Towards a New Community:
Abe KÔbÔ:
an Exploration of his Prose, Drama,
and Theatre

by

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A dissertation submitted in conformity with the requirements
for the degree of Ph. D.
Graduate Department of East Asian Studies
University of Toronto

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Abstract

The central aim of the dissertation is to examine the possibility for a new form of human social interaction which Abe proposes in his work, able to do away with outmoded, restrictive, traditional structures in favour of communal arrangements more appropriate to the modern, urban world.

The Introduction poses the question, 'Why study Abe Kôbô?' and proposes that he was an important source of stimulus who propelled Japanese literature toward areas it would not otherwise have examined.

Chapter One is a brief biographical sketch of Abe, covering his early years and the years of his work as an avant-garde novelist, playwright, and theatre director in the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s. It includes a brief description of Abe's wife and family, and concludes with a brief account of his death.

Chapter Two deals with Abe's literature. It begins with an analysis of Existentialism and the Absurd in his work. It contains an examination of what Abe himself has stated his goals to be: to examine the literature of 'rootless grass', to create new routes of communication between people. The chapter presents a chronologically developmental
close reading of several of Abe’s texts, beginning with his first published novel, and concluding with his final fragmentary work.

Chapter Three examines Abe’s dramatic writings, from his early stage plays to later radio dramas, to the plays he wrote specifically for his own theatrical troupe in the 1970s, the Abe Studio. It explores the greater emphasis on inter-character dynamics in these works, as compared with Abe’s prose, and the clearer shift in Abe’s political views from a sympathetically left-wing stance, to a more-properly individualist one.

Chapter Four explores Abe’s theories on the theatre, including his views on the function of the actor, his method of actor training, and the processes through which he put his troupe to create their stage productions. This chapter incorporates a comparison of Abe’s views on the theatre group with those of Watanabe Tamotsu, the director Senda Koreya, and the director Suzuki Tadashi.

The Conclusion presents some final thoughts on Abe’s legacy and contributions to not only Japanese but world literature as well.
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Introduction:

Why Study Abe Kôbô?

Abe Kôbô (1924–1993) was a writer of fiction, of drama, and of screen plays; he was a composer of electronic music; he was a photographer; and he was a director and trainer of stage performers. He was a Japanese who was raised in colonial Manchuria, an exile who returned to an unknown and defeated homeland at the end of the Second World War. He was a medical doctor who never practiced medicine. He was an untiring and astute critic of social tyranny over the individual. He was a person fascinated, too, by the propagation of systems, their uncontrollable spread, their vastness, and their fallibility. Every fundamental human system, from language to rational thought, to science with its blind, technological faith, to social and familial order, to nationalism and cultural dogmatism, to the processes by which individuals formulate and maintain their own private identities, finds its analysis and critique within Abe’s work. In that he wrote prose fiction in the Japanese language, Abe is part of the system of Japanese literature, but he exists within this system as a ghost in the machine, as a proponent of radical social, structural change—as a writer who himself rejected any associations with ‘Japanese literature’ in favour of the broader context of world literature. In that he created pieces for stage performance, he is also a part of the system of Japanese theatre, but he exists here, too, as an opponent of traditional forms in favour of, initially, the borrowed forms of western theatre in the guise of Shingeki, and later, as a proponent of an avant-garde style which rejected both the realism of Shingeki and the renewed willingness to experiment with
traditional forms found in the Small Theatre or Underground theatre movement of the late 1960s and 1970s.

Why then, given Abe's own rejection of so much traditionally 'Japanese', should one pay attention to his output, let alone make it the exclusive object of study, within the confines of 'Japanese literature' and 'Japanese theatre'? To answer this we must first decide whether or not it is a positive thing for systems to evolve, to develop, to take on forms capable of encompassing wider potentialities than their earlier guises would have permitted—in short, we must ask if there is room for innovation in human systems such as national literature. If we can answer in the affirmative to this question, then we will have to accept Abe as a valuable contributor to Japanese literature and stage arts, and hence an appropriate object of study, in that his work—having rejected so much within the traditional sphere of those fields—functions as a powerful stimulus to change not only of artistic standards but of the standards of human relations, as well.

This changed standard of human relations is one of the key themes in Abe's writing which I hope to explore here. Abe has stated that the discovery of new paths towards the Other is a central goal of his life, and the primary quality of this path is the language along which communication flows. Naturally a writer must be concerned with language, but few have recognised as clearly as Abe that there is a tension between the mere voicing of simple statements and a full expression of the writer's self. There is a split between the writer's use of language to answer a profound need for self-definition and creativity, and the social need for language which can express the mundane elements of simple 'communication'. This split represents the writer's greatest challenge: how to fashion truly uncommon

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1 Takano, Toshimi, "Hyôden" (Critical Biography) in Abe Kôbô: Shinchô Nihon Bungaku Arubamu, Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1994, p. 67. Hereafter AKSNBA. Unless otherwise noted, all translations from the Japanese in this study are by the author.
products from common materials? Language then takes on a vital role, that of a link between people, but a link which allows individuals to remain individual.

Abe suggests several reasons behind this need for a new link between people forged of language. Foremost among these is the urbanisation of modern life, in which “the relationship between the Other and the self has changed into something unstable and difficult to grasp.” Urbanisation has greatly shifted the percentages of the population living on farms and in the city, yet “most aspects of culture have been accumulated on top of the human relations established in rural villages. There is a discernible trend to formulate analogies of the conditions of modern existence in the structure of these rural villages, but from within this tendency, the stress or the sufferings of people living in the cities is born.” This is because in the urban world, the older, traditional bonds between people have disappeared: “We still have not discovered within us the morals, or the rules, in the complete sense, concerning relations with an unknown Other.” The older bonds were formed during simpler times, when villages operated as communal groupings of kinsmen. Such phrases as these cannot describe modern cities, but there is not yet a suitable vocabulary or model to replace the missing paths of union necessary for stable human relations. Abe sets himself the task of discovering this vocabulary, and this model. In so doing he positions himself as a fundamentally Modernist writer.

Whereas now we operate under new social relationships, our inner selves still cling to the older values. Thus there is a conflict between the self who seeks a new social relationship and the self who tries to maintain the older form. Regardless of what one wants, one still must face the new relationship, although

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3 ibid., p. 198
4 ibid.
the older self rejects it. I suppose that this has been a common literary theme forever. Whether man will survive or not is also an eternal subject, though more pronounced in our time. I think that a characteristic of modern literature is this uneasiness regarding human existence which has been superimposed on a desire for new human relationships. That is to say, there is an uneasiness as to whether the quest for new relationships is meaningful or whether human relationships are worth seeking at all. They might simply disappear altogether. That is what I am facing now. ... Thus we communicate the theme that we are unable to communicate with each other. We terminate our communication. And that's self-contradictory.5

Given Abe’s phrasing of the problem he is attempting to solve, a consideration of the possibilities of existentialism and communism appears to be a natural place to begin any study of Abe’s project. Abe was quite familiar with both of these ‘isms’, and was in fact a member of the Japanese Communist Party before his expulsion in 1962. Yet communism, with its subjugation of the individual to the whole, did not match Abe’s extreme individualism, and existentialism provided only a starting point for Abe’s exploration of the technologically urban setting of the post-war world. In such works as Suna no onna (1962, tr The Woman in the Dunes, 1964) and Hakobune sakura maru (1984, tr. The Ark Sakura, 1988), Abe ultimately rejects experiments in the forced communality of socialism on the one hand, while at the same time rejecting the notion of choice which is a tenet of existentialism—choice, with even the least contamination of force, becomes no choice at all, and is therefore only a trap. For Abe, the only viable path lies in the freedom of the

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individual to be with or without other individuals, themselves equally free to accept or reject the community they all make together.

I believe Abe found this community in his theatre troupe, the Abe Studio. I will devote a significant portion of this study to this troupe, to examining its participants’ methods of working and creating together. I’ll try to provide a balanced look at the training methods Abe employed, rather than an analysis as such of the productions themselves, for a number of reasons. Not the least of these is that very little archival material detailing these plays exists—there are photographs, occasional reviews, and the odd videotape, but these are hardly sufficient for the reconstruction of the theatre experience. Moreover, and this reason is the more important, it is in the rehearsal setting that Abe worked most closely with his troupe, sharing ideas and building the piece which the actors—and the actors alone—would finally perform. His collaborations with his wife, Machi, who designed most of the sets for the Abe Studio, with musicians, actors, and lighting engineers, all took place off-stage, as it were, in the rehearsal hall, and in that my goal here is to explore Abe’s creation of a community as the incarnation of his search for a changed world of human relations, it is in the rehearsal hall that my interest lies.

For Abe the peak of the creative act occurred in the rehearsal room as the writer and the actors shared in the process of making a play. Though his plays exhibited a vivid life of their own during their runs, Abe felt little joy of accomplishment once rehearsals were finished and performance had begun. Rather, he viewed the stage as a cemetery... [and] he described the critics as gravediggers whose function was to bury the creative act.6

I will not take part—I hope, no more than is inevitable—in this act of interment, but will focus my attentions on that living part of the process, the collaborative, productive periods in rehearsal.

But Abe was not the only Japanese director to have his own troupe and employ his own methods of training and welding individuals into a cohesive unit. It is necessary to situate Abe within a particular context the better to appraise critically his successes, and so I will compare Abe’s use of a group and its training with that of perhaps the best known of his contemporaries, Senda Koreya (1904-) and Suzuki Tadashi (1935-). Central to this discussion will be the differing duties each of these directors assigned to individuals within their troupes; or rather, the different conceptions they each may have had of the function of the group in defining ‘individuality’ and ‘creativity’. Here the concept of the system takes on immediate significance, for “it is the system [taïkeïka] which is the one universal method of cognition, and it is the system which determines the position of the actor’s self within his own world, which signifies the self-affirmation of the actor.”7 I will also explore the functions of the ‘leader’: how is it that groups of individuals equal in theory, are able to cohere and respond as a group under one person’s guidance?

The issues I’ve raised make it clear that a great thematic complexity exists within Abe’s work, for he deals with the fundamentals of human life—from how individuals can exist within a potentially hostile nature, to how they can communicate with others who remain strangers to them, even when sharing the ostensible intimacy of marriage—to how they can interact to change their communities for the better. I hope to unravel the tangle of themes Abe so artfully constructed in his fiction, one thread at a time, in a developmental tracing of his progress, ending my discussion of his literary output with his final works, the almost archetypally-structured Kangarû nôto (1991, tr. Kangaroo Notebook, 1996),

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and the fragmentary novel, *Tobu otoko* (*The Flying Man*, 1993). My discussion of his writings will show, I hope, how sincerely Abe did in fact wish for the sort of open, free community so lacking in the worlds his novels portray, and will ‘set the stage’ for an examination of his theatre.

Yet I have called Abe the exception in the system of Japanese literature, and what I have said so far may not have justified this claim. Aren’t all writers concerned with issues of language? Aren’t all post-war Japanese writers wrestling with the notion of the individual? In fact, aren’t all modern Japanese writers in *toto* concerned with the problem of the *kindai jiga*, the “modern self,” a concept the Japanese imported to deal with the type of characters they encountered in western literature?

All of these issues are true, yet “it is well known that Abe cut himself off from the traditional Japanese passions [*kanjô*], conceptions, and sentiments [*jônen*], and so was able to gain a particular, unparalleled independence.” This independence extended beyond his daily life and into his creative sphere, wherein he worked with relatively little interaction with fellow Japanese writers—some notable exceptions to this exclusionary independence, however, included Oe Kenzaburo (1935-), Hanada Kiyotera (1909-1972), and Ishikawa Jun (1899-1974), all of whom lived and worked on the fringes of the Japanese literary establishment, the *bundan*. Even Oe, now a Nobel Laureate who has virtually given up prose fiction, has not yet shaken off his cachet as an *enfant terrible* of Japanese *belles lettres*, and yet it is arguable that precisely because he has received the highest international honour available to a writer, becoming only the second Japanese novelist to achieve this distinction, he has become a more properly ‘mainstream’ commodity in the fiction ‘industry’ than Abe would ever have accepted. A brief explanation of what it is, precisely, in Abe that allows me to label him an exception in the theatre and literature of Japan is

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therefore in order. There are several criteria in this definition, ranging from Abe’s specific use of language, his denial of tradition, his resistance to more typical plot, narrative, and character structures, and to his use of the human body on stage, his use of sets and methods of actor training, and his willingness to create spontaneously in the rehearsal hall.

