



Theatre Academy

Gönderilme Tarihi/Submission Date: 31.07.2023

Kabul Tarihi/Acceptance Date: 18.09.2023

Araştırma Makalesi/Research Article

“If you don’t care you’ll die”¹: The Concept of “Liveness” in Arnold Wesker’s *Chicken Soup with Barley* and John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*

“Umursamazsan ölürsün”: Arnold Wesker’in *Arpalı Tavuk Çorbası* ve John Osborne’un *Öfke* Adlı Oyunlarında “Canlılık” Kavramı

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Abstract

The concept of “liveness” has a long-standing relationship with theatre and performance studies. This relationship has primarily been limited to questions of ontology; namely, what constitutes the ephemeral nature of theatre and what counts as “liveness” in performance in an increasingly digitized age. By contrast, this article will consider “liveness” as a doctrine and pervasive ideology in two landmark plays of 1950s Britain, Arnold Wesker’s *Chicken Soup with Barley*, and John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger*. Both plays represent dramas of emotion and were written by members of the Angry Young Men movement, a term denoting a group of working-class dramatists, who used their work to express frustration with Britain’s outdated class system and post-war society. By employing close reading alongside literary and historical analysis, this article will argue that the “anger” of the Angry Young Men is not just a descriptor for disaffected liberals but is part of a wider movement in these plays emphasizing the importance of embodying “liveness” and vitality as a means of resisting the standardized culture of everyday capitalist life.

Keywords: Liveness, Working-class, Affect, Socialism, Crisis, Feeling

¹ Wesker (2011), p.76. All numerical references are to quotations from this edition of the play.

Öz

“Canlılık” kavramının tiyatro ve performans çalışmalarıyla uzun süredir devam eden bir ilişkisi bulunmaktadır. Bu ilişki öncelikle tiyatronun geçici doğasını neyin oluşturduğu ve giderek dijitalleşen bir çağda performansta neyin “canlılık” sayılacağı gibi ontolojiye dair sorularla sınırlı kalmıştır. Buna karşın bu makale, 1950’lerin Britanya’sının iki önemli oyununda, Arnold Wesker’in *Arpalı Tavuk Çorbası* ve John Osborne’un *Öfke* adlı oyunlarında “canlılığı” bir doktrin ve yaygın bir ideoloji olarak ele alacaktır. Her iki oyun da duygu dramlarını temsil eder. Onlar, Britanya’nın köhneleşmiş sınıf sistemi ve savaş sonrası toplumuna dair hayal kırıklıklarını ifade etmek için oyun yazan bir grup işçi sınıfı tiyatro yazarını tanımlayan bir terim olan Öfkeli Genç Adamlar hareketinin üyeleri tarafından yazılmıştır. Bu makale, edebi ve tarihsel analizin yanı sıra yakın okumayı da kullanarak, Öfkeli Genç Adamlar’ın “öfkесinin” sadece hoşnutsuz liberaller için bir tanımlama olmadığını, bu oyunlarda gündelik kapitalist yaşamın standartlaştırılmış kültürüne direnmenin bir aracı olarak “canlılığı” ve canlılığı somutlaştırmanın önemini vurgulayan daha geniş bir hareketin parçası olduğunu tartışacaktır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Canlılık, İşçi Sınıfı, Duygulanım, Sosyalizm, Kriz, Duygu

Introduction

The 1956 premiere of John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* at the Royal Court Theatre in London is thought to have heralded a “revolution” (Taylor, 1968, p.32) in British theatre history. Reflecting on this revolution, which was supposedly marked by a change in post-war attitudes and a willingness to confront one’s material and ontological existence, Rebellato remarked:

Life [was] the crucial word. It is part of a cluster of terms that are distributed equally through the works of the New Left and the New Wave: the variant forms, ‘live’, ‘living’, ‘alive’, the antonyms, ‘dead’, ‘death’, the synonyms, ‘vital’ and ‘vitality,’ and the related term ‘feeling’ (1999, p.21).

