

Achieving The Impossible:
The Singularity Born Through Theatre

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**“Every word is like an unnecessary stain on silence and
nothingness.”**

-Samuel Beckett

It is a distinct and similar situation across countries, continents, borders, and communities. The stage is anywhere from fully decorated to completely stripped naked, but this is not where the importance lies. When the actor or performer steps on stage, the audience is made aware of their presence through sight, but the valuable focus is through listening. What many philosophers, theorists, and educators who study critical theory would want is for the member of the audience to pay close attention to the language that the individual on stage is using and expressing through performance. Before this moment, though, before the person who is putting on a new character makes his appearance known on stage, many things happen that lead up to this moment.

As a theatre major studying at Northwestern with years of experience prior to my education in the School of Communication, I know all about the process of preparing for a role in live performance. What I didn't know before my abroad experience is how important these steps are in the physical text that the playwright has created for a production. The language used visually and orally has an incredible history and focus in the singular experience that many try to achieve but fail to attain.

Jacques Derrida spent his life studying and discussing many subjects, but one of his main focuses was on language. The singular, and non-general, experience that billions of people have tried to conquer seems impossible to him through his study of language. The arts, with their intense relation to text, image, and impression may be the only access that you or I have to this experience, though. As Derrida claims, the person using language attempts to make the impossible, possible by using their *own* language with non-generalized terms that they have created themselves. On a daily basis, we use these terms that we have learned from others through conversation and communication and

follow the claim that we are far from escaping a generalized language. The playwright, though, has the ability to create text on the page intended for oral passage through an actor the moment they step on stage. Though Derrida and others would argue that these terms, phrases, and text are still generalized, theatre may be the single access that the individual has to a singularity. Theatre may allow a unique opportunity and existence that people have been running after for thousands and thousands of years.

In this paper, I will discuss many different views on language and the singular experience, and challenge them through the study of text in theatre in performance. In understanding this, in understanding the world, as Heidegger would say, a new look into language may become apparent in an attempt to support and also refuse many claims made through the lens of critical theory in the past. Critical theory critiques culture and society through interpretation of what we know to be true in the world around us. We may have been taught and believe certain aspects to the study of language, but the only way to approach, or even dream of, an escape into singularity is by critiquing what many hold to be true in society today. Derrida, Saussure, Heidegger, Levinas, and others spent their lives examining these topics and subjects and finding the faults in them. To understand language best, we must deconstruct the critique of others and approach a discussion of theatre. By observing and studying periods of time including those after World War II during the birth of the theatre of the absurd, we can understand how the values and ideas set in place for how we approach language can be challenged. Through theatrical texts like *Waiting for Godot*, we can observe a confrontation between playwrights and theorists in an attempt to understand and access singularities. Now, let's

attempt to criticize what is known and attempt to make the impossible, possible through the study of theatre and its text when combined with live performance.

The best way to approach the understanding and deconstruction of language is to examine how many different thinkers, critical theorists, and educators understood and used it in their studies. It is impossible to understand Derrida's thought processes and ideas without understanding Ferdinand de Saussure's approach and deep analysis of language represented in his lectures, some of which were written by his students as the *Course In General Linguistics*. In focusing on the differences and abnormalities in the method of analyzing language, we may get closer to respecting the existence of a singular, individual language, which many have deemed impossible.

As Wade Baskin puts it best in his introduction to Saussure's lecture in *Course in General Linguistics*, "In spite of the services that [scholars] rendered, the neogramarians did not illuminate the whole question, and the fundamental problems of general linguistics still await solution" (Saussure 5). There are still many issues that people in all different fields come in contact with when using language. Whether it is a critical theorist, a teacher, a scientist, or a linguist, or a playwright, the fundamental understanding of what language actually is and is created by changes definition and foundation in each case. Saussure, the inventor of modern linguistics, worked to challenge ideas and thought in this concentration by dissecting language and helping others use it properly. In Saussure's work, we understand that language represents. In its simplest form, he explains that language is a system of signs, and these signs refer to things that exist in the world. These signs contain the concept of the signifier and the signifieds that help make language what it is. Language is able to signify by creating

sounds that evoke an image, also known, for Saussure, as the signified. The key concept of the idea plays a huge part in understanding linguistic value. Saussure demonstrates how this organization works best, “Psychologically our thought—apart from its expression in words—is only a shapeless and indistinct mass. Philosophers and linguists have always agreed in recognizing that without the help of signs we would be unable to make a clear-cut, consistent distinction between two ideas. Without language, thought is a vague, uncharted nebula. There are no pre-existing ideas, and nothing is distinct before the appearance of language” (Saussure 111-112). What Saussure does not express but argues is that language is the only thing that can bring the signified concept or idea to the mind. Thought is an incredibly important part to how the individual communicates ideas and words, whether general or not, in an expression of being and existence. With this in mind, the evolution of the idea in relation to the language is always consistent with thought. The world that we are present in is made clear to us through the signifieds that Saussure discusses in this section of his lecture.

As a system of values and understandings, language is able to signify through difference. The difference here is not only important in understanding language itself, but also in all the ways that these thinkers express individuality in text if it is even able to exist. The way that this difference works is when the signifier is understood because it sounds different from other signifiers. This is the key to understanding how difference helps language best in its achievement of clarity. Through differentiation, the individual is able to contrast sounds and signifieds of the same sounds, which, as we have discussed, creates a flow of signs. This is where the process of language takes its place. This flow of signs that we have debated and continue to examine is how Heidegger expresses his

understanding of the world. This will be referenced later on, but it is important to know this distinct connection between Saussure and Heidegger in an attempt to individualize the linguistic experience. The signifiers are the only access to the signifieds that create the experience for the individual. But, in language, the sounds we have discussed are only able to retain meaning when they have an attachment to the signifieds. Though it is difficult to understand, the signifieds and the signifiers are never separated or else the process of language wouldn't exist.

