. Due to the easily quotable genre provided by Isherwood, Eno has been under-analyzed as a practitioner of the theatre, causing his unique and important contributions to remain unnoticed. Through a careful reading of Eno's currently available works, production reviews, critical essays, relevant theories, and blog postings, this thesis reevaluates Eno and his oeuvre apart from playwright Samuel Beckett and the genre of Absurdism. Eno's use of literature *as* form, conceptually mediatized diegesis, the stage *as* setting, compressed binaries, and the absent word (first noted by Marc Silverstein) set him apart from Beckett and the Absurdists. Eno and his works deserve further study and analysis beyond what they have been granted presently. This thesis presents and analyzes the unique blending of techniques employed by playwright Will Eno.

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

"Mr. Eno is a Samuel Beckett for the Jon Stewart Generation" (Isherwood *Life's*). So powerful was/is this quote from Charles Isherwood's review of Will Eno's first major play, *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* that it appears not only in the promotional material for *Thom Pain* but also in nearly every other review, press release, or article about any of Will Eno's plays or about Will Eno himself.

While I cannot deny the power or importance of this observation, the short snippet from a single review has clearly shaped the perception of this playwright and his plays in terms of both audience expectation and critical review of his works. The comparison to Samuel Beckett has been both positive and negative. The commercial success and notoriety this quote garnered, especially considering its continued usage in reviews, synopses, interviews, blogs and even this thesis, certainly give rise to a positive effect on the whole for both the playwright and his plays commercially. The problem, though, occurs when the association with Beckett carries with it other notions which serve only to pre-frame each particular encounter with this playwright and his plays.

This is far from surprising given our culture of sound-bites, so it is fitting that commercial success is similarly based on such broad, categorizing statements that treat any further examination as wasteful and/or over-particularizing. Eno's plays are, however, mysteriously complex and profound, and for those reasons undeniably important. Eno need not be simply discarded under the file heading of Absurdism (which

has always been a loosely defined category anyway) and should rather be given specific attention for his unique use (and abuse) of the theatrical form.

In his introduction to *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Martin Esslin outlines some differences between what he calls a "good play" and Absurdist plays:

> If a good play must have a cleverly constructed story, these have no story or plot to speak of; if a good play is judged by subtlety of characterization and motivation, these are often without recognizable characters and present the audience with almost mechanical puppets; if a good play has to have a fully explained theme, which is neatly exposed and finally solved, these often have neither a beginning nor an end; if a good play is to hold the mirror up to nature and portray the manners and mannerisms of the age in finely observed sketches, these seem often to be reflections of dreams and nightmares; if a good play relies on witty repartee and pointed dialogue, these often consist of incoherent babblings. (Esslin 21-22)

Eno's work does not fit neatly within this definition of Absurdism. The overriding purpose of this thesis is not, however, to prove or disprove Eno's adherence to the shakily defined genre of Absurdism, nor is it an exercise in pointing out the similarities and differences with Samuel Beckett. It is not even an attack on Charles Isherwood and his infamous quote. Rather, it is an in-depth study of a living playwright's currently available works from the starting point of the major themes, word choices, and motifs of the plays

themselves, rather than from the assumption that Eno has an innate relationship to Beckett or the genre of Absurdism.

This study will investigate a variety of motifs found in the plays themselves, and also in Eno's own writing and speaking about himself and the theatre. It will also examine existing scholarship, critical essays, and reviews of productions (including blogs) to propose alternative, more complex knowledge about an impressive, living, American playwright.

Chapter two primarily deals with Eno's use of literary form within his theatrical plays and examines the impact this literary form has on interpretation, production, and reception of his work. Eno only recently made the jump into theatrical entertainments, having previously been under the tutelage of novelist Gordon Lish. Eno's earlier experience in another form of writing, one which is not performed, has clearly had an impact on the structure of his plays, the characters they contain, and even the way in which the performers speak to the audience. The characters PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE in his play *The Flu Season* being physically embodied by actors and used to serve their namesakes' literary function are only the beginning of Eno's associations to literature as form. Eno and his works are often in agreement with many of the methods utilized by the authors and works examined by Martin Puchner in his innovative book *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-theatricality, and Drama*, which offers a strong examination of the closet drama, a theatrical form not meant to be performed. Eno's works, however, are ultimately meant to be performed and the differences between the

competing conventions of theatrical performance and literary form provoke very interesting stage productions worthy of examination. Eno utilizes the physically present audience throughout his productions. He has remarked on “the endlessly strange idea of theatre” (Houlihan). While this observation may seem initially to stem from his literary training, it also calls attention to an important quality of the theatre that those who are constantly enmeshed in the theatre overlook due to the fact that it is part of their daily lives: performance happens in the same time and space along with the actual audience. *Theater the Lively Art* textbook defines realism as "[b]roadly, an attempt to present onstage people and events corresponding to those in everyday life" (Wilson 109). In *Realism*, Pam Morris notes that there has been an "...accusation that literary realism practices a form of dishonesty, veiling its status as art to suggest it is simply a copy or reflection of life" from other genres' reacting against Realism (Morris 97). She cautions against this simplistic view as she explains how literary realism has an "... implicit contract with the reader that [realism] does refer in some way to a world beyond the text" (Morris 142). Morris's concluding definition of realism "...as performative and based upon a consensual contract with the reader that communication about a non-textual reality is possible can apply equally to poetry and drama..." (162) allows for the genre to communicate beyond the text itself. Realism, regardless of a "consensual contract," does purport to present an accurate fictional depiction of life. As such the genre in the theatre was the impetus to all but ignore the spatially and temporally present audience. This is, if

we think about it, perhaps more strange than recognizing the audience's actual existence. Eno not only recognizes their existence but utilizes and exploits that existence.

Chapter three addresses a second important component of Eno's work: the setting. Many of his plays either list or specifically imply that the stage itself is the setting for the production. This is, unlike a fleeting moment of metatheatre, a constant throughout many of his plays. Also, the temporal reality of the play itself and the audience are in sync. While, for example, Luigi Pirandello's *Six Character's in Search of an Author* takes place in a theatre, the audience is not (at least temporally) present during the production itself in terms of the story in the play. Eno links the temporal reality of the audience in many of his plays through the plot, setting, and the theatre itself. This creates a situation in which the audience is physically, spatially, and temporally present not only during the production, but also the story, and are thus included in the dramatic enactment.

The effect of the audience's inclusion within the play itself is particularly worthy of examination. Eno spoke of this during an interview for his play *Thom Pain: (based on nothing)* when he imagined a reversal of the directional flow of force through the forth wall. "But what if the force and gravity of the audience made it break the other way? What if the audience forces the events of the evening rather than just sitting there until it's over?" (Houlihan). The audience does affect the performance to an extent. The wildly differing responses to the various productions of *Thom Pain* seem to span the entire spectrum: love it, hate it, or leave mid-performance (or earlier). In a production of *Thom Pain* individual audience members may well be brought up on the stage itself.

Chapter three also addresses the convention-breaking nature of Eno's plays. Eno's characters utilize direct address throughout, speak of utilizing theatrical convention and then ignore the convention they just mentioned/described. His characters also constantly point out and reinforce the fact that the audience is in a theatre. They do so by addressing the audience, the stage manager, the lighting instruments, and mentioning the existence of props. Eno constantly reminds his audience that they are in a theatre, a place of falsehood, and yet somehow manages to forge a strong connection between the participants. This is evidenced by reviews and blog postings from audience members who attended various productions. This is a stronger connection precisely because the falsehood of their surroundings has been acknowledged.

Chapter four mines the text of the plays to foreground two prevalent motifs throughout Eno's body of work: 1) the compression of binary opposites and 2) the absent word. These two motifs, briefly defined below, when utilized individually or together, create a larger world than that contained by the walls of the theatre building itself and convey a larger meaning than words are able to on their own during a production. Eno's use of these motifs seems to blend the literary medium's very specific usage of words while also fully utilizing the "endlessly strange idea of theatre" (Houlihan) which is associated with the spatio-temporal reality addressed in chapter two in order to fully break with theatrical convention.

The first motif, the compression of binary opposites, is constantly utilized throughout Eno's work and is a clear marker of his writing. This involves Eno's

utilization of words with starkly opposite meanings in close spatial proximity on the page and close temporal proximity on the stage. The end result of this compression is a devaluation of the meaning able to be generated through language. The extremes cease to convey meaning because he has placed them so close together as to erode the entire spectrum of meaning between the words. This ultimately desensitizes us to their individual usefulness in communication. The second motif, the absent word, can be considered an after-effect of the compression of binary opposites. When the meaning-carrying component of language has been called into question, the characters in Eno's plays are unable to find the correct words for what they want to convey and simply leave them out. They are even unable to find a substitute word.

The eradication of language as a carrier of meaning would presumably create a situation in which the writer is unable to communicate anything at all. Yet, the “endlessly strange idea of theatre” (Houlihan) picks up the slack left by the compressed binaries and absent words and is counter-intuitively able to invoke a greater meaning than could ever be communicated by words alone.

These five chapters represent an early study into the career of a living American playwright who will certainly be the subject of continued scholarship in coming years and who may even be included in theatre history textbooks yet to be written. It is my sincere hope that his inclusion in future textbooks, however brief, will at the very least be found in a paragraph other than the one devoted to Samuel Beckett and/or the genre of Absurdism.

CHAPTER II

THE PAGE: LITERARY FORM

Charles Isherwood's now infamous comparison of Eno to Beckett situates the playwright and all of his works, not just the reviewed *Thom Pain (based on nothing)*, as absurdist, and thus ranks the plays and the playwright in opposition to the dominant form of realism. What is of interest to me is the effect this genre categorization may have on the subsequent reception of Eno's plays. While Absurdism may be an expedient way of ranking Eno and his plays, the genre heading also ignores, and removes further interest in thinking about, whatever may be occurring in his work of non-absurdist value, thus hushing further exploration beyond that which is encapsulated by the genre heading.

In his book *Stage Fright*, Martin Puchner define's the term *diegesis*:

> I propose a term to designate the descriptive and narrative strategies through which modern drama tries to channel, frame, control, and even interrupt what it perceives to be the unmediated theatricality of the stage and its actors. This term is *diegesis* (21-22).

Eno's creative use of *diegesis*, a controlling of the theatrical through the literary, creates a new type of theatre which desires what Roland Barthes defines as a "writerly" audience to apply meaning to a complex production which will ultimately be labeled by the narrators in the production as exactly what it is: a play. This "writerly" audience is actively involved within the meaning-making process of the production rather than waiting for explanations to be spoon fed by the production. Barthes explains that the "reader" (or in this case audience member) is ". . .no longer a consumer, but a producer of

the text" (Barthes *S/Z* 4). *The Flu Season* helps to illustrate the irrationality of grouping Eno with the absudists instead of recognizing the importance of his use of literature to affect the very form of the play itself. This chapter explores Eno's use of the literary medium's form in his plays, most notably *The Flu Season*, and suggests that there is more occurring in the works of Will Eno than has previously been explored.

The Flu Season is a play about a man and a woman under the care of a doctor and a nurse. The man and woman meet, fall in love, and then fall out of love during their brief stay in a mental hospital. The subtle yet interesting story element is that the character MAN is writing the love story (which is the script of *The Flu Season*) throughout the performance. WOMAN asks MAN "Will this be going into your play?" (Eno *Flu* 60). While the writing of the play is not the focus of the script, it is a revealing element because it carefully utilizes the literary form Eno has placed on the stage. The previously mentioned main story, however, is filtered through two narrators, PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE. These characters stand between the enacted story and the audience to somehow piece together the fragmented script written by MAN in the story of the play while the events are occurring to him rather than after they have already occurred.

In Eno's presumably unperformed section of "notes" for a production of his play *The Flu Season*, he describes how it is *through* the narrators "…that the feelings of the play pass, on their way to the audience" (*Flu* 18). In the more recently published version of the script (*The Flu Season and Other Plays*[1]) the "notes" section is even longer. The

[1] This is the most recently published version of the script which includes some additional plays. It seems that Eno is constantly revising the notes for his plays rather than the script itself. So, in this most

above quote has been removed but Eno now states that ". . .whatever feelings the narrators have about the play and its story (and they should have many strong feelings) should be seen more in their suppression than in their expression" (*Flu and Other* 51). "The Prologue and Epilogue believe what they are saying, and they care about the audience (though in very different ways)" (*Flu and Other* 51-52). The presence of these two narrators and the subsequent specificity Eno requires for them in relation to the audience suggests Eno is using what Martin Puchner calls *diegesis*. Eno is clearly utilizing descriptive and narrative strategies. He has placed literary form on the stage in the characters of PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE who view the story from their respective literary positions ". . .the Prologue is not aware of the Epilogue, the latter is aware of the former" (*Flu and Other* 52). These two characters also narrate the fragmented story and guide the audience through the play ". . .the Prologue and Epilogue are narrators. . ." (53).

Martin Puchner's book *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* examines at length the literary theatrical form of closet drama. Eno's work has much in common with this literary form of theatre *not* meant to be performed. Puchner offers a single, key defining factor for what might be considered a closet drama when he states that "[i]ntentionality and reception history are, however, only the external markers of what I take to be intrinsic to the closet drama as a genre: its resistance to the theater" (14). PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE certainly create a physical resistance to the theatre by

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recently published version the notes are longer and more specific. I assume that Eno is refining the parameters for future productions of his works based on past miscommunications.

their very presence as literary forms as well as their mediation between the play itself and the audience. Eno's resistance to the theatre can also, however, be examined in relation to his creative writing origins. The fact that he began his creative work in the medium of literature helps explain the presence of PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE and the use of a literary form in *The Flu Season*. Eno's training was originally in the read word of fiction rather than the performed word found in drama.

> …[Eno] says he avoided writing for many years. He studied fiction writing with novelist Gordon Lish but points to a short play by Don DeLillo published in Lish's literary magazine, *The Quarterly*, as the inspiration that directed him to the stage. "I'm really attracted to the mystery and the endlessly strange idea of theater," he said (Houlihan).

PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE are Eno's way to frame theatricality and reception in his play. Using literary devices to referee between the fractured representational moments of the enacted story and the audience's reception, Eno successfully mediates *theatre* as theatricality while simultaneously engaging the audience on a different level: story. Instead of just showing the audience that his production *is* theatre, Eno *tells* them. As PROLOGUE muses in his opening speech, ". . .Welcome to a play whose title is *The Snow Romance*" (*Flu and Other* 5) to which EPILOGUE retorts "About the title, the play is now called *The Flu Season*" (6).

The Flu Season's self-referencing theatrical entertainment is nothing new for Eno. *Thom Pain* was described as "existential stand-up" (Isherwood, *Life's*) and included the

audience in the script under the *dramatis personae* as a character. In his brief play *Intermission* Eno allows the actual audience to stare at a group of fictional audience members during a fictional intermission, which is the actual play. *Tragedy: a tragedy* places imaginary cameras between actor and audience, and all of Eno's plays carefully and specifically negotiate the physical space of the theatre through some specific form of mediation (a topic which will be examined in depth in the next chapter).

Eno's specific use of the literary form is worth examination apart from the absurdist ties found in Isherwood's quote. Puchner notes that ". . .diegesis not only effects the filtering of theater through literature but also creates, in the process, a new form of theater" (Puchner 27). The categorization of Eno as an absurdist serves to pre-frame the reception of the playwright and his works by inaccurately pre-defining them, and possibly excluding any reception of those works as boundary-breaking. Genre categories, notes Jill Dolan in *The Feminist Spectator as Critic*, are like canons: ideologically based and exclusionary to anything other than what has already been accepted within them. "Like canons, genre categories are also expedient ways of ranking drama or literature according to what is actually a social hierarchy" (33). This social hierarchy of forms not only cites a dominant form (Realism) but predetermines the specific requirements within certain forms. Unsurprisingly, non-realistic forms often fail to fit. "Realism requires very little of spectators… But, to engage with non-realism, spectators need to become active participants in meaning-making," observes Tori Haring-Smith in her discussion of the necessity of a new dramaturgical language for discussing

non-realist scripts (*Dramaturging Non-Realism* 50-51). Eno, in an interview with *American Theatre*, responded to the question "It isn't theatre if…" by saying, "There is a lot of 'theatre' around that isn't 'theatre,' as it makes no use of the audience's imagination. There's nothing to do, except sit there until you leave" (104).

This passive consumption is what Eno wants to combat. Pam Morris neatly summarizes Roland Barthes's definitions of "readerly" and "writerly" texts saying "The readerly work offers itself to the reader to be passively consumed…" (Morris 32). In contrast, "*Writerly* texts have to be actively produced by the reader rather than consumed, so that the reader in this sense 'writes' the text in the act of reading" (Morris 33), or in this case viewing. Eno's transformation from writing for readers to writing for theatre audiences already indicates a move away from the readerly, especially since he takes great pains to ensure that his narrators involve and relate to the audience *as* an audience. As subsequent chapters will demonstrate, Eno also compels the audience to question not simply the play at hand but also themselves.

Taken without the narrators, *The Flu Season* is a fragmented love story filled with contradictory and multiple meanings. Is it possible that Eno is staging a writerly text (fragmented/difficult) through a readerly form (literature) for a writerly production (the physicalization of the theatre)? His fragmented love story is certainly more tightly held together because of the narrators, who literally invoke the structuring and form of literature to make an otherwise writerly text readerly. The stage's conventions, and the expectation of audiences who are used to those conventions, make this play challenging.

As reviewer Elyse Sommer noted of *The Flu Season*, "Clearly this is something [t]hat not only requires the audience to pay close attention but to be willing to forego expectations for easily comprehended characters and actions. . ." (Sommer). The dominant form of realism doesn't allow for fragmented stories; direct address; dual, omnipotent narrators with differing opinions who exist in a different temporal reality (before and after the play itself); or characters who meander between plot, narration, and live event.

Will Eno's relationship to the Modernist closet dramatists, as well as literature, is one blended with a desire to be performed. The fact that a text formatted as a theatrical play is intended *not* to be performed is generally the clearest indication of a closet drama. Eno's strong links with closet drama, his desire *to be* performed, and his use of literary form creates a blending worthy of further examination. Stèphane Mallarmé, one of the closet dramatists Puchner examines, had a desire to put a book on stage with his work *Livre*. Puchner also traces two earlier works by Mallarmé, *Hérodiade* and *Igitur*, as precursors to understanding his later important work *Livre*. Mallarmé's means of staging his book are applicable to methods found in Eno's works.

In *Hérodiade* Puchner notes that the most striking element is the ". . .extended diegetic evocation of setting and characters, ninety-six lines of densely knit imagery describing a pond, a tower. . ." (61). *Thom Pain (based on nothing)*, Eno's best known work, is a long monologue which bears a particular resemblance to *Hérodiade* to the extent that Pain, the title character, tells a series of stories containing "densely knit imagery" which evoke for the audience "setting and characters" as well as describing,

often in the third person, the character's own troubled life and troubled past. Puchner notes of *Hérodiade* that "[t]his entire monologue is nothing but a particular kind of implied stage direction, implied because it is a part of. . . direct speech, a speech that assumed the function of staging this play" (61). The above can certainly be said for our narrator guides in *The Flu Season* as well as the title character in *Thom Pain (based on nothing)*. These characters do not physically enact the events, but merely recount them in descriptive words.

A conceptual link to Eno can also be found in Mallarmé's *Igitur*. Puchner notes *Igitur* is sure of only one thing, its "resistance to the real, existing theater and therefore announces: 'This story is addressed to the intelligence of the reader staging everything'" (66). So, too, does Eno reveal the nature of his work as a fiction through the narrators in *The Flu Season* and also through the title character in *Thom Pain*. Similarly, the monologue/story mode in *Thom Pain* leaves the staging, as it were, to the theatre audience, as do the descriptions amidst the fragmented love story being half-presented in *The Flu Season* leave much to the "intelligence of the [viewer]" to fill in the gaps intentionally left by the playwright. This notion of "intelligence" fits nicely with Eno's desire to have an active theatre: a "writerly" theatre.

In addition to the self-revelatory staging left to the reader/viewer, Puchner notes that *Igitur*'s "desperate attempts to bridge the gap between body and meaning" (66) should not be overlooked because these attempts created a ". . . new use of stage directions. For the place from which the narrator speaks is the stage direction" (66).

Thom Pain walks out of the light and it doesn't follow him. He describes in vivid detail his past(s) and paints pictures with words , setting up the evening with the unavoidable mental image of: “Don't imagine a pink elephant” (*Eno, Pain* 16*).* In *The Flu Season* the audience are treated to multiple instances of description (from the narrators) in place of physical action, in much the same fashion that Puchner finds in *Igitur*.

Puchner concludes his section on Mallarmé with the unfinished work the *Livre*, which is “. . . disappointing in its unfinished and fragmentary nature” (67-68). He returns to the problem of the human actor and suggests that a ceremonial program enacted in the *Livre* of bells, entrances, displays of the text, etc. serve to “. . . [keep] the theatre of mimetic impersonation at bay” (69). This point was so important, in fact, that Mallarmé called his reader of these texts the operator. Eno, too, specifically names his narrators with literary titles: PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE. Eno's purpose here, however, is opposite that of Mallarmé's. Rather than distancing the audience, Eno's literary devices serve to create greater emotional relation to the events occurring in the presented story. Eno reveals in the most recently published version of the script[2] that “[t]he play has a close relation to each of [the narrators'] identities and histories” (*Flu and Other* 52). He also notes that “. . .it might be that [the narrators]. . . have, in an earlier life, suffered the fate of the Woman. Or suffered the fate of one or more of the other characters in the play. Thus, their relation to the play is real and immediate and based in feelings. . .” (53).

[2] I was able to identify at least two published versions of the play. Each was published by the Theatre Communications Group. The first was published in 2004 as a solo work and the second was published in 2008 along with additional scripts written by Eno.

More than simply character names, however, Eno's relationship to the *Livre* is furthered by a similar presentation of character. As Puchner notes of the *Livre*, "This fragment of a scene is set by a type of descriptive stage direction, a narrative voice conjuring up a brief moment, almost a tableau" (73). While Eno arguably conjures up longer instances than the *Livre*'s tableau's, it is nonetheless important to consider the moments which theatre goers specifically remembered from a show like *Thom Pain: (based on nothing).* Reviews for the show revealed not so much the character of Thom Pain but rather the fragmentary moments he describes: ". . .memories of bees, puddles, dogs. . ." (Shade), ". . .a boy and his dog" (Heller), ". . .a boy stung by a swarm of bees" (Holman), ". . .a boy whose dog dies after a thunderstorm. . ." (Williams). Even when the character of Thom Pain was discussed, it appeared that the character was *only* revealed and constructed by the audience from such fragmentary descriptions.

These fragments, in the end, are what link Eno's characters and Mallarmé's so strongly: their composition based on fragmented events. Mallarmé, Puchner notes, called for "[t]he figure who is nothing" (Crayonne qtd. in Puchner 72), which is exactly what Thom Pain *is* (based on nothing) and what *The Flu Season*'s characters are: "a pile of words" (*Flu* 65). In fact, the main characters of *The Flu Season* are really the personified literary devices of PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE, themselves more fragmented than the story they narrate. Eno, however, differs greatly from Mallarmé. Puchner's main focus is what the *Livre* is able to achieve because of the absence of the actor: ". . . the *Livre* 'omits' these figures and instead extracts from them single details. . ." (75). Eno, of

course, can never fully "omit" his characters precisely due to his use of the theatrical medium. Thom Pain, or at least the actor portraying him, actually stands in front of us. The same is true for MAN, WOMAN, PROLOGUE, and EPILOGUE. Eno, however, doesn't want to replace or erase the humanness of his performers. Eno is unwilling to omit the actors themselves, because it is, in fact, the live persons that people the audience and stage which hold reality for him. He uses these live persons to expose the false idea that a fictional presentation could hold any reality at all.

Eno's placement of a book on stage, then, is quite different from Mallarmé's. Mallarmé had a great "… reliance on the literary text, [and he constructed] …the theater as a book, [had a] distrust of public audiences, and [an] aversion to actors…" which Puchner believes comes "… from a resistance to the theater, a resistance that keeps the theater at the center of literature" (Puchner 80). This resistance keeps theatre at the center precisely because of the origin of the resistance in the first place. "The negation and rejection inherent in the term *anti-theatricalism* is therefore not to be understood as a doing away with theater, but as a process that is dependent on that which it negates and to which it therefore remains calibrated" (Puchner 2). Eno, while relying on the literary text and using personified literary figures to structure his dramatic work, does not have any distrust of the audience (as he has included them in the *dramatis personae*[3]) or an aversion to actors.[4]

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[3] As in *Thom Pain (based on nothing)*.

[4] He names several actors whom he would love to have perform his monologues or work with in general in an *American Theatre* interview.

Eno, unlike Mallarmé, does not only "keep theater at the center of literature" (80) but rather literally places literature at the center of theatre in *The Flu Season* by housing his literary characters between enacted story and physically present audience. Reviewer Jeannette Williams writes that in *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* there is a ". . .vagueness of the script lines that masquerade as half-finished introductions to a profound suggestion the audience is supposed to complete" (Williams). Eno's literary characters PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE are bookended by a writerly script on one side of the fourth wall and a live audience on the other side at a production of the work. Theatre surrounds the book. In fact, the entire process of writing is infused into the theatrical experience in the subtle references to MAN writing the work while enacting the play. Far from simply being a metatheatrical device, the act of writing informs the form itself. The personified literary devices of PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE serve to heighten our experience of the production. They serve as the *diegesis*, to mediate, but they also complicate. Through the narrators we simultaneously sense *before* and *after*, the beginning and the end, not as experience but as story. PROLOGUE has great hopes for the story as it progresses, not knowing the end; EPILOGUE is fully aware of the outcome from the beginning and serves to poison PROLOGUE's hopeful sentiments after they have been uttered. We are kept separate from the characters enacting the story and led through the story by PROLOGUE (re-experiencing the anguish anew) and EPILOGUE (with contrasting and often negative opinions on the events, as Epilogue already knows the ending).

At the end *of The Flu Season* Eno's character EPILOGUE states, "There was never any woman, never any nurse, nor doctor, nor certainly any man. Isn't that sad… It was a pile of words. Isn't that sad" *(Flu* 65*).* After sitting through an entire production full of characters, once removed from proximity by two narrators (themselves occasionally involved in the story), we are told abruptly that "It was a pile of words" (65). This "pile" presupposes a concrete, physical, and tangible object in words. The play was written. The words were written. The words exist on paper. The "pile" is a script, a lie, a predetermined ending.

A primary focus on structure itself is crucial to understanding Eno. While the act of writing is clearly being explored in and by the character MAN in *The Flu Season*, the act of writing is also literally being depicted both visually and vocally with the unavoidable omnipresence of the personified literary devices PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE. Eno attacks the very idea that his play is anything but a total fabrication at the end of *The Flu Season.* He also writes about form itself in his self described "essay" (written in the form of a personal letter) to his (perhaps fictional) niece, Virginia. Eno muses about the "human being" and the "eulogy" being popular forms in order to help Virginia avoid showing up with "a piece of cardboard with some spray-painted macaroni glued to it" for her school art project (Eno, *Texas* 355). Eventually Eno clarifies his thoughts: "If you wrote a eulogy for pop music, then you might have something else on your hands…Do that, take a common form, some common content, and there you go, into the new night, into history, maybe, and difference" (356). He goes on to instruct his

young niece by saying "… just never do what they tell you to do, exactly… you will still stay far-enough away to stay you, and maybe they will be happy for the difference" (357). In Eno's vocabulary "staying you" involves playing with form and convention. It also involves a particularly active ("writerly") role for the audience.

The narrators, PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE, also serve as a framing device for the setting, which is described as "… a mental health institution of a not very specific type. The play also takes place, certainly, in a theatre, as each narrator makes clear" (*Flu* 17). This marks another use of *diegesis* by Eno that doesn't just remind the audience that they are in a theatre but demands they recognize that fact.

