The *theatrum mundi* metaphor can clearly be detected in all non-dramatic texts that refer to theater—while no theater per se is in sight. However, when we are confronted with the metaphor of theater in drama itself, it must be decided upon whether this is a metaphor of theater or, possibly, an instance of meta-theater. Due to the fact that the metaphor of theater is bidirectional in that it can be used to represent the world itself as theater, and vice versa, that theater can represent the world,\(^1\) the metaphor is tremendously flexible. Indeed, this double possibility of representation might encourage critics to see the Great Theater of the World when what they are actually confronted with is an example of meta-theater.

This essay will examine this issue by looking at the theater of the absurd. Furthermore, it will seek to demonstrate how the early theater of the absurd attempts, at times, to show the absurdity of theatrical conventions to a much greater extent than it attempts to show the absurdities of the world in which we live. In addition, this paper will show to what degree meta-theatricality in the early plays of the theater of the absurd also served to question the functioning of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor, and it will examine how meta-theatricality and theater as a metaphor could mutually reinforce one another, making the stages of the post-war world a place to rethink and to highlight the limits of the age-old idea of the *theatrum mundi* which dates back to Antiquity.\(^2\) Moreover, this paper seeks to convey the degree to which Ionesco and Beckett abandoned meta-theatricality in the course of their careers, in favor of an analogy between the stage and the world, in order to proclaim the absurdity of the world, which

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1 See B. Quiring's insightful introduction to the volume *Theatrum Mundi: Die Metapher des Welttheaters von Shakespeare bis Beckett*, ed. B. Quiring, Berlin 2012, pp. 7–29, p. 7.

2 A general survey of the history of the metaphor can be found in E. R. Curtius's book *Europäische Literatur und lateinisches Mittelalter*, 7th ed., Bern 1969, pp. 148–154. Regarding the changes the *theatrum mundi* metaphor underwent in the twentieth century, see especially M. Harries, “Das Ende einer Trope für die Welt”, in: Quiring (ed.), *Theatrum Mundi*, pp. 191–217; see in particular pp. 205ff.
is precisely what absurdist theater is known for. The plays of Ionesco and Beckett developed from initially providing poetological reflections on drama on stage to using the stage first and foremost to instruct the audience on the human condition. Moreover, both playwrights may well have altered their plays in response to the observations made by critics right from the very beginning of their dramatic attempts.

Even though they struggled with the label “absurd”, theater critics and literary scholars have always agreed on the fact that the theater of the absurd was about the absurdity of the world rather than about the absurdity of theater. Since the very beginning of its scholarly reception, the absurdity of the theatrical situation has scarcely been discussed. For instance, the first article on Beckett’s Waiting for Godot, written by L. Spitzer's student E. Kern in 1954, refers to the “[...] vivid dramatization of the paradox of the condition of man, whose intellect makes him aware of the universe's slighting of reason and makes him long for a state where reason shall be conferred upon this universe [...]”. M. Esslin’s pioneering book The Theatre of the Absurd from 1961, now in its eighth edition, has had a significant impact on the genre it tried to define, and it may well have not only changed the academic and public reception, but also influenced the very nature of absurdist theater itself. According to Esslin, the theater of the absurd can be defined by the philosophical meaning its authors intend to convey, which he claims to consist in the assumption that

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3 See M. Y. Bennett, The Cambridge Introduction to Theatre and Literature of the Absurd, Cambridge 2015, pp. 6f. If the nineteenth century was the century of epochs, the twentieth century was the century of labelling. Nevertheless, there has been no type of label that has not been controversial, which is why the debate about the criteria of the theater of the absurd seems to tell us more about the practice of labelling than about the actual plays.

4 The first to criticize pigeonholing of the theater of the absurd (especially Esslin’s categorization) was L. Abel in his work Metatheatre: A New View of Dramatic Form, New York, NY 1963; the most recent criticism was that of M. Y. Bennett in Reassessing the Theatre of the Absurd: Camus, Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, and Pinter, New York, NY 2011.

5 See also Bennett, Cambridge Introduction, p. 128.

6 E. Kern, “Drama Stripped for Inaction: Beckett’s Godot”, in: Yale French Studies, vol. 14, 1954, pp. 41–47, p. 47. Kern remarks that Waiting for Godot is not a play by all traditional standards, as it entirely lacks the Aristotelian plot lines (p. 41). However, she does not make this feature the subject of discussion.

7 See Ch. Innes, “The Canon: The Theatre of the Absurd. By Martin Esslin”, in: Times Higher Education Supplement, June 18, 2009, qtd. in: Bennett, Cambridge Introduction, p. 3.
human existence is essentially absurd, and that modern man is in the midst of a spiritual crisis.8

All of the relevant concepts remained attached to these thoughts, defining the theater of the absurd as theater that first and foremost exposes the absurdity of the human condition, defining the plays as having “in common the basic belief that man’s life is essentially without meaning or purpose and that human beings cannot communicate”.9 Encyclopedias such as Britannica define the genre as the works of playwrights who expressed a “postwar mood of disillusionment and scepticism […] in bizarre terms” and of authors who “shared a belief that human life was essentially without meaning or purpose and that valid communication was no longer possible. The human condition, they felt, had sunk to a state of absurdity […].”10 Furthermore, the theater of the absurd is also seen as a literary response to World War II and the Shoa,11 to “the modern world shaken in its traditional beliefs and in grave doubt as to the meaning of existence and the possibility of communication between men […].”12 In Germany, where the reception of absurdist plays was particularly strong, scholars—although they highlighted Beckett’s and Ionesco’s rupture

8 See M. Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, Harmondsworth 1972, especially the preface and the introduction.
9 The Concise Oxford Companion to the Theatre, ed. Ph. Hartnoll, Oxford and New York, NY 1972, p. 548.
10 “Theatre of the Absurd”, in: The New Encyclopædia Britannica, vol. 28, p. 556.
11 Nevertheless, it can be questioned whether it is at all plausible to maintain that dramatists of the theater of the absurd argue implicitly—immediately after the horrors of World War II and the absolute loss of order—that the audience needed to be taught in theater that the world and the values mankind claims to follow are absurd. Apart from this, the precursors of Beckett’s and Ionesco’s theater of the absurd, such as Alfred Jarry, are to be found at a time when the two world wars were not in sight. One could resolve this issue by claiming that Jarry was a forefather of the theater of the absurd because he exposed not the absurdity of the world, but rather the absurdity of theater. In this sense, Ubu Roi has to be primarily regarded as a parody of conventional theater, which is altogether possible and has in fact occasionally been suggested (see: J. Grimm, Das avantgardistische Theater Frankreichs: 1895–1930, Munich 1987, here chapter III: “Das Theater Alfred Jarrys: Die Zerstörung der theaterästhetischen Konventionen”; H. Beauchamp, “Ubu Roi, ou Macbeth-Guignol: un retournement fondateur de la parodie dramatique moderne”, in: Poétiques de la parodie et du pastiche de 1850 à nos jours, ed. C. Dousteysier-Khoeze and F. Place-Verghnes, Oxford and Bern 2006, pp. 203–213; R. Morse, “Monsieur Macbeth: From Jarry to Ionesco”, in: Macbeth and its Afterlife, ed. P. Holland, Cambridge 2004, pp. 112–125).
12 A Handbook of Contemporary Drama, ed. M. Andersen, J. Guicharnaud, K. Marrison, J. Zipes, et al., London 1971, p. 2. One might, of course, object that the literary absurd is much older than modern theater itself (see, for instance, N. Cornwell’s study on The Absurd in Literature, Manchester and New York, NY 2006).
with traditional forms of theater—even explicitly mentioned in their compendia that the expression “absurdes Theater” was wrong in terms of the logic of language, because the claim is not that it is theater that is absurd, but rather the plot embodying the “metaphysical homelessness” and the “social alienation of mankind”. Whenever the lack of theatrical logic and conventional structure in the plays was noticed, critics used to argue that the form was above all absurd in order to support the absurd content. The absurd dramatic form seemed to be nothing more than the appropriate form for the representation of the absurdity of the world. The “concept of homo absurdus” has always been and still is at the center of every definition or interpretation of these plays.