The difference that is contemplated in Saussure and Heidegger's work bases much of its thought in exchange. This exchange has multiple meanings, especially when we try to relate it to other forms like theatre, poetry, and art. Saussure discusses language as a system of exchange of values, "In the same way a word can be exchanged for something dissimilar, an idea; besides, it can be compared with something of the same nature, another word. Its value is therefore not fixed so long as one simply states that it can be 'exchanged' for a given concept'" (Saussure 115). We experience this exchange in all aspects of language. We understand language through difference but also through this process of exchange and translation. The world around the individual is meaningless unless translated as language as words can be exchanged as other languages and understandings. To permit access to these words, whether in conversation or on stage, it is imperative that the word's environment is understood, "The value of just any term is accordingly determined by its environment; it is impossible to fix even the value of the word signifying 'sun' without first considering its surroundings: in some languages it is not possible to say 'sit in the sun'" (Saussure 116). Something that Saussure does not get at here is the attempt at a unique language through these words, something that I attempt

to contemplate through the study of theatre, performance, and the text attached to it. The individual experience is perhaps accessed through the fact that some languages do not allow certain sayings as others do, something that makes one more unique than the other. It is these smaller instances and insights that allow the individual experience and language to come into the mind of existence. Without argument against the existence of a singular experience, it would be difficult to support the claim that it can truly exist.

Continuing with the concept of exchange and difference for Saussure, we must observe how in language, as he puts it, “there are only differences” (Saussure 120). Picking up from where we left off with the notion of the sign, it must be understood that it can only recognize its own value when it is in the process of exchange with something else. To put it simply, signs are only understood when compared, exchanged, and differentiated from others. In this process of contrast and variance, the signified is then compared to other signifieds to realize its context and comprehension. Saussure stresses the importance of value in how these terms and aspects of language are able to recognize and realize their own. These terms that we use in language are only able to see their value when they are accompanied by other terms and sounds that are different from themselves. These concepts and thoughts expressed by Saussure create a recognition of the ways that language goes about working and comparing itself to others.

Before we move on to other contributors to how language works and how it is created, we must observe Saussure’s connection to outside texts, such as poetry and theatre, to understand the argument for the individual language. Isabelle Alfandry allows an incredible gaze into Saussure’s relation to these art forms through his discussion of poetry. Alfandry, with Saussure’s guidance and work, observes what poetry does to

language and how it questions and puts language to the test in comparable ways to linguistics. As we observe text, we must understand Saussure's recognition of it, "Writing, though unrelated to its inner system, is used continually to represent language. We cannot simply disregard it. We must be acquainted with its usefulness, shortcomings, and dangers" (Saussure 23). Here, we see that Saussure works with writing in relation to speech and language, but warns of its separation from what language truly tries to get at. In theatrical text, the playwright is able to disassociate these ideas through what they have written in creating an individual experience, which will be discussed more later on. In a further look into text, Saussure expresses a strong stance in what it does and how people in our world treat it when using language, "Language does have a definite and stable oral tradition that is independent of writing, but the influence of the written form prevents our seeing this...still today intelligent men confuse language and writing" (Saussure 24-25). Saussure discusses a misconception in his lecture that many seem to refer to and confuse in an attack on language that the individual is unaware of. He fears that many communities and languages tend to treat writing as superior to oral speech. He continues, "Language is constantly evolving, whereas writing tends to remain stable...writing obscures language; it is not a guise for language but a disguise...the pronunciation of a word is determined, not by its spelling, but by its history...the tyranny of writing goes even further. By imposing itself upon the masses, spelling influences and modifies language" (Saussure 27-31). Saussure's strong stance that oral speech is the truth of language follows his studies closely, and he fears that representation, something wildly important in theatre, is dangerous. In performance, the actor brings the text from the page out onto the stage and to the audience. This comes through oral speech, but

stems from the written word that the playwright intended for others. Saussure expresses a deep attitude towards this in begging the listener to understand that language is the language that we speak, and what we find in books, plays, and poetry is not language, but just a representation of it. This representation of language, in Saussure's eyes, is a constant threat to what he considers actual language because people confuse and take one for the other. This fear of a threat and constant danger that looms in language in the eyes of Saussure is exactly what allows the individual language to break through its constraints, and to understand this, we must recognize Derrida's connection to it through Saussure's work.

Like Saussure, Jacques Derrida studies language through a connection to it in reference to a worry that he has for it and how people in the world use it in their lives. Derrida fears that many philosophers who study and educate audiences on language want it to be capable of doing more than it possibly can. What language delivers, to Derrida, may be less than what many want it to do and access. To best understand Derrida's relationship to language, we will observe multiple works written and lectured by him throughout his career. To begin, we will start with Derrida's creation of *différance*. Saussure, as explained before, understands language as a system of differences that only recognizes its own value through a process of exchange that occurs between things that are different from each other. Derrida latches onto this understanding and follows through with the concept of a system of differences that creates and is a source of meaning. This meaning created for and by language has an attachment to words that, as we have discussed, is only temporary. Through interpretation, differences are created by the unstable meanings we combine with ideas. Derrida is now able to explain these

differences of interpretation through *différance* discovered in *Differance At The Origin*, “the signified concept is never present in and of itself, in a sufficient presence that would refer only to itself...every concept is inscribed in a chain or in a system within which it refers to the other, to other concepts, by means of the systematic play of differences. Such a play, *différance*, is thus no longer simply a concept, but rather the possibility of conceptuality, of a conceptual process and system in general” (Derrida 63). This is where Derrida begins his reasoning for being worried about language because the exchange of values, he explains, never comes to an end, which leads to new interpretations and misunderstandings. Saussure and Derrida work together here to express that exchange is enabled and the signs they discuss need others to communicate meaning, which Derrida fears, is always changing.