Indeed, initial reviews of *Look Back in Anger* (hereafter, “*Look Back*”) pointed out the production’s “evident and blazing vitality” (Tynan, 1956) and branded its protagonist, Jimmy Porter, as “simply and abundantly alive” (Tynan, 1956). Subsumed within the overarching media label attached to the rising young (predominantly left-wing) playwrights and intellectuals of 1950s Britain – the Angry Young Men – Arnold Wesker was not immune to this sense of vitality. Wesker’s 1958 play, *Chicken Soup with Barley*, the first in his *Wesker* trilogy (hereafter, “*Chicken Soup*”), explored the lives of the Kahn family to directly confront the question of communism as a sustainable political ideal, and its ability to alleviate the crises of everyday living.

Recognizing the abundance of literature on the politics of the Angry Young Men, this article seeks to explore this notion of "liveness" or "a-liveness" in *Look Back in Anger* and *Chicken Soup with Barley*, as an alternative approach. In these plays, "liveness" is handled in a phenomenological context, implicitly rejecting Cartesian attempts to understand the world as a logical place, where perception exists without feeling. Whilst Raymond Williams remarked on the difficulty of getting hold of the "felt sense of the quality of life at a particular place and time" (1961, p.63), I will argue that the concept of "liveness" in these plays conjures the effort to deride and resist the homogeneity of a post-world-war II world, where "nobody thinks, nobody cares. No beliefs, no convictions and no enthusiasm."² In doing so, this article will combine critical theory with an exploration of the historical context of both plays to posit them as critiques of linear capitalist narratives of social progress.

By employing a three-act structure and the conventions of fourth-wall naturalism, both *Look Back* and *Chicken Soup* can be termed "old-fashioned plays" (Taylor, 1968, p.49). Their realist and domestic settings also situate them within the genre of "Kitchen-Sink Drama" – a label which connotes the foregrounding of "ordinary" working-class people, in contrast to the landed gentry (situated in on-stage drawing rooms) (Wandor, 2001, p.41). As such, the plays' attitudes to mass culture and working-class life will be examined in turn. However, in tracing their theoretical underpinnings, this article will infer that both plays internalize a more *absurdist* approach than previously thought, by re-inscribing "liveness" as something that is inherently unstable, and which, certainly in the case of *Look Back in Anger*, necessitates a compromise, bordering on delusion, to maintain.

Liveness

"Liveness" is a crucial concept for performance studies. In *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, Benjamin lamented that "[e]ven the most perfect reproduction of a work of art is lacking in one element: its presence in time and space," which he termed its "aura" (1969, p.50). Similarly, Phelan remarked that "performance's only life is in the present... [it] becomes itself through disappearance" (2003, p.146). In literary criticism, the term "life" largely derives from the commentary

² (Osborne, 1996, p.7). All numerical references are to quotations from this edition of the play.

of FR Leavis. Leavis believed that if literature is great, it should embody life and exhibit “a vital capacity for experience, a kind of reverent openness before life and a marked moral intensity” (qtd. in Rebellato, 1999, p.38). Rebellato distilled Leavis’ historical view into “a belief that at one point thought and word, feeling and expression, style and sensuousness were unified, before being torn asunder” (p24). TS Eliot, who praised the metaphysical poets for their ability to unite thought and feeling (1951, p.286), ultimately became dismayed by later generations of poets who practiced a loss of sensation united with thought.

Therefore, just as “liveness” is the descriptor of theatrical performance, it is also the descriptor of affect; a notoriously elusive term Spinoza understands as “states of a body by which its power of acting is increased or lessened, helped or hindered, and also the idea of these states” (2004, p.51). Therefore, it is suggested that the value of the anger expressed in *Look Back* and the disillusionment of *Chicken Soup*, lies not in their direction against human targets (Jimmy’s tirades against Alison and the Khans’ condemnation of Sarah’s continuing communism, respectively) but in their very *expression* (Rebellato, p.31). As Massumi remarked, “[affect] is nothing less than *the perception of one’s vitality, one’s sense of aliveness, of changeability*” (1995, p.97). I suggest that such “perception” arises through the plays’ internalization of the *absurdity* of post-World War II living – a world in which having ideological freedom was denied by a capitalist and consumerist society.

The Good Life

MacNicol (1999, p.69) remarked that the 1950s may be regarded as Britain’s least typical decade due to the novelty of full employment and steady economic growth in a century marked by recession, unemployment, and military conflict. The election of Conservative governments presided over an “age of affluence” (Lacey, 1995, p.10) where successful economic policies meant that “a comfortable, consumer-bound and increasingly privatized domestic life was [supposedly] accessible to all” (Langhamer, 2005, p.341). Indeed, Britain witnessed a doubling in average earnings between 1951 and 1961, alongside a 40 percent increase in total production (Hobspawn, 1969, p.263). In 1957, Prime Minister Harold Macmillan implored “Let’s be frank about it; most of our people have never had it so good” (Leader’s Speech, Brighton), establishing a tone of success.