It is quite possible that “the essential pattern of Japanese prose fiction toward which even the most panoramic novel gravitates” is the so-called shishōsetsu, the autobiographical form which “has been championed by many important writers and occupies a central position in Japanese letters.” This form requires of the author a certain willingness to accept the social norm, to record his place therein as a willing participant in “a language far more contextual and far more strictly oriented than western languages toward the speaker/narrator’s apprehension of the world” and the relations maintained thereby between him- or herself and the hearer/reader. It requires a capitulation to the social order and a bending of the author’s personality to fit into “a society that normally demands strict allegiance from [its] members.” It is against this very ordering—even on the level of linguistic expression—which Abe rebels in his work.

Abe’s awareness of the problems of language and the relations it creates for readers in a hierarchical society was not without precedent. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Genbun’itchi movement (literally the ‘spoken-written unification’ movement) was intent on restructuring the Japanese language, to unify its spoken and written forms and allow for a more democratic interaction between writer and reader. Despite what may at first glance appear to be superficial similarities in the project of this movement and of Abe Kōbō, for Abe, the creation of a subtle speaker/narrator—hearer/reader relation sensitive to

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11 ibid., p. xxiv
12 ibid., p. xxiv
social hierarchy does not hold any appeal. His works of fiction present a world devoid of the linguistic markers of social cohesion fundamental to the creation of more ‘representative’ Japanese narrative forms; even in the dialogues of his characters, the social niceties are lacking, presenting to the reader a raw world stripped of its referential basis. In this regard Abe’s work is far closer to western fictional styles than to Japanese. It is interesting, however, that in his theatre troupe, a hierarchy seemed to form spontaneously amongst the players, all of whom willingly subordinated their own schedules to that of Abe completely without his asking them to do so.13

There are other affinities, as well, between Abe’s prose and that of the generic categories more commonly anticipated in a western writer. Not the least of these is his finely detailed plot structures. “The literary mechanism by which an author makes the reader sense [forward movement and teleological development]... is, of course, the emplotted narrative... and it is precisely this mechanism which appears to be so attenuated... in much of Japanese fiction.”14 Abe, however, and more in keeping with a western paradigm, creates extremely ‘plot-heavy’ works, with this further condition: his plots are often so constructed as to defy rational comprehension, for this is one of Abe’s themes, that rationality represents a fallible system the social order utilises to exploit its individual subjects. Abe shares with his countryman Akutagawa Ryūnosuke (1892–1927)—a novelist who himself was more influenced by Guy de Maupassant than by any traditional Japanese writer—a willingness to create linearly progressing works, but unlike Akutagawa, Abe’s telos is often an asymptotic denial of conclusion, a pathological folding-back into itself of the narrative’s closing passages, which leaves the reader and the protagonist dangling over an impossible abyss of insanity or the destruction of narrative identity. This aspect of his work would be sufficient to grant him special status within the

13 Professor Mary Jean Cowell, in private conversation, October 26, 1996
14 Fowler, Edward, p. xx
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pages of Japanese literature, but his break from that category does not limit itself to this feature alone.

Whereas a 'traditional' Japanese writer such as Kawabata Yasunari (1899-1972), Shiga Naoya (1883-1971), or even Mori Atsushi (1925-) will seek spiritual or physical refreshment within an at least feigned return to nature, Abe rejects the natural world out of hand as something—again, closely related to Akutagawa's perception of it—deceitful, malignant, or even hostile to his characters' well-being. He seems to be approaching the widest possible applicability of his fictional world through a concentrated use of the urban to provide the setting for the majority of his work. This term 'widest possible applicability' in itself is problematic, but the point I would like to make is that Abe was trying to avoid limiting the relevance of his work to Japan alone. There are neither cherry blossoms in his writing nor cherry orchards in his theatre, no "Japan the beautiful" to bolster the protagonist's self and integrate him—and Abe's protagonists are always resolutely male—into its protecting bosom, no River of Heaven to rush into his mouth opened in expectation of benefaction. His world is an urban one, a vast, dark, sprawling one, a city the borders of which shift by the hour stranding their inhabitants in deserts of concrete bereft of signposts or allies. It is within this world that Abe places his characters the better to allow them—and the reader—the opportunity of recognising the need for, or even actually creating, new paths towards new modes of relations, new modes of existence: an urban existence revitalised as something positive. In Suna no onna Abe's protagonist dreams of new cities composed of loose collectives of 'barrel-houses', ships containing whole families able to float on the encroaching sands—this new city is his goal, a new model world populated by individuals able to come and go as they please.

The city for Abe takes the place of nature in traditional, mainstream Japanese writing, as both a force of oppression and a source of potential for the future; for the city, as a symbol of social order, represents the place at which people come together: it is the renewal
of this method of coming together to which I feel Abe aspires, and it is this aspiration which marks him as the exception to the rules of Japanese literature—which marks him as a source of renewal and expanded potential within that system.

His work maintains within itself three stages of human social development, all of which exert conflicting pressures on the protagonists who must balance the differing demands they make. The first of these is a nomadic sensibility, a hunter-gatherer urge to live as a wandering individual shunning settlement for the transient’s freedom—but also shunning the close interpersonality of the second layer which Abe’s work reflects, as a model for the existing social order: the agrarian notion of communal rigidity. In this world, of which *Suna no onna* offers a fine example, the individual is but a machine fulfilling a function, the end product of which is the continued prosperity of the community. Out of the synthesis of these two dialectical forces a third mode of existence emerges, a return to nomadism within an urban setting—the novels *Mikkai* (1977, tr. *The Secret Rendezvous*, 1979), *Hako otoko* (1973, tr. *The Box Man*, 1974), and *Moetsukita chizu* (1967, tr. *The Ruined Map*, 1969) all treat this renewed nomadic impulse as the choice their protagonists ultimately make, a choice which entails an abdication of their present social positions in order to create—or at least seek out—a new position within a new society. Such a desire for a renewed social order, whatever else it may make of Abe’s work, certainly makes it an exception to the mainstream, which is of necessity the reflection of an existing society.

I will begin my study of the exception which is Abe with a biographical overview of this man in somewhat greater detail than I have offered here. I don’t intend this chapter to provide any ultimate ‘meanings’ to Abe’s work (something to be attempted in the two chapters dealing with his writing), or to explain away his preoccupation with themes and images as simply the result of his childhood memories finding expression in his adult writings, but certainly, just as the quality of the wine will be influenced by the soil which nurtured the grapes, so to an author’s opus will bear the mineral traces of his or her earliest
years. As Abe himself has noted, he “cannot write of things separated from [his] own physiological, lived experiences.” Growing up in Manchuria, in a geographical and cultural condition quite contrary to that existing in Japan, to which he returned as an adolescent, has indeed had an effect on his work, and to be thorough in my study I must try to analyse this effect in its fullest.

The main body of this work will consist of three chapters, one dealing with Abe’s prose fiction, the next dealing with his theatre texts, and the third dealing with his methods of theatrical rehearsal. Although the goals of prose fiction and dramatic fiction may be approximately equal—that is, the conveyance of certain aesthetic information within a form of discourse I may call, loosely, ‘narrative’—I feel justified in splitting my discussion of these two forms, because of the definite differences in the emphasis Abe placed on situations and character interactions in his prose and his drama. Whereas much of his prose is in the first person, and depicts the inner, desperate workings of a character faced with the critical loss of his individuality, for example, Abe’s drama is far more willing to explore the dynamics of group interaction, to place that isolated character within an ensemble setting and deal with him not from an internal perspective but from an external one—and to deal not only with this ‘character’ but also with the character of the performer, integrated into a group of which he is but one productive part. This of course comes from the very nature of theatre itself, in that it places an actor within another group of actors, all of whom are only externally observable, yet this very structural feature of the genre permitted Abe an added dimension, a different avenue of exploration, than in prose.

In the ‘literature’ chapter I’ll discuss the thematic developments of several works which I feel are more or less representative of Abe’s style, specifically, his early works *Owarishi michi no shirube ni* (*The Road Sign at the End of the Road*, 1948),

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“Dendorokakariya” (1949, tr. “Dendrocacalia,” 1991) and those in the collection “Kabe” (Walls, 1951), his early and middle period novels Tanin no kao (1964, tr. The Face of Another, 1966), Suna no onna, and Hako otoko, and his later works Mikkai, Kangarû nôto, and Tobu otoko, focusing on such areas as his philosophical stance, his stylistic and linguistic innovations, and his treatment of issues of identity and community.

In the ‘drama’ chapter, I will examine developmentally several of his plays as texts, from his earliest dramas to his final Studio productions, such as “Seifuku” (“The Uniform,” 1955), “Doreigari” (Slave Hunting,” 1955), “Yûrei wa koko ni iru” (“The Ghost is Here,” 1958) “Bô ni natta otoko” (1969, tr. “The Man who Turned into a Stick,” 1975) and finally “Kozô wa shinda” (“The Little Elephant is Dead,” 1979) to trace the thematic similarities and affinities which exist between these works and his novels, but I will also explore the different approaches the genre of drama permitted Abe in his treatment of his subjects. In both chapters, moreover, I will examine Abe’s shifting allegorical constructions, for allegory is an important technique Abe employed in all of his work, but I will impose this condition on that statement: in his earliest prose and dramatic pieces, the allegorical ‘targets’ are clear; over time, however, Abe, I will argue, turned to a ‘referentless’ allegorical style, in which the exact correlation between elements of his plots and their ‘real-world’ counterparts becomes far less obvious, and far more ‘nightmarish’.

I will also turn my attentions to the living processes of the theatre in a chapter devoted to the workings of the rehearsal hall. I will examine Abe’s methods of training his actors, from his theories of the Neutral Position, from which an actor can produce all the physiological markers of any emotion quickly and fluidly, to the Rubber Man exercises, which enabled his actors to respond to one another’s emotional displays effectively. I will examine the collaborative methods the troupe employed to become familiar with each other’s stage presences, and occasionally to produce a play from their spontaneously performed exercises. An aim of this chapter will be the situating of Abe in relation to his
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contemporaries, and so I will compare his ‘method’ with that of perhaps the most well-known Japanese avant-garde director, Suzuki Tadashi, and with the man from whom Abe may have received his most fundamental influences, the director Senda Koreya.

Some of the themes I will trace in Abe find their first expression with the publication in 1947 of a slim collection of poetry, entitled Mumyōshishū (A Collection of Nameless Poetry). He expressed here “the loneliness of his life, his love, and his prayers charged with sentimentality; as well as a genuine sensitivity received from Rilke and thoughts learned from Heidegger.”16 His family had returned from their Manchurian home with the end of the war, and Abe’s earliest works, including this collection of poetry, address the conditions of isolation in which it was natural for him to find himself. Many of these works describe the bleakness of the Manchurian countryside; over time, Abe transfers this sense of bleakness to the urban arena, creating the image of a vast concrete wasteland, home to fragmented people existing in unrealised alienation from their true individuality as cogs in a state-imposed social order. His major novels deal with themes of atomisation and lost identity through forced integration into a collectivity not of the individual’s own creation: Suna no onna, Moetsukita chizu, Daiyon kanpyōki (1959, tr. Inter Ice-age Four, 1971), Mikkai. From this basic stance which I may characterise as existential, Abe develops an idiom capable of great stylistic variation: his works are almost symphonic, the themes of which are endlessly repeated, altered, and reaffirmed. The main theme is thus: that the individual must be free to choose his path, must be free to create his own language, and must be free to create his own community.