Though many of the thoughts and points that Derrida and Saussure agree on tend to lend a hand towards the singularity of language, not all of their teachings connect in context and substance. Through the study of critical theory, many attempt to understand and criticize the world around us and how it is created and understood through the mind and essence of a human being existing in that world. As studied earlier, we understand that Edmund Husserl, who worked closely with the study of phenomenology, attempts to bring the world to presence for the human mentally. Off of this point, Saussure would attempt to support this claim and continue it by saying that language is used to attain this presence in the mind. Language is key in understanding the world here because it is able to separate understanding from confusion. This thought and strong opinion is where Derrida’s fear for language is born. He references Saussure and tries to paint a picture of a dissimilar attitude for the reader, “Since language, which Saussure says is a

classification, has not fallen from the sky, its differences have been produced, are produced effects, but they are effects which do not find their cause in a subject or substance, in a thing in general, a being that is somewhere present, thereby eluding the play of *différance*” (Derrida 64). This is where the views on language diverge and create an opening for a new kind of understanding for the singular experience that we are getting at. Derrida tries to warn the reader that language does not work the way others have told them it does, but that words in language are used and have effect by referring them and comparing them to other words. By doing this, he introduces the trace, which has major significance in the argument for singularity, “I have attempted to indicate a way out of the closure of this framework via the ‘trace,’ which is no more an effect than it has a cause, but which in and of itself, outside its text, is not sufficient to operate the necessary transgression” (Derrida 64). Here, we must observe how Derrida uses text to support his claims. The idea of something outside of text, language itself outside of text, is something that many of these thinkers refer to when discussing an oral experience. For the playwright, text itself is incredibly important; it is the connection that their work has to the audience through the speech they have given the actor. There is no separation between the text and the speech, which many would disagree with if the text were referencing language directly. To dig deeper into this argument, we must criticize and analyze the trace that Derrida engages with in his discussions.

Difference is critical in understanding when working with *différance* and how language is signified through Derrida’s work. As we have discussed infinity and the idea of the finite or infinite self, this concept finds itself not only relating to the human being’s life an desire, but also to language. These differences are infinite in working out the

concept and context of a word or idea, especially in theatre, poetry, and literature. Every single play that has been used, every book that has been read, every poem that has been recited aloud contains more than billions of these infinite words and ideas that give others meaning. Specifically for the script of a play, every word, phrase, expression, or saying that has not been used in a specific line of dialogue is a trace. The trace, as we have been taught, is the ghost of all possibilities and exchanges when compared to what is being discussed, said, or analyzed. Trace allows for an understanding and determination of meaning and signification, whether in conversation, text, a play, or a book. The trace also allows an entry into an attempt at a singular experience. Though Derrida argues that the language is not owned by a singular person or group, which will be discussed later on in reference to another one of his works, these potentially infinite instances and possibilities reference an individuality never discussed previously. Though they are infinite, they are singular and independent when a person converses or exchanges with another and applies their own opinion or view to it. In the setting of a theatre or an educational theatre experience, those discussing the text of a playwright, whether he or she is present or not, bring their own ideas and comments to the playing space about what they have read and processed. The traces exist for what they have not mentioned and what could still be mentioned to create a singular opinion, something that helps build the singular language. When an actor reads a play, they take away something different from others even if they have similar understandings to the text they have been assigned. The trace exists here in the language through difference of meaning that one takes from the text with its intended purpose from the playwright. This differentiation, in its access to the text, creates a world of meaning that is positive and negative. It allows

meaning to be produced as it is undermined in the system of language. To understand *différance* and Derrida's work and how it approaches and criticizes language, we must value the trace and recognize it as something different from what Saussure discusses allows language to work the way it does. What Derrida wants the reader and student to understand that Saussure does not express is the idea that when we create conversation or read the text of a play, we are consistently differentiating through exchange which only adds to the thought of the trace. Through this, interpretation is accessed and enabled through the trace in our constant understanding of one another through conversation. The negative and positives are clear because the trace allows us to convey and communicate, but at the same time demeans and destabilized our communication. Language and communication is a process, and the trace, though positive and negative in what it does for it, helps us move along and move closer to the singular experience and exchange.

Before we move on to Derrida's personal connection to language through his life experience, we must pay close attention to these positive and negative aspects of language that help us understand the idea of the *pharmakon* in language. Derrida's discussion of the *pharmakon* comes from his studies of Plato and how Plato attempts to understand and dissect language like the others that we have previously discussed. Plato observes language through speech, primarily because he wants to highlight the significance of speech in enabling argument in conversation. In critical theory, a fundamental aspect of many of the teachings lies in time and presence. Plato reacts to speech in a positive manner because it enables debate and conversation in the time and world that the individual exists in. In their position of present time, speech allows them to communicate and exchange through language. Like Saussure, Plato avoids writing as

