guage"—the breakdown in communication that is a result of the failure of man to know himself, to relate himself meaningfully to other men and to his world. At bottom, one feels, this is another manifestation of the mourning for the old, dead gods, whose presence or assumed presence is necessary for man to remain man. Humanism is a failure, the absurdists say, because man is not "human," cannot know himself, therefore cannot control himself, and, above all, cannot control his world. In Beckett, the world cannot be controlled, and nothing happens; in Ionesco, the hallucinatory movement of the world cannot be controlled, for the hero who attempts to do so (Bérenger in *The Killer* and *Rhinoceros*) discovers in himself an unconscious collaboration with the forces of destruction. The stasis of ordinary humanity in the drama of the absurd is an extreme working-out of the dilemma of the humanist or liberal writer: how to create tragedy, which is predicated upon the uniqueness of human beings, in a leveled world in which all are equal and all are perhaps without value. The stupid anguish of Ionesco's characters is eloquence for our time; as Raymond Williams says in a study of liberal tragedy (the tragedy of the "heroic liberator opposed and destroyed by a false society"), when one identifies with the false society, the society cannot then be opposed or challenged by death, but must simply be confessed, forgiven, and lived with. Suffering is "separate and finally isolated"; the deadlock is absolute and we are all victims." [3]

The distortion and madness of language in the absurd theater relate, then, to the interior distortion and madness of a society that still can make itself understood on a conventional, cliché-ridden level. It is a theater of and for victims—creatures who have misplaced their souls or

deliberately betrayed them—relating to an audience in the same condition that has not yet, as Nietzsche would say, heard the news. Their language reflects their deracination, for without absolute values the romantic imagination cannot endure sanity: it demands grotesque images, a frenzied dance of madness to express its anguish. If Chekhov does not seem romantic, it is because of his impersonality, his refusal to exaggerate or make particularly poetic the suffering his hollow people endure. Always their limitations are carefully exposed as self-induced limitations, not gross misfortunes that symbolize the evil of the universe. But the vision of man in absurdist drama and in Chekhov is similar, if not identical. The mournful poetry of *Waiting for Godot*—

> "Have you not done tormenting me with your accused time? . . . One day, is that not enough for you, one day like any other day, he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll go deaf, one day we were born, one day we'll die, the same day, the same second. . . . They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more."

—is matched by the laments of a typical Chekhovian character (Andrei of *The Three Sisters* talking to a man who cannot hear well):

> "Oh, where is it, where has it all gone, my past when I was young, gay, clever, when I dreamed and thought with grace, when my present and my future were lighted up with hope? Why is it that when we have barely begun to live, we grow dull, gray, uninteresting, lazy, indifferent, useless, unhappy. . . . Our town has been in existence now for two hundred years, there are a hundred thousand people in it, and not one who isn't exactly like all the others, not one saint . . . not one scholar, not one artist, no one in the least remarkable. . . . They just eat, drink, sleep, and then die . . . others are

born and they, too, eat, drink, sleep, and to keep from being stupefied by boredom, they relieve the monotony of life with their odious gossip, with vodka, cards . . . and an overwhelmingly vulgar influence weighs on the children, the divine spark is extinguished in them, and they become the same pitiful, identical corpses as their fathers and mothers."

Beckett's outcasts seem to arrive at once at their insights, making no progress toward any kind of enlightenment; Chekhov's people, involved as they are in a three-dimensional drama, move in a way that is less a progression than a devastation of illusion. Ionesco's people are victims of their incapacity for expression and are therefore less than human. At the end of *The Bald Soprano,* the Smiths and Martins yell furiously at each other, having achieved a kind of passionate rapport beneath the level of rationality, but the achievement of passion marks the end of their humanity. *The Chairs* is a play about nothing but words—the first part being concerned with half-expressed, private anecdotes, and the second part with the desperate, pathetic attempt to turn private experience into universal knowledge, mocked cruelly by Ionesco's mute Orator, who either betrays the Old Man or delivers his message precisely; in either case the "message" is lost. The traditional farewell of tragedy—Othello's final words, Antony's final words—is parodied here, for when life has lost its meaning and there is only "metaphysical emptiness," words have no value.

