

Will Eno: The Page, The Stage, and The Word

This thesis examines the works of playwright Will Eno. Charles Isherwood, in his *New York Times* review of Will Eno's first major play *Thom Pain (based on nothing)* said “Mr. Eno is a Samuel Beckett for the Jon Stewart Generation” (Isherwood *Life's*). The quote is so prevalent 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. This short quote from a single review has shaped the public perception of this playwright and his plays. This affects both audience expectation and critical review of his works. The commercial success and notoriety this quote garnered, especially considering its continued usage in reviews, synopses, interviews, and blogs has positively affected both the playwright and his plays commercially. A problem emerges when we realize that the association with Beckett carries other notions which only pre-frame each encounter with this playwright and his plays. As such, valuable study of Eno and his works is largely unavailable.

Samuel Beckett, to whom Eno is related by the quote, is famously included in a group of playwrights identified by Martin Esslin as writing in the genre of Absurdism. In his introduction to *The Theatre of the Absurd*, Esslin outlines some differences between what he calls a “good play” and Absurdist plays. Eno’s work does not, however, fit neatly within the definition of Absurdism identified by Esslin. The overriding purpose of this thesis is not to prove or disprove Eno’s adherence to the shakily defined genre of Absurdism, nor is it an exercise in pointing out Eno's 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 investigates a variety of motifs found in the plays themselves and includes analysis of Eno's own writing and speaking about himself and the theatre. It also examines existing scholarship, critical essays, and reviews of productions (including blog reviews) to propose alternative, more complex knowledge about an impressive, living, American playwright.

The first major chapter examines Will Eno and his oeuvre as related to literature. Martin Puchner's book *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* examines 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). In Eno's play *The Flu Season* two characters, PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE, create a physical resistance to the theatre by their very presence as literary forms. They also provide mediation between the play itself and the audience as they stand between the audience and the story being told to narrate from their literary perspectives of beginning and end. Generally, the clearest indication of a closet drama is the presence of a text, formatted as a theatrical play, that is *not* intended to be performed.

Eno also began his creative work in the medium of literature, which helps explain the presence of PROLOGUE and EPILOGUE and the particularly heavy use of a literary form in *The Flu Season*. 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.

Reviewer Jeannette Williams noted that, “[*Thom Pain*]¹ is no [*Waiting for Godot*]². It is filled with description and forces the audience to imagine a scene apart from the sole actor on stage” (Williams). Even if, as Eno says in his “note” prefacing *The Flu Season* “[t]his is not to say that there is

1 Play by Will Eno.

2 Play by Samuel Beckett.

anything terrifically complicated going on here” (*Flu* 18), one thing is certain: Eno *is* doing something different from the genre of Absurdism to which he is usually confined.

The second major chapter examines two tendencies found in Eno's work. First examined is Eno's tendency to literally set his enacted plays in situations which involve live audiences, including his use of the actual theatre itself as the setting for his plays and his tendency to provoke direct interaction with the audience during the course of a play. The second tendency examined is Eno's use of *implied mediatization* as a story element for a diegetic purpose. Auslander's arguments about “liveness” are examined *in relation to* Eno's scripts. Eno's use of the stage as setting, and 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.

Implied mediatization is a term that will be employed to note Eno's implication of mediatized elements in his plays. In *Tragedy: a tragedy* Eno implies the presence of video cameras and televisions in the play as it is about reporters who speak directly to cameras which are then broadcast to a “general” public. This “general” public becomes the live audience who, by virtue of our over-mediatized society, have no trouble identifying the form of what they are viewing as television even without the presence of cameras or televisions. Auslander insists that television provides a greater sense of proximity to performers than does live performance because mediatized forms (like television) do not promise (and subsequently deny) presence.

Auslander overlooks 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 during his performances, 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.

Eno also frequently uses the "theatre" or the "stage" as the setting for his plays. This is an important characteristic of his works 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 separating audience and performer. Though some of his plays do not use the stage as setting, they maintain the concurrent temporal reality with the audience who are always 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. Due to Eno's specific use of the audience, any synopsis of a his plays is impossible without mention of them. 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.

Eno's anti-theatrical tendencies are not, however, hostile towards the theatre. As Puchner points out, "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.

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. 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. Eno's anti-theatricalism contributes to the profound and interesting way his plays affect the audience.

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). The culminating effect of a non-existent 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.

The third major chapter examines two common motifs of Will Eno: the compression of binary opposites and the absent word (first identified by Marc Silverstein). By reading these two motifs via applicable theoretical and critical writings, these motifs bring meaning-making through language into question. 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.

His primary motif at the level of dialogue is the use of binary opposites in close proximity within characters' speech. 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).

The second motif of the absent word also serves to devalue the entire structure of language. In Eno's plays sentences can no longer be formed, there is an inability to connect the thought to the word, the characters experience speechlessness, and they eventually succumb even to attempts at communication via individual letters in a desperate attempt define themselves through an effort to grasp an unlocatable meaning. His compression of language serves to eradicate the meaning generally thought to be inherent to language producing the absent word. 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 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). When the character Frank in *Tragedy: a tragedy* says, “It seems there is no word” (*Tragedy* 70) he 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.

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*). Marc Silverstein similarly 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.

Whether the ultimate effect of the productions is attributed to Eno's writing or not, the speech of the performers is "like smoke and [their bodies are] the burning." (Margolin 97) The audience can see that 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 the moments of silence, those moments of grasping, that the audience truly 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. At the end of *Thom Pain* an audience member is brought onto the stage. What does this usurper of Thom say, when standing in front of an audience of peers, alone, 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?

“ . . . [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 do not typically involve absent words or frequently compressed binaries to devalue language in order to produce 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.

Eno's relationship to the Theatre of the Absurd is simply that he is part of a different group of writers using the theatre to present something new for the present time, as the Absurdist did decades ago. Eno has problematized both what Esslin terms a “good play” and what Esslin terms the Theatre of the Absurd . When speaking of the Theatre of the Absurd, Esslin said:

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 plays contain identifiable *plots, characters* as opposed to mechanical puppets or subtle characterization, *endings* (despite occasional circular leanings), *current reality* more than dreams, nightmares, or nature because of his specific use of the live audience, and his works have been praised for a blending that could be called *witty babblings*.

Clearly, then, Eno does not rightly fit in with the Absurdists. 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 not created as much of a storm as he should due to Isherwood's incorrect categorization of his play *Thom Pain (based on nothing)*.

This thesis reexamines Eno's works separate from Absurdism or Beckett. Careful readings of the works themselves reveal specifically how Eno has crafted his plays. Production reviews indicate a semi-shared experience by the theatre-goers as well as the particularly self-reflexive tendency in audiences of his works. This thesis is 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.

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