Perhaps the theatre physically embodies the falsehood of representation: the physical space where false lives are lived out for our entertainment. Perhaps the rejection of the theatrical extends to the very idea of theatre or representation itself. Eno, then, is not trying to distance his audience from the narrative story through these narrative techniques, but through open and clear statements he is rejecting truths that audiences might wish to locate within the theatre in general. The truth in Eno's works is to be found in the communication between the actual physical bodies in the audience and on the stage rather than being found specifically in plot or story. The "writerly" script Eno has written is filtered through an act of reading (embodied for the stage) in the characters of PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE. However, this innovation of a *book on stage* would seem to require a new attitude from audiences, critics, and scholars with which to view his work. This new attitude requires a recognition of something different and new occurring

in the theatre (rather than resting on the loosely defined genre of Absurdism) in order to compare and contrast these plays with the most popular/common forms of representation today.

As Elyse Sommer noted at the end of her review of *The Flu Season*, "[this] is not the play for those who prefer their story telling straight up, with a beginning, middle and upbeat ending; but adventurous theater goers will want to make [*The Flu Season*] part of their Off-Broadway theater season" (Sommer). Eno merges closet drama, literature, and theatre in a desire for communication. Is this a new genre? If so, what is that genre called? "Given Mallarmé's rebellion against the genre of drama and its relation to the theater, it is perhaps not surprising that he had difficulties giving a name to the theatrical and literary genre he was creating" (Puchner 70). This trouble with genre is found for Eno's other works as well. Another play by Eno called *Tragedy: a tragedy* has been included in a collection of plays by playwrights whom editor Mac Wellman called "… a group of young writers whose art is almost that of the paranormal, nay, the normal paranormal" (vii). He goes on to typify this work as "… the theater of the normal parareal and hyper-normal…" (vii). Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponte in her review of *Thom Pain* suggested ". . . contradiction as genre" (756). Young Jean Lee, in the preface to an anthology of new works in which a play by Eno is included, separates the work of these new playwrights from predefined categories and/or intentions they could be stamped with:

> . . .we are all playing with theatrical conventions, structure, and language in ways that excite us, without consideration of the demands of mainstream commercial theater or of the imperatives of some outdated notion of the avant-garde. (viii)

It is clear that Eno is using an interesting blend of theatre and literature. So what, in the end, is Eno's play doing? "[*Thom Pain*] is no [*Waiting for Godot*]. It is filled with description and forces the audience to imagine a scene apart from the sole actor on stage" (Williams). Perhaps *The Flu Season* is a love story, perhaps it is a throwaway piece of absurdist writing from a guy who wants to be Beckett, or maybe, just maybe, the writing is an example of something new, springing from the forms of literature and landing squarely on the stage (purposefully) but all the while maintaining its uniqueness despite its new environment and the presence of an audience. Even if, as Eno says in his "note" prefacing *The Flu Season* "This is not to say that there is anything terrifically complicated going on here" (*Flu* 18), one thing is certain: Eno *is* doing something different, no matter what name it is given.

CHAPTER III

THE STAGE: QUESTIONING EXISTENCE

Philip Auslander's book *Liveness* examines the often confusing relationship between the live and the mediatized. It also examines the defensive and often unfounded position from which the theatre and its proponents battle against the mediatized forms to which they refer as lesser. At the forefront of the battle is the undeniable fact that we now live (and in fact have lived for many years) in a mediatized society. Television, film, radio, vinyl, 8 track, tape, cd, mp3, flac, dvd, Blu-Ray, and the ever changing entity that is the internet are proof of our heavily mediatized times.

It is important, at this juncture, to clarify a difference in my usage of the terms "mediatized" and "mediated" as I do make use of them for different reasons. I will employ the term "mediatized" as Auslander does ". . . to indicate that a particular cultural object is a product of the mass media or of media technology" (Auslander 5). This will include things like television, film, and photography. The term "mediated" is used very similarly to the term *diegesis* from chapter one as a "mediated" event is one has something *in-between* and is, thus, limiting a passage between two groups (in this case the performer and the audience) that would otherwise be unmediated. Thus, television is a "mediatized" form that is by its nature "mediated" by the presence of the camera and the television between the performer(s) and the audience. In contrast, *The Flu Season*, as explored in chapter one, is "mediated" because of the two narrators who stand between the audience and the enacted story, yet is not "mediatized" because there is no use of "mass media or of media technology" (5).

Given the concern over the concept of the “live,” this chapter examines Will Eno's tendency to literally set his enacted plays in situations which involve live audiences (including his use of the actual theatre itself as setting) as well as his tendency to provoke direct interaction with the audience during the course of a play. A second characteristic of Eno's works is his implied use of mediatization *as* story elements for a diegetic purpose. This chapter examines Auslanders arguments *in relation to* Eno's scripts. I suggest that Eno's use of the stage as setting as well as his specific use of mediatized diegetic elements go beyond the restricted view of the "live" offered by Auslander and force us to reexamine the powerful nature of theatre within a mediatized culture.

First I will examine Eno's use of diegesis through mediatized forms. These take a variety of different guises in his plays including radio, television, photography, and film. I suggest Eno has created a truly engaging and satisfying kind of presence and proximity by examining his works using Auslander's analyses of the state of live performance in *Liveness*.

Auslander examines the problem of presence in live performance by explaining the necessity of separation between performer and audience in order to keep the performance intact. Presence, however, is not as problematic in mediatized forms because the promise of presence is never expected in a mediatized work. “Live performance places us in the living presence of the performers, other human beings with whom we desire unity and can imagine achieving it, because they are there, in front of us. Yet live performance also inevitably frustrates that desire since its very occurrence presupposes a

gap between performer and spectator" (Auslander 57). The promise of presence held forth by live performances, inevitably fails to be delivered. Rather, live performance yields an unavoidable lack, owing to the inability of performance to remain performance while actually offering presence. Mediatized forms, however, where no presence is expected, are able to offer a greater experience of proximity precisely because there are no failed expectations. "Whereas mediatized performance can provide the occasion for a satisfactory experience of community *within* the audience, live performance inevitably yields a sense of the failure to achieve community *between* the audience and the performer" (Auslander 57). It is clear that the type of presence in each scenario is different. In the case of live events it is the proximity between performers and audiences that is offered, sought, and ultimately denied whereas mediatized presence is created within the audience community in a way that the live's promise of (performer) presence cannot satisfy.

Auslander notes that television initially modeled itself on live theatre. "Film pre-dates television" (12), as Auslander notes. He wondered why television chose, as its model, the theatre instead of film and quickly provides the answer: "Television's essence was seen in its ability to transmit events as they occur, not in a filmic capacity to record events for later viewing" (Auslander 12). This "essence" of "liveness" found in television at its inception still lives on today, long after television has largely ceased to be a realm of live broadcasts. ". . .[I]ntimacy and immediacy are precisely the qualities attributed to television that enabled it to displace live performance" (Auslander 32). The displacement

of live performance is increasingly apparent in our mediatized society. This has affected the way live performance itself is done. “The ubiquity of reproductions of performances of all kinds in our culture has led to the depreciation of live presence, which can only be compensated for by making the perceptual experience of the live as much as possible like that of the mediatized, even in cases where the live event provides its own brand of proximity” (Auslander 36).

The depreciation of live presence is complicated, but Auslander provides ample proof of this concept in action. He references video screens at sporting events and concerts and easily suggests that it is largely the screens that spectators choose to view, the mediatized form of the concurrently occurring live performance over the live performers themselves. This provides proximity unavailable during the live event. “Because we are already intimately familiar with the images from our televisual and filmic experience of them, we see them as proximate no matter how far away they may be in physical distance” (Auslander 35). This proximity *through* mediation is what I wish to explore in reference to Will Eno and his works.

In Eno's works it is clear that he utilizes a variety of forms of diegesis in order to demarcate very clearly the performers from the audience. I will initially focus on the mediatized forms of diegesis found in his plays *Tragedy: a tragedy, A Canadian Lies Dying on American Ice, The Bully Composition,* and *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Rain.*

In *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Rain* the audience encounters two characters, both making videos for a dating service, at the moment they are taping. This man and woman

may be recording their videos at the same time or they may not be. It is clear, however, that they are not in the same story space, as each is unaware of the other's presence and they effectively deliver intertwined monologues. These characters are also separated from the audience by a mediatized diegetic encapsulated in the idea of a video recording device even though no recording device exists.

The recording devices are not called for in the script and in the most recent production at The Flea there were no physical video recording devices between the actors and the audience. In Dorothy Chansky's review of the show she noted that "[t]he actors faced forward, with Hutchison's eyes trained upward, to the last row of the audience, and Tomei's downward at the first row of feet" (Chansky 460). The devices, then, are assumed to be in use based on contextual observations and direct lines from the script. In any case, an audience member's experience of viewing a taping session did not include a visual confirmation of the device used to capture it. Rather, this production choice counter-intuitively removed the very proof of the device's existence and rendered a greater implied and felt proximity than would be possible with the devices present.

The Bully Composition, also included in the collection of short pieces with *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Rain,* provides us with a physically present mediatized diegetic device present in a photographic camera. The short play is centered around the idea of recreating an old war photograph using the audience members as stand-ins for the now long dead soldiers. This piece, perhaps more than the others, challenges the notion that a mediatized representation (in this case, the photograph) can *actually* lead us into closer

community/communication with the authentic event. While Auslander does believe that mediatization can provide the feeling of closeness to the performer(s) Eno is commenting on the inability of representations to depict the truth accurately. As the argument between the two individuals in the script makes clear, the interpretation inherent in even the idea of recreating this image from long ago, the feelings from long ago, and even the time of day (is the sun setting or rising?) belies the perceived amount of "truth" available through photographic means.

A Canadian Lies Dying on American Ice is presented as a live radio broadcast at a hockey game during a lull in the match caused by a Canadian player being injured. The sportscasters are in the awkward (yet not uncommon) position of having to fill on-air time with anything until the game resumes. In this play it is the voices of the broadcasters and the events of which they speak that are seemingly diegetically mediatized for the audience in the theatre in order to create the sense of hearing the events unfold through the live radio broadcast.

Finally, *Tragedy: a tragedy* takes the form of a live breaking-news broadcast and depicts several correspondents in various areas of a town reporting to the audience, and to each other, what is (or is not) happening during a period of time after the sun has set. Again, television cameras are not present, but are rather implied by the specific forms of direct address, spatial relationships between the characters on stage (they do not see each other except through implied mediatization) and, in the case of the character

CONSTANCE AT HOME**,** there is a requested movement, looking at one camera to another, written into the script in the form of stage directions (*Flu & Other* 75).

What is of interest to me here is how Eno has acknowledged the unavoidable nature of our mediatized society and utilized that mediatized promise of community which Auslander pointed out to transcend: 1) what is possible in the mediatized form (*actual* liveness in the form of real bodies on the stage is now possible because the mediatization is only implied), and 2) potentially transcend the *expectations* of a live audience of his works (implied mediatization implies a denial of the possibility for a connection to/with the performers but since the mediatization is *only* implied a greater connection *is* possible: physical presence).

Auslander notes that "[t]he ubiquity of reproductions of performances of all kinds in our culture has led to the depreciation of live presence, which can only be compensated for by making the perceptual experience of the live as much as possible like that of the mediatized, even in cases where the live event provides its own brand of proximity" (Auslander 36). This is evident in Auslander's examples of music videos becoming the basis for live music tour performances. Auslander is primarily concerned, however, with the incorporation of actual mediatized forms occurring alongside or within live events. His interests include instant replay screens at baseball games as well as video screens at concerts. What I believe he largely misses is the ability of mediatization to be quickly invoked as an experienced concept without the actual necessity of a mediatized form taking place, precisely because of the prevalence of media in our current society. This

allows Eno, through context, text, and specific conventions, to imply mediatization when in fact mediatization isn't actually taking place.

The implication of mediatization creates the possibility for the communal bonding caused by television's implied proximity/actual distance while *also* allowing for the theatre's promise of presence and actual proximity. In fact, if Eno were to actually request or require video cameras to be present he would essentially be *limiting* the proximity both of the live spectator (whose view might be blocked by the device) and also, strangely, altering the felt notion of televisual proximity precisely because of the intermediary object's physical presence, whether blocking anyone's sightlines or not. This strange notion of proximity is not the only peculiarity of the televised medium. Auslander notes other peculiarities inherent to the recorded medium.

> The current practice of taping before "a live studio audience" is a simulation, rather than a replication, of the conditions of live theatrical production. The presence of the studio audience on the television screen and soundtrack implies that the program is a record of a real event. Because the programs are edited, however, the home audience does not see the same performance as the studio audience, but sees a performance that never took place. (Auslander 22)

Productions of Eno's works *do* take place. They take place at the moment they are being performed and within a spatial and temporal relationship to the audience. It is not, however, simply Eno's flirtation with the implication of mediatized diegetic elements that

allow his plays to provoke a proximity between audience members. Eno, through another specific strategy, has removed the mediatized all together and put center stage, in its place, the undeniable spatio-temporal relationship between audiences and performers .

This spatio-temporal relationship is the stage *as* setting. Eno frequently uses the "theatre" or the "stage" as the setting for his plays. This is an important characteristic of his plays and serves to link the audience more strongly to the characters, actors, and the work itself as well as to each other. Through Eno's anti-theatricalism, his use of the stage as setting serves to break with convention, shatter the fourth wall, and remove the frame. Though some of his plays do not use the stage as setting, they maintain the concurrent temporal reality with the audience who are always, in one way or another, treated *as* a present audience. Throughout the course of an Eno play the audience will, at various times, be participants, experience connection with the characters, and (ideally) question their own existence. Eno's anti-theatricalism contributes to the profound and interesting way his plays affect the audience. This is true even *without* mediatization in these plays.

Eno's short play *Oh, the Humanity* opens with MAN and WOMAN sitting in two chairs (arranged like the front seat of a car) facing the audience. Eno specifies the absence of anything other than the actors and the chairs to indicate that this is supposed to be a car. WOMAN puts on lipstick (indicating the presence of a mirror) while MAN inserts a key into the ignition with WOMAN making the appropriate accompanying sounds of an engine not starting. MAN gets out to check what is wrong.