13 See, for instance, R. Hess’s definition of “Theater des Absurden” in Literaturwissenschaftliche Grundbegriffe für Romanisten, ed. R. Hess, G. Siebenmann, and T. Stegmann, 4th ed., Tübingen and Basel 2003, pp. 332–334, p. 332. See also G. von Wilpert, who defines “Absurdes Drama, absurdes Theater, Theater des Absurden” as an avant-garde form of drama, “die aus Protest gegen bürgerl. Scheinsicherheit, unechte Lebensführung und lebensfernen Intellektualismus in provozierender Abkehr vom konventionellen Theater das Gewohnte in Frage stellt, Raum für die absurde Logik einer sinnentleerten Welt schafft und das Sinnlose oder Sinnwidrige zur Grundlage dramat. Gestaltung nimmt” (Sachwörterbuch der Literatur, 8th ed., Stuttgart 2001, p. 4).

14 See, for instance, Esslin’s introduction to The Theatre of the Absurd (“The absurdity of the Absurd”), as well as The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, ed. J. A. Cuddon, 4th ed., London 1999, p. 912, or Hess, “Theater des Absurden”, pp. 332f. See also the entire Erlanger Rede, held by Wolfgang Hildesheimer in 1960, where Hildesheimer attempts to prove that the theater of the absurd is not about the absurdity of theater, but rather the absurdity of the world. Commencing with a psychological sleight-of-hand (“Das absurde Theater dient der Konfrontation des Publikums mit dem Absurden, indem es ihm seine eigene Absurdität vor Augen führt. Da jedoch das Publikum im allgemeinen nicht ohne weiteres gewillt ist, die Philosophie des Absurden hinzunehmen, geschweige denn, auf sich selbst zu beziehen und sich selbst als absurd zu betrachten, so betrachtet es die Konfrontation auf dem Theater als absurd” [“Über das absurde Theater”, in: Wolfgang Hildesheimer, Theaterstücke: Über das absurde Theater, Frankfurt/Main 1976, pp. 169f.]), he states that the theater of the absurd was “weniger eine Rebellion gegen eine hergebrachte Form des Theaters als gegen eine hergebrachte Form der Weltansicht, wie sie sich des Theaters bedient und sich auf ihm manifestiert” (p. 171), and that its playwrights were clearly not interested in “burning questions” of theater, as well as being indifferent towards the question of whether theater as an institution was to have a future or not (p. 180), which is extremely doubtful, as Beckett’s play Eleutheria or Ionesco’s plays Victime du devoir or L’improviso de Versailles deal—even explicitly—with these issues.

15 Penguin Dictionary, p. 911.
K. W. Hempfer was the first to conjecture that the theater of the absurd needed to be defined by more characteristics than its exposure of the metaphysics of absurdity. In particular, it is Ionesco’s and Beckett’s problematization of language in their plays—pointed out extensively by critics—which Hempfer considers to be not only a concomitant feature, but a hallmark that is conducive to defining the very essence of the theater of the absurd.

This essay endeavors to demonstrate to what degree the theater of the absurd not only encapsulates the absurdity of the world in which we live or the absurdity of language itself, but also the absurdity of language in theater, and hence the absurdity of theatrical conventions.

Meta-theatricality is a crucial aspect of absurdist theater, which has long been neglected by critics who have favored a more didactical reading right from the outset. In particular, the early plays of Ionesco and Beckett seem to present a much greater sample of meta-theatrical references than is typically assumed in the relevant scholarship. At the beginning of their dramatic careers, both playwrights were rather sceptical towards theater itself. Beckett thought of play-writing as a form of recreation from his novelistic work. Ionesco, who had studied and taught French literature, did not like the medium at all, rarely going to view plays and feeling quite uncomfortable in the theater. In 1958, he described in a most entertaining article titled “Expérience du théâtre” to what degree he “hated” theater:

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16 See K. W. Hempfer, who demonstrates that the breaking of the rules of presupposition constitutes another hallmark of absurdist theater (“Die Theorie der Präsuppositionen und die Analyse des Dialogs im ‘Absurden Theater’ (am Beispiel von Ionescos La cantatrice chauve)”, in: Zeitschrift für französische Sprache und Literatur, suppl. no. 4, 1977, pp. 33–70). Bennett was the last one who attempted to define the genre not in terms of the possible meaning of the plays (i.e. “the world is absurd”), but in terms of techniques and aesthetic forms preferred by a certain group of authors, an approach that seems to prevent reductionist labelling (Cambridge Introduction, p. 8). However, Bennett does not focus on the meta-theatricality of the plays either—indeed, the contrary sometimes appears to be the case: “However, Pirandello and (even more so) Brecht were experimenting with the meta-theatrical, with Brecht breaking the ‘fourth wall’ of theater. The theatrical absurd with the exception of mostly two plays (Genet’s The Blacks: A Clown Show and Jack Gelber’s The Connection [...] is neither meta-theatrical nor does it make any attempt to ‘break the fourth wall’ of theatrical realism. In this way, Pirandello and Brecht exert essentially no influence upon the playwrights associated with the Theatre of the Absurd” (p. 14).