something that is to be appreciated and highlighted. Saussure and Plato agree that when studying language, people must be cautious of the use of writing because it acts as an infector to speech. In the context of a play, the playwright attempts to bring the audience member and performer into the setting and time of the text written. Plato would disagree in an attempt to teach that writing does not allow this presence and that speech is the only access to this moment. The playwright diverges from this understanding, though, by creating a script to express this presence through speech after it has been taken from the page. This is where Plato and Saussure fail to recognize the possible existence of a singular language when involving individuality. They observe writing as something to be avoided, even though it is able to help dialogue. In the script of a play, the writing is what allows the actor and performer to access their character through dialogue. In the process of building the character, the text does wonders in allowing the actor to memorize and connect to the speech by remembering the lines they are supposed to say when performing on stage. In the specific and incredibly important instance of theatre, writing is viewed as an addition to speech because it strengthens the dialogue that will be expressed in the future. The fundamental understanding of the pharmakon lies in its reference to a potion that can either heal or kill. This potion, which can be either a medicine or a poison, attempts to help a certain cause but also infects and destabilizes it whether it is aware of it or not. As Derrida best puts it, "Plato maintains both the exteriority of writing and its power of maleficent penetration its ability to affect or infect what lies deepest inside" (Derrida 135). In the instance of theatre, the only thing that the writing in a text does is affect the speech and dialogue that is accompanied by it. This is a situation where the pharmakon is nothing but a medicine, because speech and dialogue go

hand in hand in this experience. Though this is not always the case, here we see an entry for the individual experience to flourish. Derrida would argue that although the writing is viewed as a supplement in this pharmikological situation, it adds destabilizing traces to the process of speech. An important term coined by Derrida, deconstruction, exemplifies this negative relationship because it is an intervention that tries to show that this specific text does not bring the concept it is getting at to the mind. Here, the mind of the actor or audience member would be struggling with the text in Derrida's teachings, but it is the disconnect and connect of the text and speech in theatre that allows it to surpass and disprove these ideas.

To solidify these understandings and continue on with the concept of the trace, and to further understand Derrida's later work and personal connection to it, we must remain closely to his study of the trace and of the cinder. For Derrida, the cinder is not very different from the trace, it is just viewed in a different light and context. The trace is a concept that illustrates that the signifier was once present in a moment, but it is no longer there because of its relationship through difference. The cinder is similar, but it is a more simple way to think of the trace because it is something that is no longer there or alive in concept, but haunts this exact concept very closely. We know a cinder, without Derrida's teachings, as something burnt and dead, and this is exactly why he uses the word to compare it with the trace. To best understand Derrida's relationship between cinders and language, we must evaluate and examine his famous quote "Il n'y a pas de hors texte". Translated exactly, it means that there is nothing outside of text. Derrida is trying to explain that outside of text and textuality, nothing meaningful is said, which is supported by all of his work with the trace and différance. In continuing his explanation,

he best explains in his book, *Cinders*, how this process goes about working, “There are cinders only insofar as there is the hearth, the fireplace, some fire or place. Cinder as the house of being...” (Derrida 23). For Derrida, language is perfectly described by cinders because when we use it, there are infinite traces existing from previous situations that surround the text that is being read or discussed in the present. Outside of text, there is no meaning for Derrida, so there is nothing outside of cinders that holds meaning. When Derrida says “cinder as the house of being” he is referring to it as the house of language. We are unable to leave this house of cinders and language because it is what we know and the traces and cinders haunting it have created it and contextualized it. Derrida would then support the claim that all texts, even theatrical ones, do not belong to the person or playwright who dedicated their lives to these items. He is strict in saying that the text does not belong to that person because the language they are using does not belong to them. But, theatre allows an escape from cinders because of its distinct and irreplaceable connection to speech and text, and the relationship that they hold unseen in other texts. The intention of reading to speech, from text to mouth, isn’t represented in the texts that Derrida is discussing, which is one of the main reasons he avoids discussion of live theatre and performance.

In an attempt to further dissect Derrida’s divergence from theatrical text, it is imperative to observe these distinctions through a different lens. Though similar in many aspects, theatre and cinema diverge from each other in much of how they are created and how they use text for purpose. Derrida has commented on cinema in the past, and it allows for an entry into the world of theatre through discussions with Peter Szendy, a French philosopher who studies closely the theory of film when connected to thinkers

like Derrida. Following another one of Derrida's main points "there is no extratext", Szendy finds comparison through a move from extratext to extrafilm. In the specific instance of extratext, Derrida is no longer fully discussing what we understand to be text. He is discussing the architext, referring to the cinders that once existed and still haunt it. Szendy comments on Derrida's relationship to cinema and film in the afterword of *Apocalypse-Cinema: 2012 and Other Ends of the World*, "Derrida in effect declares: 'I have no memory for cinema. It is a form of culture that, in me, does not leave a trace'" (Szendy 3). In a lazy attempt to avoid the relationship in the arts between language and text, Derrida avoids the discussion of something that we are attempting to get to the core of through the singular experience. Cinders, a thought that Derrida taught for years and stood by, find themselves present in theatre and film in their relationship to how the arts come to be. Szendy explains, "For cinder belongs to cinema...so true it is that cinders is the name or the figure for what cinema shelters within itself structurally...the camera is always already carried to the limit of all possible testimony or testament—'It testifies without testifying,' as Derrida says" (Szendy 6). Szendy now takes the world of cinema and applies it to the physical world that we find ourselves in, that we are constantly trying to bring to presence in our minds. Szendy suggests that world is a film and that when we are observing things and people around us, we are already directing this film. This concept, Szendy explains, is coined as the thought and understanding of archi-cinema.