In pursuing this theme within his work Abe did not deny himself that very freedom to experiment with the formal qualities and linguistic potential that he postulates as vital for the fullest expression of every individual’s fullest self. His novels and short fiction cover a

16 Takano, AKSNA, p. 4
great range of genres, from historical allegory, to detective story, to apocalyptic science fiction, to tales of Kafka-esque physical transformation, to anti-narratives which deconstruct themselves gleefully and deny the possibility of identifying the narrative subject as existing within the confines of the printed page. Some of his works seem to wear their interpretive possibilities openly, in fact inviting the reader to accept their analyses as they stand; others deny the possibility of communication between work and reader as part of their structural integrity; still others become opaque and distorting mirrors of the very process of reading itself. What makes this variety possible is Abe’s facility with language and the type of startling metaphors his personal, expressive tastes permit him to create. Language thus provides a starting point for the examination of Abe’s handling of his themes and aims.

Language in addition obliquely provides a model for the study of Abe’s work, in the guise of structuralism: the study of language examines not what a sentence means, but rather how it means, and I feel that this type of analysis is most suitable for the study of an author’s, of this author’s, work. Structuralism, growing out of the work of the Russian Formalists and building on the studies of plot components and their interactions which Vladimir Propp conducted, allows the critic to construct a lexicon of an author’s tropes and themes, to chart their interplay and variations while remaining sensitive to forces outside of a particular text. Unlike New Criticism which removed a work from its wider context, I perceive structural analysis as being not at all opposed to comparative or situational efforts to view a text within the frame of a historical period—and when examining what it is which marks a particular author as an exception to the general area in which his work is usually categorised, such efforts become an integral part of the overall strategy.

Structuralism also permits the critic to arrive at an interpretive strategy which has at least some degree of objectivity. Interpretation is a personal process, one which the text will guide and in some cases authorise but one which nonetheless remains a matter of
appropriating elements of the text into one’s own critical view: it creates an allegory of the text (after de Man’s *Allegories of Reading*) one is then free to represent as one’s property, as an artifact of consumption. While this is acceptable, enjoyable, and unavoidable, it is very much in need of a temperance, a critical brake which can control its more subjective moments of appropriation. I think such a brake comes in the form of an interest in the properties of the text which permit it to convey its ‘meanings’, and while I cannot do away with examining what those meanings are (that is to say, allegorical exegesis or interpretation), it is equally if not more important to trace the processes through which the text will take the reader in the communicative enterprise.

It would appear that Abe himself may have agreed with this: as his works developed, they came to contain innumerable interpretive possibilities in the richness of their thematic textures, the exact delineation of which would border on the impossible. The inclusion of so many potential readings, so many issues, permits his works to mean a great many things to a great many readers. No one reading of *Hako otoko*, for example, will take into account of all of its layers, all of its frustrations of the usual reading process or its denial of the unity of narrative voice; in short, a single unifying reading would be hard pressed to come up with a single ‘meaning’ for this complex work, arriving instead at only an appreciation of aspects of its signification which will be more or less detailed depending upon the sensitivity and skill of the reader. This is what I mean when I say his works become ‘referentlessly allegorical’, seeming to mean much while frustrating the process of assigning meaning to them. I feel that an analysis of the strategies the text employs to create these multi-layered meanings, though, would allow later readers to recognise those strategies and mechanisms, and so produce for themselves interpretations encompassing a wider range of the text’s possibilities. What must emerge from an acceptance of this is not an interest in those diverse aspects of meaning but a fascination with the process of meaning production: the system whereby Abe generates these thematic variations. This is
consistent with what I perceive to be an essential theme of Abe's work, the freedom of the individual to choose his or her own meaning, and share those within a freely created community—or not share them at all, as his or her mood dictates.

Allegory is an important factor in this consideration of meaning, interpretation, and community, for it, perhaps more than all other literary devices, presupposes a number of things pertinent to these three terms. The idea of an 'interpretive community' is a fertile one, and I will try to show in this study that Abe used the technique of allegory to create and reach on varying levels as wide a range of interpretive communities as possible.

In sharing my views of Abe's work, I do not propose to speak for their author, but in those places where his voice will make the task of examining the texts a more fruitful one, I think we should listen to it. The acceptance of a slightly ambiguous use of the word 'Abe' to mark either the biographical, historical personage of Abe Kôbô, or the textual strategy of Abe as a literary style,17 I think, will allow us to overcome a certain minor conundrum, in that while I have no way at all of knowing what Abe truly thought or wished to accomplish by writing or being involved in the theatre, I have very definite means at my disposal to examine his works and explore what possibilities they allow the reader to actualise. The texts Abe has left behind maintain him as "a philosophical style,"18 and it is in this sense that I propose to speak of Abe—anything else would be an act of hubris, an unseemly appropriation.

The notion of community in Abe's writings raises a possibility Abe himself was not blind to: that of, in fact, forming such a community of free individuals who have brought their creative energies together in order to construct something of value for themselves. In this regard Abe's involvement in the theatre takes on a deeper significance. The act of writing prose involves in essence two people: a writer and a reader, with little chance of

17 Eco, Umberto The Role of the Reader, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1979, pp. 10–11
18 ibid., p. 11
direct contact and exchange between the two. Any ‘communication’ as such is in a single direction; it takes place internally, privately, and silently. In part because of this, it can operate on a reader on a certain deep level, allowing the reader to examine him- or herself without the potentially shameful presence of prying eyes. Reading prose is, in many ways, a closed process. The worlds of the theatre and theatrical communication, though, are precisely that: worlds, containing within themselves groups, cooperations, channels of communication, and a sense of shared experience. In short, they are microcosms which their inhabitants may more easily control the better to suite their own desires than the greater social world into which they have been born. Communication in these worlds takes place externally, publicly, and within a context of sound, and gives the artist a dimension of possibilities which the ‘private’ communication of the novelist cannot obtain: the possibilities of collaboration. This collaboration, though, here occurs between artists, for I consider Abe’s involvement in the theatre to have been focused on the processes of working with the actors. I suggest that in Abe’s case, if not in that of every theatre company, the group creates for itself, with the audience functioning rather like Origuchi’s marebito, or ‘uninvited guests’19 whose presence, however necessary for the performance, was not vital to the process we have seen Abe most appreciated, the act of creation. To concentrate on that closed rehearsal space is not unreasonably, and in so doing I will be concentrating on the working community Abe had created for the purpose of filling that space.

As a playwright, stage designer, composer, trainer, and director, Abe poured much of his creative energy into this theatrical space. His troupe, the Abe Studio, existed for

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19 This concept runs throughout the work of this most intriguing though understudied Japanese scholar, Origuchi Shinobu, and refers to a visitor from the other world or spirit realm who comes to observe human affairs. Origuchi conceived of every theatrical performance as essentially composed of the performer and the marebito who made up the real audience.
seven years in Tokyo during the 1970s, but even before its creation Abe had gained considerable success as a playwright. His first dramatic works were stage plays produced in the mid-1950s, based occasionally on original short stories he adapted. From here development into radio and television was an easy step, and films followed during the 1960s. In fact the works by which Abe is perhaps best known are the filmed version of his novel *Suna no onna*, and the stage play "Tomodachi," (1967, tr. "Friends," 1969) which Abe developed from an earlier short story entitled "Chin'yūsha" ("The Intruders," 1952). This play has been staged throughout the world, in dozens of languages. When performed in Czechoslovakia and Poland in the 1960s this work spoke directly to the concerns and fears of the audience, addressing the compelling issues of foreign, armed invasion through the brilliantly underplayed, and widely comprehensible allegory of a home invaded by strangers. In his own studio Abe worked with a group of actors, developing patterns of movement and a fluid, improvisatory style of collaboration which to me indicate the strength of community he was able to inspire in his troupe—involvement in the theatre becomes here a manifestation of the philosophic stance Abe maintained with single-mindedness of purpose throughout his career, that individuals must be free to create their own relations within free urban villages, unfettered by traditional hatreds or obligations which serve not to bind people together but to wall them off, one from another.

I find it of extreme importance that Abe worked in the theatre as more than simply a writer of dramatic texts. He directed his own productions, worked on aspects of set design and musical score, and he trained the members of his troupe in collaboration with instructors of modern dance and movement. No study of Abe Kōbō could begin to approach completion without taking into account the great deal of attention Abe paid to having his works performed—and that he continued to write novels while simultaneously creating highly imaginative works for the stage indicates the fundamental differences of effect each mode of artistic production offered him.
And yet Abe did not stop at merely concentrating his language for production—he took an active role in forming his own theatrical troupe, and very often mounted collaborative pieces which grew out of spontaneously ad-libbed rehearsals. For this reason the critic of Abe’s work must pay as great attention to his stage as Abe himself did. It is extremely unfortunate in this regard, however, that there is relatively little archival material documenting the performances of the Abe Studio for posterity, but nonetheless, in that Abe’s greatest involvement in this group came in fact in the rehearsal space, and in that there are materials describing Abe’s methods of training and working with his actors, it will be one of the tasks of this study to examine the processes by which an idea will have found its way to the stage.

Abe’s work in the theatre did not occur in a vacuum devoid of influences or reactions to other types of theatre, and theatrical experiments other directors were conducting. During the years of his greatest activity in this sphere the so-called underground theatre, begun in the late 1960s, was developing into a coherent program, one which David Goodman is able to characterise as exhibiting a renewed interest in traditional techniques and thematic materials—that is, it was exhibiting a reaction against the world of Shingeki, the western-inspired form of realist theatre predominant in Japan in both the pre- and post-war periods, which had resolutely turned its back on the theatre culture of that country.20 If for these young theatre troupes this period truly does constitute a “return of the gods” indigenous to Japan, for Abe theatrical efforts continued to mark him as separate from his contemporaries in many important ways. Abe’s theatre work was not an attempt to revalidate Japan; the training techniques he employed were not patterned on exercises to strengthen the lower body and anchor it in the ground—to anchor it in the posture of farmers of rice, as are those techniques of Suzuki Tadashi. His plays are not retellings of myths to awaken within

his audience a sense of continuing heritage, as were the Nô plays of Mishima. Nor were his plays embraces of western technique—an early play like "Tomodachi" may utilise techniques of western realism to create a wide frame for its reception, but in many ways this particular play is an exception in itself to much of Abe’s output, which became more experimental and properly avant-garde as his volume of work increased. Abe’s theatre is an effort to communicate, in the sense of a creation of community: a community as much for the performers as for the spectators. His work is not didactic; it contains as much a ludic sense as a moralising, ritualising one. In this regard his work deals with the continued rediscovery of the need for theatre in human existence, the psychological need to recreate images of the self through play. These images, easily adopted, easily discarded, allow the individual the freedom to define him- or herself in a particular context which s/he will create. This act of creation Abe offers to his actors and audience, I believe, to permit them the freedom to imagine their own lives transformed through their own actions.

