

**Experience and Language in
David Mamet's *American Buffalo***

Belma Baskett

要約

David Mamet の *American Buffalo* における体験と言語

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David Mamet はその劇の中でコンテキストと明確性を欠いた現代人の世界を創造してきた。そこでは自己主張は、言語という手段を通して、不確かな形でなされてくる。彼の劇の大部分は動機がないように見える。しかし実はその言語の中にこそ動機は見出し得るのである。

こうした Mamet の作品を分析するには、その語句のリズミックな反復に注意しなければならない。そのリズムは、しばしば、議論の論理的な進行を *non sequiturs* の連続、及び断片的反応にしてしまうのである。Mamet のリズムの重要な構成要素の一つは、サブテキストとして機能する沈黙の巾広い使用である。このサブテキストの使用により、Mamet は、登場人物の実存的現実になづくことを試みる、すなわち食い違う言葉を越えたところに彼らの体験を示すことを試みるのである。Mamet は、彼の登場人物達の世界をその人物達の外と内に二分してきた。それは実存現象学的見地、正確に言えば、R. D. Laing によって示された人間学、社会現象学の見解によっているのである。一言でいえば、Mamet の *American Buffalo* における言語とは、Laing によって体系化された行為と言語の間の隔たりの問題を劇的に再現したものである。

David Mamet is a child of the age. In his plays he has created modern worlds, lacking in context and specificity. The assertion of self in these plays is tentatively made through the medium of language; in Mamet's worlds, language seems to be the only thing left—the only source of stability in a shifting landscape. In this twentieth-century wasteland of relativity, speech is the anchor, the *cognito ergo sum* of the modern world, except that for Mamet's world the maxim must be altered to read: "I speak, therefore I am."¹

Many critics, although noting the preeminence of language in Mamet's plays, have nonetheless determined that the action seems largely unmotivated.² Yet it is precisely in the language that the motives are to be found. Having divested his landscape of detail and fixtures, Mamet contemplates a void. The words of the characters begin a construct of experience—one comment elicits another, shaping immediate behavior and providing the basis for the developing action. In analyzing any of Mamet's works, careful attention must be paid not only to the words, but also to their syntax, grammar and arrangement; for the structure of his scenes rely on an almost rhythmic repetition of words and phrases. This rhythm frequently reduces the logical progression of a discussion to a series of *non sequiturs* and fragmentary responses. It is this technique that is most revelatory of Mamet's intentions. A significant component of Mamet's rhythm is his extensive use of silence which functions as the subtext crucial to the sense of the speech. This subtext is in many respects more important than the manifest speech; often the unspoken in Mamet's plays asserts feelings that are contradictory to those expressed in the spoken lines. He invalidates the information given in the spoken text by the use of pauses and repetition which tend to reduce the authority of the words.

In his use of the subtext, Mamet is attempting to get at the existential reality of his characters—to reveal their experience beyond the words that mislead. Mamet's characters use words as if they were flares in the dark, as mere beacons to transmit an inexact logistic of their whereabouts to others who are just as adrift.

Consequently, Mamet has dichotomized the world of his characters as outside and inside each character: there is the world outside the person—and his behavior in that world. But there is also the world inside the person and his private experience of his behavior. It is an existential phenomenological perspective of the world, precisely the perspective utilized in R. D. Laing's science of persons—Social Phenomenology. There is no explicit evidence that Mamet was influenced by Laing. Yet the perceptions of the human dyad, the latter's therapeutic approach and the former's dramaturgic one, are so strikingly similar that they invite comparison. An in depth account of Laingian psychology is clearly impossible here, but a brief look at some of the major philosophical principles undergirding Social Phenomenology will prove useful in a critical examination of Mamet's work.

Laing posited an idiosyncratic world within each individual that is only accessible to another indirectly through speech and action. The expressed speech or visible action of

a person may be an inadequate reflection of his real experience ; yet it is the communication that the recipient of the signal acts upon. Consequently, in reacting to that faulty information, the recipient sends another signal which is not only based upon distorted information, but which may not even accord with the recipient's own real experience. Therefore the actions or words that each of us projects in the world are merely reactions to reactions. In essence, "we can see other people's behavior, but not their experience. . . . The other person's behavior is an experience of mine. My behavior is an experience of the other . . ." ³ Thus, we never experience the reality of another directly ; instead, we internalize the behavior of another and understand it according to our own idiosyncratic store of meanings. There seems to be little chance of real understanding in such a world. Correspondingly, there is little chance of real understanding in Mamet's plays.