17 See S. E. Gontarski, “The Body in the Body in Beckett’s Theatre”, in: Samuel Beckett: Endlessness in the Year 2000, ed. A. Moorjani and C. Veit, Amsterdam and New York, NY 2001, pp. 169–177, p. 170.
Il me semble parfois que je me suis mis à écrire du théâtre parce que je le détestais. […] Je n'y goûtais aucun plaisir, je n'y participais pas. Le jeu des comédiens me gênait: j'étais gêné pour eux. Les situations me paraissaient arbitraires. Il y avait quelque chose de faux, me semblait-il, dans tout cela. La représentation théâtrale n'avait pas de magie pour moi. Tout me paraissait un peu ridicule, un peu pénible.18

Eight years earlier, Ionesco had written his very first play, La cantatrice chauve (The Bald Soprano or The Bald Prima Donna). The subtitle of the play is “Anti-pièce”, which already hints at its parodistic character. The beginning of the play, which is also the “beginning” of the beginning of Ionesco’s dramatic career, starts with the following stage direction:

Intérieur bourgeois anglais, avec des fauteuils anglais. Soirée anglaise. M. Smith, anglais, dans son fauteuil et ses pantoufles anglais, fume sa pipe anglaise et lit un journal anglais, près d’un feu anglais. Il a des lunettes anglaises, une petite moustache grise, anglaise. À côté de lui, dans un autre fauteuil anglais, Mme Smith, anglaise, raccommode des chaussettes anglaises. Un long moment de silence anglais. La pendule anglaise frappe dix-sept coups anglais.19

The more detailed the stage direction, the harder it becomes to represent: A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs and an English evening (maybe the actors are having tea)—these might be feasible. An Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper—this sounds rather ridiculous, but not as absurd as an “English fire” or “A long moment of English silence”; the latter descriptions are neither imaginable nor representable on stage. However, the most absurd element of the stage direction is the English clock, which strikes “17 English strokes”, as a clock cannot strike “English” strokes and no hall clock could go beyond 12 strokes.20 Also, why does it have to be exactly 17 strokes, and not 16 or 18? One does not know, and one is not going to find out because this is irrelevant for the plot. All one can do is guess that this stage

18 Eugène Ionesco, “Expérience du théâtre”, in: La Nouvelle Revue Française, vol. 62, 1958, pp. 247–270, p. 247. See also Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 134.
19 Eugène Ionesco, La cantatrice chauve, in: Eugène Ionesco, Théâtre complet, ed. E. Jacquart, Paris 1991, pp. 7–42, p. 9. [A middle-class English interior, with English armchairs. An English evening. Mr. Smith, an Englishman, seated in his English armchair and wearing English slippers, is smoking his English pipe and reading an English newspaper, near an English fire. He is wearing English spectacles and a small gray English mustache. Beside him, in another English armchair, Mrs. Smith, an Englishwoman, is darning some English socks. A long moment of English silence. The English clock strikes 17 English strokes (translation by D. M. Allen).]
20 Before naming the play La cantatrice chauve, Ionesco titled it L’Anglais sans peine and L’Heure anglaise.
direction contains an empty precision, leading absolutely nowhere, just like the stage directions at the very beginning of Beckett’s *Fin de partie*, where Clov’s running around is detailed meticulously, and even the exact number of steps he has to take is indicated.\(^{21}\) Indeed, in the case of Beckett’s play, one is not able to discern why the author is forcing the actor to take exactly this number of steps. Yet, as this is the question we immediately ask ourselves when reading the text, Beckett and Ionesco seem to be playing with the recipient’s impulse to interpret everything, to look out for the sense behind things, to see symbols everywhere, especially in absurdist theater, in a decidedly non-realistic theater, where (so it seems) everything that happens on stage has categorically been construed as figurative, as a metaphor for something concerning the real world. Ionesco and Beckett seem to be parodying the approach that the ideal recipient of theater\(^{22}\) is always inferring that everything is a symbol and has some deeper and hidden meaning that needs to be revealed. Beckett even raises the issue explicitly on stage with the famous line where his characters ask themselves: “On n’est pas en train de . . . de . . . signifier quelque chose?\(^{23}\)

However, unlike most of Beckett’s stage directions, the aforementioned directions of Ionesco are not even possible to enact. Therefore, they cannot be written for the actor or the spectator, but merely for the reader. This supposition is confirmed by a stage direction we find two pages later in *La cantatrice chauve*:

\[
\text{Un autre moment de silence. La pendule sonne sept fois. Silence. La pendule sonne trois fois. Silence. La pendule ne sonne aucune fois.}\]

\(21\) “Il [Clov] descend de l’escabeau, fait six pas vers la fenêtre à droite, retourne prendre l’escabeau, l’installe sous la fenêtre à droite, monte dessus, tire le rideau. Il descend de l’escabeau, fait trois pas vers la fenêtre à gauche, retourne prendre l’escabeau, monte dessus, regarde pas la fenêtre. Rire bref. Il descend de l’escabeau, fait un pas vers la fenêtre à droite, retourne prendre l’escabeau, l’installe sous la fenêtre à droite, monte dessus, regarde par la fenêtre” (Samuel Beckett, *Fin de partie*, Paris 1957, p. 14). [He gets down, takes six steps (for example) towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, draws back curtain. He gets down, takes three steps towards window left, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window left, gets up on it, looks out of the window. Brief laugh. He gets down, takes one step towards window right, goes back for ladder, carries it over and sets it down under window right, gets up on it, looks out of window (translations are Beckett’s own).]

\(22\) See also M. Pfister, *Das Drama*, 11th ed., Munich 2001, p. 222.

\(23\) Beckett, *Fin de partie*, p. 49. [“We’re not beginning to . . . to . . . mean something?”]

\(24\) Ionesco, *La cantatrice chauve*, p. 12. [Another moment of silence. The clock strikes seven times. Silence. The clock strikes three times. Silence. The clock doesn’t strike.]
Again, we find very precise indications, mentioning the exact number of
strokes, seven times, three times, and then we have to deal with the hilarious
instruction of “La pendule ne sonne aucune fois”; later on in the play, one en-
counters the following stage directions:

Un assez long moment de silence... La pendule sonne vingt-neuf fois

and

La pendule sonne tant qu’elle veut. Après de nombreux instants, M. et Mme Martin se
séparent [...].

“The clock strikes as much as it likes”. What does the clock like to do? How many
are “nombreux instants”, and can we count those moments of silence? “Nombreux”
seems to be more precise than quelques moments, but one cannot talk
about numerous moments of silence, as several consecutive moments would just
be one long moment. Hence, the more precise the instruction, the less realizable
it becomes. The absurd stage directions regarding the clock are less due to the
fact that the clock indicates the opposite of the correct time “in a spirit of contra-
diction”, as Esslin asserts together with Monsieur Martin, but they are first and
foremost a parody of stage directions in general. What follows the “seventeen
English strokes” is Madame Smith saying “Tiens, il est neuf heures”, and obvi-
ously, there is a lack of logic, as 17 strokes do not mean that it is nine o’clock.

What comes next is something that Hempfer has pointed out as being a sheer
violation of the basic rules of presupposition, here: pragmatic presupposition.