Yet the domestic setting of *Look Back*: a rented flat in a large Victorian house in the midlands, seems symptomatic of 1956; when comfortable Victorian Britain had "corroded, its prosperous houses now chopped up for occupation by less-wealthy tenants" (Shepherd, 2009, p.141). The considerably longer arc of *Chicken Soup*, tracing twenty years in the life of the Jewish Khan family, begins with a thriving, lively family home in 1936. Act One is set in a basement (in the play's original version, an attic) in London's East End, which is "warm and lived in" (Wesker, p.5). Indeed, the home serves as a kind of military base in the first scene, allowing young communists to discuss their strategies for blocking an anti-Fascist march; "Sarah, you seen the streets yet? Mobbed Mo-opped! The lads have been there since seven this morning" (p.9).

In *Chicken Soup*'s second act, when World War II has "come and gone" (p.31), the Khans have moved into an isolated LCC council house, and the mood has dampened. The absence of familial and neighbourly connection mirrors the termination of political purpose in the Khans' lives, symbolising their move from the "secure anti-fascist Communism of the 1930s to the bewildered and disaffected leftism" (Wandor, 2001, p.55) accelerated by the mass culture of the late 1950s (Hoggart, 1957, p.247). On a visceral level, it depicts the loss of the "positive practice of neighbourhood," which Raymond Williams credited as key to the working classes' sense of "life" and "collectivity" (1933, p.134). Harry's sister, Cissie Khan remarks, "these flats are a world on their own. You live a whole lifetime here and not know your own next-door neighbour" (Wesker, p.67). In this way, Wesker has arranged the "scenic images in *Chicken Soup*" so that "one can almost chart the regression – of both the family and the society" (Adler, 1979, p.432). Similarly, in *Look Back*, Osborne's references to war, suffering, death, and miscarriage are eventually subsumed by the play's lasting motif of a make-believe game, which demarcates Jimmy and Alison as living outside of society, under their own rules and removed from adult responsibilities.

The structure of both plays therefore highlights the frequently fantastical nature of political rhetoric. Following Slotkin's (1986) definition of myths as the narratives used to naturalize ideology in every human culture (pp.70-91), Macmillan's words seem mythical in how they promulgate the idea of a new Britain, close in nature to the

infamously unattainable “American Dream” across the pond in the United States. Indeed, the simplistic meta-narrative of social and economic “progress” in 1950s Britain concealed a darker reality. Post-war progressivist developments, and the new welfare state had not delivered and Shepherd notes that there was a growing realisation that public platitudes were hollow (p.138). In Macmillan’s speech one can detect an underlying discourse of power; people are instructed to observe positive changes in society, and therefore are *told* how to feel. This personifies the effects of a consumerist society, which produced not only *goods*, but standardised *people*, “systematically forming the objects of which they speak” (Foucault, 1972, p.49). Clearly, “ordinary” language needed challenging (Shepherd, p.138). Luckily, Wesker and Osborne took “the pursuit of vibrant language and patent honesty” as their intention from the outset (Osborne, Introduction, p.viii).

For *Coppieters* (1975, p.38), “Wesker furthers the belief that by and large everyone is born not just with the ability but also with the desire to be active.” His play is united by matriarch Sarah Kahn, who is described at the outset as a “*small, fiery woman*,” whose “*movements indicate great energy and vitality*” (Wesker, p.5). Interestingly, Wesker’s play is never overtly political; whilst tracing the decline in socialist ideals, he couches them in familial terms. As Ponnuswami suggests, “Sarah’s continuing devotion to socialism is both problematised and redeemed by the fact that she is seen to remain ‘a simple, old-fashioned humanist,’” (1998, p.242) as Wesker dubbed himself (qtd. in Ponnuswami, 1998, p142.). Sarah’s political commitment is depicted as simple, logical, and pragmatic; she remarked: “[t]he only thing that mattered was to be happy and eat. Anything that made you unhappy or stopped you eating was the fault of capitalism” (Wesker, p.61). In this sense, politics is used in the play insofar as it is useful. Thus, marches occur offstage, rendered subservient to the family unit. In alignment with Arendt’s view of the Jewish family circle as the “last fortress” in the preservation of the race (1976, p.27), the East End is conceptualised as a “big mother,” (Wesker, p.61) and Sarah its sustenance. This conflation of the personal and the political is shown at the very outset of *Chicken Soup*:

Sarah. (*from the kitchen*) You took the children to Lottie’s?
 Harry. (*Taking up book to read*) I took them.
 Sarah. They didn’t mind?
 Harry. No, they didn’t mind.

Sarah. Is Hymie coming?

Harry. I don't know.

Sarah. (*to herself*) Nothing he knows! (*to Harry*) You didn't ask him? He didn't say?

He knows about the demonstration, doesn't he? (p.5)

Harry continues to evade Sarah's questions by discussing a book instead. Describing Harry as Sarah's "*antithesis*," (p.5) Wesker portrays a marriage in crisis; bearable only via the semantic release of speaking about the other in the third person – "Nothing he knows!" (p.5); "She's such a funny woman" (p.10). For Wandor, by directly subverting the gender stereotype of the all-powerful, articulate male (demonstrated forcefully in *Look Back*), Wesker sows the seeds of the Khan's family's destruction – "the centre of power is the woman – Sarah – and it seems to be the very nature of her strength and power which necessitates creating her opposite: the physically weak, frail, intellectual, cinema-loving Harry" (p.52). However, I suggest instead that Harry's disintegration emanates from his engagement with the "deadening" elements of mass culture. Indeed when the group return from the march against the "black shirts," Harry is uncharacteristically invigorated – "I tell you, show young people what socialism means and they recognize life!" (p.27) Yet this is ironically undercut by the fact that he did not march at all, but only waved a banner for a short period before going to his "mother's place" (p.27) for tea.

In this way, Harry personifies what Raymond Williams regards as the poisonous effects of mass culture – dismantling the "common culture" of the working class and hampering their means of communication (p.336). Lacey (p.6) notes that British culture was "transformed" by consumerism in the 1950s, as the UK adjusted to a post-imperial reality of subordination to US interests, such as pop culture and film. The shift from popular culture (free to be chosen) to an ideologically imposed mass culture, can be considered in terms of Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony, whereby ideological power is exercised in a given society by the ruling class (bourgeoisie) via cultural domination.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer referred to the "culture industry" as a capitalist system of production, wherein standardized cultural goods manipulate people into becoming compliant and docile (1997, p.137). Whilst Marx may have regarded religion as the opiate of the people (subtly referenced in *Look Back* by

Jimmy's distaste at Alison's churchgoing), in the 1950s, amusement under late capitalism emerged as "the prolongation of work" (Adorno, 1997, p.137), sedating the population to remain in their allotted social sphere. For all Jimmy's histrionics, lamenting how "My heart is so full, I feel ill" (p.57), his life is ultimately one of hedonism which keeps him rooted in the proletariat. For Pattie, the set of *Look Back* is more bohemian than working class, representing "Jimmy Porter's space, with 'a jungle of newspapers and weeklies' to feed his brain, a marital bed to fulfil his sexual needs and a gas stove with food cupboard to still his hunger (p. 5)" (2012, p.148). As with Harry Khan's preference for cinema over politics, mass culture emerges as an Althusserian ideological state apparatus, leading to the manufacturing and manipulation of consent where ideas embedded in the actions or practices governed by rituals (1971, p.158).

In *Chicken Soup*, Harry's demise can therefore be seen as a powerful symbol of Eliot's "dissociation of sensibility" (1951), a phrase referring to the loss of fusion between thought and feeling. By Act Three, having suffered two strokes, he is reduced to a baby-like figure: mute, occasionally soiling himself and requiring Sarah's full-time care. As Innes (2002, p.10) summarised, this decline symbolically derives from Harry's cultural conditioning and a corresponding inability to care: "apathy...is indistinguishable from mortal illness." By contrast, Sarah "*retains much of her energy*," (Wesker, p.55) with "thought and feeling" united in her efforts to "fight everybody who doesn't care" (p.75), including her son, Ronnie, to whom she warns, "if you don't care you'll die." (p.76)