Laing has categorized levels of interpersonal perspectives: direct perspective, metaperspective and meta-metaperspective. (Theoretically, this could extend on, *ad infinitum*, but that would extend beyond the level of human sensibility.) Direct perspective would entail, for example, X's regard of X's anger ; metaperspective, X's view of Y's view of X's anger ; and lastly, meta-metaperspective, X's view of Y's view of X's view of X's anger.

Laing's theory is particularly useful in illuminating Mamet's *American Buffalo*. The two-act play deals with three sleazy characters in a junk shop : Don Dubrow, a man in his late forties, the owner of Don's Resale Shop ; Walter Cole, called Teach, a friend and associate of Don ; and Bob, Don's assistant or "gopher," as Mamet describes him. The first act takes place in the junk shop on a Friday morning, the second on the same night at the same place. The main plot deals with the plan to steal a coin collection.

At the start of the play Don and Bob are alone in the shop. Bob has just come in, having deserted his lookout post spying on a man. His first words are that he is sorry, and he keeps repeating them the rest of the scene. They are both sitting down. There is no violent action, but repetitions and pauses help build a premonition of violence. Bob has come back with no news to report. They are concerned with a man who had been in the junk shop and noticed a coin with the buffalo head and for which he paid ninety dollars. Don had not been aware of the coin or of its value. After the purchaser's departure, Don has figured out that he must be a coin collector and has sent Bob to learn where he lives, what his habits are, etc., preparatory to robbing him. Bob says he has no information. No one came out the front door, he went to the back, saw no one. Bob is afraid he has failed in his duty and keeps saying he is sorry. Don is calm because he thinks that is what is expected of him. His responses contain many pauses and repetitions. Don speaks, "You don't come in until you do a thing. . . this isn't good enough. If you want to do business. . . if we got a business deal, it isn't good enough. I want you to remember this." ⁴ Don is acting like the well-informed business man he wants to consider himself and continues lecturing to Bob : "Everything that I know. . . picked up on the street. That's all business is. . . common sense, experience, and talent" (p. 6). Don advises Bob as if he were a bona fide apprentice in a business and not the untrustworthy criminal as well as "junkie" that he is. Don says : "Everything Bobby : it's going to

happen to you, it's not going to happen to you, the important thing is can you deal with it, can you learn from it" (p. 6). Later Don defines what business is: "That's what business is. People taking care of themselves. Huh?" (p. 7).

The characters in *American Buffalo* reject who they are; petty criminals, they redefine themselves through their speech as businessmen. Such speech is intended only to deceive the speaker himself and enable him to retain an acceptable self-image, for the other always knows the real situation. As far as dealing with other people is concerned, Don's advice to Bob is "... keep clear who your friends are, and who treated you like what." As he is being given such paternal sounding advice, Bob answers "Yeah... Oh! Yeah" and his main contribution to the dialogue still is "I'm sorry" because he is thinking of what he thinks Don must really be thinking in the Laingian pattern. When Don says, "Things are not always what they seem to be," Bob can reiterate with "I know" wholeheartedly; this he can go along with because it coincides with what he is thinking, too. Otherwise the dialogue is largely one-sided with many pauses written in by Mamet. The pauses point to the bewilderment of the "junkie" trying to figure out where he stands. Here and throughout the play, Mamet's dialogues consist of almost as many pauses as spoken words. As Heidegger puts it, "Reticence (Verschwiegenheit) makes something manifest, and does away with 'idle talk'."⁵ In another context, he develops this idea more fully:

In talking to one another, the person who keeps silent can 'make one understand' (that is he can develop an understanding), and can do so more authentically than the person who is never short of words. Speaking at length (Viel-sprechen) about something does not offer the slightest guarantee that thereby understanding is advanced. On the contrary, talking extensively about something, covers it up and brings what is understood to sham clarity...⁶