WOMAN. (Checking her lipstick, arranging her hair:) Is it the battery?

MAN. No.

WOMAN. What is it? Are we stuck?

MAN. It's just chairs.

WOMAN. What, hon?

MAN. It's just two chairs (Eno, *Humanity*, 5).

They are, of course, just two chairs. This is, of course, just a theatre. This startling realization by MAN causes the audience to be, at once, pulled out of the fictional world that was created by their so-called suspension of disbelief while simultaneously being ever more strongly linked in that disbelief with MAN. This exchange between MAN and the audience illustrates at least one common truth of the theatre: people are willing to believe. With the absence of anything on stage to denote a car other than two chairs and the actors' motions and sound effects, the audience will accept that the two chairs are a car.

Eno is, of course, banking on this convention of theatre (suspension of disbelief) to give him the opportunity to turn it completely around. The desire and requirement to accept the storytelling are immediately betrayed , however, in the fourth line of the short script: "MAN. It's just chairs" (Eno, *Humanity* 5). Is this funny? Is it shocking? Do we feel betrayed by the playwright? Do we feel stupid for believing two chairs were a car? Do we question theatre? I contend that all of these responses are possible and perhaps desirable. One thing is for certain: the "magic" of theatre has been dispelled at the

beginning of the play. The “magic” is also dispelled at the end of this short play in the form of a character who breaches the fourth wall. This character will be discussed later.

Any synopsis of an Eno play is impossible without mention of the audience. The impact of the work itself is less dependent on an understanding of whatever plot one is able to discern from Eno's works and more dependent on the live audience's participation in/with the theatrical event. The audience is one of the most important and imperative elements in understanding Eno's plays precisely because he has involved them *in* the space and time of the production.

While *Oh, the Humanity* is certainly indicative of Eno's convention-breaking ways his play *Thom Pain* breaks the boundaries between audience and character entirely. One of the first things to strike a person reading *Thom Pain* would be the setting of the play: “*Theatre*” (Eno *Pain* 11). Similarly, though less specifically clear, this sense would occur at the beginning of the play in which Thom speaks “[h]ow wonderful to see you all” (*Pain* 13) from the darkness at the beginning of the evening. We would be remiss to conclude our examination into the, as Eno says, “. . .endlessly strange idea of theatre. . .” (Houlihan) with the setting alone. While the stage itself as the setting conjures up reasonable ideas of metatheatre and Luigi Pirandello's important work *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, Eno's works, unlike Pirandello's, take place at the very moment of the actual production. Where many works depicting the theatre or the stage as the setting list the plot and story at a time other than the then current experience of the audience, Eno's work is specifically designed to occur in the same time *with* the theatre patrons’

experience of the work. This is no small difference. In fact, Eno's concern with this peculiarity makes him, I believe, one of our most important theatre artists today.

The very brief descriptions below indicate the frequency of Eno's setting choice of the stage. *The Flu Season*, for example, depicts a fragmented story which is filtered through our personified literary device narrators who stand at the proscenium and, as Eno notes, make sure that we know the setting is ". . . in a theatre, as each narrator makes clear" (3 *Flu and Other*). *Lady Grey (in ever lower light)*, much like *Thom Pain*, is a monologue (though shorter in length) delivered by a single individual on the stage having what amounts to a conversation, from the stage, with the spatially and temporally present audience. *Mr. Theater Comes Home Different* is a short play depicting a fully developed stage set which the actor systematically (and angrily) dismantles before the audience because of the set's undeniable falsehood. The character also goads the audience about believing he is their dying mother, father, or other character, once again pointing out the fact that a falsehood is being viewed in the theatre. *The Birth of Something* is a chamber opera with music by Anthony Brandt and for which Will Eno wrote the libretto. In the short work two people find themselves on stage, in a theatre, where they systematically put on various costumes, play various roles and scenes (while alluding rather specifically to other works and characters one might have seen on a stage) eventually concluding "whatever it was, however it ended, we should be glad, it was only pretended" (Eno *Birth*). *Oh, The Humanity* takes place on the stage, which is emphasized at the moment we are told that ". . . it's just two chairs" (Eno, *Humanity* 5). In all of these plays the stage

is the setting, and the audience is directly addressed throughout. Eno's intentional use of the stage as setting carries with it a wide variety of anti-theatrical tendencies.

Eno's anti-theatrical tendencies are not, however, hostile towards the theatre. As Martin Puchner points out in his book *Stage Fright*, "The resistance registered in the prefix *anti* thus does not describe a place outside the horizon of the theater, but a variety of attitudes through which the theater is being kept at arm's length and, in the process of resistance, utterly transformed" (Puchner 2). Anti-theatricalism actually serves to catapult the theatre itself to new heights of imagination, creativity, and forms. As Puchner notes, ". . .anti-theatricalism always emerges in response to a specific theatre . . ." (Ackerman 2). This specific theatre is the theatre of passivity. Eno wishes to invoke moments of reality by including the audience itself within his productions.

Eno's use of the stage as a setting is one of several anti-theatrical tendencies confronting many conventions of the theatre including the relatively recent idea of the fourth wall. Arnold Aronson's ideas about framing are apposite here. "A frame, of course, is that which surrounds, borders, limits and defines an image or object" (Aronson 22). In the most specific sense Aronson is talking about the mysterious fourth wall and/or the existence of the proscenium. The frame is also the expectations and conventions of theatre itself which serve to bind the experience and idea of theatre by both limiting and defining. Aronson specifically notes that ". . .it is the presence of the frame that separates performance from daily life and foregrounds it" (Aronson 22). This frame implies more than the simple locating of an invisible fourth wall along the proscenium, although this

fourth wall marks an identifiable division. The fourth wall allows for a clearly compartmentalized experience of theatre to take place by granting spectators the ability to separate performance from their own lives. Yet Eno problematizes this frame. As explored in chapter one, Eno's use of the narrators in *The Flu Season* as physical landmarks of the proscenium creates an arguably stronger visual marker to determine the existence of the fourth wall than if they were not present at the proscenium. Yet, their presence is itself problematic, as the characters are not completely part of the performed world Eno has set up, but are more properly understood as a mediating presence. Auslander also finds the frame to be necessary for a live performance to take place. “Live performance['s]. . . very occurrence presupposes a gap between performer and spectator” (Auslander 57).

While *The Flu Season* is mediated by the narrators, *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* is not mediated at all. Charles Isherwood initially called *Thom Pain* “existential stand-up” (Isherwood, *Life's*). In fact, the play finds much in common with the form of stand-up comedy. As a consequence (read: benefit) of all of this, Eno has created a unique theatrical experience worth examining in this respect. While both *Thom Pain* and stand-up comedy happen in the same actual time and place with the audience, it is generally the latter which *presents* something that occurs in the same time and place as the audience. This is largely due to the convention and form of stand-up comedy. Comedians do not (generally) pretend to represent anyone other than themselves nor do they (generally) tell

jokes to other comedians on the stage[5]. They tell their jokes to the spatially and temporally present audience in the here and now. Isherwood's acknowledgment of stand-up comedy's link to the fourth wall-breaking form of Eno's *Thom Pain* is apt, but the breaking of the fourth wall doesn't always have to yield laughter.

A review of *Thom Pain* begins with a description of the beginning of the play which outlines the convention-breaking nature of Eno's work:

> In the darkness of the not-quite-blackened black box of the theater, a man, annoyed, fumbles with a dictionary and reads the definition of fear. As he moves into the rising light, he's now just an arm's length away from the people sitting silently in the small house. Nobody is afraid. Perhaps that's a miscalculation. For the audience is soon to find itself in a dangerous place . . . (Davidson)

And what is this dangerous place? Is it the theatre itself? Or is it, perhaps, something else? This theatre reviewers' remarks are valuable because they note the significance that is found in the live performances of *Thom Pain* and they illuminate the fact that Eno's works require a live audience to be completely effective.

When Thom Pain brings an audience member onto the stage or PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE meander between staged play and commentators, the fourth wall has been

[5] Deirdre Heddon has explored the concept of persona, even within plays based on, written, and performed by the same person. There is a "...gap between who [the performer] is outside of performance, and who [the performer performs]..." (142). Even when portraying oneself, Heddon notes that "...the moment anyone is onstage, they arguably become something else... developing a style of presentation" (142). This "...is best described as a *persona*, and it is this persona that... the performer, performs" (Heddon 142).

obliterated. Without the frame clearly intact we have lost “theatre” and have obscured the theatrical event itself with life. The space is “dangerous,” as the reviewer of *Thom Pain* noted, because there is no separation.

> . . .without a frame there can be no theatre. And equally important, the spectator must be able to identify the presence of the frame because the frame not only creates the theatrical event, it creates the spectator – the one who observes what is in the frame. (Aronson 21)

The breaking of the fourth wall, the removal of the frame, has created a situation in which the audience is no longer spectating and the characters are no longer distinguishable fallacies. The breakdown of the frame has eradicated the divisions necessary to clearly define spectator and actor. This de-audiencing of the audience has a great impact on those very same spectators.

Richard Schechner speaks of this phenomenon in an essay documenting the relationship between entertainment and efficacy, and the movement between ritual and performance over time. He notes that the movement from ritual to theatre means that "[t]heatre comes into existence when a separation occurs between spectators and performance" (Schechner 137). Will Eno is attempting to remove this separation and, given Schechner's theory, move somewhat towards ritual. The audience participants are now actively involved in the process and move from theatre to ritual when ". . .the audience is transformed from a collection of separate individuals into a group or congregation of participants" (157).

This is a movement away from entertainment/performative and towards efficacy/ritual. Though, and this must be clear, Eno is by no means closer to efficacy/ritual than he is to entertainment/performative. Schechner, in fact, notes that there are *always* elements of each within the other. "In all entertainment there is some efficacy and in all ritual there is some theatre" (152). "Theatre is a middle world where groups actually interact not only through audience participation but by subtler means of audience inclusion. . ." (162).

While the removal of the separation between audience and performer does not take place in every script by Eno, he casts plants in the audience, brings an audience member on stage, involves the audience *as* an audience, and features direct address frequently throughout the course of many of his productions. These elements serve to weaken the division between audience and performer. While Eno is certainly attacking a primary framing device of theatre in the form of the fourth wall, he is also attacking other conventions. At one point in *Thom Pain* Eno has Thom walk out of the spotlight, and then ask a technician if he can ". . .get some light over here. . ." (Eno *Pain* 23). Thom then proceeds to walk into the darkness, out of the view of the audience, for a moment before returning to the light. As Mimi Gisolfi D'Aponte notes in her review of the show in *Theatre Journal* ". . .I found myself applauding the invention of the spotlight when Thom moved beyond his" (D'Aponte 755). This interest in the exposure of convention somewhat mimics the desires of Brecht. As Aronson notes "The two great theoreticians of the first half of the twentieth century Artaud and Brecht, both, of course, challenged

the theatrical frame" (Aronson 33). Yet, they challenged the theatrical frame in different ways.

> "While Cage, Artaud and many others have sought to dissolve, transgress or supercede the frame that defines the space of the stage, Brecht sought to expose, foreground and overdetermine not only the proscenium frame but also the various framing devices of the stage and of the drama, thereby heightening the sense of scenic divisions and theatrical constructedness" (Ackerman 9).

It is my impression that Eno is challenging the frame in both ways simultaneously. Eno points out the existence of the fourth wall through implied mediatization, as well as through the use of literary devices. He dissolves the fourth wall with direct address and by exploiting the spatio-temporal relationship of live theatre. He supersedes and exposes, dissolves and overdetermines the frame. Eno, like the stand-up comedian, ultimately seems to be working not to distance his audience from the story by placing them concretely behind a fourth wall denouncing them as spectators, but instead inviting them to live their own story.

One reviewer of *Thom Pain* noted how bright it was in the house throughout the performance. "The house is so well lit during the show, I suddenly felt the need to hide my scrawl with my left hand so the people around me couldn't read the notes" (Shade). In fact, it was so bright that one could read expressions on other people's faces enough for her to specifically note the difference between the many audience members who laughed

along with the protagonist and four guys who ". . .looked as if they were unsure why they were there. . ." (Shade). While a review which focused on audience members' actions during the show instead of on the action on the stage would normally be a sign of a failed production, in Eno's case it is the sign of a successful one. The audience is engaged not only with the performance and performer but also with each other. They are engaged and aware of all those living, breathing beings sitting next to them in the dark. Another review noted that *Thom Pain* ". . .meanders mercurially across the thin membrane separating theater from real life, script from uncomfortable social interaction, sweet reminiscence from crude rant" (Davidson). The review fails to acknowledge the fact that the "thin membrane" is in fact broken and violated during the show as Thom speaks directly to the audience for the entire show: there is no "other world" on stage. The fact that the review mentions the existence of the membrane at all points towards its important impact for Eno's interesting play.

What Eno specifically does to include the audience itself into his play is to list them under the *dramatis personae* as characters in *Thom Pain (based on nothing).*

> ". . .rejection of theatre through elimination of the frame (or in some cases, more precisely, the incorporation of the spectator *within the frame*) was intended to re-engage the spectator in an active role in the performance in order not simply to entertain but to transform" (Aronson 34).

This transformation is multifaceted. By including them within the character list for the play, he has explicitly eliminated the frame of the fourth wall entirely by demanding (in

one part of the script) that an audience member come up on stage as a volunteer for a magical act of disappearing (Eno *Pain* 35). The audience, then, is not just listed in the script as having a role in the production but certainly do, in very specific ways, perform themselves. They are, in the case of *Thom Pain*, effectively indistinguishable from our monologist by the end of the play.

"Theatre is understood sometimes as a medium, sometimes as trope or idea, but always as a crucial configuration of relationships between 'actors' and 'audiences' that cannot be taken for granted and is subject to questions from a variety of perspectives. . ." (Ackerman 1). Eno describes theatre as "endlessly strange" in part because of the physical presence of real people doing real things in the same time and place as the real audience (Lehmann 102). In fact, the majority of his published works specifically denote (either by special note, introduction, theme, circumstance, or dialogue) that the audience is (and must be) spatially and temporally present during a production of his works. This difference is primary to the theatre Eno is creating and emphasizes the importance he places on the audience.