In April of 1996 the Donald Keene Centre of Japanese Culture at Columbia University hosted a month-long exhibition commemorating Abe Kôbô, culminating in the three-day International Kôbô Abe Commemorative Symposium, an event which brought together forty scholars, actors, and personal acquaintances of Abe’s to present work and reminiscences inspired by this author. I was fortunate enough to attend this conference as an observer, and found it exhilarating: and yet here a concise overall analysis of Abe’s opus was lacking. Granted the aims of this conference did not encompass such a project, and I have hopes that several of the emerging scholars represented at this symposium will produce texts exploring more deeply the wealth of output of this man, yet a critical evaluation of his work taken as a whole and seeking to understand the relations and necessities of the many aspects of his creativity would be a valuable document, indeed. It is towards such a document that I intend to direct my own efforts, not in the hope of achieving this goal but in the hope of making an overdue first attempt.
Chapter One:

A Biographical Sketch

Abe Kôbô was born in Tokyo, in 1924, the first child of parents who were temporarily in that city "for a year of research."\(^1\) His father was a medical doctor who worked in Manchuria; his mother "was a writer when she was young and she wrote novels."\(^2\) She was from Hokkaido, to which Abe and his mother were to return, also temporarily, in 1931 to avoid the Japanese invasion of the Chinese mainland. Both of these locations, Manchuria and Hokkaido, are important, in that they represent perhaps the only frontier lands many Japanese would ever have really experienced, the only places where the significance of 'being Japanese' was not a pre-existing given. In short, they are places on the periphery of the mainstream, margins in which may be written comments critical of the whole and yet not completely excluded from that whole. The ideas both of these locations represent were to figure prominently in his writings, Manchuria for its bleakness, its flatness, its hostile nature, and Hokkaido for its promise of a new land, a 'wild west', as it were, where individuals could carve out their own worlds as they saw fit—Abe's novel *Enomoto Buyô* (1965, *The Life of Enomoto Buyô*), is nothing other than an extended paean in praise of Hokkaido's (at least potential for) freedom. Both of these places marked Abe as an outsider in the Japan to which he was taken, knowing nothing of its realities save what he had read about in his lessons: "‘I learned that in ‘our landscape’ there are mountains and there are rivers and that cherry trees bloom. However, in the place where I

\(^2\) ibid., p. 34
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was living my everyday life, there were neither mountains nor anything like them, and as far as my eyes could see there was only a plain; there were not even cherry trees.”

Abe grew up in a colonial setting, yet his teachers used Monbushō (Ministry of Education) textbooks. He recalled later in a conversation with Donald Keene that “whenever I would be scolded by my teachers, they would always tell me straight away that ‘a child back home would never do such a thing’. And so in my head I really yearned for Japan.” This yearning, though, was tempered by the knowledge that he was not in fact living in Japan, that he was not in fact a typical Japanese: “Certainly, since I was raised in the colony at a time when Japanese nationalism was most strong, this created my custom of looking at Japan from the outside, relativistically.” Further, “I have the habit of doubting the significance of belonging to a nation, be it Japan or any nation, or belonging to any society. And so, in a certain sense, I’ve lived without especially mystifying nationality.”

Living away from Japan also gave Abe direct experience of a mixed society, in which the people he encountered daily were not all of a single race. This gave him knowledge of racism, and the realities of people’s actions being in contradiction with an officially sponsored equality:

When we were children, of course we lived under the Colonial Policy, but we discovered that that was a falsehood. We had what was called the “Harmony of the Five Races” in Manchuria. Manchukuo was not what would be called an independent state in today’s way of thinking, but to some extent it was autonomous then, and we who were living there had dual citizenship. We were

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4 ibid.

5 ibid., pp. 90-91
taught as children that the five races were all equal, and that this was a great paradise of racial harmony. We were taught to believe this.

But in actuality, well, for example, when we were riding the train, if a Chinese were seated and a Japanese were to come along, the latter would chase him away and take his seat. We'd get angry seeing this, because it was contrary to the Harmony of the Five Races. The people who would behave like that weren't the ones who'd lived long in Manchuria, but the newly arrived travelers and whatnot. We really got angry seeing that.6

What we can see from this anecdote is that Abe, even as a child dreaming of returning to the land he'd been taught to consider his own, was aware of the contradictions of that land. Japanese nationality was something his teachers placed on him, like a uniform which refused to fit properly. However desirable that uniform may initially seem, eventually discomfort will force the wearer to remove it—either to alter it or discard it for good. I believe this was to prove the case for Abe; the discrepancies between his boyhood hopes for a Japan which would embrace him in its varied landscape of mountains, rivers, and cherries, and the realities of a country essentially closed to him because of his upbringing, would become more and more apparent as he grew. We can see this process of dealing with these discrepancies at work in his first published work, the collection of poetry he released under the title of Mumyōshishū (Collection of Nameless Poems) in 1947, wherein he gives voice to his greatly troubled longing, complaining that his "Spirit, cut off from history, is cut off too from laughter."7 I would like to remark on only the epigraph to this work, "What wounds my truth is always the name." The name is the ostensible quality of

6 ibid., pp. 91-92
actuality; it is the policy of racial harmony so disregarded by the people living under it. The name is the Japan of dreams, and of course, the truth is that those dreams were not to be realised.

Having returned to Japan to complete his higher schooling, Abe then entered the School of Medicine at the Tokyo Imperial University "partially in deference to his physician father but also 'because of the specific situation of the time. Those students who specialised in medicine were exempted from becoming soldiers.'"8 He was far better at mathematics than medicine, and "once jokingly remarked that he was allowed to graduate only on the condition that he promise never to practice."9 Nonetheless this medical training "permitted [him] the habit of looking at the human body from the outside, without mystifying it,"10 a habit which would also help develop his objectivity in regarding the actual conditions in which he was to live.

By the age of twenty one, Abe had met and married the woman who would be his companion and artistic collaborator—a brilliant artist in her own right, working in pen and ink—for the rest of his life: Yamada Machi. Machi designed the covers for most of Abe's books, which frequently also included line drawings that elements of the texts had inspired her to create. Their only child, Neri,11 now Mano Neri, a physician and writer living in Tokyo, has remarked that all her life she wished her mother would receive greater

8 Shields, p. 34
9 ibid.
10 "Bungaku to fûksei," p. 90
11 Just as an aside, I would like to comment on this name, somewhat unusual in Japanese. It appears to me to be a transliteration of the English name, 'Nelly', and I like to think that Abe chose it for much the same reason he chose to read his own name 'Kôbō' rather than 'Kimifusa', that is, for its denial of nationality and acceptance of internationality. The Manos, Abe's daughter's family, have several children. Their oldest child, Abe Kôbô's first grandchild, is a charming girl named Risa, also an odd name in Japanese, but tantalisingly harmonious with the English name 'Lisa'. It is very tempting to imagine Abe Kôbô having a hand in naming this child, although I have no proof to support this at all.
recognition for her own works, which were not limited to book design, but also *objets*, drawings, and set designs for the Abe Studio productions.\textsuperscript{12} It is quite telling of the strength of the bond between these two people that Machi was to pass away just a few months after her husband’s passing.

Abe began writing fiction upon his graduation from medical school. His first long work, *Owarishimichi no shirube ni* (The Roadsign at the End of the Road) was published in 1948. He won the second Post-War Literary Prize for his story “Akai mayu” (The Red Cocoon) in 1951, and later in the same year, the twenty fifth Akutagawa Prize for “Kabe—S. Karumashi no hanzai” (Walls—the Crime of S. Karma). One fact I find interesting is that Abe’s earliest works were published under a pronunciation of his given name he was later to change. The *kun* (native) reading of Abe’s given name is “Kimifusa,” its *on* (phonetic, or Chinese) reading is “Kôbô.” Although Abe himself signed his name (in English) and is universally known as “Kôbô,” evidence suggests that as late as 1961, works by him were appearing bearing indications that his name was to be pronounced “Kimifusa.”\textsuperscript{13} This is significant, I feel, for it suggests a growing rejection of things Japanese within Abe’s developing self-definition, and a growing willingness to accept the duality of his citizenship, as a colonial Japanese, or citizen of the world.

The indignation Abe felt at watching the behaviour of the Japanese so in contrast to the avowed “Harmony of the Five Races” may in fact have fostered within him a sense of the equality of all peoples. In short, this may have facilitated his attraction to the Japanese Communist Party, which he joined along with Hanada Kiyoteru (1909–1975). Even before his writing began to receive the prestigious recognition of literary awards, Abe was

\textsuperscript{12} Mano, Neri, in remarks made during the First International Kobo Abe Commemorative Symposium, held in New York at Columbia University in April of 1996.

\textsuperscript{13} A photograph in *Shinchô nihon bungaku arubamu* (Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1994) shows the title page of an essay by Abe, “Chichindera yapana,” in *Bungakukai*, September, 1961, credited to “Abe Kimifusa.”
involved with party operations. Trips to Eastern Europe in the late 1950s and "direct exposure to the actuality of communist society disillusioned and dispirited him," however, but it was in this part of the world that his work first received international attention. Vlasta Winkelhöferova, the first person ever to translate one of Abe's stories, has noted the wide appreciation his work enjoyed in her Czechoslovakia. In fact, Dr. Winkelhöferova has also mentioned that following the Russian invasion which crushed the Prague Spring of 1968, Abe's play "Tomodachi," with its story of an average man whose home is invaded by unwanted visitors, slipped past the censors and provided its audiences with a deliciously allegorical comment on their own situation. This play met a similar response when it appeared in Polish translation later the same year. That Abe's play should function in this manner is not at all surprising, for his project is opposed to all forms of forced conformity, coming from either the political right or left. It was Abe's criticisms of the Japanese Communist Party's support for the Stalinist Soviet Union and its suppression of the independence movement in Hungary which ultimately led to his expulsion. In 1957 he had published a book entitled Tôô o iku—Hungaria mondai no haikei (Journey to Eastern Europe—the Background to the Hungarian Problem, Tokyo: Kôdansha, 1957) sympathetic to Hungarian independence, which the Party roundly criticised. Abe refused to retract his opinions; the Party refused to maintain his membership. In all, I think this was perhaps a significant factor in giving Abe an impetus towards his later works—by this point none of his most representative novels had yet been written, and Abe could not have produced a work such as Suna no onna, I believe, with its story of an individual trapped into a desolate community, had he still been affiliated with the Communist Party.

14 Shields, p. 36
15 Winkelhöferova, Vlasta, in remarks made during the Abe Symposium at Columbia University in New York, April 1996
Abe’s involvement with Hanada Kiyoteru, on the other hand, continued for many years. Hanada was a writer devoted to the avant-garde, and influenced by French Surrealism. In fact his own involvement with the Japanese Communist Party came about because he was inspired by Breton’s conception of revolutionary art—art and life were to be changed together. It goes without saying that Breton was also eventually to find this concept unworkable within the framework of Stalinist Communism, breaking with the French Communist Party as a result.

Hanada was a proponent of the avant-garde, and had been for many years before meeting Abe Kôbô, some fifteen years his junior. He was already an established writer and critic by the time Abe joined his “Yoru no kai” (Evening Group) in 1948, and in fact many of Abe’s earliest themes and fascinations find their parallels in Hanada’s own works. A kindred spirit dwells in both men, an equal willingness to do away with the restrictions of traditions and history in favour of a newly created world. I have noted already how Abe, in his early poems, felt himself to be cut off from history. Hanada “believed it was the future which created and affirmed the self... Because we live in the future, that is, because the future is the process of ‘becoming’, the traces of the past are to be extinguished.”

We may notice here two things: one, of course, is a typical avant-garde disavowal of the past and its traditions (cf. Poggioli conceptions of this movement in his book, *The Avant Garde*); and the other is the similarity to Sartrean existentialism which holds that human life is a process of ‘becoming’. For Hanada, as well, “human existence... is both ‘being’ and at the same time ‘becoming’,” it is something over which humans thus have control to shape or guide as they are able. Abe, too, held this belief, stating that “the reason that I was so attracted by existentialism initially was quite simply that I was persuaded that

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17 ibid.
existence precedes essence.” In fact, Hanada was so willing to disregard the past that when on what was to be his deathbed he "saw the manuscript of his chronology, he took a red pen and crossed it out." Yet there is more uniting these two men than a facile willingness to accept the value of what will be, based on one's own actions, over the uncontrollable past. Both, for one, were fascinated by the concept of transformation. Okinawa Noboru claims that Abe's short story "Dendorokakariya" (Dendrocacalia, 1949), in which a man gradually feels himself changing into a plant, ultimately to be entrapped in a greenhouse display bearing the name 'Dendrocacalia', shows the clear influence of Hanada, under whose guidance "the new writer... blossomed." Hanada had published a critical work on Kafka entitled "Ningyo no chinmoku" (Silence of the Human Fish), and this image, too, of 'human fish', was to figure prominently in several of Abe's later works for the stage. It is even possible that Abe's continuing interests in sand and the desert were influenced by Hanada, who in 1952 published an essay entitled "Sabaku ni tsuite," (Concerning the Desert) prefiguring Abe's Sabaku no shisō (Desert Thoughts) by nearly twenty years, and reading quite similarly to Niki Jumpei's musings on sand in Abe's Suna no onna.