Another topic of conversation between Don and Bob is about what to eat for breakfast. The roles are the same. Don is giving Bob fatherly advice about breakfast being the most important meal of the day, arguing that the nutritive benefits of coffee are zero. He says, coffee is good for "not one thing. The stuff eats you up. You can't live on coffee" (p. 8). Then it is time for Don to set himself as example; he asks, "What do you see me eat when I come in here everyday?" Bob answers truthfully, "Coffee." Don is angry. Bob's answer should have been "Yogurt" because he always asserts that yogurt is good for you, though he admits he drinks a little coffee. Bob is getting more bewildered—he has to keep a conversation going about health and breakfast and pretend that Don is eating what is good for him and thank Don for his concern, all the time knowing that he has not done his duty and deserves rebuke if he cannot somehow justify his behavior. Bob is aware that Don's apparently solicitous words have been a denial of the speaker's inner reality. The scene ends six pages later with Bob saying, "I'm sorry, Donny." Bob still believes Don is angry and the paternal advice has not made him change his mind. Pauses and repetitions have negated the effect of the words. Bob has let the manifest speech pass by and has been affected by the subtext. The existential

reality Bob is aware of all the time and his fear are beyond the misleading words.

Then Bob starts cleaning the debris around the poker table. They are still talking about what to have for breakfast, but the poker game of the night before intrudes more and more and becomes an important subterranean influence. We learn that Ruthie won 200 and Fletcher 400 dollars. Don did “okay” but “not like Fletch. . . . Teach did not do too good.” The truth later comes out that Don and Teach between them lost the 600 dollars. When Teach appears, it is obvious that he is simmering about his loss at the poker game since he lost to Ruthie, a woman, but this is never said directly.

As Teach comes into the shop, he says good morning, walks around the store a bit in silence, then comes out with “Fuckin’ Ruthie” six times. After hearing the same thing repeated so many times, Don can ask, “What?”

Teach: Fuckin’ Ruthie. . .

Don: . . . Yeah?

Teach says he is angry with Ruthie because this morning he went to the Riverside cafe to get some coffee and saw her at a table having breakfast. He reached for a piece of her toast and she said, “Help yourself.” He says he is furious at her treatment of him. He recalls he has often treated her to coffee, cigarettes, sweet rolls; he has picked up the check many times never making a big thing of it, never saying “This one’s on me.” Teach’s image of himself is as a “generous friend” helping when someone is sick or when somebody has lost a lot of money at the race track or when somebody needs help with the rent. He has given much and he feels abused when he reached just for a piece of toast. He has always treated everybody more than fairly, and never complained. “Is this true, Don?” he asks. Well, we have heard him complaining for three pages justifying himself, cursing and using rough language. Talking about his grievance, he gets angrier and angrier.

“They treat me like an asshole, they are an asshole.”

Pause

“The only way to teach these people is to kill them.”

Pause

Don: “You want some coffee?” (pp. 11–12).

Don is not interested in Teach’s explanation of his anger because in Don’s perspective Teach is really angry about the poker game. So he changes the subject, and for two pages they discuss what to have Bob get them for breakfast. Will they have what is good for one, or black coffee, their habitual drink. But the subtext is that both Don and Teach are still upset about the poker game and suspect they were cheated. Teach’s later comment explains how they feel about friendship and losing money at poker:

“We’re talking about money for Chrissake, huh? We’re talking about cards. Friendship is friendship and a wonderful thing, and I am all for it. I have never said different, and you know me on this point.

Okay

But let’s just keep it separate, huh, let’s just keep the two apart, and

maybe we can deal with each other like some human beings” (p. 15).

“Friendship” and acting like “human beings” are positive terms they use, but Don and Teach both know they are talking about violent feelings, frustrations, desire for revenge, desire to hurt. Seeing Ruthie in the morning has reminded Teach just as seeing the poker table has reminded Don, and they are both seething. Sprinkled in with the euphemisms and clichés are expressions like, “Vicious dyke,” “She is not a good card player. She is a mooch and she is a locksmith. . . you see how she fucking plays. . . and always with that cunt on her shoulder” (pp. 14–15). So curse words for Ruthie continue to be sprinkled in the conversation about breakfast. Some of these are given in parenthesis. Mamet has a footnote explaining his use of parenthesis: “Some portions of the dialogue appear in parenthesis, which serve to mark a slight change of outlook on the part of the speaker—perhaps a momentary change to a more introspective regard. –D. M.” (p. 5)

Bob is sent out to bring them breakfast and comes back to report he has seen the man leave with a suitcase. We know that means they can break into the coin collector’s house that night. Bob has forgotten the coffee, so he has to go back for it. Teach, in the meantime, has become aware of a conspiracy between Don and Bob and he wants to become part of the deal. Don at first puts him off with “it’s nothing” and Teach continues with his questions, saying he’s “just asking for talk.” The dialogue builds to a crescendo and in ten pages of each saying only a word or two at a time, or at most a sentence, Teach has found out all about the job and that Don is sending Bob into the man’s house that night. The rest of the first act shows Teach trying to get in on the job, trying to break up the conspiracy of Don and Bob.