Chekhov's naturalism when it is most "natural" arouses in the audience the same sense of mystery that Ionesco's deliberate absurdity does. When Masha, who takes snuff and is hopelessly in love with the young writer Treplev, walks off stage in act 2 of *The Seagull* and has to drag her leg along because it has gone to sleep, the detail is both naturalistic and gratuitously absurd; so also is the snoring of Sorin in the same scene. The governess Charlotta of *The Cherry Orchard,* who eats cucumbers that she carries in her pocket and performs bizarre sleight-of-hand tricks, remains inexplicable. In *The Three Sisters,* the fugue-like pronouncement of major themes, desultory as it is, is yet interrupted by the solemn recitation of "facts": "And in Moscow . . . some merchants were eating pancakes; one of them, who ate forty, it seems died. It was either forty or fifty, I don't remember," "Balzac was married in Berdichev," and "Tsisikar. Smallpox is raging there." The gloomy fourth act is punctuated by Chebutykin's singing of "Ta-ra-ra boom-de-ay." The large groupings of people on Chekhov's stage make possible mock choral comments that pass judgments upon the main characters unintentionally. But essentially Chekhov's characters pass judgment on themselves. The first act of *The Three Sisters* begins with a birthday celebration, yet its tone is oddly elegaic. Olga, the oldest sister, says at once: "Father died a year ago today." The entire play, spreading out as it does over a period of years, is a working out of the significance of that fact. "Father," the dead general, the intellectual who "oppressed" education on his children to prepare them for a sort of life absolutely unavailable, is equated with Moscow, the paradise, the lost Eden, the lost "home," and the sisters' willed obsession with this ghostly lost home will cause them to lose their real home. But the several statements of rapturous yearning for Moscow at the very start of the play are undercut by the seemingly incidental remarks of the men who are visiting: "Like hell he did!" "Of course, that's nonsense," "With one hand I can lift only fifty pounds, but with two I can lift a hundred and eighty or even two hundred pounds . . . ," and "For falling hair . . . two ounces of naphthaline to half a bottle of spirits . . . dissolve and apply daily. . . ." Mixed in with these phrases are the line of poetry that keeps running through Masha's mind and that will become an expression of her love—"A green oak by a curved seashore . . . upon that oak a golden chain . . ."—and the lines from a fable that Solyony quotes, anticipating both his and Protopopov's destruction of the dream of this first act—"He no sooner cried 'alack' than the bear was on his back. . . ."

In Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*, all conversation is nonsense. It does not point toward any thematic sense, but is content to be a hilarious expression of the nonsense people do speak:

MR. SMITH
One walks on his feet, but one heats with electricity or coal.
MR. MARTIN
He who sells an ox today, will have an egg tomorrow.
MRS. SMITH
In real life, one must look out the window.
MRS. MARTIN
One can sit down on a chair, when the chair doesn't have any.
MR. SMITH
One must always think of everything.
MR. MARTIN
The ceiling is above, the floor is below.

These aphorisms, which make as much sense as most clichés, then degenerate into pure sound, noise, bestiality, as the Smiths and the Martins yell furiously at each other. One regrets the unnecessary conclusion of "It's not that way, it's over here"—the "it" obviously meaning

sanity—but the decision to end the play with the Martins taking the Smiths' places is an excellent one, emphasizing as it does the endlessness of this purgatorial condition. For Ionesco and Chekhov the condition of man is rather like Beckett's notion of the spherical purgatory, in which one can never make any progress and the "shadow in the end is no better than the substance."[4] That the "reality" is no better than its appearance would suggest, and that the appearance, which seems preferable to the reality precisely because of its being illusory, is ultimately "no better," is an ironic inversion of what one might expect; man is willfully deceived by his language and his conception of the world, but this deception does him no good because he himself lacks the imagination to give it beauty.