I do not conclude too much from these similarities of interest, though. It is sufficient to recognise that Hanada played a significant rôle in shaping the literary tastes of the younger Abe, and maintained a lifelong friendship with him, as well. A detailed delineation of the deeper points of similarity between the two will have to await another study, yet had

18 Shields, p. 33
19 Ogawa, p. 10
20 Okinawa, Noboru Hanada Kiyoteru to Abe Kōbō: Avangyarudo bungaku no sansei no tame ni, Tokyo: Daisanbunmeisha, 1980. p. 11
21 Takano Toshimi provides reproductions of portions of these essays by Hanada in her book Shinchō nihon bungaku Arubamu Abe Kōbō, on pages 16 and 26.
Abe taken nothing more from Hanada than encouragement to do away with the past, this would have been quite enough to claim him as an important influence.

Other writers influenced Abe, too, of course. In an interview with Nancy Shields Abe claims Poe as the "first person to inspire [him] to write," but certainly there were many more, "from Dostoevsky to Kafka, from Proust to Beckett. What Abe soon arrived at was the hazardous attempt to transform into something narratable within its unspeakable, unknown depths, the previously unnarratable human condition of the twentieth century." Expressionism and surrealism, too, with their radical reassessment of what constituted art and human existence, gave Abe models for the explorations he was to undertake in his own work, but the thing which perhaps influenced him most greatly of all was his having "lost his two homelands to the war, Japan and Manchuria."

Following the initial poverty and hardship in which he and his young wife lived in Tokyo, "where Abe sold charcoal and pickles on the street to support them," the 1950s were an incredibly productive and increasingly prosperous period for Abe, seeing the publication of over a dozen short stories, four major novels, a collection of political essays, a collection of film criticism, the stagings of seven plays (including one musical) many of which were directed by one of the principal figures of the modern Japanese dramatic world, Senda Koreya, the release of a film written by Abe, and the broadcast of a dozen radio or television plays on NHK. Abe and Machi even found time in all of this to produce their daughter, Neri. The 1960s were no less active, with a comparable quantity of material in production, broadcast, or in publication, including the works for which Abe is perhaps best known: the stage play "Tomodachi" and the novel *Suna no onna*. Other major works from

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22 Shields, p. 33
23 Takano, p. 15
24 ibid., p. 10
25 Shields, p. 35
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this period include the novels *Daiyon kanpyōki* (Inter Ice-Age Four), *Tanin no kao* (The Face of Another), *Moetsukita chizu* (The Ruined Map), the stage plays "Ishi no kataru hi" (The Day the Stones Talked) and "Omaenimo tsumi ga aru" (You Too are Guilty), and the filmed versions of *Suna no onna* and *Tanin no kao*.

With the 1970s, though, Abe turned his attentions more directly to the stage, forming his own theatre troupe, the Abe Studio, in 1973. For the next seven years this group mounted one or two productions a year, all save one (Harold Pinter's "Dumb Waiter") either written by Abe, or developed in rehearsal by the entire troupe. Abe worked not only on the scripts to these pieces, but also on the sets, the lighting, the direction, and the musical scores, composing them on the Moog synthesiser he had purchased for that purpose. This does not mean that he gave up writing fiction; far from it. His two most richly complex works to that point, *Hako Otoko* (The Box Man) and *Mikkai* (Secret Rendezvous) appeared as brackets to this decade, in 1973 and 1977, respectively. In 1975, Columbia University conferred the honorary degree of Doctor of Humane Letters on Abe, and Abe published a collection of transcribed dreams, *Warau tsuki* (The Laughing Moon).

In the 1980s, Abe published the novel *Hakobune sakura maru* (The Ark Sakura), a collection of interviews entitled *Toshi e no kairō* (Paths Back to the City) which included a number of photographs taken by Abe, a collection of essays, and a collection of film scenarios. In 1991 he published the last novel he would see in print, *Kangarō nōto* (Kangaroo Note). His health began failing him, resulting in a hospitalisation in 1992, and his death early in 1993, in which year his final work, *Tobu otoko* (The Flying Man) was released on floppy disk in the condition in which Abe had left it, incomplete, on his word processor.

The incredible diversity of his artistic output tempts me to see Abe as something of a Renaissance man, skilled in letters, music, and the photographic arts. Photography allowed him to record a world which both attracted and repelled him, a world which, paradoxically,
however much he may have wished to change it, he was unable to affect: "I let my camera fulfill my duty in place of me. The act of pressing the shutter may be my way of justifying myself to the things and spaces that reproach me for my silence." Abe’s work as a photographer harmonises with his very visual style of writing, in which ‘snapshot’ descriptions of scenes function to propel the reader from episode to episode. Photography seems to have influenced Abe to such a great extent that William Parker, Emeritus Professor of Art and History of Photography, postulates *Hako otoko*, with its main character who lives in a box and its essentially visual mode of presentation, as an extended, ontological metaphor for human/photographic interaction and merger.

The final medium of artistic expression to which Abe was to turn his attention was music. I have mentioned his compositions on the Moog synthesiser for his theatre troupe, but Abe eventually maintained what amounted to a basic home recording studio in his workshop at Hakone. As far as I know no commercial recordings of Abe’s compositions exist, although I have heard a sample of his work as part of a video recording of the final production the Abe Studio mounted in 1979, “Kozō wa shinda” (The Little Elephant is Dead). In this production the synthesiser soundtrack functions almost in place of dialogue between the performers. Moody, dark, occasionally very melodic, it remains generally in the minor keys and employs tonalities I can only describe as “Abe-ish” in their idiosyncracy, yet all in all I found the score to be quite an effective accompaniment to the actions on stage. Perhaps the only other figure I can think of who was able to combine composition so well with his ‘main’ artistic medium would be Charlie Chaplin, although, naturally, the styles of these two men are as opposite as their reputations would lead one to expect.

26 ibid., p. 30
27 Parker, William E., in remarks made during the Abe Symposium, Columbia University, New York, April 1996
These few pages certainly do not exhaust the wide range of experiences which served to form the totality of Abe’s life, nor do they provide an ‘explanation’ for the sorts of works Abe produced during his creative career. Nonetheless I hope that even in their brief form, they will give us an image of a truly fascinating man, borne out in detail in the works I shall now address.
Chapter Two:

The Fiction of Abe Kôbô

However fantastic the stories that Abe writes may become in the course of their development, they all begin in seemingly benign ways. Abe takes simple, daily occurrences, as innocuous as waking up, as the entranceway to his dystopic, absurdist vision. He first presents a smooth, mundane surface, and proceeds to dismantle it. Underneath the tangible surface of the mundane world of “Baberu no tô no tanuki” (“The Badger from the Tower of Babel,” 1951), for example, lurks a completely different world populated by transparent people whose shadows non-existent creatures have stolen and eaten, a world wherein mannequins and business cards come to life to usurp the identities of their owners and place them on trial, as in “S. Karuma shi no hanzai” (“The Crime of S. Karuma,” 1951), where wives are swept away from faceless husbands—who wear synthetic masks over top their disfigured selves—in the dead of night by unsummoned ambulances, only to turn up again as contestants in bizarre sexual contests subterranean hospitals organise for the amusement of their numberless patients, as in Mikkai (1977, tr. Secret Rendezvous, 1979). This world, in which logic pursues itself towards illogical extremes, in which the word ‘community’ takes on connotations of oppression and the death of the individual, is the world of Abe Kôbô’s fiction.

This word ‘community’ belies a chilling lack of human interconnectedness in Abe’s fictional world. His protagonists exist in isolation from their fellows, unable to communicate with them, unable to trust them. This world, resoundingly urban, is
fragmented in the modernist sense of the word: individuals live atomised lives, cut off from their pasts, trapped within static presents. Given the experiences Abe lived through in his youth, his vision of a hostile society closed to him, the individual, is not surprising. What is surprising, though, is the single-mindedness with which Abe presents this theme in his work, and the obvious yearning for a new social order into which his characters would be able to integrate themselves of their own free will.

In the first few minutes of Teshigahara’s *Suna no onna* (*The Woman in the Dunes*, 1964), the cinematic adaptation of Abe’s 1962 novel of the same name, comes a memorable scene which offers a metaphoric encapsulation of one of Abe’s key themes, the need for adaptability and a new form of existence. The scene consists of a boat buried up to its gunwales in the drifting sands of an enormous dune. In this boat the protagonist of the story, Niki Jumpei, pauses for a rest from his hot work of insect-collecting. The boat, prisoner of the accumulated sand, offers the image of a completely useless object, unable to adapt itself to its changed environment, and so left behind by the times, the retreating sea, and its owner. In writing this scene for the film, Abe discovered a compelling form in which to present his message, that in the face of fundamental change, rigid adherence to bygone patterns will only result in obsolescence. He dealt with this message in different metaphorical shapes in most of his novels, but notably here in *Suna no onna*, wherein he presents Niki Jumpei dreaming of barrel houses able to float on the sands, carrying their occupants to new and ever-changing communities. This is Abe’s fundamental, immutable goal: the discovery of new forms of community in a world become different through the changed circumstances of urban, mechanised existence. In this section, I will examine how this theme operates as the *basso continuo* for the fugal compositions Abe created in his prose, his other themes forming a contrapuntal fantasy above this constant ground.
These other themes are all related to the problems of the individual within a social system. They range from the human position within a hostile natural world, to the problems of personal versus public language in communicative exchange, to the relationships between men and women presented as metaphors for the fundamental unit of social cohesion, the bond between lovers. Throughout the course of Abe’s career his treatment of this material exhibits shifting emphases which reflect the refinement of his own views. After his expulsion from the Japanese Communist Party in 1962 for supporting Hungarian independence from the Soviet Union, the socialistic denunciations of human exploitation and depictions of alienation which seem subtly to blame the individual for his predicament, which Abe wrote in the 1950s, give way to more properly anti-social tracts clearly rejecting both dictatorial attempts at communalisation and existentialist claims of the individual’s potential to exist in isolation. In fact this expulsion was perhaps the most crucial event in concretising Abe’s opposition to any social order not formed spontaneously among free individuals: *Suna no onna* itself is one of the best examples of this view in his, or anyone’s, opus. The themes of Abe’s novels weave together into intricate tapestries of simple, repeating patterns—this is Abe’s genius, to have been able to construct so many fascinating works from such persistently recognisable materials.

Abe would seem to have taken the inscription on the grave of Karl Marx to heart, that “Philosophers have only interpreted the world; the aim, however, is to change it.” To this end Abe depicts a world his readers will easily recognise as in need of change. The structural challenges Abe presents to the reader, I would like to argue, parody the traditional fictional experience the better to allegorise the position of the alienated modern self, and transform the reading experience into a hallucinatory quest for self-integration into a world wherein meaning is restored to its position as a free, individual, yet *mutually ‘shareable’* construct.
The problem Abe addresses in his work is fundamental to the modern, urban era, facing the breakdown of traditional, village-based communal organisations and a confrontation with “new kinds of social structure which... resist analysis in the liberal and socialist terms” it has come to accept as essential.¹ He describes the genre in which he writes as the “literature of rootless grasses;”² this phrase helps him understand the resistance some readers feel to his work, for they are reacting against the implied unimportance of the state in that term.