On the surface the planning starts as any business discussion. All three are duplicitous and don’t trust each other, but they all know they need each other. All are violent, underworld types, but through their language they pretend to be ordinary businessmen. Each tries to be level-headed, calm and business-like. At first Teach speaks to his friend, Don, as a man of the world, a man totally at ease with the world of business. As the story progresses, however, it becomes clear by the ellipsés in his speech and its rhythm that Mamet is attempting to communicate Teach’s disorientation. Then there is the problem of shifting loyalties. Don would like to leave Teach out and take Fletcher as the third man. Teach thinks he is the best qualified. Don is included because he first thought of the robbery, but Teach does not want Fletcher or Bob. Yet Teach knows that Don thinks of the job as his private property. Don wants Fletcher, and Bob wants in. Here Mamet is concerned with three people who group in two different alignments, two against one. As G.K. Chesterton observed, we are all in the same boat in a stormy sea, and we owe each other a terrible loyalty. In *American Buffalo* this loyalty is shifting. Laing’s comment on “reciprocal loyalty” in such a group as well as in the so-called “brotherhood unto death” fits the situation in the play. The rationale of both is external danger. This external danger is very real since all through the play the characters can see the police patrol car going up and down the street outside the shop.

External danger comes from *them*. Laing writes, "The invention of Them creates Us, and We may need to invent Them to reinvent Ourselves." Laing leaves no doubt about "us" and "them."

Let there be no illusions about the brotherhoods of man. My brother, as dear to me as I am to myself, my twin, my double, my flesh and blood, may be a fellow lyncher as well as a fellow martyr, and in either case is liable to meet his death at my hand if he chooses to take a different view of the situation.⁷

At the beginning Teach is alone against Don and Bob. The latter always refers to "them" to keep Don on his side. Then there is a change. Bob is lumped with "them," owing to the efforts of Teach, and Teach and Don become united as "Us." Here another Laingian concept is relevant. At first Don does not want Teach in on the job. Don and Teach disagree. Laing says that in disagreement we are forced to see our own point of view through contrast with another person who does not share it:

We act not only in terms of our own experience, but of what we think *they* experience and how we think they think we experience and so on in a logically / vertiginous spiral to infinity.

Our language is only partially adequate to express this state of affairs. On level one, two people... may agree or disagree. As we say they see eye to eye or otherwise. They share a common point of view. But on level two they may or may not think they agree or disagree, and they may or may not be correct in either case. Whereas level one is concerned with agreement or disagreement, level two is concerned with understanding or misunderstanding. Level three is concerned with a third level of awareness: What do I think you think I think? That is, with realization of or failure to realize second-level understanding or misunderstanding on the basis of first-level agreement or disagreement. Theoretically, there is no end to these levels."⁸ [Mamet's explanation of "us" and "them" is interesting in terms of group synthesis. To quote Laing again, In order that *We* come into being as a group, it is necessary not only that I regard, let us say, you and him and me as *We*, but that you and he also think of us as *We*.

.....

I interiorize your and his synthesis, you interiorize his and mine, he interiorizes mine and yours. I interiorize your interiorization of mine and his; you interiorize my interiorization of yours and his. Furthermore, he interiorizes my interiorization of his and yours—a logical ongoing spiral of reciprocal perspective to infinity.⁹

This formulation describes exactly what happens in the play. The shift in the grouping of "us" as Don and Teach is not easily achieved. The talk of being business associates acquires an added dimension of covert black mail with Teach's remarks about a crowbar,

the unmentioned, unmentionable incident :

Teach: We both know what we're saying here, We both know we're talking about some job needs more than the kid's gonna skin-pop go in there with a crowbar. . .

Don: I don't want you mentioning that.

Teach: It slipped out.

Don: You know how I feel on that.

Teach: Yes. And I'm sorry, Don. I admire that. All that I'm saying don't confuse business with pleasure.