Mme SMITH. Tiens, il est 9 heures. Nous avons mangé de la soupe, du poisson, des
pommes de terre au lard, de la salade anglaise. Les enfants ont bu de
l’eau anglaise. Nous avons bien mangé, ce soir. C’est parce que nous
habitons dans les environs de Londres et que notre nom est Smith.

25 Ibid., p. 19. [A rather long moment of silence. The clock strikes 29 times.]
26 Ibid., p. 21. [The clock strikes as much as it likes. After several seconds, Mr. and Mrs. Smith sepa-
rate (...).] There are similar stage directions in scene VIII: “Il embrasse ou il n’embrasse pas Mme
Smith” [He either kisses or does not kiss Mrs. Smith] (p. 33), and “Mme Smith, tombe à ses genoux,
en sanglotant, ou ne le fait pas” [falls on her knees sobbing, or else she does not do this] (ibid.).
27 Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 139.
28 The spectator is not necessarily going to notice this logical error at all, because he will
probably not count the strikes right from the first strike, nor will he notice the eight strikes to
be missing.
29 Hempfer, “Die Theorie der Präsuppositionen”, pp. 53–60.
30 Ionesco, La cantatrice chauve, p. 9. [“There, it’s nine o’clock. We’ve drunk the soup, and
eaten the fish and chips, and the English salad. The children have drunk English water. We’ve
It is commonly known that Ionesco picked up the idea of breaking those rules of presupposition from his English language textbook, where people constantly repeat what others already know. However, it is clear that Ionesco’s aim is not to mock study books, but to question the use of language, namely the language of the theater, because first of all, parodying stage directions refers to nothing but theater, as this is the only place where they exist. The meta-linguistic commentaries within Madame Smith’s comment have to be regarded as meta-theatrical commentaries, not least because no one would ever talk in that way—well, almost no one: a protagonist in a poorly made theater play could do so, especially in the exposition of the play, which has been, since the beginning of theater, a crucial element of the well-wrought play according to accepted theatrical techniques. An artful announcement of the plot line, the smooth introduction of the *dramatis personae* and the situation, is commonly considered to be indispensable for a successful play. Ionesco’s expository scene is far too explicit, and he seems to be doing everything but endeavoring to use any form of technique. The playwright’s first theatrical attempt starts with a parody of a classical *scène d’exposition*, which is, by all means, not always eminently subtle or realistic either—this is what Ionesco could have meant when he said in “Expérience du théâtre” that “Les situations me paraissaient arbitraires. Il y avait quelque chose de faux [. . .]. Tout me paraissait un peu ridicule, un peu pénible.”

As one delves further into the *Bald Soprano*, one discovers further parodies of typical elements of classical theater, and of the knowledge one acquires in school. Given that Ionesco was a teacher of French literature, he was most likely to have been teaching theatrical techniques and conventions to his students. There are, for example, Monsieur and Madame Smith’s guests, a couple called Monsieur and Madame Martin, who realize already in the first half of the play, little by little, and after a long chat, that they actually are husband and wife and live together in the same apartment with their pretty eaten well this evening. That’s because we live in the suburbs of London and because our name is Smith.”

31 See also Bennett, who claims that “Ionesco is exposing how unrealistic theatrical realism actually is. The characters Mr. and Mrs. Smith must awkwardly and unnaturally talk about themselves, what is going on, and provide context for themselves and their actions” (*Cambridge Introduction*, p. 83).
little “white-eyed and red-eyed” daughter. This “revelation” is obviously nothing more than a ludicrous parody of an anagnorisis:

> Alors, chère Madame, je crois qu’il n’y a pas de doute, nous nous sommes déjà vus et vous êtes ma propre épouse… Élisabeth, je t’ai retrouvée!
>
> Ils s’assoient dans le même fauteuil, se tiennent embrassés et s’endorment.\(^{32}\)

Apart from this scene, we find an extremely short love story in the play, but it is a love story without a story: Towards the end of the play, a clandestine couple is revealed, but no other character is really interested in learning more about their relationship.

Finally, *La cantatrice chauve* ends how it started, precisely like Beckett’s *Endgame* a few years later.\(^{33}\) It might have been that the French, more than any other nation, were used to a quite rational development of the action, to a clear beginning, a clear climax, and a clear ending, following *les règles du théâtre classique* and Aristotelian plot lines.\(^{34}\) As Ionesco appears to be parodying these expectations, he is calling theatrical conventions into doubt right from the beginning of his first play.

In his early career as a dramatist, Ionesco wrote a series of poetological plays, which were not particularly successful. *Victimes du devoir* (*Victims of Duty*), written in 1953, was one of Ionesco’s favorites.\(^{35}\) It has a real—an absurd—plot, but as a “Pseudo-Drama” (the subtitle of the play), it is essentially a long disquisition on drama (from antiquity to the twentieth century), which starts with a facetiously clumsy dialogue between a husband and his wife, both sitting in their living room. The wife is darning socks when the husband asks her, out of the blue, about her conceptions of contemporary theater: “Que penses-tu du

\[^{32}\text{Ionesco, } La cantatrice chauve, p. 18f. [“Then, dear lady, I believe that there can be no doubt about it, we have seen each other before and you are my own wife . . . Elizabeth, I have found you again!” ( . . . ) They sit together in the same armchair, their arms around each other, and fall asleep.]}\]

\[^{33}\text{On the various forms of repetition that can be found in Beckett’s work, see P. Brunel, “Autour de Samuel Beckett: Devanciers, épigones et hérétiques”, in: La mort de Godot: Attente et évanescence au théâtre, ed. P. Brunel, Paris 1970, pp. 9–39, in particular pp. 31f.}\]

\[^{34}\text{M. Kesting was the first to draw attention to this point (Das epische Theater: Eine Untersuchung zum Formproblem des modernen Dramas, Munich 1957, especially pp. 159f.); see also H. Seipel’s critique in: Untersuchungen zum experimentellen Theater von Beckett und Ionesesco, Bonn 1963, in particular pp. 67ff., and P. Ronge, Polemik, Parodie und Satire bei Ionesco: Elemente einer Theatertheorie und Formen des Theaters über das Theater, Bad Homburg vor der Höhe 1967, pp. 41ff.}\]

\[^{35}\text{Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, p. 152f.}\]
théâtre d’aujourd’hui, quelles sont tes conceptions théâtrales ?”

At the end of the play, a character named Nicolas d’Eu concludes that in theater, one should no longer separate the tragic and the comic. Yet Nicholas does not wish to be a writer as he claims: “Nous avons Ionesco et Ionesco, cela suffit!”

*L’impromptu de l’Alma ou le caméléon du berger*, written in 1955, clearly implies a reference to Molière’s *L’impromptu de Versailles*, where the author/director/actor Molière discusses the rehearsal of a play with his actors and reflects on the contemporary state of theater and on the art of theater in general. Ionesco’s *L’impromptu de l’Alma* is likewise an entirely poetological play; the main actor plays the author, Ionesco, and critics appear on stage, asking the author to be more instructive and to write a play that has an ideological message:

IONESCO, qui a repris un peu le courage.
Messieurs, peut-être, le théâtre est-il, simplement, le drame, une action, une action dans un temps et un lieu donnés...