It’s not rare to feel a great resistance to this term, ‘rootless’. It’s a fundamental, shared physiological condition of any collective [kyōdōtai] to feel resistance to anything rootless. If we look at this historically, however, it is not an essential human trait. It is something which was created within certain historical conditions, but it is quite strong in the present situation.

I came across the following idea in the reading I’ve been doing lately. The writer claimed that the notion of the state [kokka] was not something that the Japanese originally held, but was quickly created in the years after the Meiji Period. Because this notion was extremely unilateral on the part of the government, an internalised conception of the state was not formed. The writer came to the conclusion that it would have been a fearful thing indeed had this new notion of the state not been formulated.

This may seem logical at a glance, but there’s a great logical leap involved here. Why would it be a fearful thing not to have any conception of the state? This belief, that it would have been something fearful for things to have continued on

without a new conception of the nation, hides within itself somewhere the a priori premise that the idea of the state is necessary.

I use the term ‘rootless grass’ to express my doubts about this way of thinking.3

Through his novels, Abe hopes to examine the types of existence best suited to the rootless grasses of the modern age—people who have become cut off from the traditions which can no longer anchor them in an urban world, and who are threatened by dictatorial conformity to the ‘physiology’ of the collective which sees this rootlessness as an evil to be battled by a precise application of those outdated traditions. Abe is certainly not the only thinker to perceive the problems inherent in this readjustment of the patterns of human existence—authors from Breton to Sartre to Gabriel Garcia Marquez have dealt with phrasing the problems in terms of their own solutions to it: Breton in the vocabulary of a revolutionary merger of dream with reality, Sartre in the vocabulary of existential choice, Marquez in the vocabulary of a transcendent magic-realisim. Abe flirts with all of these vocabularies. The American sociologist C. Wright Mills, whom I admire for his lucidity of phrasing, approaches the issue of a fragmenting Modernism thus:

The rôle of reason in human affairs and the idea of the free individual as the seat of reason are the most important themes inherited by twentieth-century social scientists from the philosophers of the Enlightenment. If they are to remain the key values in terms of which troubles are specified and issues focused, then the ideals of reason and of freedom must now be re-stated as problems in more precise and solvable ways than have been available to earlier thinkers and

3 ibid., pp. 12-3
investigators. For in our time these two values, reason and freedom, are in obvious yet subtle peril.

The underlying trends are well known. Great and rational organisations—in brief, bureaucracies—have indeed increased, but the substantive reason of the individual at large has not. Caught in the limited milieux of their everyday lives, ordinary men often cannot reason about the great structures—rational and irrational—of which their milieux are subordinate parts. Accordingly, they often carry out series of apparently rational actions without any ideas of the ends they serve...

Science, it turns out, is not a technological Second Coming. That its techniques and its rationality are given a central place in a society does not mean that men live reasonably and without myth, fraud, and superstition.... Rationally organised social arrangements are not necessarily a means for increased freedom—for the individual or for society. In fact they often are a means of tyranny and manipulation, a means of expropriating the very chance to reason, the very capacity to act as a free man....

The increasing rationalisation of society, the contradiction between such rationality and reason, the collapse of the assumed coincidence of reason and freedom—these developments lie back of the rise into view of the man who is 'with' rationality but without reason, who is increasingly self-rationalised and also increasingly uneasy. It is in terms of this type of man that the contemporary problem of freedom is best stated.4

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4 Mills, C. Wright, pp. 168-9
Abe has turned his attention to precisely this modern man, rationalised to the point of irrational isolation from his very identity. This is the individual ready to confront his way of life as an existential problem—the Existentialist character who must choose a method for transforming the social structure which rejects him while steadfastly maintaining its own structural rigidity and recalcitrance. The individual loses his identity, unable to reason an appropriate response to the social resistance of the world around him, and unable thus to effect a change in that world. He becomes victim to a technologically advanced world of mass-produced things, of imitations and simulacra which absorb him, ultimately to displace and replace him. Thus Abe rejects the capitalist vision of a world filled to capacity with an ever-increasingly complex array of commodities. He rejects, too, technology as the panacea for the crisis in human relations his novels depict; in fact his 1959 novel Daiyon kanpyôki (Inter Ice-Age Four, 1970) is a chilling exploration of the consequences of the loss of human identity to the computer, a prophetic examination of the catastrophic blind faith in technology’s ability to predict, regulate, and ameliorate the human condition.

Abe’s concentration on the existential character and its cognate Absurdist situation permits him the unique place he holds in Japanese literature. More than many of his Japanese contemporaries, Abe was concerned with an exploration of the Absurd in daily life, with examining its sources and attempting to reconcile its challenge. This concern made him very much in harmony with the broader intellectual currents of Existentialism and Absurdism which held sway in Europe during the early years of his literary career.

The Absurd is the “dialectical experience of an individual trying to relate to an irrational world; and it is this way of existing, through a passionate choice, a revolt against any moral or metaphysical absolutes, and a total commitment to freedom, that becomes the
focal point of existential thought."\(^5\) This experience of the Absurd arises in a number of situations directly applicable to a consideration of Abe’s work; for example, the “acute feeling of isolation between ourselves and others; we are bewildered when we perceive other human beings as non-human…. [creating] the confrontation of our desire for unity and clarity and the world’s disunity and irrationality.”\(^6\) Abe, however, in seeking unity between the individual and society, places his emphasis neither on the sort of unquestioning integration of this individual into the social order that Natsume Sôseki sought, for this would amount to a compromise of the value of the self, nor on the creation of the self as an absolute which post-war Japanese writers pursue, for this would compromise the value of the Other. As Takano Toshimi phrases this condition,

> many post-war writers concretise \(koteika\) the inner aspects of the self, in relation to their circumstances. They then examine the conditions of the anti-humanistic features \(hanningenteki naru mono\) within the microcosm of this modern self. Thus in this optimistic way they make this post-war ‘Self’ absolute. This sterile consciousness, which continues to carry with it the self as an unmovable idea, is a powerful causal factor in the creation of the so-called blind alley of the post-war spirit.\(^7\)

Through the parodies of this position which many of his characters represent, Abe rejects the view of the modern self as anything at all unified. Rather than attempting to

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\(^6\) ibid., pp. 2-3  
\(^7\) Takano, Toshimi *Abe Kôbô ron*. Tokyo: Hanagamisha, 1979. p. 13
explore any illusory *idée fixe* of the immutability of the self, his “aim is reflected in his way of writing which attempts to construct a point of view able to break through the boundaries facing the post-war man, based on the creation of Kafkaesque worlds.”

I hope to show here that, fundamentally, Abe’s work is not ‘difficult’, despite the confusion with which students and scholars alike often meet it. This is an issue which puzzled Abe himself and caused him to muse in 1969 that “the supposed incomprehensibility of my work does not come about from any true incomprehensibility, but rather, I think, from its having here and there sections which do not lend themselves to the readers’ sensitivity.” Abe’s message, that there is a need for new communal forms which can accommodate modern, urban, individual freedom, is readily perceivable, although frequently one must read it through the filters of satire or parody. Abe considers his aim to be similar to an inoculation against the strengthening of an irrational collectivity:

Collectivities have the function of creating bonds between us, but at the same time, they serve to create enemies, to exclude something or other, and through the act of strengthening this exclusion, they consolidate their internal organisations. So, when by some means a weak collectivity tries to consolidate itself rapidly, it ends up strengthening not its consolidation, but its system of exclusion. Take, for example, the Nazis—by excluding the Jews, by excluding the non-Aryans, they compressed the country into the shape it took.

After about two generations of this sort of thing, conceptions are fixed into a certain image. And so, even though the notion of the state which the Japanese have inculcated into themselves is nothing more than a few generations old, it is a

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8 *ibid.*

9 Abe, Kôbô, “Ne nashi kusa no bungaku,” p. 12
surprisingly fixed part of their make-up. There's a great unease if it is ever denied, and because they have been trained in consolidating this internal system through the exclusion of the Other [tasha], whenever their concept of the state is the least bit irritated, there is an immediate reaction of refusal.

To some extent in fact I aim for this reaction of refusal, but within that reaction there's something similar to a preventative inoculation: I think that if, like a vaccine, it isn't repeated, it won't serve its purpose. It will just lead to a feeling of resistance, which becomes an expression of incomprehension.\(^{10}\)

Thus Abe attempts to prod his audience into an awareness of the normalising forces around them, in order to break free from those forces. Through this act of destruction which is an act of creation, Abe aims for a recreation of the self and its society as flexible, adaptable, and truly related to its situation.

This necessary relation to the situation in which the modern self exists locates Abe's search for a solution very much in the real world—but, paradoxically, a 'real' world in which complete unreality is not only possible but the order of the day. In Abe's fiction there is no yearning, for example, for the spiritual or mystical transcendence to the 'other side' which characterises the works of Kawabata Yasunari, and no transcendent, divine nationalism which is Mishima's stock-in-trade. In that he yearns for a human solution to the problems of human interconnectedness, Abe is thoroughly materialistic in his approach to the modern world, and in his depiction of its conundrum, as well—it is the ever-increasing complexity of products and their modes of production, the ever-increasing intricacy and yet impenetrability of urban structures and the corresponding compartmentalisation of their inhabitants which forms for him the essence of the issue at

\(^{10}\) ibid., p. 13
hand. Thus it is surprising that the otherwise astute critic of Abe's work, Takano Toshimi, would engage in a line of reasoning which attempts to fix the object of Abe's desires as God:

Our daily lives are always given some sort of meaning. For example, one performs the act of eating breakfast for the sake of that day's work. However, let's try to imagine an existence which is freedom itself, a freedom which rejects that form of significance, which receives no limits whatsoever based on any meanings at all. This would probably be God. It follows that humans are certainly not gods. That being so, an existence 'just as it is', without meaning, completely free, is a form of falsehood. It is nothing more than a mirage [kyozô] which appears only within hope. Thus, it is only through experiencing hopelessness that we can glimpse freedom.

Abe, in his personal flight of escape towards Nothingness [mu], dreams of freedom. This is primal, colossal, cheerless hope itself. This is his mirage of being pursued by infinity as he makes his way through an infinite process. Abe himself, while wagering on this mirage, earnestly tears through the deceptions of existence-in-actuality. When he does so, of course, it is clear that in his youth the roots of his life were destroyed. Thus, for him to overcome the dark, spreading pit of Nothingness [kyomu] within himself, he requires a free spirit which will not assign any significance to even that very Nothingness itself. That is to say, doesn't he require God? However, this self-emancipatory hope is possible only as an ideal. It cannot be accomplished. It becomes possible only through death. That is to say, calling out for God is really calling out for death. Isn't the freedom
which Abe Kôbô is able to recognise only this grasping of the self as a contradictory actuality, an arrival at death while calling out for God?  

Takano here conflates the two poles of response to the Absurd that Camus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, postulates in order to reject: suicide and faith in the divine. Granted, both are possible courses of action, amounting in the end to an abdication of the self in favour of blind faith, “hoping for eternal and divine intervention from what many call God” and Takano calls Death, but Abe places his hopes squarely on the Absurd itself. Consider what Abe has his narrator relate in the very novel to which Takano refers: “But I hated God…. To put it another way, I am quite enough for me.” The existence which is pure freedom is the Absurd existence, which recognises its own responsibility for forming the world around it—“this is the point at which life begins,” and it is to somewhere beyond this point that Abe casts his gaze in search of the type of world he values.

For this reason Existentialism offers a point of departure for a study of Abe’s themes, but only a point of departure and no more. Existentialism, a philosophy of personal choice and responsibility, focuses itself on the individual and his reaction to the Other, but pays relatively little attention to the creation of a social order—although obviously it carries an implied corollary that from individuals able to choose their paths responsibly, a mature society will emerge. I hope to show here that Abe, through his depiction of the searching individual, deals more explicitly with the larger issue of social cohesion beyond Existentialism’s overture to that problem.