The curiosity and position of this conversation, though, is through the conversation and conversion of images and film into live theatre and the text associated with it. Through archi-cinema, we are able to investigate further into the art of theatre through film under Derrida's discussions. Archi-cinema, when combined with live

performance, allows the individual to watch a live performance and create a cinematic experience from themselves as they watch the play unfold. The idea of no extratext or extrafilm exists in this live performance because it finds itself in a similar structure. As the audience member continues to watch the performance, they are creating an individual experience, a singularity, by looking in certain directions and blinking when they please. The different rhythms in these patterns individualize the experience through whether they are passionate and they blink less, or bored and they diverge their attention from the stage elsewhere. Through sight, in theatre, the individual is already directing a sort of cinematic experience for themselves because the reality they are set is an existence in archi-cinema. What Derrida fails to address the connection to here is his fundamental understanding of how the experience is created through differences. In live performance, there are only differences because it never presents or confronts the individual with a full presence. There are only traces and cinders in these performances that refer to one another. Following the assumption that there is no extratext, the differences that exist get multiplied in this theatrical experience itself. The textual structure that creates this performance from the ground up has an incredible amount of micro-differences that individualize the experience for each being observing and creating their singularity. Nothing in these experiences is the same because there is no extratext and because there are traces, the differences are multiplied infinitely within this domain of live performance. Derrida refuses to approach or understand these connections, but they are supported using his theories and understandings of the world around him. Through his own teachings, we are able to support the idea of individuality through the theatrical experience when based in live performance and the text that it stems from.

Though Derrida's argument seems to be deconstructed above, to fully support the claims that we are making about individuality in theatre, we must recognize more of his arguments relating to language. Most of this discussion will come through Derrida's book *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*. This book finds itself relating to his life and upbringing and we are able to understand why he finds himself so furiously connected to language because of his own history. The main, simple ideas that Derrida attempts to express is that there is an illusion created by beings today that when they are speaking, they have the impression that they are the origin of what they say. The book attempts to explain that this is incorrect, and that the human being is never the origin of what they say, what they say comes from the other. The relationship then, between the individual and language, finds itself completely based in outside forces and contexts as it is not the property of the speaking subject. Though Derrida makes fantastic points and connections to this impossible individualized experience, he once again fails to recognize the areas of study that may escape his own understandings, such as theatre and film.

When individuals in society use and represent language, they often believe and are strong in opinion that the language they are using belongs to them. This comes from the idea of community, nationality, and society. From the beginning of his book, *Monolingualism of the Other or The Prosthesis of Origin*, Derrida explains this common thought to be incorrect, "I only have one language; it is not mine.' Or rather, and better still: I am monolingual. My monolingualism dwells, and I call it my dwelling; it feels like one to me, and I remain in it and inhabit it. It inhabits me" (Derrida 1). From this moment in the book, we understand language to be dangerous in its relationship to the individual because that relationship seems more intimate, in Derrida's eyes, than it actually is. The

individual is claiming ownership over a language that is examined by him as a language that belongs to more than this singularity. This ownership relates to the idea discussed above though Derrida's own terms, deconstruction. The difference that Derrida stresses comes from the other. The other is what allows individual to become different in each other's eyes, but it still does not allow access to an individual and singular language because a person is unable to claim ownership over their identity and language. As Derrida discusses the concept of dwelling, he is referring to identification through language. The language that we put out into the world is references as our dwelling because it is able to support our identification. In speaking and existing in these languages, we are creating an existence for ourselves but in a general way. This is where Derrida diverges from his own conversation in the book and allows conversation and debate with his own thought. In theatre, the actor or performer finds themselves present in the body of the character through speaking the words that they have lived through and memorized. Other theorists support this claim, but Derrida attempts to demean it by an argument of generality. But, it is through this existence that the individual attempts to attain an individual experience. By existing in the words that the playwright has created, whether general or not, the performer diverges from the crowd as an individual using singular expressions.

This presents us with the idea that Derrida holds closely in his work, the idiom. Put bust, the idiom is viewed as an invented language that we create to make our own experience, but Derrida suggests that we are using general terms and language that we inherit, so the pure and singular experience is unable to be attained. Here, we are introduced to two propositions which are equally valid, but contradictory in what they are

trying to express, “A bling genealogical impulse would find its moving source, its force, and its recourse in the very partition of this double law, in the antinomical duplicity of this clause of belonging: 1. We only ever speak one language—or rather one idiom only. 2. We never speak only one language—or rather there is no pure idiom” (Derrida 8). The idiom introduced here is exactly what Derrida and others refute, but what we are trying to attain and discuss. This idea of a pure idiom is exactly what people try to achieve, but fail to do according to Derrida. The idiom is used to understand the relationship with language because it does not define itself purely as something different from language. As we have discussed, it is a happening to language because people like playwrights make it happen to language. In Derrida’s eyes, it is an attempt at a singularity in the domain of writing by using language to utilize the idiom. What Derrida argues, then, is that even the book that he is writing in his own terms and language is something general and inconsistent in its singularity. The literature that we find in theatre and poetry attempts to prove a singular experience by shifting our gaze and understanding of the laws represented in language. Through his own philosophies, Derrida diverges from the idea of singularity because he wants to focus on generalities. In the individual experience, whether for the person on the street or the performer on stage, the being attempts to create their own bias through language. Derrida then argues that through this use of the idiom, it cannot be pure because all of these terms and phrases come from the outside. In our existence in the world, we are consistently interacting, being taught by, and dealing with the other that Derrida references throughout his work. We have discussed the idea of sovereignty in language, and the happenings that take place toward language are not dependent on itself. Sovereignty, to Derrida, does not exist in these exchanges because it

is not, and can never be, a pure expression of the subject. To Derrida, in speech, we are only translating something that has come from the outside. In his understanding, speech is a translation from the individual, but they are not using their own words. The individual is brainwashed through their experience that what they are expressing comes from themselves, but these words are more ordinary than they understand them to be. The individual finds himself or herself stuck in a constant repetition that argues against individuality. This is where the problem of translation lies, for Derrida, because it brings up the key point that the individual is constantly trying to attain and run after an impossible translation. As we have discussed countless times, this happening and circumstance is the individual trying to make the impossible possible in their attempts at writing and speech. In an attempt to avoid common language, they are pursuing a singularity that many theorists claim does not exist. Derrida references this as a dimension of promise that the individual requires but is unable to attain. Certain texts in theatre describe this situation, but what Derrida does not observe is the text's attention and support of singularity through absurdism, which will be addressed later on in a theatrical context.