This importance is specifically demonstrated in *Thom Pain* by Eno's use of a plant in the audience. There are a wide variety of differing interpretations by reviewers of *Thom Pain* offered regarding this audience member (a plant) leaving mid-show. This moment, which Eno has specifically written into the script, was taken as ". . .an obvious

plant. . .” (Heller) by one reviewer and as an unplanned occurrence as a result of the production by another (Shade)[6].

While *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* and the other plays above are examples of using the actual space of the theatre as literal setting, Eno constantly uses this concept of stage-as-setting even when the plots or stories of his works do not coincide directly within the theatre itself as is the case with his conceptually mediatized diegesis. While these other plays are not as flagrantly fourth wall breaking as the plays examined so far in this chapter, they do contain elements of a the concept which serves to eliminate the fourth wall through felt proximity from conceptual mediatization. In *A Canadian Lies Dying on American Ice* two broadcasters essentially make up complicated and heart wrenching back stories about an injured player simply in order to fill time. While this is markedly different from the clearly fourth wall breaking *Thom Pain*, it is another use of the audience occurring in this short work. While the hockey game is clearly not an actual event, the audience is being treated (albeit *only* verbally) as a live audience of the broadcast. *Intermission* reverses the spatial relationship of audience/stage and the temporal relationship of play/intermission by placing a fictional audience on stage staring out at the actual audience during a fictional intermission of a play which *is* the actual play for the *actual* audience. *The Bully Composition*, one of the short plays in *Oh, the Humanity and Other Exclamations*, includes the audience temporally in the story itself as

[6] I have yet to verify whether or not the audience member who leaves was actually a plant in these productions. My assumption is that they were because Eno specifies that they are plants in his script. A more interesting question is whether or not the audience members who sometimes followed the plant out of the theatre (leaving the production) were also plants. I suspect that they were not plants and that Eno's plant had given them license to leave the theatre.

they are openly addressed, en masse, as the “actors” portraying unnamed historical persons for a recreated war photograph. This also occurs in *Tragedy: a tragedy*, which utilizes a “live” local nightly newscast as its primary idea. The play mediates the physical space of the stage by the assumed presence of physically absent cameras filming the various locations of a “live” broadcast by a news team coving the setting of the sun. This technique is akin to that of another short work in *Oh, the Humanity* titled *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Rain*, in which two out-of-luck singles record videos of themselves for a dating service (physically in the same space of the theatre, separated by space and possibly time by story) but inevitably mediated from the audience by the “video cameras” used to record their synopsis of themselves and their hopes for a partner. The setting, then, is a peculiar blend of the stage, the unlocatable “story,” and theatrical convention itself. The time is now.

The inclusion of the audience as participants and performers creates an interesting and volatile theatrical experience. In *The Flu Season*, while the theatre itself is the listed setting, one reviewer noted a connection with our narrators “. . .Prologue. . . and Epilogue. . . who, like us, are observers of the plays action. . .” (Marchese). Another reviewer noted that “the discussions expand to include the nature of human destiny while the examination extends from stage to audience, aimed firmly at the jugulars behind the fourth-wall” (Leggett). One interview cited the unpredictable nature of *Thom Pain* due to the audience. "Some nights, people highly objected to it," director Jeff Steitzer of Actors Theatre in Phoenix says. "Other nights, it was as if someone had filled the theater with

nitrous oxide. You never were sure what would happen" (Lawson). While variety of reception is almost always a component of theatre, there is something intrinsically different in Eno's plays, because the playwright has built the unpredictability into his show specifically to allow the audience to have a greater role in determining the course of the performance. His plays are subject to intentional variation because of the "endlessly strange" idea of theatre. The audience has an effect on the production.

Near the end of *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* an audience member comes up on stage for a "little disappearing act" (Eno Pain 35) and is largely ignored for the last two pages of the play. Thom addresses the audience member verbally saying "I thought you would have left by now" (36). Just before the last lines of the play "*Thom Pain looks at the person onstage, as if challenging him to act, to respond"* (37). One reviewer noted that despite the tragedy of it all, Thom was hopeful.

> And maybe he'd bestow that hope on you. Maybe he'd even bring you up on stage and ask you to close your eyes and trust him. First you'd be his prop, and then his co-star – and finally his illuminated successor: You could be the one under the lights who receives, conducts and transmits all the hope Thom Pain is trying to give us. Trying garrulously, trying fitfully, trying tenderly. Yes, that's it – trying (Sobsey).

The audience, then, has usurped the stage. They stand, at the play's end, in place of our protagonist. They are the sequel. The audience, in a way, stare at themselves (or at least

at their representative) at the end of the night. The audience is intimately connected not only with Thom Pain, but with each other by the play's end.

With the audience being both included in the play itself and the play itself occurring in the actual spatial and temporal experience of the audience there is an invocation of the “endlessly strange” which has made its way through audience, actor, and even into the thoughts of critics and reviewers. The following critical comments suggest that audiences (including bloggers and critics) begin to question an existence larger than the play itself. “Should we feel something toward fictional characters, even if the history of plays and novels is one of recycled and repeated themes? . . .As stubbornly perplexing as it is, the script. . . forces us to think about the nature of the human condition” (Marchese). Another reviewer noted “[a] complex play which rewards those who care to unravel its meaning, [*The Flu Season*] is also a human drama whose power lies in Woman's 'last word': sympathy” (Leggett).

Suspension of disbelief is constantly challenged throughout Eno's body of work and yet, somehow, audiences "feel something" about these fictional characters despite the fact that the characters openly challenge the audiences passive seat in the darkness during the plays or completely obliterate an expected trust by remarking that a car is only chairs. Returning to the short play *Oh, the Humanity*, in which Man and Woman are going to a baptism or funeral, have car trouble, and make the startling realization that “It's just chairs” (*Humanity* 5), we are eventually greeted by a character who, in the script, is named Stranger. In the premier of the five short plays which comprise the larger work *Oh*

The Humanity and Other Exclamations presented at The Flea, in which *Oh, the Humanity* was the final play, the character referred to himself as "The beauty of things, the majesty of – I don't know – the world? The universe?" (OTH Press Script 51). However, in an earlier version of the script, Stranger referred to himself as "The magic of theatre" (*Humanity* 8). This self-naming, albeit from an older published version of the short play, seems more appropriate because it explains more clearly Eno's idea of the "endlessly strange" component of theatre[7].

> It would probably come as no surprise to you were I to move to center-stage now. (*He takes a single leisurely step, not moving much closer to center-stage at all.*) Were I, as the "magic of theatre," to bring it all home, to begin my speech, and speak plainly, lovingly, humanly, as we all move slowly, surely, humanly toward the end, toward knowing, toward reckoning and completion, with peace in our hearts, all of us certain of simple things, certain in our knowledge that we are loved, that people love us, that God loves us, that God exists and loves us, that people exist and love us. (*A general pause.*) Ah, the magic (Eno, *Humanity* 9-10).

There are a number of things to note here, at the end of this short play. First, STRANGER, acting as the magic of theatre, speaks of a convention regarding direct address of important information as taking place from center-stage. This suggestion and

[7] Neither version is necessarily "better" than the other version. One is an earlier version of the work published in 2005 and the other is a later revision of the first included with four other short plays to comprise an evening of short works *Oh, the Humanity and Other Exclamations* that opened at The Flea on November 29th, 2007.

his ultimately pathetic attempt to take center-stage serve to once again sever an existing convention of the stage from its standard execution. Also, the STRANGER is actively challenging the existence or importance of what we think of when we hear the word catharsis; an ending, a purging, a reassurance that all will be well, a denouement, a tying up of loose ends, an explanation, a return to stasis. All of these things could, and should, be provided for us, the audience, the "Little world within the larger world" (Eno, *Humanity* 8) by the end of the play which reflects our lives, or at least gives them some sort of structured and organized meaning from which to glean a reality or meaning.

The backtracking of the STRANGER to assert that God must exist before the deity could love us, and people would have to exist prior to their love for us also puts us back in uncertain territory about a defined meaning for our lives and prods us to question existence: of God, of people, and of theatre. "Ah, the magic" (10). Theatre has failed us, the "magic of theatre" has failed us, and despite all of our sincere-hearted attempts to believe (or rather, suspend our disbelief), we are ultimately left without the organizing principles we believed were inherent to the theatre. However, so are the characters in the play. Man and Woman never leave their fictional world and never fully exist, as the STRANGER does, with the audience outside the bounds of the stage. And yet that stranger, the "magic of theatre" is able to freely enter both worlds. MAN and WOMAN return to their chairs. MAN tries to turn the key but there is no sound. "STRANGER *smiles a sincere and gentle little smile toward* MAN *and* WOMAN, *and then turns out to the audience, same smile. Lights fade*)" (10). We, like MAN and WOMAN, believed the

chairs were a car. How stupid we were. How stupid we are. The audience members' unwavering faith in the theatre's ability to hold meaning has been upended and under this new understanding they are invited to reconsider the act of spectating and the prominent place they have given it in their lives.

Our playwright, Will Eno, depicts the "magic of theatre" as a hack, a liar, with no special meaning to impart and no real idea where we're going. In fact, the only thing that this fourth-wall straddling entity can provide is ". . . *a sincere and gentle little smile*" (10). This smile is given both to MAN and WOMAN (actors in the theatre world) as well as to the audience, further increasing our kinship with the characters on the stage.

The peculiar relationship created between performer, character, and spectator in Eno's plays is not merely a byproduct of his works but in many ways a goal of the playwright. In a recently published selection of interviews with Joe Sola, Eno said that "There's always a big picture. It's probably always the same big picture. And it always has You in it" (Sola 42). Eno places the audience in the completed work itself, rather than outside of it. Sola, the interviewer, remembers the character of Thom Pain ". . .almost demanding to the audience the question, 'what are you doing here, here in this theatre, why aren't you out riding a bike, or playing tennis, or going out to dinner with friends?' Something similar to this happens in *The Flu Season* as well. Why do you want to poke at the audience?" (Sola 42). Eno's answer to this question is revelatory concerning his own view of his work and his work's purpose. Eno's reply was "I don't know. I like audiences. It's not so much 'poke.' I guess it's something of, if you want to question Existence, you

have to question your actual simplest existence, right here and now, in the seat you're sitting in" (Sola 42).

This questioning is a stated purpose of the plays themselves and it is in evidence in the often direct questioning and inclusion of the audience in Eno's productions. Similarly, his use of the stage itself as the setting for some of his theatrical productions certainly doesn't provide any other place for the audience to be than where they actually are, in the seat in which they are sitting. Even when the setting of Eno's play is not the stage, as in *Tragedy: a tragedy*, the audience is still in the inescapable position of being an audience (albeit one separated by implied mediatization) because *Tragedy: a tragedy* depicts several news broadcasters speaking through cameras and out to local television sets which are being "viewed" by the audience. The culminating effect of a broken fourth wall, broken conventions, implied mediatization, and time and space simultaneously occurring for an audience of Eno's works creates a kinship between audience and character, audience and actor, and the audience and itself.

CHAPTER IV

THE WORD: ERODING THE SPECTRUM

In this chapter I will examine several of Eno's plays with the goal of identifying two common motifs of this new playwright: the compression of binary opposites and the absent word. By reading these two motifs via applicable theoretical and critical writings, I will ultimately attempt to answer the following question: If Eno's two motifs bring meaning-making through language into question, how can one account for the powerful impact of his various works? The answer includes Eno's written works in conjunction with the actors in the live space and a physically present audience. In answering this question I will consider whether or not Eno's works are important, given the critical and theoretical underpinnings of the motifs throughout his available body of work to date. Eno utilizes language in his plays to allow for performers during productions to go beyond the written text provided by Eno and connect and communicate to the audience without verbal language. To begin, then, I will identify the motifs inherent to this new playwright's style.

> I sometimes think that life is too
> large to put into words, and then set
> to music, and then, orchestrate, at all.
>
> -Will Eno, *The Birth of Something*

A "motif" is defined as a ". . . recurring salient thematic element (as in the arts; *esp* : a dominant idea or central theme." It is also described as ". . . a single or repeated design or color" (Webster, 757-8). I will first deal with Eno's motifs as ". . . a single or repeated [type of dialogue]." I want to begin by looking at specific phrases in his works

without getting caught up in the overall work in entirety. Eventually I will make an examination of his specific works on the whole at which point "motif" will be used to describe ". . . a dominant idea or central theme" of Eno's oeuvre. (757-8). For now "motif" will be used to describe singular types of dialogue without expanding to whole plays.

Lights, action! Darkness, inaction!
-Will Eno, *The Flu Season*

Eno's primary motif at the level of dialogue is the use of binary opposites in close proximity within characters' speech. This motif of binary compression is even acknowledged in reviews of his work. "Mr. Eno's voice, or rather the voice of Thom Pain, the ostensible narrator who is also, ostensibly, that dazed and changed little boy, is alternately lyrical and affectless, ecstatic and flat, sardonic and sincere" (Isherwood, *Life's*). The terms lyrical/affectless, ecstatic/flat, and sardonic/sincere are all binary opposites recognized by the reviewer during a production of the play. These critical acknowledgments are recognitions of Eno's primary motif. Eno's binary terms are opposite in their meaning: Dark and light, night and day, up and down. These words are the bookends of a spectrum of possibility. When dealing with black and white, for example, there is also a large, in-between area which houses various shades of gray. But what happens when there is less and less room between black and white within which gray exists? This is the question Eno ponders through his primary motif. Eno compresses binary opposites on the page and on the stage by bringing the terms close together

(spatially on the page and temporally on the stage). Examples appear throughout his work.