In *Look Back*, Alison remarks to her father who served in Imperialist India, "You're hurt because everything is changed. Jimmy is hurt because everything is the same." (Osborne, p.68) Jimmy Porter recognised that oppression does not end; it merely changes its form. Indeed, the monotony of working-class living that belay the consumerist age and other UK cultural outputs in the late 1950s and 1960s similarly exposed the repetitiveness of factory life and the turn to sexuality as a means of escape. As Camus wrote in *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1955):

Rising, tram, four hours in the office or factory, meal, tram, four hours of work, meal, sleep and Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday, according to the same rhythm - this path is easily followed most of the time, but one day the 'why' arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement (2013, p.15).

The absurdism of *Look Back in Anger* comes through interrogating this "why." As Shepherd summarises, the opening "has the two men reading Sunday newspapers; one complains of boredom and the woman irons. This belongs generically with images of a society where people 'do nothing;' where they are caught up into meaningless and low-level activity – alienated" (p.145). Indeed, the opening exhibits an ontological toing and froing between disparaging cultural symbols, yet participating in them regardless:

Jimmy and Cliff are seated in the two armchairs...All that we can see of either is two pairs of legs, sprawled way out beyond the newspapers which hide the rest of them from sight...Beside them, and between them, is a jungle of newspapers and weeklies...

Jimmy: Why do I do this every Sunday? Even the book reviews seem to be the same as last week's. Different books – same reviews. Have you finished that one yet? (Osborne, p.5)

In a feat of meta-theatre, Jimmy's repetitive frustrations – "God, how I hate Sundays!... We never seem to get any further, do we? Always the same ritual" (Osborne, p.11) – mirror the play's "asymmetrical symmetry" (Fletcher & Spurling, 1972, p.66). All three Acts begin on a Sunday evening, "with the sense of it being the fag-end of an uneventful day, spent on banal rituals of passing time, before it is back to the treadmill of work the following day" (Gieseckam, 2000, p.93). This sense of entrapment, and the turn to cultural sedatives as a futile way out, dramatizes Nietzsche's concept of nihilism – the idea that life has no value or meaning (1882). In effect, it also enacts a phenomenological understanding of temporality. Whilst René Descartes argued that the categories of mind and body are distinct, Jimmy's anger uproots the notion that time gains meaning via its logical, Cartesian measurement in minutes and seconds. As Husserl argued, phenomenal consciousness cannot be naturalized (Welton, 1999) thus, for Jimmy, time gains meaning only when he realizes what it is set against: the repetitive nature of capitalism. In *Chicken Soup*, this sense is communicated by the fact that the entirety of the first act (and the political excitement it entails) is set over a single day, whereas Acts 2 and 3 move from 1946 to 1956, suggesting that the days of contemporary capitalist life are interchangeable and unworthy of documentation. For Jimmy, time moves slowly when he is "alive" but helpless, and quickly and pointlessly for the Khans when the "liveness" of socialism has been extinguished.

Resistance and Fantasy

The taut atmosphere of both plays also symbolizes the playwrights' recognition that "something was banking up under the stodgy surface of life in mid-century England" (Kitchin, 1962, p.99). Just as Ada Khan in *Chicken Soup* comes to recognize that "the only rotten society is an industrial society" (Wesker, p.38), Jimmy in *Look Back* demonstrates how "liveness" is not something that can be bought, but requires individual agency; a self-raising from the pervasive "delicious sloth" (Osborne, p.8) of the 1950s. Problematically, however, Jimmy roots his offensive not in planning the future, but in sentimentalizing the past; lamenting that there "aren't any good, brave causes left" (p.83). Whilst Stuart Hall (1981, p.217) praised this as a sign of the re-awakened liberal conscience: "the dead thing which drives Jimmy to distraction within Alison...is also the dead heart of England, the 'bloody unfeeling core'" – *affectually*, it seems that Jimmy's anger – doggedly pursuing Alison and picking fights – result from a crisis of self-definition. Jimmy fetishizes the past to the extent that his present becomes paralysed. Like a child, he wants to play the soldier, idealising his father's death in the Spanish Civil War as an example of noble suffering, and himself as the dutiful mourner – "But *I* was the only one who cared" (p.56).