Here we see the conflicting perspectives that Teach and Don have of the incident of the crowbar. Teach can use it to discredit Bob and to blackmail Don, all the time aware of Don's perspective and he apologizes. The dialogue makes this clear :

Don: But I don't want that talk, only, Teach.

Pause

You understand?

Teach: I more than understand, and I apologize.

Pause.

I'm sorry.

Don: That's the only thing.

Teach: All right. But I tell you. I'm glad I said it.

Don: Why?

Teach: 'Cause it's best for these things to be out in the open.

Don: But I don't want it in the open.

Teach: Which is why I apologized.

Pause (pp. 34-35).

The pauses help to highlight the lack of logic. So in his response Teach makes both a direct perspective comment and a metaperspective comment. The word *crowbar* is the kind of word Laing refers to as a beacon. It helps to show Don what he has to do. In addition to the blackmail effect of the episode of the crowbar, Teach has picked up a strange metal object from the junk lying around the shop. He asks Don what it is.

Don: It's a thing that they stick in dead pigs keep their legs apart
all the blood runs out.

Teach nods. Pause.

Teach: Mmmmm

Pause (p. 35).

All through the dialogue about how to split the spoils, Teach never lets go of the menacing object, and his comments like "You want to bargain? You want to mess with the points?" take on a poignancy beyond the words even though Mamet has never written in stage directions to show anger, frustration, resentment or any such emotion, and in the New York production of the play, the tone was kept at everyday level, offhand and nonchalant. It is the pauses, repetitions and non-sequiturs that create the menacing atmosphere.

When Bob comes back with the coffee, he has to be bought off. Don and Bob bargain, but the only words actually spoken are Bob saying he needs money and Don asking how much? Bob presses his advantage even though he only keeps repeating he needs money. With each repetition, the subtext apparent to Don makes him increase the amount. Finally, Bob leaves. Then Don and Teach discuss how they'll split the spoils and they part to meet at night to do the job. Fletcher is still in on the job, too, because Don wants him in.

As the second act opens, Don is waiting for Teach, who is late. Bob comes in and says he has a Buffalo-head coin and tries to sell it to Don. Teach shows up and explains he is late because his watch is broken. Don is upset and doesn't believe him. They are still bickering about the job. Don's attitude is that he is paying Teach to do a job. Teach corrects him :

Teach: Donny. You aren't paying me to do a thing. We are doing something together. I know we are. My watch broke, that is my concern. The *thing* is your and my concern. And the concern of Fletcher. You want to find a reason we should jump all over each other all of a sudden like we work in a bloodbank, fine. But it's not good business.

Pause (p. 63).

The euphemistic pretense that they are businessmen continues. Teach and Don don't mistrust each other utterly. Don is annoyed that Teach is late. Teach is annoyed that Bob is there and suspects Don has disregarded his warning about keeping Bob in on the job. Teach says: "You're sure it isn't like the bowling league, Fletch doesn't show up, we just suit up Bobby, give him a shot, and he goes in?" (p. 65).

So Don pays Bob and gets him to leave pretending the night rendezvous will lead to nothing more than another poker game. But Fletcher never shows up and his phone does not answer. Don insists they need Fletcher to get into the house and to open the safe, *if* there is a safe. Teach is afraid Fletcher may be doing the job on his own. But Don has not given him the address. Teach is frustrated, angry and one feels the tension mounting. The impression is conveyed that Teach would do the job on his own if he knew the address, but he does not.

All this time the poker game of the night before is still in the background. Teach is trying to discredit Fletcher for cheating at cards. Maybe Fletcher was in league with Ruth. Don is not convinced because Teach never called Fletcher a cheat during the game. Don replies: "It's not my responsibility to cause bloodshed. I am not your keeper" (p. 82). Still Don is not convinced that Fletcher is a cheat, it is only Teach's opinion. Teach replies: "According to me, yes. I am the person it's usually according to when I'm talking. Have you noticed this? And I'm not crazed about it you're coming out I would lie to you on this. Fuck this. On anything" (p. 83). Teach wants to do the job on his own. He takes out a revolver and begins to load it.

Don: What is that?

Teach: What?

Don: That.
Teach: This "gun"?
Don: Yes.
Teach: What does it look like?
Don: A gun.
Teach: It is a gun.
Don: I don't like it.
Teach: Don't look at it.
Don: I'm serious.
Teach: So am I (p. 84).