In *Tragedy: a tragedy* we witness television reporters in various locations reporting back to the studio about the developing story of the sun setting and perhaps never rising again. This news-style format allows for brief monologic snippets from each of the reporters, all of whom share the tendency to compress binary opposites throughout their brief period of on-air time. JOHN IN THE FIELD asks if there was "… a change in the air, a sameness in the air?" (*Tragedy* 53) and also says "It's always night, but, sometimes, it's day" (59). MICHAEL, LEGAL ADVISER comments on the absent governors words saying they are ". . . meant to ease the uneasy nerves of the people of this state" (54) and later offers pseudo-medical advice with ". . . I lie down. And if that doesn't work, I try to stand up, or sit" (62). Between "lie down" and "stand up" Michael has covered the entire spectrum of options; placing sitting as a mid-point: a three-option spectrum.

Throughout the play MICHAEL also reads the words of the absent governor, whose letter at one point reads "Quit asking why it's so dark, and start remembering how great it was that it ever got light" and ". . . we shall reign and prosper, until we freeze to death" (58). FRANK IN THE STUDIO introduces a recording that ". . . may enlighten the darkness. . ." (55). CONSTANCE AT HOME identifies the scene, "Behind me here, the people not here. . ." and goes on to note ". . . when you listen, the quiet is not technically that quiet" (56), "Belly rises, belly falls" (62) and "I waited and then I left"

(63). Finally, THE WITNESS speaks at the end of the play, but he only offers us similarly compressed binaries such as ". . . night fell, like usual. But differently, sort of," and "It would be like that, at the start of the end of the world, I guess, wouldn't it" (70). One part of THE WITNESS's final speech at the end of the play reads:

> And all their worries turned into a sort of comfort. And their doubts about things turned into a kind of faith, sort of. And new people were born during this. And new words were invented to talk about people with. Newness, like, reigned over the world in the story. Then a bright white horse showed up. I don't know why or what happened with it or any of the rest of it, because I always fell asleep. (Frank appears asleep.)

Binary compressions appear throughout *Tragedy: a tragedy* as a motif. This motif occurs in Eno's other works as well. In the short work *Intermission* we encounter four patrons of the theatre during the intermission of a fictional play titled *The Mayor*. The characters sit on the stage, facing the audience as an audience facing a play. Even the setting itself, at the intermission of a play, signals the binary opposite of what is expected from typical theatre performance in that the actual audience becomes the imagined stage. We encounter two couples, one young (Jack and Jill) and one old (Mr. and Mrs. Smith), who converse during the intermission of the play. Eno has established binaries in this play through the use of young and old characters, only first or only last names, and has reversed the seating of the spectators and the performers. However, textual binary compression is frequently invoked in this short play as well. JACK says "I think it's a

little over-written. Or underwritten" (*Intermission* 667). MR. SMITH states "I am not the way I am" (667). MRS. SMITH utters the phrase ". . . unthinkably intelligent" (667) and speaks of wearing sweaters to ". . . fight off the cold of a warm and sunny day" (676). It is clear that Eno is interested in binary opposites in *Intermission* both within the dialogue and also through the character names, ages, and even audience/spectator relationship.

In another short work, *Ladies and Gentlemen, the Rain*, Eno again invokes the use of binary compression in his language. This short work has only two characters, LADY and GENTLEMAN, who sit on stools, not realizing the other is there, and record what seems like a dating service video. Sometimes long monologue, sometimes (unknown to the characters) intertwined dialogue, this play includes phrases like, "None of that really puts me in the mood. But I guess there's a chance that any of it could" (*Rain* 20), "And I have little patience for things that take a long time" (20), "I want to start a family. Or, at least, finish one" (21),"Sometimes, you wish you were dead, but you will die wishing you could live, and you know that" (21), "Somewhere, I will really take my really last breath – fine. I guess. I can live with that. Or, no, I guess I can't" (21), "I will love you forever until right before I die" (22), "The sky is different again, like it always is" (22). Finally there is a visual/verbal binary to end the play with "Is there a little light that's supposed to come on?" (23) followed by the stage direction "(Lights go to black.)" (23). This is, however, a double binary compression, both with the line about "light coming on" (referring to the camera) and the stage direction "lights go to black" and the fact that this

is the end of the play for the audience; yet for the characters, without successfully recording the tape for the dating service, it is only the beginning of their intended actions.

In Eno's longer work *The Flu Season* we encounter binary opposition as characters when PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE become Eno's framing device for the play. Eno notes in the dramatis personae that PROLOGUE "… should differ physically from Epilogue. Perhaps he is large, and Epilogue is skinny. Where Prologue is warm and tender, Epilogue would be cold…" (*Flu* 17). The action takes place both in a mental health institution and in a theatre. MAN, WOMAN, NURSE, and DOCTOR are the main characters. In scene two the following exchange occurs: "WOMAN: I need to call somebody. MAN: I'm waiting for someone to call" (25). NURSE reminisces about the past concluding "My one true love: a meaningless fling" (29). EPILOGUE concludes scene three by saying that "… there's nothing necessarily sad about anything. Or happy" (30). WOMAN asks "Can we go be alone somewhere" (44). PROLOGUE tries to introduce act two scene three with "Lights, action!" only to be followed by EPILOGUE's recant of "Darkness, inaction" (51). As the relationship between MAN and WOMAN dwindles we begin scene four with "WOMAN: You can stop loving me overnight? MAN: I started loving you overnight" (54). DOCTOR opens scene eight with "I stand outside and tilt my head to the traffic and wonder if it's people coming or people going and revel at how it all sounds the same" (58). Towards the end of the play we've lost track of seasons all together. "EPILOGUE: It is neither not winter nor not summer" (65).

Finally we conclude with "PROLOGUE: Thank you for coming. The End. Good night. EPILOGUE: Thank you for coming. There is no end. Good night" (65-66).

Eno's motif of short snippets of binary opposites compressed spatially and temporally in dialogue is a major component of his artistic body of work, but the question remains as to what effect this motif has in his work. The effect has to do with the difficulties inherent in verbal language.

> Wouldn't it be lovely, to be reduced
> to such simplicity. Such elegant
> economy, with reference to identity.
> -Will Eno, *The Birth of Something*

Eno's motif of binary terms in close succession serves to demonstrate the inherent difficulty of language, something explored in relation to the playwright's work by Marc Silverstein. In "'A Word By Which You Will Be Revealed': The Problem of Language in Will Eno's Monologues" Silverstein asserts that "Language and the symbolic order it forms mark the subject's radical alienation from the real, the realm of being, and thus language itself becomes the obstacle to [our] search for the word that will reveal and express being" (62). Silverstein works through two of Eno's monologues, *Thom Pain: (based on nothing)* and *Lady Grey (in ever-lower light),* to identify in Eno's work an attempt by the characters to locate meaning in a single word. While the characters in the monologues Silverstein explores clearly express their desire for such a word, the theme of an absent/adequate word prevails throughout Eno's body of work.

In *Tragedy: a tragedy* Eno reveals a number of unfinished thoughts that lack, perhaps, only a single word that would have conveyed meaning yet remains absent from

the play and unavailable to the characters who wish to speak the word. The word has not been written by the playwright and thus cannot uttered by characters/performers. This is identified by a dash and introduces the second motif: the absent word. FRANK IN THE STUDIO searches for those ever elusive words, "It is difficult to find the right –. We thank you for –. Let's go now –. (*He looks at the floor. Pause.*)" and fails again later on the same page with, "The air is very –. The light is. . . it's a problem" (60). JOHN IN THE FIELD asks, ". . .can what we are doing be called –" (62). CONSTANCE AT HOME seeks for and fails to find the word which would describe a personal experience, "That was the greatest thing I've ever read. And, I feel, the most –" (64). JOHN IN THE FIELD, now with a nosebleed, attempts to quit his job with, "Perhaps you can't see, just over my shoulder, anything. And I'm bleeding. And I'm saying, 'I'm bleeding.' I am sick and signing off. Off into the – what would be a beautiful word? (*He tilts his head back to stop the bleeding, looking straight up.*)" (67). FRANK IN THE STUDIO begins to sense how meaningless it all is on page 68 by asking, "Could one of you please report a little lie for me to live by?" and after the reporters cannot, he decides to recite someone else's words:

> In the lawn-mowing tones of speeches unspoken, in a light wholly absent, by a river by a willow, there did the dark horses of the thrashing –." Forget it. I don't have the time or breath to misquote old poetry I memorized wrong in the first place. (*A pause.*) Jesus. (*He checks his pulse.*) My heart is going –. John, please, anyone, I think I might be having – (68).

A revealing moment occurs when Frank asks, after failing attempts at relaxation and self medication, for Constance to "…be daughterly with me. Maybe you could describe your environment, out there. Even, whatever season we are in. You don't have to make sentences. You could give us a list. A nice list to relax us" (68). Frank has even given up on the sentence, the smallest set of words comprising a complete idea.

At the bottom of page 68 of the script there is a brief sequence of dialogue where a word is found but only increases the obscurity of meaning both within the "found" word and the context of the play.

> CONSTANCE AT HOME: (*A pause.*) There is some –
>
> FRANK IN THE STUDIO: Yes?
>
> CONSTANCE AT HOME: I'm not finished.
>
> FRANK IN THE STUDIO: Of course, I'm sorry. Go ahead.
>
> CONSTANCE AT HOME: – fog.

The feeling of an absent word, set up in the script as a dash "–" throughout has increased our hope that the word will be found. However, upon a word's discovery it is apparent that any clarity that might have been inherent in the word is obscured like "fog."

As we near the end of the play, the characters associate themselves even more clearly with language. The characters soon break down language even further from the inadequacy of the sentence and the inability of the word to communicate meaning to the difficulties of individual letters. "JOHN IN THE FIELD: When I was six, this was fairly impressive: A, B, C, D, E, F, G – ah, but I'm sure you know how all that turns out. This

concludes myself. You?" (69). "FRANK IN THE STUDIO: Constance? John? (*A long, long pause. Clearly no one else is going to speak.*) God. When I was younger–. Years back, when I used to–. People have sometimes asked– or, to do–. (*A pause.*)" (70). Frank eventually acknowledges, after a pause, that "It seems there is no word" (70).

The devaluation of the entire structure of language takes place. Sentences can't be formed, there is an inability to connect the thought to the word, the characters experience speechlessness, and eventually succumb even to attempts at communication via individual letters in a desperate attempt define themselves in an effort to grasp an unlocatable meaning. This motif is not, however, only present in the monologues examined by Marc Silverstein. Over the course of *Tragedy: a tragedy* Eno compresses the binary terms and demonstrates the failure of language to contain or express meaning. His combination of compression and devaluation of language serves to eradicate the meaning generally thought to be inherent to language. Jacques Derrida explains that language itself carries no inherent meaning and is based on difference. We do not know what long means if we cannot compare it to/with short. We do not know what dark is if we cannot compare it to/with light. Binary opposites are the foundation for meaning in language. Since our words are dependent upon other words for their meaning there is no absolute location of meaning because it shifts with each comparison. The absence of a definable location of absolute meaning leaves us only with signifiers and no signified, which basically means that the words themselves (signifiers of unlocatable meanings) only call up other words (more signifiers of other unlocatable meanings) but never call up

the locatable meaning itself (the desired signified). “There is not a single signified that escapes . . . the play of signifying references that constitute language” (Derrida *Of Grammatology* 7).

Frank’s “It seems there is no word” (*Tragedy* 70) does not deny, as does Derrida, that there actually is a signified, but rather asserts that there is no way to signify it (i.e., no signifier for it). When coupled with Eno’s systematic devaluation of language throughout the course of the play it becomes apparent that meaning through language is being put into question by his work. How, then, can one account for the powerful impact his plays seem to have? Charles Isherwood’s review of *Thom Pain: (based on nothing)* describes the event as “… one of those treasured nights in the theater - treasured nights anywhere, for that matter - that can leave you both breathless with exhilaration and, depending on your sensitivity to meditations on the bleak and beautiful mysteries of human experience, in a puddle of tears. Also in stitches, here and there. Speechless, in any case” (Isherwood, *Life’s*).

One way to try to account for the plays' impact is to examine the “motif” not as “a single or repeated [type of dialogue],” as I have done so far in this chapter, but as a “dominant idea or central theme” (Webster, 757-8). So far I have demonstrated that the motif of binary compression extends across the body of Eno's work. However, it is more difficult to examine the effect that this constant barrage of binaries has over the course of a single production. Rather than merely being something we can identify in Eno’s writing

style, his frequent and relentless use of binary compression is in fact a motif in the broader sense: "a dominant idea or central theme" (Webster's 757-8) of his scripts.

> Time. Do you feel it? …I wouldn't
> know how it feels. In words.
> -Will Eno, *The Flu Season*

Hans-Thies Lehmann, in his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, notes two factors in temporal manipulation: duration and repetition. He discusses duration, or how long, in relation to the theatre of Robert Wilson and his "prolongation of time" to create a "… 'Continuous Present', to use the words of Wilson's role model Gertrude Stein" (Lehmann 156). The duration which Eno is utilizing is not the same as that of Wilson's performers, who elongate the time taken to perform simple movements. Rather, Eno's work with temporality effects the opposite: compression. While Eno's characters or performers are not physically moving around the stage at a faster than the average speed, they are certainly dealing with binary opposites and absent words at an alarmingly accelerated rate. This accelerated duration could also be understood as a compression of time. Eno's libretto to the chamber opera *The Birth of Something* displays this accelerated rate of binary opposites in a compressed time. Act I is reprinted in entirety:

> WOMAN: It's a boy.
>
> MAN: (*Peers into the blanket*) And so it is.
>
> WOMAN: Wait, I'm wrong, it is a girl.
>
> MAN: (*Peering again into the blanket*.) Well, whichever, it's a start (*Birth* 2).

Lehmann's second characteristic of time, repetition, is also relevant for analyzing Eno's work. Far from being a casual stroke of the pen, Eno's utilization of binary compression is revelatory of his work both as a method of analysis for his plays and as an identifying motif of the author. Eno's work is easily identified by his repetitive use of the compression of binary opposites and absent words. "As in duration, a crystallization of time occurs in repetition, a more or less subtle compression and negation of the course of time itself" (Lehmann 156). Binary compression and absent words are repeated over and over again in Eno's works and are subsequently identifiable motifs of the playwright. Eno's motifs should be viewed in a new light, for reasons Lehmann spells out:

> "In new theatre languages, however, repetition takes on a different, even opposite meaning: formerly employed for structuring and constructing form, it is now used for the destructuring and deconstructing of story, meaning and totality in form" (Lehmann 156).