The pure idiom, which seems far-fetched, comes into existence through the use of common language by creating a singular experience unattended by others. While Derrida argues against it, his relationship with the French language contributes to the discussion of singularity, "Since the prior-to-the-first time of pre-originary language does not exist, it must be invented. Injunctions, the summons of another writing. But, above all, it must be written within languages, so to speak. One must summon up writing inside the given language" (Derrida 64). Here, we are able to look further into the relationship between

the playwright and the language they are using to create and write their own piece of work, which encompasses their singularity. When a playwright writes a text, the majority of the time they are using a language that has ties to their nationality and culture that they have lived their lives as part of. While this language does not belong to them, it gives them the access to create a singular and individual text through their own words, the words which Derrida would describe as general and vague. But, in their attempts at a unique text, they challenge this notion set forth by language. The promise here kept and followed through by the playwright is available through theatrical texts because of its dynamic relationship with speech. Derrida discusses the promise, “The promise of which I speak, the one of which I was saying above that remains threatening (contrary to what is generally thought about the promise) and of which I am now proposing that it promises the impossible but also the possibility of all speech; this strange promise neither yields nor delivers any messianic or eschatological content here...this promise resembles the salvation addressed to the other, the other recognized as an entirely different other” (Derrida 68). This promise, which is posed as a threat, is used as a weapon by the playwright or individual in an attempt to disconnect from the other by using text intended for them. The text that a playwright creates in their own voice which is meant to be read orally shows a disconnect from the literature that expresses a vague terminology. Derrida coins this term as madness found in the singularity of language. If this is the idea and thought that he stands by, then the playwright is mad in their work and its planned purpose and meaning. This madness consumes the playwright by giving them the idea and notion that they have one language and it belongs to that distinct individual. While the language they already speak lends a hand to this continuation of it into an idiom, it

only helps build from the foundation to create a unique, unseen text. Derrida understands that it is a rare occurrence when the individual does something personal with language, but it is regarded as possible. This discussion of translation and the impossibility of it connects to earlier thought which gets at the being's desire for an individualized, personal, and singular experience not only through language, but through life itself.

Many of the texts, ideas, and thinkers that we have discussed criticize the world around them in attempts to bring truths to the world that we are present in. Other philosophers and great minds, including Heidegger and Levinas, used similar theories to determine and get at more of these truths in the lives of human beings. Through much of his work, Heidegger wanted to get at an understanding and existence of authenticity where the person, or Dasein, could take ownership of their lives in an individual manner. His thought stemmed from the idea that in understanding, the world is brought to light in truth and that by being in the world, this was an attempt to discover truths. Heidegger's connection with language, which we must take into account, was one similar to many notions we have previously discussed. He believed that language was a body of retained metaphors and words, which existed before the being did. In our attempts to understand and individualize singularities, we must observe authenticity as part of this notion. We are able to see Heidegger's issue with the individual distancing themselves from the general being in *Being and Time*, "As they-self, the particular Dasein has been, dispersed into the "they", and must first find itself...Dasein discovers the world in its own way and brings it close, if it discloses to itself its own authentic Being, then this discovery of the 'world' and this disclosure of Dasein are always accomplished as a clearing away of concealments and obscurities, as a breaking up of the disguises with which Dasein bars

its own way” (Heidegger 167). An incredible part of the argument of the singularity of theatrical texts and individualized language comes from the ownership of one’s being. Heidegger worries that people are thrown into a society or community where they are indistinguishable, and the only way to escape this is to stick out by taking ownership of the time and place that they find themselves in. By living life authentically and distancing oneself from the generalized language, the individual is able to alienate himself or herself from what we see as usual. When we observe text in theatre, we are unable to say that every word used is seeing the page for the first time. This goes along with what Derrida argues. But, we must observe it in a distanced fashion that lends a hand to creating a singularity. Heidegger supports this claim, “Authentic Being-one’s-Self does not rest upon an exceptional condition of the subject, a condition that has been detached from the ‘they’; it is rather an existentiell modification of the ‘they’ as an essential existentielle” (Heidegger 168). The key word here to observe in relation to language is ‘detached’. In these texts, we still see reference to words and terms that have been used before, but it is in the distancing and detachment that allows a unique, new text. This authentic life, to Heidegger and others, is one that is seductive because it is what Derrida explains as impossible. By living an authentic life and using an individualized language in theatre, the playwright is able to see a world unseen by most beings existing in a present time. It is desirable because it seems unattainable, when in reality, critical theory distracts from a possible existence that is easily ignored. By doing this, by taking action as Heidegger suggests, the being is able to bring the world to light in its truth while reacting to it emotionally and responding in an understanding invisible to others. Other thinkers, students, and studiers of Heidegger took his material and explanations and continued

them by critiquing them in their attempts to aid the being in claiming ownership of their lives. As the playwright exists in the world like any other person, they take part in the journey and possibility of living an authentic life. Levinas, a man who wrote on Heidegger, attempted to use Heidegger's work to observe philosophies and expand and continue attempts at individuality.