Unlike Sarah in *Chicken Soup*, Jimmy's narrative of "caring" does not underscore his "liveness," emanating as it does from "a profoundly solitary experience" (Worth, 1968, p.105). Like Eliot's and Leavis' conception of liveness as a union between mind and body, I build on Williams' notion of a "common culture" to suggest that human vitality is constituted through *communal* experience (echoing the "communitas" which Dolan (2010, p.11) regards as the cohesive feeling of belonging that bathes a theatre audience when watching a play). As a classic maternal figure, Sarah comes into being through her responsibilities – the ground of her being is not herself but others (Levinas, 1989, p.83). This is shown through the play's focus on her multi-tasking "as a wholesome unity of feeling and physical expression" (Rebellato, 1999, p.29), as evidenced through the stage directions – she is repeatedly "*preparing things as she talks*" (p.7) and "*bringing in tea*" (p.8). Whilst Jimmy is impulsive, incessant, and undeniably "present" throughout *Look Back* (Osborne described his tirades as "arias" (Introduction, p.xi) a notion heightened by the fact that he plays the jazz trumpet throughout "as if he wanted to kill someone with it" (Osborne, p.38)) he seems to be shouting into *nothingness*. As Innes (2002, p.98) summarises: "the

movement in the play is one of progressive isolation, with the protagonist driving each of his companions away." Whilst Osborne may utilise this as a wry attempt to illustrate society's destruction of personal relationships (Shepherd, p.148), the irony lies in the fact that, in a consumerist age, anger itself had "become a highly saleable commodity" (Maschler, 1957, p.8.). Indeed, the "Angry Young Men" label endures today as the skewed branding of an era that included other individuals practicing societal critique, such as the seminal female playwright, Shelagh Delaney. This highlights how singular emotions like anger are claimed by capitalist structures. "Liveness," which I understand as a "practical consciousness of a present kind, in a living and interrelating continuity" (Williams, 1958, p.132) would appear to be the only way to break out of such ontological limitations.

The mind-body dialectic can be seen as the central difference between Wesker and Osborne's plays. Whilst Osborne emphasised the emotional, remarking elsewhere, "I want to make people feel; to give them lessons in feeling" (Osborne, 1957, p.55). Wesker made clear that he believed people "have to think as well" (Wesker, 2003). Whilst anger does give a sense of vitality and *liveness*, the growing realisation that Jimmy "doesn't know where he is, or where he's going" (Osborne, p.88) renders him doomed to the realm of fantasy to achieve a vicarious *affect*. Thus, in the first scene, he exclaims:

Oh heavens, how I long for a little ordinary human enthusiasm... I want to hear a warm, thrilling voice cry out Hallelujah! (*He bangs his breast theatrically.*) Hallelujah! I'm alive! I've an idea. Why don't we have a little game? Let's pretend that we're human beings, and that we're actually alive (p.11).

Jimmy's mood in this passage is deadly serious. Despite the flippant tone and histrionics; banging his breast in a kind of patriotism to the gospel singer as the embodiment of "natural" humanity ("Hallelujah!") (Sierz, 2008, p.30), his use of the word "ordinary" before "human enthusiasm," suggests that there is something fundamentally lacking in his life. Furthermore, the use of the verb "have" as opposed to the more common "*play*" a game, implies that this is not mere entertainment, but a serious coping mechanism to thwart what Berlant (2011, p.10) termed the "crisis ordinariness" of living. For Berlant, "crisis ordinariness" is the way in which crisis operates in the ordinary through embedded conditions of precariousness (2011, p10). In both plays, capitalism enacts the precariousness of "living socially," with the

characters' lives "always in some sense in the hands of the other" (Butler, 2004, p.14) against their will. Jimmy Porter's penchant for melodrama and Harry Kahn's passion for film highlight how feelings, even if fake, trump *thinking* about reality in this world.