Instead of using this repetition of binary motif and absent words to "structure and construct," Eno is "destructuring and deconstructing. . . meaning. . ." (Lehmann 156). Recalling Derrida, we can understand the limits inherent to language preventing words from adequately conveying a meaning. This limit is what Eno is trying to surpass.

Eno's motifs, the compression of binary opposites and the absent word, have a specific effect on language itself, and that effect is related to Lehmann's explanation of repetition as a category of time on stage. "If processes are repeated to such an extent that they can no longer be experienced as part of a scenic architecture and structure of

organization, the overtaxed recipient experiences them as meaningless and redundant, as a seemingly unending, unsythesizable, uncontrolled and uncontrollable course of events" (Lehmann 156). Lehmann is primarily speaking of a physical repetition here to differentiate what he terms the "postdramatic theatre" from other accepted forms where motif is already utilized. These other accepted forms are those of the dramatic theatre where "[w]holeness, illusion and world representation are inherent in the model 'drama'" (22). The postdramatic, however, focuses ". . .no longer on the questions whether and how the theatre 'corresponds to' the text that eclipses everything else. . ." (56). These repeated processes would include "… rhythm, melody, visual structure, rhetoric and prosody…" (156) but my purpose is to examine language. To that end I note that a repetition of binary compression would dissociate the audience from language itself, rendering that language "… meaningless and redundant, as a seemingly unending, unsynthesizable, uncontrolled and uncontrollable… surge of signifiers" (156). This "surge of signifiers" which Eno invokes in his plays makes language itself "meaningless and redundant" and renders it an unlikely conduit through which to find meaning.

However, Eno also uses frequent repetition in the form of an absent word. Jean-François Lyotard notes that ". . .we can conceive the infinitely great, the infinitely powerful, but every presentation of an object destined to 'make visible' this absolute greatness or power appears to us painfully inadequate. Those are Ideas of which no presentation is possible" (Lyotard 43). This impossible presentation of an idea, while never actually successful, is, however, made invokable through a "negative presentation."

(44). Through this "negative presentation" arises the moment at which one's imagination experiences an abstraction, one that reaches for a "…presentation of the infinite…" (Lyotard 44). Eno's motif of the absent word, while abandoning language itself and any attempt to signify the idea or meaning, becomes the "negative presentation" of the incommunicable idea and/or meaning. By leaving the idea or meaning completely absent Eno has created an "abstraction" which invokes that idea or meaning through a "negative presentation" and thus provides an "…'abstraction' itself like a presentation…" (Lyotard 44).

Through this invocation Eno has, albeit not *completely* successfully, surpassed the inability of language to adequately convey meaning. As Lyotard puts it, the use of negative presentation is employed to "…enable us to see only by making it impossible to see" (44).

> Is repetition a failure in daring, or a
> step toward deliverance?
> -Will Eno, *The Flu Season*

Eno's motif of binary compression combined with the motif of the absent word has created an avenue through which meaning itself can be invoked. "… the real that is literally being masked in and by the theatrical semblance can resurface in it at any moment" (Lehmann 103). More specifically, it is language itself which masks the real, thus twisting Lehmann to read, "… the real that is literally being masked in and by the [use of language] can resurface in it at any moment." This resurfacing of the real is the largest motif of all in Eno's works. When asked to complete the sentence, "It isn't theatre if…" Eno responded with the following answer, which is worth reviewing in full:

> There is a lot of "theatre" around that isn't "theatre," as it makes no use of the audience's imagination. There's nothing to do, except sit there until you leave. You look at a set of a living room, and it's all there, down to the last electrical outlet. So we are in the habit of suspending less and less disbelief. Occasionally, an actor in a desperately naturalistic play will switch on a lamp beside a bed, and the lamp (controlled by the stage manager) will come on a second early or late. Suddenly, there's this feeling, this life, real honest laughter in the audience, even self-awareness, somehow. So… it isn't theatre if the lamp comes on at the exact moment in which the actor pretends to turn it on. (*American Theatre* 104)

Eno's interest here is in *experiencing* something in the theatre. "I'm really attracted to the mystery and endlessly strange idea of theater" (Houlihan). This endlessly strange idea of theatre is condensed by Lehmann when he notes that "… theatre is *at the same time* material process – walking, standing, sitting, speaking, coughing, stumbling, singing – and 'sign for' walking standing sitting, etc. Theatre takes place as a practice that is at once signifying and entirely real" (Lehmann 102). This "entirely real" aspect is what Eno is after.

In his humorous and revealing "From Texas, to Virginia: An Essay on Form," Eno reflects on the importance of the *person* in art by speaking highly of a play he and his niece attended. "He wrote a play in the form of himself. Took the form of his one and only body and wrote a play out of it, on paper, with his arm and hand. . . the body ages as

a body, it never gets old as a starting point, as a theme, a source of content" (*Contemporary Theatre Review* 356). This emphasis on the body as source of artwork cements Eno as a writer for the "endlessly strange" theatre that is "at once signifying and entirely real" (Lehmann 102) because of the physical presence of actors in the same time and space as the audience.

Eno also tackles the issue of meaning in his short letter to Virginia. "See, Virginia, these people with their meaning, all they're doing is replacing one set of signs with another" (*Contemporary Theatre Review* 356). This replacement of signs for signs is another inhibition to meaning itself. Instead of replacing signs with signs, Eno removed any attempt at signification by removing both the words themselves (absent word) and the space between the words (binary compression) eradicating the basis of language found in difference. "…[T]he difference between the signified and signifier is *nothing*" (Derrida 23).

Through the two motifs examined in this chapter, it is clear that Eno's goal is to point to the failures of language and invoke the "real" that is constantly masked by language *by*, ironically, employing language in a specific way. Silverstein notes a moment in Eno's monologue *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* where an event is "… all the more valuable, all the more *real*, because it occurs 'without language'…" (Silverstein 84). Viewing language as the obstacle to a revelation and expression of being, and in fact the primary obstacle to the "real," the logical conclusion is to operate without language in order to experience the real which Eno so desperately desires in the theatre. Recall

Isherwood's evening in the theatre leaving him "…in a puddle of tears. Also in stitches, here and there. Speechless, in any case" (Isherwood, *Life's*). This recognition of speechlessness is perhaps the most valuable review which could be given to one of Eno's works. While Isherwood crafted the comment about Beckett that both promotes and problematizes Eno to this day, his ultimate indication of speechlessness after the play marks him as an intuitive reviewer of Eno's work, albeit without a clearly defined, demonstrated or explained reason for his speechlessness.

However, the "felt" nature of Isherwood's experience that night is all the more valuable for that reason: it was an experience. "Interaction with the audience is used here not as an ingratiating gimmick but in the spirit that art shouldn't be afraid to reach out and grab us by the throat, to insist that it's not there to be admired at a distance, but experienced intimately and maybe even painfully" (Isherwood, *Life's*). The type of theatre where you just "sit there" is not the type of theatre that Eno has crafted nor the type of theatre which Isherwood experienced that night.

It is not only the words, however, that communicate so much in an Eno production. Despite Eno's penchant for the literary he has embraced the theatre, which means embracing live performers. A second grader with a good vocabulary who could read to us the words Eno has written would not produce the same effect as the text in the hands of capable performers. W.B. Worthen notes that ". . . reopening the territory between performance studies and drama requires a considerably more vigorous contestation of the 'literary' dimension of drama, in which doing things *with* words resists

the sense that it's the *words* that are doing the doing" (13). In Eno's plays, as in all plays, the words *do* do the doing, in a sense. What Will Eno, as a playwright, composes are certainly words. He came from a non-theatrical literary training where the end product would be the words written on the page. Even Beckett's *Act Without Words* uses, specifically, words themselves printed on paper to communicate the action he wishes to appear on stage. In *Act Without Words*, however, we are perhaps given the clearest example of words not "doing the doing" (13). They certainly influence to an extent what doing is done, but the words themselves in the context of a performance are not the only thing doing the doing. Something is still being communicated despite an absence of words. Audiences need not have read the script of *Act Without Words* in order to receive something from a production of the play.

Deb Margolin echoes these sentiments and turns towards silences as important facets of communication.

> Whether a performance involves language or not, language fails, both within a given performance, and without, as language is applied in a discussion of it. It's become clear to me that the failure of language is the predication of drama, and that language onstage is just the certain needlework on a larger fabric of silence. If language really worked, there'd be no drama (95).

Drama is, then, the struggle to communicate the incommunicable. Eno's script is only the blueprint, the floor plan of a performance embodied and communicated by performers

during performances. Often, this communication happens during the silences. In Eno's case the silences have been specifically built into the script itself.

> If I posit Silence as the true residence of Drama, what does that leave the audience, and where does that leave the playwright? It leaves us with synecdoche, it leaves us in the territory where the body is synecdochical, the body onstage is somehow every body, and the family onstage is every family, and the man onstage is Everyman (Margolin 95).

Thom Pain, Eno's "modern day Everyman," is such an embodiment. Not only is Thom Pain somehow Everyman, but so is the audience of a performance of *Thom Pain*. Somehow, when the audience member (plant or not) usurps Thom Pain at the end of the show s/he even more directly becomes, somehow, Everyman.

Through Thom Pain's fumbling in a dictionary to *define* words, Newspeople's inability to *find* words, Lady Grey's *search for a* word, and Prologue and Epilogue's *embodiment of* literary form, these various problems with language concluding with the confession in *The Flu Season* that it was all "a pile of words" (*Flu* 65) are both true and not true. "Yet drama isn't always and only 'literature': sometimes it provides a material instrument for performing. . ." (Worthen 15). This material instrument may very well be the words themselves, but what we call music is not the piano nor the printed music on a page but the hearing of those printed notes as played by a musician. In fact, the piano itself, as instrument, can produce so many styles of music, combinations of sounds, familiar and unfamiliar songs and tunes that we must begin to see the theatre itself in

these terms. Each production is perhaps as an illumination of the printed sheet music. Either way, it is not the paper which is art in these mediums but the performances of what is on that paper. Otherwise it is truly just "a pile of words" (*Flu* 65). Eno is specifically writing for the theatre's unique use of bodies on the stage.

Deb Margolin's final series of questions at the end of her brief article are enlightening in terms of performers performing.

> *I'm trying to think: What is language, anyway, what is speech? Does it just float, like smoke from fire, away from the speaker, signifying rather than being the thing that caused it? Is speech, like smoke, a byproduct of some burning rather than the burning itself? It is that, isn't it, my speech is like smoke and my body is the burning, can't you see that, I'm sure you can see that. . .* (Margolin 97).

It is clear, whether the ultimate effect of the productions is attributed to Eno's writing or not, that the speech of the performers is "like smoke and [their bodies are] the burning." The audience can see that, especially in the silences. Especially in the moments where performers/characters grasp blindly at the smoke of language trying to coerce the wisps into communicating the incommunicable. It is in these moments of silence, these moments of grasping, that the audience sees: not fire, but glowing embers. The hearth of meaning barely visible; perceptible now only because of the absence of smoke, the absence of language. What does the usurper of Thom Pain say, when standing in front of an audience of peers at the close of the play? Nothing. Eno has written no words for this

member of the *dramatis personae*: could he have possibly written anything more meaningful than silence?

Lehmann's observation about the impossibility of adequately communicating an idea or meaning suggests the importance of the endeavor Eno has taken up:

> … [S]uch a presence can never be completely "there" or "fulfilled", in the full sense of the word, . . . it always retains the character of the "longed for" and the "alluded to", and always disappears when it enters into the reflected experience. [Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht] goes back to [Friedrich] Schiller's idea of a reference which is not naïve but merely "sentimental" in order to think of it as the "birth of presence"… as a coming, an advent, a simply *imaginable* presence (Lehmann 141).

The concept of the "negative presentation" through the absent word and binary compression has indeed invoked an "*imaginable* presence," one worthy of being called "astonishing in its impact" (Isherwood, *Life's*).

When speaking of postdramatic texts, Lehmann notes that "…the step to postdramatic theatre is taken only when the theatrical means beyond language are positioned equally alongside the text and are systematically thinkable without it" (Lehmann 55). Eno has certainly attempted to position a means beyond language alongside his text. In fact, Eno has riddled language to the extent that the invocation of the "real" which has been created is so strong that the full impact of the result is *only* thinkable without language. ". . .all the more valuable, all the more *real*, because it occurs

'without language'. . ." (Silverstein 84). Silverstein wisely points out that language is a problem. He is not, however, the only one to have noticed the problem of language in Eno's work. Isherwood's most recent review of a work by Eno, a new series of shorts titled *Oh, the Humanity and other exclamations,* reasserted that Eno's work functions on the premise that an expression beyond language is of the ultimate importance. "I am moved by Mr. Eno's conviction that inside the skins of normal folk. . . live. . . people whose souls would speak more eloquently than their tongues, if given the chance" (Isherwood, *Brief*). Isherwood realizes that the tongue, that odd appendage which fashions language, will never speak more eloquently than the soul, the intangible and yet longed for and ultimately "*imaginable* presence" operating only beyond language.

While Eno ultimately cannot escape the confines of language nor truly go beyond or outside of it, he certainly skirts the edges of the possible in terms of representation of the limiting nature of language. In this Eno completes Lehmann's point that "Postdramatic theatre emphasizes what is incomplete and incompletable about it" (Lehmann 99). While the project is both incomplete and incompletable, and is aware of that fact, this doesn't make the attempt any less worthwhile.

> To sum up the more or less indescribable: "Thom Pain" is at bottom a surreal meditation on the empty promises life makes, the way experience never lives up to the weird and awesome fact of being. But it is also, in its odd, bewitching beauty, an affirmation of life's worth. A minor proof of it, even (Isherwood, *Life's*).

Eno's work isn't a complete proof of life's worth but it is a "minor proof of it." Isherwood enjoyed the play and his reflection is apt, but even a negative review of *Oh, the Humanity and other exclamations* managed to notice the limitations of language after the production.