On the surface in this exchange, there is no violence; it is all in the subtext, and one gets the impression that the two understand each other well. Outside they can still see the police car cruising from time to time. It is dangerous inside and out.

There is a knock at the door and they both panic. The first impulse is not to open the door; then Teach opens it a crack. It is Bob, and he reluctantly lets him in. Bob says he knows they're going to play poker and did not want to disturb them, but as it turns out he knew all the time they were waiting for Fletcher, and he has come to tell them Fletcher is in the hospital. Bob thinks he is saying what they want to hear, but he is very vague about the whole matter. He reports that Fletcher has been mugged. "They" broke his jaw, Mexicans, maybe. He is in the hospital, the Masonic hospital, maybe. Teach seizes the opportunity to get even with Bob.

Teach: Hey, thanks for coming here. You did real good in coming here.

Bob: Yeah?

Teach (To Don): He did real good in coming here, huh, Donny?

(To Don): We really owe you something (pp. 88–89).

Bob senses danger, although the words themselves do not convey the menace directly, and he starts to leave. Teach detains him, asking details about Fletcher's broken jaw. Don in the meantime has reflected and asks Bob where he got the nickel he sold him. It has dawned on Don that Bob may be deceiving him about the coin, too. Then he calls the Masonic hospital to see if Fletcher is there. He is not. This is the last straw. Bob insists, "They broke his jaw." Teach questions him, and Don warns him that he had better answer. Teach is quite assertive, saying, "Then let's make *this* clear: Loyalty does not mean *shit* a situation like this; I don't know what you and them are up to, and I do not care, but only you come clean with us" (p. 93). Now "us" is Teach and Don. Bob is lumped with "Them." Don has no desire anymore to stand by him. Teach continues harassing Bob, "I want for you to tell us here and now (and for your own protection) what is going on, what is set up. . . where Fletcher is. . . and everything you know" (p. 94). The suspicion is that Fletcher did not show up to join Don and Teach (us) so maybe Fletcher and Bob went in together and they obtained the coin. Teach grabs a nearby object and hits Bob viciously on the side of the head. Don's comments go from "I can't believe this" and "you brought it on yourself," to "you got to see our point here" and "we don't want to

hit you, but you're the only one who knows the score."

Bob is writhing on the floor, in pain, his ear is bleeding, and he is very frightened. The phone rings. Ruth is calling to tell Don about Fletcher who is in the Columbus hospital. This information checks with Bob's information and they confirm it with a call to the hospital. They decide to take Bob to the hospital where he'll give his real name but say he hurt himself when he fell downstairs. But first Teach wants to know about the coin. Bob says he bought it in a store for Don. Don's loyalty shifts back to Bob. He tells Teach to leave. Teach is uncontrollably angry. Finally all the pretensions are forgotten and Teach and Don start fighting and hitting each other.

Bob chooses that moment to make the confession that he never saw the man—the story about the man leaving with suitcases, etc. was a lie. Teach wrecks the shop with the "dead pig-sticker" and makes the following speech summing up the absurd situation :

The Whole Entire World.

There is No Law.

There is No Right and Wrong.

The World is Lies.

There is No Friendship.

Every Fucking Thing.

Pause.

Every God-forsaken Thing.

.....

We all live like the cavemen (p. 103).

The setting of the play reinforces these sentiments as the junkshop becomes symbolic of the chaotic world where values, like the coin, if there are any, are impossible to recognize. The junk lying around forms the landscape of the wasteland of the play.

The structure of *American Buffalo* then, is that of a successive peeling away of a series of realities to reveal the hidden anxieties beneath the surface. The well-crafted dialogue is remarkable for its economy and pointedness throughout. By means of this dialogue Mamet is able to express the lifelong sense of insecurity and alienation of his characters. The use of "this," "that," and "thing" referring to the unspeakable, the unmentionable, alert us that language here is used to indicate what it cannot say. Often language is used to make sounds which punctuate the silences. Positive concepts evoked by such expressions as "human being," "friendship," and "business" are euphemisms merely floating on the surface for the characters using these terms live by the rules of the underworld in all its ruthlessness and violence. So sentences like, "Let's act like human beings" actually point to the recognition of the speaker that they are all "cavemen" underneath the civilized expression.