Indeed, Jimmy and Alison's marriage can only work through fantasy; playing games of squirrels and bears; "a silly symphony for people who couldn't bear the pain of being human beings any longer" (p.45). Therefore, despite Jimmy's curse on Alison: "If you could have a child, and it would die" (p.34), which prophetically comes to pass, her response is a release of "feeling" (p.94) which enables her to participate once more in this sadistic universe, and ironically pity *him* – "Oh, poor, poor, bears!" (p.95) Like Ronnie in *Chicken Soup* who cannot answer his mother's entreat to care – "I-I can't, not now, it's too big, not yet – it's too big to care for it, I-I..." (Wesker, p.76) – Jimmy cannot answer Alison's visceral suffering – "Don't. Please don't...I can't [...] Please, I-I..." (Osborne, p.94) In this regard, *Look Back* which "started by calling for a celebration of life, in the end, stands revealed not just as a humble acceptance of the complexity of existence but as a ritual exorcism of female fertility and motherhood" (Gilleman, 2002, p.60), disrupting its supposed "revolutionary" effect.

Whilst Osborne's characters may find some sort of depraved reconciliation, *Chicken Soup* is marked by the Khan family's implosion, as they become dejected and disillusioned by "the news about Hungary" (Wesker, p.74) (i.e., the Russian government's violent suppression of the peoples' revolt). Ronnie, in particular, is disgusted by his mother's blind devotion to communism, yet Sarah refuses to be silenced in a speech that Wesker (cited in Drabble, 1975, p.28) referred to as the crux of the play:

All my life I worked with a party that meant glory and freedom and brotherhood. You want me to give it up now?...If the electrician who comes to mend my fuse blows it instead, so I should stop having electricity? I should cut off my light? Socialism is my light, can you understand that? A way of life (p.74).

Unlike Ronnie's former idealism, Sarah's communism is instinctive. Whilst some critics have thought her deluded, leaving the play in a dramatic and intellectual impasse (Hall, p.217), I support Shepherd's view that:

this alliterative gathering up – light, life, love – gives emotional solidity to the political rebalancing that is going on [...] group organization is replaced, in a backlash

against post-war dreams of a remodeled society by...*affirmation of that polemical term of the 1950s 'life,' emphasis on the inner person* (p.148).

Indeed, the metaphor of "light" symbolises Sarah's self-awareness, in contrast to the flippancy of her family's black-and-white thinking. Rather than turning her back on the socialist cause, Sarah admits to a fraught and complicated relationship with socialism. Considering Wesker's own difficulties; signing the *New Left May Day Manifesto*, whilst struggling to let the "Old Left" go (Ponnuswami, p.138.), it is argued that this posits Sarah as a *realistic* figure of what it meant to be a working-class Jew in the 1950s. Furthermore, whilst she stands alone at the play's close, Sarah refuses to let the ideological collectivity of the working class die, by praising the communist "brotherhood." As Shepherd summarised: "[c]onsistency, right or wrong, and a politics that is emotionally certain: these are the features of the woman at the centre" (Shepherd, p.148). In this sense, it is precisely because "head and heart come into collision and neither is the victor" (Billington, 2005) that Wesker's writing is abundantly *alive*, enacting a rejection of Cartesian dualism and an existential phenomenology that posits feeling as central to our experiences of the world.

Conclusion

In 1954, theatre critic Kenneth Tynan (p.32) called for "plays about cabmen and demigods, plays about warriors, politicians, and grocers." This article suggests that by 1960, Osborne and Wesker had answered his call vehemently, by creating realistic characters forced to navigate the failures of post-war promises and cultural change. I have sought to argue that both *Look Back in Anger* and *Chicken Soup with Barley* internalize performative, affectual and literary concepts of "liveness" within their characters' struggles in a capitalist age. In a meta-theatrical sense, these plays resist the linear narrative of social progress and the supposedly innocuous rise of mass culture by instigating a "revolutionary" Angry Young Men movement in British theatre, just as they trace mass culture's "deadening" effects on characters such as Harry Khan, and (to a lesser extent) Jimmy Porter.

In this way, I have suggested that the theoretical consequences and underpinnings of both plays should not be overlooked. The emphasis on "liveness" and feeling in both plays suggests that existential phenomenology is the only way to

resist the standardization imposed by capitalism, and emerges as a means, however small, of asserting our capacity for individualized experience. Whilst ultimately, Alison and Jimmy turn to fantasy as a way of evading the monotony of working-class living, and Ronnie Khan retreats politically, Wesker's matriarch Sarah is posited as the phenomenological heroine, exhibiting *liveness* in her actions and ideology. As such, Wesker's play exemplifies what is perhaps the message of the age; Nietzsche's oft-cited observation that "what matters is not eternal life but eternal vivacity" (quoted in Camus, 2013, p.69).

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