One of the main differences seen in Heidegger and Levinas' work was their approach to the relationship with the other. As a person involved in the process of theatre, the playwright and performer interacts with multiple working parts of a performance process and must deal with past members in creating original work. While Heidegger appreciated a certain distance from the other, Levinas understood the other as someone who had to be respected when approached by the individual. Heidegger saw the world in a light where the being existed for themselves, and Levinas viewed it as a being that was intended for the other. In this relationship with the people that surround us, we are able to more closely observe and understand how a unique mind and existence exists among the general. Levinas explains this difference in *Ethics and Infinity*, "From whence an entirely different movement: to escape the 'there is' one must not be posed but deposed; to make an act of deposition, in the sense one speaks of deposed kings. This deposition of sovereignty by the ego is the social relationship with the Other, the dis-inter-ested relation" (Levinas 52). In disassociating ourselves with the other and claiming that the only way to fall out of the category of the general is by creating a distance, we are ignorant in using the other to help ourselves live an authentic life. The sovereignty that we hold so dear must be shared and given to the other to find the pure sovereignty that we so desire. The playwright uses past and other texts, experiences, and performances to

create a unique piece of literary text, but this does not mean that what they are creating is old and unobserved. The other, for Levinas, puts us in contact with this mystery, which we are trying so hard to solve. By working with the other and not avoiding them, we are able to challenge ourselves to make the world more knowledgeable to ourselves and access a sphere outside of generalities. By doing this, we confront misunderstanding and use Heidegger's teachings to figure out what we mustn't do. An opportunity is presented where the individual can transcend their understanding of the world and surpass the ceiling, which keeps them stuck in an unavoidable majority. He continues on this thought in *Entre Nous*, "It concerns others whose mode of existence—always distinct from that of things, nothing but things, and from that of things ready-to-hand—is the mode of human being-there, sharing the same world, understood precisely in terms of work and around the instrumental order of those things of the world, and thus in which 'they are what they do'" (Levinas, 212). Here, we are exposed to an individuality unexpressed before.

Levinas responds to Heidegger's claims of death and authenticity by explaining that the individual is unable to share their being with another without having this other present in their life. He continues, "The authenticity of the I, in my view, is this listening by the first one called, this attention to the other without subrogation, and thus already faithfulness to values despite one's own morality. The possibility of sacrifice as a meaning of the human adventure. Possibility of the meaningful, despite death, though it be without resurrection! The ultimate meaning of love without concupiscence, and of an I no longer hateful" (Levinas 227). To hone in on a feeling and existence of individuality, the person must focus and respect the other whether in death or language. Levinas emphasizes the fact that we are unable to understand everything, but by accepting otherness, we challenge our

own understandings of the world. By challenging our present understanding, we escape generalities and follow a path towards individuality. In working with these thinkers, the individual is able to transcend thought and words, meaning, and interpretations known to all. The person, the playwright, must make an active decision to be open and willing to challenge others in their ethics and thought. Many people and playwrights refuse to accept this and find themselves far from an idiomatic language. These thoughts and understandings are used to challenge those who find themselves far from an independence from the other.

Societal changes and situations allow the individual to respond to these questions with their own interpretations in regards to individuality. In studying Theodor Adorno, we observe a Jew coming straight out of World War II as a survivor of the atrocities committed during this period of history. Adorno holds one of the darkest viewpoints and in studying his works, we are able to view the furthest agreement towards a world where singularity is present or attainable and dissect his interpretation to arrive towards our argument. In *Minima Moralia* he clarifies, “The private existence, which yearns to look like one worthy of human beings, simultaneously betrays the latter, because the similarity of the general implementation is withdrawn, which more than ever before requires and independent sensibility”(Section 6 Adorno). Adorno views the individual in society as someone transformed into a machine who is unable to listen to themselves and who is “rotten to [their] utmost core”. Adorno fears that after periods like the Holocaust, every single person’s experiences have become the same and each person is interchangeable. In times of suffering and difficulty, it is understandable why someone like Adorno finds themselves feeling this way. But it is by combating these governments and disagreeing

with the ideas and lies they spread that allow for independence. Adorno fears that the being's life has sunk to a private existence, but in this existence, the person or playwright is able to achieve clarity in their work by observing these moments in time and using these experiences as a tool to progress society away from generalities. Adorno aids in the argument against the insignificance of human life and existence. It is in these texts that we find meaning and reason to live and combat what seems best or natural in society. By doing this, the playwright is able to use the performance space as an area to exhibit a new, progressive attitude to larger audiences across nations.

To understand how physical theatrical text can influence and create a singular experience and language, we need to observe and critique a play that examines similar situations and periods as the thinkers mentioned before. In the years following World War II, the wave of absurdism represented in theatre allowed playwrights, many of whom were French and European, to criticize and examine life and language through the use of performance. Like many philosophers and thinkers, these playwrights and performers worked to address issues and crises represented in society that appeared to affect and change the way people interacted during the time. As we have seen with many educators and critical theorists, many people came out of the war hopeless and examining human life as pathetic, harmful, and evil. This negative attitude towards the human experience indicated a change in how people interacted and went about living their daily lives and communicating with one another. This is where playwrights found the opportunity to address these matters and the study of language through their work in text, which eventually found its way to speech. One of the main playwrights to latch onto the movement of the theatre of the absurd and create a singular language through his text was

Samuel Beckett. Beckett, a world-renowned playwright, observed the absurdities represented in language and communication through what he saw as the hopelessness and failure of man and mankind. Through his own deconstruction of how people interacted, he discovered a way to use his text to reference a singularity that could represent itself through language. By critiquing and picking apart the human experience, he was able to understand individuality through a new lens and use multiple works to challenge the thoughts and ideas that many people such as Heidegger, Saussure, and others had believed and professed to be true.