As in Ionesco and Beckett, one finds in Chekhov the substitution of language for action. All his plays are demonstrations of the impotence of will. The doctor in *Uncle Vanya* works very hard, hasn't had a single day free in ten years, but he regards his present work as meaningless drudgery and looks to the misty future for a righting of present horrors. For most of the others, talk is unrelated to action. When Irina speaks ecstatically of "work," she is unable to anticipate her very natural and inevitable disgust with the work she can actually find to do. Vershinin, entrapped in an ugly marriage, echoes Astrov's prophecy that salvation lies somewhere in the future: "In two or three hundred years life on this earth will be unimaginably beautiful, wonderful. Man needs such a life, and so long as it is not here, he must foresee it, expect it, dream about it, prepare for it." The sisters and their brother, Andrei, learned French, German, and English from their father—the means of expressing themselves in three languages besides their own—and yet of course they have nothing to express; Masha says: "In this town, to know three languages is a needless luxury—not even a luxury, but a sort of superfluous appendage, like a sixth finger." In *The Cherry Orchard,* language is hardly shared by the characters. The merchant Lopakhin explains what the family must do in order to save their estate, but they cannot understand him. As the catastrophe nears, they expend themselves in useless dialogue calculated to distract them from reality. Even the student Trofimov, who expresses once again Chekhov's own hopes for an ideal future, is an "eternal student" who knows nothing of life and whose high-sounding words are perhaps ludicrous. He says of his relationship with Anya:

> "We are above love. To avoid the petty and the illusory, which prevent our being free and happy—that is the aim and meaning of life. Forward! We are moving irresistibly toward the bright star that burns in the distance! Forward! Do not fall behind, friends!"

Anya, delighted, exclaims: "How well you talk!" And the emphasis surely is on the word "talk," an ironic emphasis since it implies the young man's own illusory condition. The same sort of substitution of talk for action is found everywhere in the absurdist theater, most notably in Beckett's plays (and in his novels as well). In Ionesco's short play, *The Lesson,* a curious transformation of the eclipsing of life by language is effected when the tyrannical professor kills his student with the word "knife"—having complete control of the meanings of words, he controls the girl's reactions to them and hence her life. The totalitarian misuse of language suggested by the professor's omnipotence is sounded also in *The Killer,* where

a fascistic woman named Mother Peep demonstrates the facility of believing that stupidity is intelligence, cowardice is bravery, clear-sightedness is blindness, liquidation is "only physical."

The Three Sisters demonstrates most clearly the progress of disintegration that is the basis of most absurdist plays. After the substitution of language for action there is the substitution of false rhetoric for the truth. When Olga says happily at the beginning of the play that she longs passionately to go "home" again (to Moscow) and that this dream "keeps growing stronger and stronger," one accepts this as perfectly truthful and admirable. When the same refrain is repeated throughout the play, however, it takes on a sinister and ironic note the sisters themselves do not understand. Thus, at the conclusion of act 2, while Natasha runs out to a very real man, Irina is left alone to yearn for her illusory paradise. "To Moscow!" she cries, and the cry is by now discomforting. The end of act 3 has Irina, the youngest, again yearning for Moscow, but by now she has had to agree to a marriage she does not really want: "I'll marry him, I'm willing, only let us go to Moscow! I implore you, let us go! There's nothing in the world better than Moscow!" Now the longing is hysterical and is intended to cover up the knowledge she has expressed earlier—that everything has somehow gone wrong, that she has forgotten her Italian, that they will never, never see Moscow. The end of the play has the sisters grouped together and consoling themselves with rhetoric, much like Sonya at the end of *Uncle Vanya.* We have here a brutal counterpointing of idealism and nihilism, as the sisters hear the military music and say that they want to live, that "it seems as if just a little more and we shall know why we live, why we