> So far as an evening at the theater goes, *Oh, The Humanity* is a pretty artificial one, and if it manages to peer for a moment into our souls, that's only because it speaks so eloquently about the things that we don't know how to say (even though this would never be the way we'd say them) (Riccio).

We don't know how to say these soul peering words because the words aren't there for us to say. Even this unenthusiastic reviewer was able to experience that Eno's play "manages to peer for a moment into our souls. . ." (Riccio).

In the end, Eno probably wouldn't turn down a comparison to Samuel Beckett, whom he admires.

> When asked if "Thom Pain" can be compared to Samuel Beckett's "Waiting for Godot," Eno said, "Beckett is a gorgeous writer and it is hard to resist those sentences of his, so his work rings in my head a bit. . . Eno adds that he thinks, however, 'Thom Pain' is 10 or 20 times more optimistic than "most things around" (Eno, Enthusiastic).

This optimism has been heralded by many of the reviews of his productions. Eno himself says of Beckett that "He never really seemed to me, as everyone always claims him to be,

unreasonably despairing or overly glum… I'd say, in a sideways sort of way, I learned how to live from him a little" (Kalb 3). Eno's interest in Beckett is undeniable. While Eno says that "Any comparison kind of overwhelms me," his specification of that overwhelming feeling simply shows an admiration for the famed playwright, "overwhelms me, the way it would an altar boy if you said to him, 'Hey, you remind me a lot of Jesus.' I overheard a man say to his wife, after a performance of *Thom Pain*, 'Worse than Beckett.' I felt as if someone had called me dumber than Einstein" (Kalb 3-4).

Yet Eno's writing style is clearly his own: his own identifiable motifs, his own curious thoughts about theatre, and his own success to live up to. In an interview with Froggy's Delight Eno says that ". . .life is very mysterious. I think theatre can, if not explain the mystery, at least make the mystery more apparent" (Eno, *Froggy*). Eno has certainly made the mystery of life more apparent through his motifs, which reveal language as ineffective for the type of communication that would seem to touch the "real."

Certain bloggers and critics would choose to simplify the complexity of what Eno is doing. Mike Mariano composed a blog entry titled "Write Your Own Will Eno Play!" that lists sixteen steps which, if followed, claim to produce a work of similar value to *Thom Pain: (based on nothing)*. Step four is "Add grandiose gesture of universal significance. (Make sure it contains no actual universal significance)" and steps thirteen and fourteen read "…ask a basic question about existence. Don't answer it" (Mariano). In

many ways, Mariano, like Isherwood, has figured Eno out. The "grandiose gesture of universal significance" and the unanswered question about existence are, perhaps, relevant landmarks contained in any of Eno's works. However, the end product of a work by Eno contains a depth more profound than an unanswered question. Eno's crafty use of language through the two motifs explored in this chapter create a break with language itself, revealing it as the suppressor of the real and subsequently the denier of communicable meaning. His subsequent use of a "negative presentation" allows for an invocation, albeit imagined, of the meaning itself, leaving the audience with an experience of theatre that amounts to more than sitting until the show concludes.

Jeffrey Jones, in his introduction to *New Downtown Now*, speaks of new ways to read plays. He uses the term "pattern" very similarly to the use of "motif" in this essay and notes:

> This single property of pattern makes possible the idea of a tightly structured, bounded piece that, being at the same time independent of its content, resists complete definition and is therefore open. At this point, the piece, or play, no longer exists to illustrate (a point of view, a time and place) but becomes experience itself – autonomous, ineffable (Jones, xv).

This idea illustrates exactly what Eno desires for the theatre: a theatre of experience where something happens. This never necessarily meant direct audience participation or physical contact but instead reflects a desire for something more "real" to surface, for the soul to speak.

". . .[T]heatre . . . always reminds us of the space for *new* ways of producing meaning that diverge from the officially licensed rules" (Lehmann 102). The officially licensed rules in theatre don't typically involve absent words or frequently compressed binaries for producing meaning, but Eno serves as a reminder to the theatre of its meaning-generating possibilities beyond and through the use of verbal language for the stage.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION: THE PAGE, THE STAGE, AND THE WORD

In the introduction to the third edition of *The Theatre of the Absurd* Martin Esslin recounts the story of Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* playing to an audience of prisoners at San Quentin penitentiary. While this unique audience viewing this particular play (apparently chosen largely because it contained no female characters) might bring up reasonable concerns about its success, the play was extremely successful with the inmates. "Why did a play of the supposedly esoteric avant-garde make so immediate and so deep an impact on an audience of convicts?" (Esslin 21) Two reasons entertained by Esslin for the production's success are: The similarity of the situation of the isolated tramps in *Waiting for Godot* and the locked up prisoners in San Quentin; and the prisoners having no preconceived notions about the theatre and, therefore, not being shocked or offended by the play's non-adherence to convention and form.

Esslin offered two interesting reasons why the prisoners were able to accept and appreciate Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot*. Esslin also put a particularly specific emphasis on the audience itself for the play's relative success. Will Eno's interest in the audience bears consideration in relation to this particular story about Beckett's play, but Eno is living and writing not only in a different time period (a new millenium) from Beckett but also for a different audience (not the prisoners of Esslin's example).

When Will Eno eliminates the fourth wall in his productions, treats his audience as an audience, and heavily values inadequate language as medium, he is clearly doing something different from Beckett and the absurdists with whom he has been linked. In

fact, Americans who now spend more time as audiences than they do sleeping, are very different from the audiences for whom Beckett wrote (Butsch 295).

Esslin's concern in *The Theatre of the Absurd* was to point out and attempt to define a particular vein in the body of theatre which he found unique and worthy of distinction. His combination of a variety of authors, works, and ideas formed for him (and for the world) the genre of Absurdism. The work within this new genre was initially met with confusion and ill-fated comparisons to other genres. “Inevitably, plays written in this new convention will, when judged by the standards and criteria of another, be regarded as impertinent and outrageous impostures” (Esslin 21). This, however, is a cycle that the history of theatre has seen repeated again and again: new forms and conventions are initially rejected until they become stronger and/or eventually diminish as popular modes of presentation.

Eno's works are, for me, what the Absurdist writers were for Esslin. The previous chapters have outlined what makes Eno so important and interesting. It is clear that Eno's commonality with the Theatre of the Absurd is that he is part of a group of writers (perhaps those included in the *New Downtown Now* anthology) using the theatre to present something new for the present time, as the Absurdists did decades ago.

Esslin's introduction to his book that created the theatrical genre of Absurdism noted some characteristics of the genre. Eno does not fit neatly on one side of the spectrum between Realism and Absurdism. He has problematized both what Esslin terms a “good play” and what Esslin terms the Theatre of the Absurd .

Plot and story are elements that Eno certainly deploys in his plays, but he utilizes them in innovative ways. In *The Flu Season*, Eno borrows from the form of literature for PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE, uses them as a mediating device, yet still manages to depict scenes forming the story (albeit fragmented) of a MAN and WOMAN falling in and out of love. The story of *Tragedy: a tragedy* is about the sun setting and perhaps never rising again. This, however, is only what we think the story is for, as time progresses, it becomes clear that the central story is more about the news anchors *as* people and the audience's relationship *to* media.

Regarding character, Eno's certainly are not subtle, but they also certainly are not unrecognizable or mechanical puppets. The character Thom Pain is certainly recognizable as a person. In fact, many reviews of the work wrote of the character Thom Pain as a modern day everyman. Eno's work with language, mediation, and breaks with convention have all been carefully crafted to create a character while exposing the actor and the audience as human beings: real human beings. His characters are neither mechanical nor puppets.

Additionally, Eno's works have defined themes. His themes, however, extend into the audience instead of remaining neatly within the imaginary confines of the stage. Generally speaking, his theme is the inadequacy of locating a personal meaning within a mediatized setting: theatre included. Whether through the speakers at a hockey game, the television set of a local nightly newscast, or in the audience of a theatrical production, Eno challenges the idea that meaning can be found through passive spectatorship. He

does not, however, attempt to fully solve anything for the audience, leaving that particular job to the viewer of his works. An example of this is the STRANGER in *Oh, the Humanity* who the audience expects will neatly wrap things up as a *deus ex machina* but then dashes their hopes when his movement toward center stage is only a tiny step, and his explanation is that there is no explanation. Eno's plays do, however, have beginnings and endings, none so clearly outlined as in *The Flu Season* which, from the onset, is framed as a book.

Esslin notes that the Theatre of the Absurd "relies on fantasy and dream reality" (Esslin 25). Eno's plays are not "dreams and nightmares" or "fantasy and dream reality." Instead, they strongly urge the audience into a clearer understanding of themselves and their world. These works are meant to create a connection of real people with other real people: Audience with actor and Audience with itself.

Finally, Eno's works are not filled with "incoherent babblings." Unlike many passages in *The Bald Soprano* or other Absurdist works, Eno's works have often been heralded for their poetic and witty word play. Esslin describes the Theatre of the Absurd as either uninterested in or not containing such poetry. Eno's background in literature has certainly shaped his plays, which fully utilize the power and inadequacy of language.

Eno employs rational devices, like PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE, in unique ways, but obviously believes in rationality and discursive thought. On the other hand "the Theatre of the Absurd strives to express its sense of the senselessness of the human condition and the inadequacy of the rational approach by the open abandonment of

rational devices and discursive thought" (Esslin 24). Eno's utilization of literary structures and complex binary compression are evidence suggesting that Eno believes in logic, especially for building an argument against typical theatrical presentations.

Eno's strong dependence on language *qua* language often leaves his stages quite bare. *Thom Pain: (based on nothing)*, for instance, has hardly any props, certainly no "set" (as the action takes place in the theatre itself), and, as previously discussed, the action truly takes place through the words and stories THOM recounts, and it is left to the viewers to "stage" the play in their minds[8]. The Theatre of the Absurd, however, ". . . tends toward a radical devaluation of language, toward a poetry that is to emerge from the concrete and objectified images of the stage itself" (Esslin 26). While Eno is certainly creating stage images in his works, his primary concern is language itself. Even when language is being devalued by presentation, the presentational mode is utilized to demonstrate the devaluation is language itself, and generally not concrete images. The words, for Eno, create many of the images in the mind of the spectator. This is, however, produced not simply by language but by trained performers communicating beyond, with, in, and through the gaps left by Eno. Therefore, when Esslin states that "The Theatre of the Absurd is thus part of the 'anti-literacy' movement of our time. . ." (Esslin 25) he is

[8] There are, of course, designers for these productions. David Korins explains about *Thom Pain* that "'Producers will look at that and say there was no set designer," he observes. "But every single fold and dip was designed and sewn in. We hung up the fabric, we made it crooked – we made it look like it was sort of thrown together very quickly. . . "[n]othing in this world is undesigned. It might be poorly designed, but nothing is undesigned'" (Time Out New York). However, both the published version of the script and Mimi Gisolfi D'aponte's review of the show for *Theatre Journal* list David Korins as Design Consultant. The Lighting Designer is still the Lighting Designer.

certainly not speaking of playwrights like Eno, who works with literary modes, ideas, and constructs.

Clearly, then, Eno does not rightly fit with the Absurdists. Ironically, however, while perhaps not accurately categorizing Eno's works, the comment by reviewer Charles Isherwood may well have shielded Eno from unnecessary scrutiny and the larger storm which may have materialized had there not been a box into which Eno could be placed.

> A public conditioned to an accepted convention tends to receive the impact of artistic experiences through a filter of critical standards, of predetermined expectations and terms of reference, which is the natural result of the schooling of its taste and faculty of perception. (Esslin 28)

Eno, writing in a time after which Absurdism has become an accepted genre and included in history books, may have been saved from some of the critical reception that these earlier playwrights received, because of this perceived connection with the genre. The comment by Isherwood may have provided a framework within which to situate Eno (albeit incorrectly), protecting him and his works from an adverse reaction which may have materialized had there not been a category into which Eno was placed.

Critical response to his work has largely remained under the umbrella genre of Absurdism and in relation/comparison to Beckett. This bespeaks a disconnect between experience and practice, something which Esslin notes happened when Absurdism was in its infancy:.". . .a tug of war ensues between impressions that have undoubtedly been received and critical preconceptions that clearly exclude the possibility that any such

impressions could have been felt. Hence the storms of frustration and indignation always caused by works in a new convention" (Esslin 28). Eno, perhaps, has been saved from much of the storm thanks to Isherwood's incorrect categorization of his play *Thom Pain*.

This thesis has attempted to reexamine Eno's works on their own merit, separate from Absurdism or Beckett. Careful readings of the works themselves reveal how specifically Eno has crafted his plays. Production reviews indicate a semi-shared experience by the theatre-goers as well as the particularly self-reflexive tendency of audiences of his works. Passive spectatorship has been revoked, and Eno has ensured that the lofty thoughts engendered after an evening experiencing one of his works are personal inquiries that contain ramifications for individual audience members. The audience members question their personal existence in addition to questioning the great deal of time they spend being an audience.

One of the primary lessons for the theatre that can be gleaned from attending a Will Eno play is that spectacle is not what is unique about theatre. Magical costume and set changes resemble stage magic or filmic special effects more than the unique nature of theatre. As Esslin writes, "The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing *about* the absurdity of the human condition; it merely *presents* it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images" (Esslin 25). Eno certainly presents the "endlessly strange" idea of theatre in being but does so through a live performer and words and thoughts, not primarily through images. It is not through "concrete stage images" that the feelings pass, on their way to the audience; it is through PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE, live actors

speaking words, enacting silences, and transversing the imaginary boundary of the fourth wall.

The ultimate relevance of Eno's works for the theatre remains to be seen. While he has certainly been successful, he is hardly a household name and certainly is not currently in every theatre history textbook on the market. In fact, many are unaware of his plays at all, or any play other than *Thom Pain: (based on nothing)*. This situation needs to be remedied and it is my hope that this thesis can become a part of making Will Eno and his plays more well known and studied. It is my belief that Eno's works carry vital lessons for the theatre as we may come to understand it in the future.

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