[...]
BARTHOLOMÉUS I.
Le théâtre, Monsieur, est une leçon sur un événement instructif, un événement plein d’enseignement...

Indeed, *Victimes du devoir* and *L’impromptu de l’Alma* have mostly been forgotten, unlike Ionesco’s plays which have a moral lesson, such as *La leçon* (*The Lesson*) and *Rhinocéros* (*Rhinoceros*), where meta-theatricality is rare or not to be found at all. *La leçon* is not only a parody of authoritarian French education in general, but above all it is a (not particularly subtle) critique of all sorts of totalitarianism, and the brassard “portant un insigne, peut-être la svastika nazie” at the end of the play is an explicit reference to very recent history. *La leçon* may be regarded as anticipating the flagship play of absurdist theater, *Rhinocéros*, which Ionesco wrote four years later. In this play, which was eminently successful in Germany, the population of a typically French village turns, one after the other, into rhinoceroses, until only one human is left to fight the raucous animals. The story can be dissected quite

36 Eugène Ionesco, *Victimes du devoir*, in: Ionesco, *Théâtre complet*, pp. 203–250, p. 207.
37 Ibid., p. 243. See also Ionesco, “Expérience du théâtre”, p. 269, in order to assess to what degree the character is repeating the author’s own vision of theater.
38 Ionesco, *Victimes du devoir*, p. 246.
39 Molière himself is the subject of discussion in Ionesco’s play—see *L’impromptu de l’Alma ou le caméléon du berger*, in: Ionesco, *Théâtre complet*, pp. 423–466, pp. 435ff.
40 Ionesco, *L’impromptu de l’Alma*, p. 439.
41 Eugène Ionesco, *La Leçon*, in: Ionesco, *Théâtre complet*, pp. 43–75, p. 74.
easily: The village is the world in which we live, the hero is the average Frenchman with the average French name Béranger, and the moral lesson we learn is clear: we should not become rhinoceroses like the others, that is, we should neither become collaborateurs of the Nazis nor adherents of (Stalinist) communist totalitarianism. The plot is absurd, but it has a real message, indeed quite a concrete moral message; since the beginning of its reception, the play has rightly been regarded as more of a parable than an instance of absurdist theater.

Taking into account the degree to which Ionesco’s early plays differ from his later ones, critics have tried to categorize his work into different phases: his earlier plays were either said to focus first and foremost on the malfunctioning of language, or on the exposure of the “total absurdity of the world.” However, one might doubt that a sentence like “C’est parce que nous habitons dans les environs de Londres et que notre nom est Smith” constitutes a satirical parody of language, and that the formulation “La pendule ne sonne aucune fois” genuinely instructs us on the total absurdity of the world.

In view of the fact that the analysis of the possibilities and limits of theater was crucial for Ionesco (see his Notes et contre-notes from 1962), the failure of communication and the absurdity of the action taking place on stage can equally be considered to constitute a parody of theater itself. Not least because Ionesco claimed to feel uncomfortable in the theater—namely in any theater, not only when attending performances of Boulevard Theater or existentialist plays—his parodistic early plays appear to amount to a problematization of theater in general.

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42 See also K. Schoell’s overview in his essay “Eugène Ionesco, Rhinocéros (1959)”, in: 20. Jahrhundert: Theater, ed. K. Schoell, Tübingen 2006, pp. 239–278, pp. 242–244.

43 See, for instance, H. Hanstein, who published a study on the evolution of Ionesco’s theater, calling the language in the early plays “alienated language” (“entfremdete Sprache”) (Studien zur Entwicklung von Ionescos Theater, Heidelberg 1971, esp. chapter II: “Entfremdete Sprache’ und das Phänomen der Aggression in den frühen Stücken”), or Seipel, Untersuchungen. See also S. Sontag’s original objection to the reading focusing on a critique of language: “[It] misses the important fact that in much of modern art one can no longer really speak of subject-matter in the old sense. Rather the subject-matter is the technique. What Ionesco did—no mean feat—was to appropriate for the theater one of the great technical discoveries of modern poetry: that all language can be considered from the outside, as by a stranger. […] His early plays are not about ‘meaninglessness’. They are attempts to use meaninglessness theatrically.” (“Ionesco”, in: S. Sontag, Against Interpretation, New York, NY 1966, pp. 115–123, p. 119).

44 R. Daus, Das Theater des Absurden in Frankreich, Stuttgart 1977, esp. pp. 44f. and pp. 49f.

45 See, in particular, Ronge, Polemik, Parodie und Satire bei Ionesco.
Eleutheria is the title of Samuel Beckett’s first completed dramatic attempt, undertaken in 1947. However, Beckett never wanted it to be released, and it therefore remained unpublished until 1995, six years after his death. Beckett’s biographer and friend, James Knowlson, reports that Beckett thought the play was “overexplicit”, and there is no need to contradict Beckett’s assessment. Nevertheless, it is far from clear what, indeed, is overexplicit in this play. There are not many scholarly studies of Eleutheria; however, one point most of them have commented on are the explicit references to Arthur Schopenhauer’s philosophy, which are still to be found in Beckett’s later plays, as many critics have pointed out. In addition, what I consider first and foremost to be overexplicit is the play’s meta-theatricality and its questioning of the medium of theater, which raises the issue of the limits of the theatrum mundi metaphor.

A short summary of the plot might be helpful at this point: The play deals with a promising young author named Victor who has a pretty fiancée and wealthy parents, but who claims to lack freedom (eleutheria), which is why he has left his family and lives the life of a hermit in a studio apartment, basically staying in bed all day long. His overt aim is to get rid of his body, and to watch himself slowly dying. We find very clear references to Schopenhauer’s concept of self-effacement, where real freedom is not the freedom of the will, but the freedom from the will, and the will is, in all cases, the will of the body. Following the main character of the play, Victor (or Schopenhauer), this leads to two sorts of possibilities: either asceticism, or the enjoyment of art, which, however, turns out to be a merely temporary solution (Victor tries all forms of art, but all are in vain). Interestingly, these ideas are not only extremely close to Schopenhauer, but also remind us of Kierkegaard’s concept of the aestheticization of life. In light of this, it might not be accidental that the main protagonist is named Victor—as the latter lives the life of a hermit, the name echoes the pseudonym

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46 James Knowlson, Damned to Fame, London 1996, p. 363. The fact that En attendant Godot was completed so shortly after Eleutheria (and would have been offered for production almost at the same time) might have been the initial reason for Beckett’s withholding it; see also M. J. Sidnell’s essay on Beckett’s early dramatic attempts: “Beckett’s Discovery of Theater: Human Wishes and the Dramaturgical Contexts of Eleutheria”, in: The South Carolina Review, vol. 43, 2010, p. 36–49, esp. p. 41.