11 Takano, p. 23-4  
12 Baker, p. 2  
13 Abe, Kôbô *Owarishimichi no shirube ni, Abe Kôbôzensakuhin*, Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1972. V. 1, p. 72  
14 Baker, p. 2
The Absurd, however, offers Abe a more consistent means through which to create his fictional worlds. Abe makes use of a number of key theoretical features of this philosophical stance, notably the extremely diligent efforts on the part of his protagonists to apply rationalism to an irrationally complex situation, and a perception of nature as hostilely menacing to modern man. In contrast to the alienatingly-complex social order in which the protagonist must live, the natural world exists as a random chaos into which he has been made to enter not of his own free will. Thus,

a supposedly cognitive relationship between two factors lies at the centre of the Absurd, with the cognitive consciousness on the one hand and the recognisable world on the other. What characterises this relationship more than anything else is the basic lack of correspondence between the two factors involved. Human consciousness, which is, by its very nature, rational, can do nothing but try to impose upon the essentially irrational world the categories of intelligence and reason which are alien to it. From the human point of view unintelligibility, or opacity, is the essential characteristic of the world, just as the feeling of uncertainty and the profound need for a unified and coherent explanation are the essential characteristics and principle traits of the human condition.

... The possibility of gaining knowledge of the world, the quality and reliability of experience and intelligence, the limits of human knowledge and all the other traditional problems of epistemology no longer appear as abstract philosophical questions or as pragmatic problems of scientific thought, but as existential issues
which determine the fundamental feeling of man regarding the purpose of his life
and his relationship to the universe.\textsuperscript{15}

Nature becomes the ground on which the protagonist of Absurdist fiction will attempt
to solve these existential issues—even within the city, the principle location of Abe’s
works, nature looms as an ever-present threat to the stability of the protagonist, as one
more obstacle to his creation of an integrating social order. Abe carries within him the
memories of the Manchurian landscape from his youth, the bleak, barren, windswept
desert which recurs again and again in his novels as the frightening site of the alienation
his characters experience. This is consistent with Absurdism, as well, in which

Nature refuses to reveal itself to human consciousness, which seeks order and
unity... Nature, of its very character, opposes the anthropocentric, instrumental
meaning projected upon it by man. In moments of revelation, when the Absurd
consciousness is awakened, the world refuses to accommodate itself to the forms
and blueprints which have, from the outset, been stamped upon it by man, rejects
the decor which habit has hidden from our sight, and withstands with all its
‘density’ the efforts of the human mind to conquer it and the efforts of
consciousness to unite with it.\textsuperscript{16}

In the face of this resistance the existential character experiences himself as nothing
and so must come to terms with a wide-ranging nihilism—he must overcome an ideological

\textsuperscript{15} Milman, Yoseph \textit{Opacity in the Writings of Robbe-Grillet, Pinter, and Zach: A Study in the Poetics of

\textsuperscript{16} ibid., p. 10
Chapter Two: Abe's Fiction

On the one hand, the movement of nihilism has become more manifest in its planetary, all-corroding, many-faceted irresistibleness. No one with any insight will still deny today that nihilism is in the most varied and most hidden forms of 'the normal state' of man.... The best evidence of this are the exclusively re-active attempts against nihilism which, instead of entering into a discussion of its essence, strive for the restoration of what has been. They seek salvation in flight, namely in flight from a glimpse of the worthiness of questioning the metaphysical position of man. The same flight is also urgent where apparently all metaphysics is abandoned and is replaced by logistics, sociology, and psychology.\(^{17}\)

Abe explores exactly this condition, this desperate clinging to a traditional mode, this 'restoration', which the transformed, technological world has made impossibly out-dated, this flight from a metaphysical re-evaluation of human social norms in favour of a scientific blind faith in the forces of reasonless rationalisation. Through his parodies of technological societies devoid of human contact, Abe explores the extremities of this futile flight for salvation.

The one rhetorical device of which Abe most consistently makes use in his prose and his dramatic works, as well, is allegory. This is the trope which permits him, in no uncertain terms, to formulate his texts as messages he intends his audience to decipher—he occasionally even goes so far as to name his characters with immediate visual clues as to

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their significance. For example in the short story "Dendorokakariya" (1949; tr. "Dendroacalia," 1991), the protagonist is named, in transliteration of the English word, "Mister Common." Also, in Suna no onna the protagonist's name appears at the close of the novel on the blotter of a police investigation into his disappearance, declaring Niki Jumpei—'Mr. Plain and Average Niki'—to be deceased. Allegory functions for Abe as a means of removing his work from the particularities of the Japanese conditions upon which he commented. Despite the potential allegory has for limiting the comprehensibility of a work, assuming as it does a narrowly particular interpretive community sufficiently versed in social codes to read through the surface of the work to its deeper levels of signification, Abe's valuation of the individual's rôle in determining his life, and his subsequent grounding in the application of what C. Wright Mills discusses as 'rationality' to that process of choice, opens his works up to the much larger urban, industrial communities of the world—he aims for more than a parochially fabulous receptacle in hopes of addressing a condition he sees as trans-national in its dimensions. The real-world poles of Abe's allegorical creations are the individual with his right to associate (or dissociate) freely with parties of his own choosing, on the one hand, and the social order which dictates both propriety and the situation of the individual based on its needs for efficiency and cohesion, on the other. In this sense Abe's use of the trope is perfectly in accord with what Angus Fletcher has proposed to be its underlying subversive qualities:

Considered also as a nonmetaphysical semantic device, whether leading to apocalypse or not, allegory... appears to express conflict between rival authorities.... One ideal will be pitted against another, its opposite: thus the familiar propagandist function of the mode, thus the conservative satirical function, thus the didactic function. The mode is hierarchical in essence...
Hierarchy is never simply a system giving people their “proper place;” it goes further and tells them what their legitimate powers are. Any hierarchy is bound to elicit sharp emotive responses toward these powers. We are therefore able to describe the mode from a dynamic point of view. Allegories are far less the dull systems that they are reputed to be than they are symbolic power struggles. If they are often rigid, muscle-bound structures, that follows from their involvement with authoritarian conflict. If they are abstract, harsh, mechanistic, and remote from everyday life, that may sometimes answer a genuine need. When a people is being lulled into inaction by the routine of daily life, so as to forget all higher aspirations, an author perhaps does well to present behaviour in a grotesque, abstract caricature. In such a way he may arouse a general self-criticism, and the method will be justified [emphasis added].

Both this satirical criticism and the apocalyptic escape into an infinite space and time tend toward high human goals. In both cases allegory is serving major social and spiritual needs. When we add to these the functions of education (the didactic strain) and entertainment (the riddling or romantic strains), we have a modality of symbolism which we must respect.18

Abe, as I will show, is very much enamoured with both satirical criticism (his basic method) and this ‘apocalyptic escape into an infinite space and time’ evidenced through perhaps his favourite device, the asymptotic conclusions to his more complex plot structures in which the protagonist’s voice trails off into a nothingness from which there can logically be no possible return.

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Although from an author's point of view, allegory "will last as long as the artist is capable of categorising and yet at the same time remains capable of doubt and anxiety and hope,"\textsuperscript{19} I would like to argue one further point from the perspective of the reader or critic, that the very act of interpreting a work in itself accepts the allegorical potential of that work as manifest. Otherwise all criticism would of necessity stop at a retelling of the story in truncated and so unsatisfactory form, or else limit itself to historicising the work and re-encapsulating it into the sealed container of its time, virtually admitting to the incomprehensibility of texts removed from the contexts of their eras. This is clearly an untenable position—the very reading of a text outside of its original situation accepts that the reader has something \textit{in common} with the text. Interpretation of the work will proceed from this point along lines which assume the presence of meaning—in short, will assume the presence of allegorical elements within the text that permit it to transcend its original situation. In this sense (as well as in a more conventional sense which would say that his texts contain messages buried beneath the surface) Abe's works are allegorical: they are not limited to the Japanese context. Further, in that "allegories are the natural mirrors of ideology,"\textsuperscript{20} they offer an obvious mode to the writer whose aim is a re-formation of ideological tenets.

And yet despite Abe's allegorical initiatives, his work is not without an equally subversive trend which attempts to divert the very interpretive process it simultaneously invites. Abe frustrates the rational processes of reading and interpretation through plot complexity and a structural rigour that incorporates elements devilishly provocative yet elusive of liminal comprehension—in short, he attempts to create modern myths and riddles the exegeses of which ridicule the very principles of rationality their readers will employ in

\textsuperscript{19} ibid., p. 367
\textsuperscript{20} ibid., p. 368
their decipherment, seduced by the verbal clues and markers Abe has strewn like so many temptations throughout his work. In this sense he plays upon the over-rationalisation of the modern age; to defeat logic, he utilises logic carried, logically, to its perverted extreme. The tendency to interpret rationally which Abe so parodies is one he knows his readers have little chance of avoiding, for

Modern literary criticism bases its interpretive practice on postulates advanced by the romantic aesthetic, first and foremost on that of organic form (to such an extent that it might well be labeled 'organic criticism'). Everything in a work corresponds to everything else, everything tends toward a single 'figure in the carpet', and the best interpretation is the one that allows for the integration of the greatest number of textual elements. Thus we are ill equipped to read discontinuity, incoherence, the unintelligible.

...One can imagine a case in which no specific indices are present, nor any global principle requiring interpretation—and yet the subject does not cease to interpret....[sic] The case exists, but it falls outside the accepted exegetical strategies: it is what psychopathologists call the 'interpretive delirium', and it is a form of paranoia. Which suggests, conversely, that our society does indeed require motivation for every decision to interpret.21

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p. 38
To induce this 'form of paranoia' and to play upon its obsessions is, I feel, an important objective for Abe in structuring his more intricately-woven plots, and it is to an examination of the devices of some of these that I will now turn.

The best place to start any taxonomical investigation into Abe’s artistic lexicon is with his earliest prose fictions. Here, the ingredients of his later novels are present in relatively obvious guises: plausible entranceways into absurd situations; physical transformation into plants or bizarre creatures; isolated protagonists who are pursued by vastly-organised conspiracies; nature looming as a hostile force just beyond the rational grasp of this protagonist; plot structures made incredibly complex by the protagonist’s illogically logical rationalisations of his actions; conflict between the individual and a society which does not care about him. This is not to say that these earliest stories are without skillful construction; quite the opposite is true. However, Abe’s first works are so vocal in their thematic rigour that they seem to read as self-introductory advertisements. I can identify three main periods in Abe’s career: the first begins in the early 1950s and ends with his expulsion from the Japanese Communist Party. It is a period in which, as in the texts making up the collection entitled Kabe (Walls, 1951), stories of physical transformation and exploitation predominate, and where Abe first explores the creative potential of phrasing his compositions within the form of the first-person, reportage style which would come to dominate his later writings. Here, also, the formal device of the journey, quest, or flight of escape takes shape, most obviously in his very first publication Owarishimichi no shirube ni (The Roadsign at the End of the Road, 1948), but also in numerous other short stories.

One further feature serves to justify my placing of a dividing line at the time of Abe’s expulsion from the JCP, and this is a shift in his attitude toward the individual he presents
in his work. Before the expulsion, several of Abe's stories seem to imply that the individual's anti-social qualities are a flaw: they come about because of some psychological defect or even because of a physiological contamination. Approaching the time of his break with the Party, however, the fault for the confrontation between the individual and society becomes definitely the fault of social imposition, a dictatorial effort to break the spirit of the individual—and yet this shift does not completely 'rehabilitate' the individual, who still remains distant from the type of person capable of inhabiting Abe's ideal world.