At the end, the play has come full circle with Bob screaming, "I'm sorry, Donny," just as at the beginning. Despite all that has happened, the characters remain as they were. Laing's comment relevant to this point is, "We and they must be transcended in the totality of the human race, if we in destroying them are not to destroy us all."¹⁰ Don, Teach and Bob have come very close to destroying everything in an attempt to alienate

“us” from “them” and destroy “them.” Teach is posing as a businessman with some knowledge of the underworld yet he fails miserably. His language is never consonant with what we feel must be his experience. He is using language as a mask. It is the small tragedy of this play that all three characters use language in precisely the same way and, consequently, never succeed in making permanent bonds.

Mamet skillfully wields silence, pause, and ellipsis in order to convey the subliminal reaction of Don, Teach and Bob. In this play, direct, meta-perspective and meta-meta-perspective are constantly manipulated. The characters are assessed on many levels at once: how they perceive the statement; how they think the other perceives it; how they feel the other views their perceptions of the issue. Since the logic of the dialogue exists on an inarticulate level, statement and response sometimes appear to be *non sequiturs* as reflected in the following instance: After wrecking the shop and giving his philosophical speech, Teach wants to know if there is any paper around. He sees a newspaper on the counter and makes himself a hat with it. He puts on the hat and looks at himself in the window and comments, “I look like a sissy.” This *non sequitur* only makes sense when one is willing to see covert homosexuality in the play as critics have seen in Mamet’s other plays. At the end Teach is trying to placate Don—putting himself at the same parallel as Bob. Is the whole play then about Teach and Bob competing for Don?

Mamet is conveying the nature of each character’s separate experience. He does this by going beyond the cognitive meaning of the words employed. He goes beyond the cognitive by using words repetitively, by using unorthodox syntax and *non sequiturs*. Once this is perceived, one can see that the use of words in this manner breaks up the ordered universe that grammatical statement implies about experience. Words used in a disorganized fashion are closer to conveying the tumult of real idiosyncratic experience. Teach’s behavior may have upset Don; however, his words are delivered with almost journalistic detachment. Don can only judge Teach’s experience by his perceptions of the latter’s behavior—if that behavior is misleading, then Don’s impression is wrong.

Nothing is resolved at the end of the play. Fear and isolation are still a lurking threat in this arid environment. In Mamet’s world people seem irrevocably cut off from each other. As Laing put it, “I cannot experience your experience. You cannot experience my experience.”¹¹ For Mamet’s characters, words are muffled signals welling up from subterranean depths; they do not communicate the existential reality of the person uttering them. Yet words are the only buoys that Mamet’s characters hold onto.

To sum up, one can say that in *American Buffalo* language misleads the characters, confuses them and makes them ineffective, and yet it is the only thing they have. The dialogue, cryptic, pseudo-business-like, at times paternal, masks violent criminal and destructive tendencies, the simmering anger of the poker game the night before and maybe even latent homosexual leanings. The words each character has uttered are aimed at constructing a tentative bridge to another character, but they have served only to reinforce alienation and the inevitable destruction and violence. The cleaning up consists of medical help for Bob without any reconciliation or understanding. Neither is

there real understanding between Don and Teach. If at the end Don seems to want to embrace Teach in a dyadic relationship, it is, perhaps, because he feels that being part of a couple is better than being alone. But the dialogue still consists of abusive language and belittling comments which are used to hide fear and insecurity. The words the characters use deny their inner reality and make them misunderstood. Consequently they end up being even further alienated. As such, David Mamet's treatment of language in *American Buffalo* provides a dramatic enactment of the disparity between behavior and language formulated by Laing.

NOTES

- 1 Richard Eder, "David Mamet's New Realism," *New York Times*, 12 March 1978, p. 42.
- 2 For one example, see "Walter Kerr, "Parody In and Out of Focus," *New York Times*, 30 October 1977.
- 3 R. D. Laing, *The Politics of Experience*, (New York : Pantheon, 1967), pp. 1-2.
- 4 David Mamet, *American Buffalo*, (N.Y.: Grove Press, Inc., 1976) p. 3. (Page numbers for subsequent quotations will be given in the text).
- 5 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Macquarrie and Robinson (N. Y.: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 6.
- 6 Heidegger, p. 28.
- 7 Laing, p. 91.
- 8 Laing, pp. 78-79.
- 9 Laing, pp. 84-85.
- 10 Laing, p. 98.
- 11 Laing, p. 54.

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