Samuel Beckett's attempt at a singular language and experience is best observed in his play *Waiting for Godot*. Like many other absurdist playwrights such as Edward Albee, Jean Genet, and Eugène Ionesco, Beckett focused precisely on the dialogue in his plays between his characters to illustrate the misinterpretations that could be represented in communication and language. The setting of the play never changes, and the two main characters have little to no contact with other beings or the outside world. Because of this scenario and situation, the two communicate with each other in a dialogue that references a natural, singular idiom difficult to find elsewhere. Though the play is an attempt at focusing on the negatives represented in humankind, the two main characters, Vladimir and Estragon, depend on each other to continue on through the bleak existences that they find themselves present in. When we observe critical theory, we understand that many thinkers focus on the presence of being in a certain time and place. In *Waiting for Godot*, the two characters do live in the present, but time is disregarded as the setting stays consistent and the actions rarely change. One of the only other characters to appear throughout the entire performance is the boy who is sent by Godot who allows a

reference to how time works in this world created by Beckett. The boy often comes to inform the two men that Godot will come, but at another time, “Mr. Godot told me to tell you he won’t come this evening but surely to-morrow” (Beckett 101). This repetition is consistently relevant and presented in this play as time is disregarded following the changes taking place in society after the war. Many thinkers who discussed language as an impossibility of singularity explained that language is used through repetition of terms and general phrases that beings have heard from others. Beckett uses this repetition to further this thought, but to also challenge it. As time is disregarded and the boy returns to say Godot will come the next day, the language is changing as it becomes a singularity. It is in this reference to repetition that Beckett highlights the generalities present in language to access a circular logic and communication between the characters to create a new language. Beckett has Vladimir and Estragon repeating themselves constantly from the first page of the play until the end:

Estragon: What did we do yesterday?

Vladimir: What did we do yesterday? (Beckett 24)

In their actions and words, Estragon and Vladimir create a circular language and logic that escapes the foundation of language that many understand to be the main concentration of it. This devaluation of language is the only way it has access to a singular experience.

When we have discussed and examined language before, we understood that it is thought of as a system created through the experience of the other. In our understanding of language and the other, we use general phrases and interpretations that came long before us that are attached to a common language making us indistinct. In *Waiting for*

Godot, the characters struggle to communicate because the language they are using is new and unheard of in the world they find themselves present in. In society, we use language to access the world we are present in, but these two characters use their own language to pass time because there is no real discussion or communication found in Beckett's text:

Vladimir: That passed the time.

Estragon: It would have passed in any case.

Vladimir: Yes, but not so rapidly. (*Pause.*)

Estragon: What do we do now?

Vladimir: I don't know. (Beckett 95)

In this play, Beckett creates a language between the two characters that involves intense interrogation and miscommunication. The questions they pose to each other are unanswerable because the two are using an idiom that has no given set of standards that common language usually has access to. This communication and general understanding is not present in this text because of its approach of a singularity. As the text continues, there are many references to nonsensical phrases and terms that have little to no meaning that help build and create a new language. We have learned that when other languages are created and used by large amounts of beings, new vague terms that many have trouble understanding and connecting with are used. This is what we have learned creates a language, which then branches off into generalities used widespread among societies and communities. The language and access to singularity that Beckett criticizes and creates through theatrical texts in the theatre of the absurd is indeed an observation into the impossible.

In our confrontation with language and communication, we oftentimes like to claim the words we use and the feelings we express as our own. Through the study of critical theory, we understand that though we may think this, the other is usually the reason we end up saying the things that we do. Language itself is used all throughout the world as a means of communication and a way to connect, but it is incredibly difficult to find and achieve a pure singularity or existence in reference to it. In its attempts to help us understand the world and being, it largely influences the way people approach each other and the way they live their lives. Derrida and Saussure worked effortlessly to approach the subject of language to criticize it and explain how it is properly used and abused. Heidegger and Levinas understood the existence of human beings in a presence in the world that allowed access to the language we often hear and use every day of our lives. Theatre is an exception, though. Viewed in different cities, states, communities, and societies, it gives an access to audiences that many other mediums and arts fail to attain. The combination and relationship between text and speech that the playwright creates challenges everyday thought of experience and language. The written word is viewed as dangerous and as a threat to what “real” language is, but the playwright uses the pharmakon as a medicine to find the positive aspects of their relationship. As it is intended for speech, it converges into an unseen and rarely accessed look into language and it gives the individual a unique reference and contact with it. The traces represented in theatre allow a singular experience to come to being through live performance and the text associated with it. We have discussed singularities and the individual as something similar, but it is important to note that the individual is classified in the world we live in today. Singularities are not simply individuals that are different than what we know, but

they live through différance and act as a singularity that we attempt to grasp. Theatre allows this never-ending mission to come to a close. In an observation of many theatrical texts, not those of just Beckett and absurdist playwrights, we can find more instances of a singular language and use it as a tool to introduce individualities. Though it will always be argued and critiqued, these texts and performances may be our only way of achieving what many for years have argued is unattainable. Perhaps theatre is our only entry into our consistent desire for transcendence and our only way to understand our being.

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