47 Regarding Beckett’s general interest in Schopenhauer, see in particular U. Pothast, Die eigentliche metaphysische Tätigkeit: Über Schopenhauers Ästhetik und ihre Anwendung durch Samuel Beckett, Frankfurt/Main 1982. S. Schneider has shown to what degree Beckett illustrates Schopenhauer’s philosophy in Eleutheria (“Samuel Becketts Eleutheria: Die menschliche Freiheit als Schopenhauersche Tragikomödie”, in: Germanisch-Romanische Monatsschrift, vol. 50, 2000, pp. 361–377).
under which Kierkegaard published *Either—Or*, namely Victor Eremita. Hence, Beckett does not only seem to be referring to Schopenhauer, but also to Kierkegaard. Therefore, Theodor W. Adorno’s dictum of “Kulturmüll”—“cultural trash”, as he calls the quoted discourses in *Endgame*—appears to be applicable to *Eleutheria* as well. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that in *Eleutheria*—a play which raises the issue of the *theatrum mundi*, as we will see—Beckett refers so extensively to Schopenhauer, a philosopher who availed himself frequently of the metaphor of *Welttheater*.

In the following, I will focus on the aforementioned meta-theatricality of the play. Right in the first scene of *Eleutheria*, Victor’s father, Monsieur Krap, states, “Au point de vue dramatique, l’absence de ma femme ne sert à rien”, which already hints at the potential self-awareness apparent in this character. A few lines later, when the strange Dr. Piouk enters, we are confronted with the following dialogue:

M. Krap. Je me demande à quoi vous allez servir dans cette comédie.
Dr. Piouk, ayant mûrement réfléchi.
    j’espère que je pourrai être utile.
Mme Meck, inquiète.
    Je ne comprends pas.
Dr. Piouk. Et vous, cher monsieur, votre rôle est-il bien déterminé ?
M. Krap. Il est terminé.
Dr. Piouk. Vous restez pourtant en scène.
M. Krap. On dirait.

48 “Was Beckett an Philosophie aufbietet, depraviert er selber zum Kulturmüll, nicht anders als die ungezählten Anspielungen auf Bildungsfermente […]” (“Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen”, in: Theodor W. Adorno, *Versuch, das Endspiel zu verstehen: Aufsätze zur Literatur des 20. Jahrhunderts I*, Frankfurt/Main 1973, pp. 167–214, p. 167). See also E. Fischer-Lichte, who identified an impressively large number of literary quotes in *Endgame* (*Geschichte des Dramas. Band 2: Von der Romantik bis zur Gegenwart*, Tübingen 1990, pp. 245–248).

49 On the other hand, one has to consider that Schopenhauer was simply the philosopher of twentieth-century artists, probably not least because he claims that art can lead to metaphysical insight. On Schopenhauer’s *Welttheater*, see *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, ed. W. Frhr. von Löhneysen, Stuttgart and Frankfurt/Main 1976, vol. II, especially ch. 31: “Vom Genie” (p. 498). The most recent and remarkably popular examination of Schopenhauer’s “Welttheater” was undertaken by Michel Houellebecq in *En présence de Schopenhauer*, Paris 2017, especially ch. 4: “Le théâtre du monde”.

50 Samuel Beckett, *Eleutheria*, Paris 1995, p. 33. [“Dramatically speaking, my wife’s absence serves no purpose” (translation by M. Brodsky).]

51 Ibid., p. 40. [M. Krap: “I’m wondering of what use you’re going to be in the farce.” Dr. Piouk: (Upon mature reflection) “I hope that I will be able to be useful.” Mme. Meck: (Worried) “I don’t understand.” Dr. Piouk: “And your role, my dear sir, is it very clear-cut?” M. Krap: “It is being
In Act II, the meta-theatricality gains momentum as well as an interesting twist, which leads us back to our main interest: namely the intertwining of meta-theatricality and theater as metaphor. When Victor’s family and a glazier are in Victor’s room and Victor is not seen, the dialogue is as follows:

Mme Meck. Où est-il ?
Vitrier. Il est sous le lit, madame, comme du temps de Molière.
(Victor sort de sous le lit) Il fallait y rester.
Mme Meck. À quoi rime cette comédie ?
Vitrier. C’est dans un but de délassement et de divertissement publics, madame.52

In this dialogue, the characters themselves are merging meta-theatricality and theater as a metaphor. Madame Meck calls the ridiculous situation a comedy, referring to the *theatrum mundi* as “the world as a stage”. The glazier is obviously referring to the history of theater, to Molière, and is talking about the sense and purpose of theater itself, with the stage representing the world. This linkage between the two meanings of the metaphor intensifies as the play continues.

What started as more or less explicit allusions to the characters’ meta-theatrical self-awareness becomes open criticism of theater itself:

Vitrier. Ne voyez-vous pas que nous sommes tous en train de tourner autour de quelque chose qui n’a pas de sens ? Il faut lui trouver un sens, sinon il n’y a qu’à baisser le rideau.
Dr. Piouk. Et après ? Je ne vois aucun inconvénient à ce qu’on baisse le rideau sur mon non-sens; c’est d’ailleurs ce qui arrive le plus souvent.53

However, it is in the third and final act where we find Beckett’s most explicit breaking of the fourth wall,54 and a highly exceptional form of meta-theatrical...
self-awareness: At one moment in *Eleutheria* the play stagnates, and a spectator leaves the auditorium and climbs onto the stage in order to criticize the plot, its author, and the actors. The spectator claims to be a representative of the audience: “Car je ne suis pas un, mais mille spectateurs, tous légèrement différents les uns des autres.”55 “Audience member” and “actors”, as well as a “stage-box voice” discuss the script extensively, but nonetheless, the controversy does not lead anywhere.56 The “spectator” goes on asking Victor to shape the narration of his life so as to result in an acceptable story, threatening him with his “Chinese torturer”:

Spectateur. [...]. Sortez un peu de vos généralités, je vous en prie. C’est votre cas qui nous préoccupe, pas celui du genre humain.
Victor. Mais ils sont solidaires.
Spectateur. Comment ? Balivernes ! [...].57

Victor, who is forced to tell his individual story, claims it to be possible for the audience to transfer his particular case to life in general—but the spectator considers this thought to be sheer “balderdash”. Hence, the question raised here is whether one particular case can be translated into a point concerning the human condition. Is it at all possible to link these levels? At this moment in the play, the answer is anything but evident. Victor continues to tell the “story” of

55 Beckett, *Eleutheria*, p. 127. [“For I am not one audience member, but a thousand, all slightly different from each other”].

56 Interestingly, already in Beckett’s earliest play, the “spectator” compares the play to a chess game—and a chess game of the lowest level—to explain his discomfort while attending the play: “C’est comme lorsqu’on assiste à une partie d’échecs entre joueurs de dernière catégorie. Il y a trois quarts d’heure qu’ils n’ont pas touché à une pièce, ils sont là comme deux couillons à bâiller sur l’échiquier, et vous aussi vous êtes là, encore plus couillon qu’eux, cloué sur place, dégoûté, ennuyé, fatigué, émerveillé par tant de bêtise. Jusqu’au moment où vous n’y tenez plus. Alors, vous leur dites, mais faites ça, faites ça, qu’est-ce que vous attendez ? Faites ça et c’est fini, nous pourrons aller nous coucher” (ibid., p. 133). [“It’s like when you watch a chess game between players of the lowest class. For three quarters of an hour they haven’t touched a single piece. They sit there gaping at the board like two horses’ asses and you’re also there, even more of a horse’s ass than they are, nailed to the spot, disgusted, bored, worn-out, filled with wonder at so much stupidity. Up until the moment when you can’t take it anymore. Then you tell them, So do that, do that, what are you waiting for, do that and it’s all over, we can go to bed”]. It is commonly known that Beckett was intrigued by chess (see for instance *Murphy* or *Endgame*); see P. Brockmeier, *Samuel Beckett*, Stuttgart 2001, pp. 154f.

57 Beckett, *Eleutheria*, p. 144. [Spectator: “Get out a bit from under these generalities, if you please. We’re preoccupied with your case, not with that of the human race.” Victor: “But they are of a piece.” Spectator: “What? Twaddle!”]
his life, which the “spectator”, before leaving the stage, surprisingly states to be “pas mal du tout, […] un peu longue, un peu ennuyeuse, un peu… bête, mais pas mal, pas mal du tout, jolie même par endroits, à condition de ne pas y regarder de trop près, chose que nous ne faisons jamais”. For the spectateur, a badly constructed story appears to be better than no story at all.

The end of the play is announced with Victor renouncing his quest for “true freedom”, concluding:

Victor. […] On ne peut pas se voir mort. C’est du théâtre. Je ne…

One last time, we have to make the choice: is it the play to which he is referring, or is it life in its entirety, which is, after all, just a play?

The final stage direction in Eleutheria reads as follows:

Puis il [Victor] se couche, le maigre dos tourné à l’humanité.

Why did Beckett choose the lofty word “mankind” and not just “the audience”? This can be taken to be a thoroughly optimistic understanding of theater as a metaphor; with this stage direction, the author himself is finally accepting the spectators as representatives of humankind. Hence, he considers it to be possible to take one particular case and extrapolate from it a statement about the human condition.

The intertwining of meta-theatricality and theater as a metaphor reaches its apex in Beckett’s Endgame. The play abounds with meta-theatrical elements, as well as invocations of the topos of Welttheater that scholars have already pointed out extensively, emphasizing first and foremost the prevalence of plays within the play.

58 See the insightful analysis in Davis’s essay “‘Not a Soul in Sight!’”, esp. p. 96.
59 Beckett, Eleutheria, p. 149f. [“It wasn’t bad at all, your story, a bit long, a bit boring, a bit silly, but not bad, not bad at all, even pretty-sounding in spots, on condition that one isn’t too particular, something we never are.”]
60 Ibid., p. 150. [“One cannot see oneself dead. It’s theatrics. I no—”.
61 Ibid., p. 167. [Then he gets into bed, his scrawny back turned on mankind.]
62 See Fischer-Lichte, Geschichte des Dramas, particularly the chapter “Zerstückelung und Wiedergeburt”, pp. 240–289. See also K. Dorney’s approach that reads Endgame as a meta-linguistic and meta-theatrical commentary (“Hamming it up in Endgame: A Theatrical Reading”, in: Samuel Beckett’s Endgame, ed. M. S. Byron, Amsterdam and New York, NY 2007, pp. 227–252).
Endgame opens with the famous line: “Fini, c’est fini, ça va finir, ça va peut-être finir.”63 Beckett is hereby immediately raising the question of whether it is the play or the world that is finished. Both readings are possible, as he could be representing on stage a post-apocalyptic scene dealing with the end of the world or he could be mocking our Aristotelian plot expectations by starting the play with saying that it is all over. This double reading, put forward by the playwright right at the beginning, is maintained throughout the entire play; Clov, for instance, remarks towards the end of the play: “C’est ce que nous appelons gagner la sortie”.64 This meta-theatricality is similar to the question posed by Nell and Clov: “Pourquoi cette comédie, tous les jours?”65—the characters might be aware of their own theatricality66 and questioning their job as actors, or they might be questioning the senselessness of their life by referring to a theatrical metaphor.

On the one hand, the characters in Endgame explicitly invoke the idea of the stage as a place that represents the world:

Hamm. Fais-moi faire un petit tour. (Clov se met derrière le fauteuil et le fait avancer.) Pas trop vite! (Clov fait avancer le fauteuil.) Fais-moi faire le tour du monde! (Clov fait avancer le fauteuil.) Rase les murs. Puis ramène-moi au centre.67

When Clov starts to observe the world beyond the stage through his telescope, Hamm does not want him to look at anything special, but to “[r]egarde la terre”,68 to see “rien que le tout”,69 and a “[n]oir clair” is the predominant color of “tout l’univers”.70 Hence, Clov is supposed to look at the world outside the stage in the same manner one would look at a stage representing the world. In other words: in this famous teichoscopy, the actors themselves are

63 Beckett, Fin de partie, p. 15. [“Finished, it’s finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished.”]
64 Ibid., p. 109. [“This is what we call making an exit.”]
65 Ibid., p. 29 and p. 49. [“Why this farce, day after day?”]
66 See George Tabori, who staged Fin de partie in 1998 at the Akademietheater of the Vienna Burgtheater as a rehearsal.
67 Beckett, Fin de partie, p. 41. [“Take me for a little turn. (Clov goes behind the chair and pushes it forward.) Not too fast! (Clov pushes chair.) Right round the world! (Clov pushes chair.) Hug the walls, then back to the center again.”] Fischer-Lichte interprets Hamm as a tragic hero who, like any other dramatic hero, constantly needs to be (in) the center of attention/the world (Geschichte des Dramas, p. 247f.).
68 Beckett, Fin de partie, p. 43. [“Look at the earth.”]
69 Ibid., p. 97. [“merely the whole thing”.]
70 Ibid., p. 48. [“Light black. From pole to pole”.]
looking at the Great Theater of the World.\footnote{On this point see M. J. Schäfer, who pursues the theme of the \textit{theatrum mundi} metaphor in \textit{Endgame} in his essay “Samuel Beckett's Reduktion des Welttheaters im \textit{Endspiel}”, in: \textit{Null, Nichts und Negation: Becketts No-Thing}, ed. A. v. Schäfer and K. Kröger, Bielefeld 2016, pp. 117–141, especially p. 122.} However, the most interesting point here is that at the same moment, the limits of the exposed world are explicitly commented on by Hamm, as he knocks at the walls and ascertains that they consist of theater mock up:

\textit{Hamm. Tu entends? (Il frappe le mur avec son doigt replié. Un temps.) Tu entends? Des briques creuses. (Il frappe encore.) Tout ça c'est creux!}\footnote{Beckett, \textit{Fin de partie}, p. 42. [“Do you hear? (He strikes the wall with his knuckles.) Do you hear? Hollow bricks! (He strikes again.) All that's hollow!”] See also Schäfer, “Reduktion”, p. 125.}

To a certain degree, all of Beckett’s characters in his earlier plays are aware of the fact that they are part of a play being performed on stage, questioning their own performance and function and exposing the limits of the concept of the \textit{theatrum mundi}. This has been especially pointed out with regard to \textit{Fin de partie},\footnote{M. Foucré was the first to point out the degree to which the characters in the play are aware of the fact of being on stage (\textit{Le geste et la parole dans le théâtre de Samuel Beckett}, Paris 1970).} but it applies to \textit{Waiting for Godot} as well, where Vladimir and Estragon perform exercises similar to acting exercises,\footnotemark[74] or, additionally, anticipate the audience’s reaction, talking about this “[c]harmante soirée” where “on se croirait au spectacle”,\footnotemark[75] or claiming: “Voilà notre fin de soirée assurée”\footnotemark[76]. This meta-theatricality gains momentum when Vladimir complains: “Je commence à en avoir assez de ce motif”.\footnotemark[77] We also find stage directions, at least in the original French version, which are as unusual as Ionesco’s, as they appear to be mocking the very essence of stage directions: “\textit{Estragon agite son pied, en faisant jouer les orteils, afin que l'air y circule mieux.}”\footnote{Beckett not only indicates \textit{what} the characters should do, but \textit{why} they should do so, and his nonsensical explanation does not make things clearer. When Vladimir and Estragon start to look for a path to escape from their situation, they define the limits of the world.} Beckett not only indicates \textit{what} the characters should do, but \textit{why} they should do so, and his nonsensical explanation does not make things clearer. When Vladimir and Estragon start to look for a path to escape from their situation, they define the limits of the world.
exposed world on stage, as they desperately try to leave the stage. While they look around, they realize “Nous sommes cernés!”,”79 “Il n’y a pas d’issue par là”, 80 and Vladimir pushes Estragon towards the auditorium (Vladimir va le relever, l’amène vers la rampe. Geste vers l’auditorium) and says, “Sauve-toi par là. Allez.” However, Estragon flinches in horror, whereupon Vladimir cracks the hoary theater joke: “Tu ne veux pas ? Ma foi, ça se comprend.”81

The level of the characters’ self-awareness distinguishes Beckett’s earlier plays from his posterior ones.82 The most famous of all is probably Happy Days, the first play written after Beckett had taken a break from theater. The play is primarily a long soliloquy of the female protagonist, whose body is slowly sinking into the ground, and who constantly exclaims “This is a happy day!” She appears to have no idea she is part of a play, nor does she recognize the bizarre nature of her situation.83 Happy Days forms a world in itself, an absurd, unrealistic, and probably metaphorical world, but a world as a whole, where the human being is sinking deeper and deeper into the ground, and incessantly calling out that “this is a happy day”. Beckett’s late characters are, just like Ionesco’s late characters, unable to reflect on the entirely absurd situation and their own absurd actions. They do not wonder why they are sinking into the ground or why people are transforming into rhinoceroses; they do not question the absurd situation and they know even less about their being part of a play. Ionesco and Beckett confront the audience with a more than strange situation,

79 Ibid., p. 104. [“We’re surrounded!”]
80 Ibid. [“There’s no way out there”. (He takes Estragon by the arm and drags him towards front. Gesture towards auditorium.)]
81 Ibid. [“You won’t? Well, I can understand that.”] On the stage as a “claustrophobic space, surrounded at all sides, to which the character is condemned: an infernal space from which there is no real escape”, see Davis, “‘Not a Soul in Sight!’”, p. 98.
82 See Bennett, who makes a similar statement for Godot, Endgame, and Act without Words I (Cambridge Introduction, p. 57; see also p. 82 on Ionesco’s Rhinocéros). Davis claims that—from Eleutheria to Endgame—“Beckett moves away from his initial experimentation with explicit fourth-wall breaks—which can be seen as part of an unsuccessful first attempt at establishing his personal theatrical model […]” (“‘Not a Soul in Sight!’”, p. 101). One might object that breaking the fourth wall is a genuinely meta-theatrical effect, and over the course of his career Beckett simply reduced every form of meta-theatrical effect.
83 See Bennett, Cambridge Introduction, p. 57. The only potentially ambiguous moment could be the beginning of act two when Winnie exclaims: “Someone is looking at me.” She could mean some divine being, or the spectator. This latter interpretation would seem to be supported by the slightly meta-theatrical remark she makes immediately afterwards: “What is that unforgettable line?” (Happy Days, London and Boston, MA 2010, p. 160). On the interdependence between the subject and its perceiver in Beckett’s work, see Fischer-Lichte, Geschichte des Dramas, p. 252, as well as Sh. Levy, Samuel Beckett’s Self-Referential Drama: The Three I’s, Basingstoke 1990.
which can only be resolved if it is accepted as an allegorical plot—constituting a world in itself and allowing the recipient to conceive of the stage as a place where it is possible to make statements about the real world. In their early absurdist plays, one still has to decide whether the dialogue or the commentary are intended as meta-theatrical references or rather refer to the *theatrum mundi*, whereas in the playwrights’ later plays, this question is not even raised.

As has become clear, part of the absurdity presented on stage in the earliest plays of Beckett and Ionesco is the absurdity of theatrical conventions, expressed primarily in meta-theatrical remarks. The staged plot is, of course, absurd—yet this is not the only, nor the basic feature of the theater of the absurd. Another crucial point is the absurdity on the meta-theatrical and self-referential level, which has been neglected by critics, who, in order to emphasize a didactic interpretation right from the beginning, have preferred to cling to general assumptions about the world. This essay, however, has sought to draw attention to the early plays of Ionesco and Beckett in order to illustrate their range of meta-theatricality and to demonstrate how this meta-theatricality served to expose the limits of the *theatrum mundi* metaphor. Hence, it is necessary to speculate on the reasons why, at the beginning of their careers, the playwrights attempted to make this metaphor a subject of discussion. As mentioned at the beginning of this essay, the metaphor of the Great Theater of the World functions in both directions insofar as the world can be seen and understood as a stage and the stage can be seen as representing the world. Indeed, generalizability is a necessary condition for every form of representation. Therefore, the actual question raised by Ionesco and Beckett appears to be whether this completely broken post-war world is still *generalizable* and thus suitable for representation to the degree that the stage could represent the world.