The second period in Abe's career stretches roughly from 1962 to 1973. During this time, Abe hardens his opposition to the social domination of the individual, as I have implied above. The novel Suna no onna explores this theme almost to the point of predictability, while the dramatic text Tomodachi (1967, tr. Friends, 1969), presents it in a painfully plausible story of benevolent abduction. Abe further develops his depictions of the loss of individual identity and the report-style of his narrative delivery in Tanin no kao (1964, tr. The Face of Another, 1966) and Moetsukito chizu (1967, tr. The Ruined Map, 1969), respectively, till they reach their apotheosis in the virulently anti-narrativistic Hako otoko (1973, tr. The Box Man, 1974).

The third period stretches roughly from the late-1970s till Abe's death in 1993. Here, his works become mythological descents into the deepest structures of human consciousness, questing for the very roots of communal integration. The novels Mikkai (1977, tr. Secret Rendezvous, 1979), Hakobune sakura maru (1984, tr. The Ark Sakura, 1988), Kangarū nōto (1991, tr. The Kangaroo Notebook, 1996), and the posthumously published fragment, Tobu otoko (The Flying Man, 1993), explore archetypal conceptions of community, apocalypse, and rebirth which, although related to Abe's earliest texts through the continuity of this thematic material, are more accomplished works of art. In the
pages to follow, I will trace the developmental progression I have sketched out here, referring in greater detail to several of the works I’ve listed.

Abe’s first major publication is the novella *Owarishi michi no shirube ni* (*The Roadsign at the End of the Road*, 1948). This work, structured as a first-person narrative in three ‘notebooks’ with a short coda of thirteen pages, tells the story of a young man identified only late in the narrative as ‘T’ who, as a result of a chance encounter with an old friend, meets a beautiful woman with whom he falls in love. She, however, loves the friend, and even though the narrator—through the agency of that very friend—becomes the woman’s guardian, and throws the friend out of the house he had been sharing with her and her aged mother, she continues to see him. In jealousy the guardian decides to abandon everything, his home, his country, the woman who scorns his love, and depart for the Asian mainland at the height of Japan’s colonial escapades in that region. There, he works for a cider brewer. He witnesses the actions of the Japanese Imperial Army. He contracts tuberculosis, and arrives at his deathbed. His acquaintances bring him opium to ease his sufferings, and under its influence, he begins to write the three notebooks which make up the novel. In the first notebook, entitled ‘The Roadsign at the End of the Road’ and set in the narrator’s present time, he tells of trekking across the barren Manchurian plains and of being confined to his sickbed by his illness. In the second, entitled ‘The Unwriteable Words’, he tells of the events leading to his departure from Japan ten years earlier. This notebook is structured as a letter to ‘You’, the woman with whom he had fallen in love, and it is only in this abstract, distant form that he is able to confess his feelings for her. At the notebook’s close, under the influence of the opium the narrator has been convinced to smoke, he reads its contents to one of his acquaintances who had believed the narrator to be harbouring a secret of potentially great worth: the reading of this notebook makes it clear to
the acquaintance, however, that no such secret exists. He and another acquaintance then mock the narrator for being Japanese: the tide of the war on the Asian mainland is turning, and Japan’s Imperial Army is about to experience defeat at the hands of the Eighth Route Army. The acquaintances predict that the narrator will not live another week, what with his illness and the lack of the opium to which he has become addicted, and which the misfortunes of war will now make virtually impossible to obtain. The notebook closes with one acquaintance asking the narrator cynically if he believes in God as they abandon him to his fate. In the third notebook, entitled ‘The Unknowable God,’ the narrator remains in his present time, discovering that only one of his former acquaintances has pity for him. In this book the narrator rejects the faith this man tries to impart to him, and reaffirms his individuality—as well as his isolation and rejection of his ‘home town’. The thirteen-page epilogue contains the narrator’s stated determination to grasp his existence actively:

If I were searching for a magic formula to change myself into a plant, would I have bothered to come as far as this edge of the world?... If I’d only wanted to possess myself as a plant, I would only have had to become insane. It is precisely because I wanted to possess myself as an animal that I had to chase myself away from my home town.22

Ironically, however, at the close of these pages, the narrator is abandoned by his acquaintance and left immobile on his sickbed, hearing only “death ringing in my ears, the clamourings of ghosts.... I am now my own sovereign. I have found my way to the opposite extreme of every home town, to the lands of every god.”23

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22 Abe, *Owarishi michi no shirube ni*, p. 105
23 ibid., p. 109-10
Throughout all three notebooks the narrator muses on the consternating qualities of existence, always wondering why people must live ‘this way’ \((kakuraru)\). In fact from the very outset the novel creates an atmosphere of desperate philosophical enquiry, with the narrator complaining of loneliness and abandonment. The work proper opens with a brief epigraph, “To a Dead Friend: I shall build a monument, in order to kill my home town friends, again and again forever…”\(^{24}\) The first notebook begins with the gloomy observation that “for the journey which begins where it ends, there is no finish. I must speak of the birth which comes within the grave. Why must people live \textit{in this way}?”\(^{25}\)

Abe, within this dark philosophical novel cloaked in the concepts of Existentialism, persistently questions the very roots of existence, to determine where in fact those roots are. Or perhaps rather, the problem for him is the independence born from Nothingness of a character who has fallen into his own isolated hell, a character who has been banished for all eternity from a world in which the very questioning itself of existence’s roots has become impossible. We may say that this work probes the drama of a character who, while rejecting his homeland \([kokyō]\), strives to achieve his independence. At the time, Abe’s youthful make-up, which took shape even as it was trying to extinguish the traditional spiritual landscape of Japan within itself, was transformed at a stroke into nihilism by the sense of devastation it encountered during the war and after the defeat.\(^{26}\)

\(^{24}\) ibid., p. 7
\(^{25}\) ibid., p. 9
\(^{26}\) Takano, p. 21
The protagonist Abe creates in this novel represents his philosophical point of departure, but it is not, in fact, for independence that he strives—this 'independence' after all is something he had rather inflicted upon himself out of an immature jealousy. The secret his acquaintances believe him to be concealing create jealousy within them, as well, which is responsible for the narrator's continued alienation from their group. The importance of the novel for a discussion of Abe's work comes not from any structural feature apart from its arrangement as a series of confessional 'notebooks'—for within these books it reads very smoothly as a realist narrative—nor from any philosophical innovation, but rather from the placement of the self-alienating individual, first, within the barren ground of a bleak and hostile desert, and later within the closed hut which serves as his sick-ward. In both settings the protagonist must exist for himself within his own enclosed mental world as an outsider, quite literally a foreigner, to the landscape and social order around him. In short, the work is important for presenting a character who must deal with a situation of his own making; it approaches the issue of the essence of existence as fundamentally a matter of choice, and leaves this protagonist in a situation from which, by virtue of the qualitatively bad choices the plot reveals him to have made, he cannot extricate himself save through the death his illness makes urgent. A tone of almost querulous complaint hangs so persistently over the protagonist's considerations of the way in which he must live that sympathy becomes a sensation which eludes the reader's grasp. Abe presents this narrator as so stubbornly individualistic that he borders on a caricature of the existential character, welcoming every calamity the easier to curse the past which has denied him the prize of the woman's love. Before he left his city for the Asian continent, the protagonist tells her of his plans. Afterwards,

That night, with nothing holding me back, I sobbed to my heart's content.
After crying I burned my letters, notes, and her photographs. As the red flames disappeared into soot, I felt happiness. From my conviction that in compensation for having thrown away my hometown, at least happiness had been bestowed upon me, I made up my mind to believe in that happiness.

And so I started out, off to the wilderness where the winds would tear down any hometown faster than I could build it...27

His determination to believe in his happiness is an attempt to force himself to live in accord with bad faith, to convince himself of his own ability to overcome the simple human need for companionship which has initiated his flight from its demands—for in order to receive companionship one must be first a companion. The protagonist had lived alone, the narrative reveals, without parents or friends. Through the chance encounter with an old acquaintance he becomes once more a part of a ‘society’ which he rejects when it does not afford to him the fulfillment of his desires. Out of this selfish dissatisfaction the protagonist rejects not only the small circle which had caused his disappointment, but the whole nation around it. This act of self-centred destruction, then, defines the individual in this novel as one who would destroy rather than adapt—thus Abe’s almost orthodoxly socialistic condemnation of the individual as antithetical to the creation of a greater social good which in turn would benefit him as well.

The theme of physical transformation which so captured Abe’s imagination in variously refined forms throughout his career appears in this earliest period in, for example, “Dendorokakariya,” the story of a man who discovers himself to be turning slowly into a plant. Transformation is a device which writers from Ovid to Kafka have

27 Abe, Owarishi, p. 12
employed to comment on aspects of their characters or the world around them. Although from the theoretical analysis of western uses of this device, there appears to be a qualitative difference between classical and modern writers, I feel this distinction may be rather naïve. Abe, I would argue, is able to reconcile this apparent difference in a synthesis of the two diametric positions which Olsen describes as follows:

[The classical instance] needs more language around it, needs more words to place it, to circumscribe it, to plug it into a grid. In other words, it needs a context... [The modern text], on the other hand, refuses such language. [Its] discourse is briefer and it talks around the event, explaining what happened after the transformation. No amount of context will help interpret it... With the first example, the context helps explain, locate, interpret. With the second there is no context; the reader is adrift; if she wishes the text to mean, she must create her own "meaning"; meanwhile, the text remains mute...

In the premodern transformation, the human body loses form. Or, more precisely, the soul separates from the human body without losing its individuality, and it enters something else... The process of transformation has filtered out the essence of a being and displayed it for all to see.... The premodern metamorphosis is by or for God or the gods, where the alien body serves as a means of edification for the victim or hero, as well as for the victim's or hero's fellows who may see in it an image of themselves. In short, it is a metamorphosis charged with certainty, reason, importance.

Just the opposite is the case with postmodern metamorphosis, where there no longer lingers a redemptive flavour... There is... no explanation that aids the reader in solving the puzzle, because... there is no puzzle. Rather, some people
happen to change... while others happen not to.... It is unreasonable, unaccountable, uninterpretable. It carries with it no suggestion of what the reader is supposed to make of it, or worse, carries with it so many conflicting suggestions that each cancels out the next.28

Abe uses transformation allegorically to criticise the ineffectual introspection Takano discusses as ‘the blind alley’ of the post-war Japanese self—Mister Common, the protagonist of this brief work, discovers that, on every occasion he becomes a plant, his face separates from his body and twists around backwards, so that he sees his own eyes staring in at him. Only with great effort is he able to wrench his face back into its proper orientation and so regain his human form, until finally he can no longer muster the strength to do so and becomes just another plant on display in a botanist’s hot-house full of other individuals who, themselves, have become plants. Thus, although this protagonist is ‘contextless’ within the confines of the narrative, having only the barest of names, devoid of particular features, placeless in terms of address, city, or nation, nonetheless within the allegorical frame of this story, the context is quite clear—the essence of the protagonist, ‘Common’, becomes obvious through this transformation: his introspection has reduced him to a passive form of existence, has robbed him of his human ability to act, to function as a self-controlled man. This transformation then is “irresistible, underscoring a lack of individual will and selfhood,”29 leaving its object simply one more example of the stifling atmosphere of the modern. In other words, the apparent ‘contextlessness’ becomes the very point, the very context itself, and the introspective protagonist’s transformation into a


\[29\] ibid., p. 54
hot-house plant becomes the metaphor for his and in general the passive society’s inappropriateness for any action capable of improving this situation. Through this parody of the postwar self Abe dismisses any consideration of it as a viable mode. “The problem of ‘transformation’ is therefore the lifeline which released Abe from the sterility of the post-war ‘Self’ into the wilderness of the imagination,” wherein change for the better remains a possibility.30

_Kabe_, the collection of works for which Abe won the Akutagawa Prize in 1951, came not long after _Owarishi michi no shirube ni_. This volume reads as a self-introduction, containing in miniature all of the themes Abe would return to in his later works. I propose that even the very title, “Kabe,” is a cryptic form of Abe’s self-identification—“K. Abe.” With this work Abe’s career truly begins. The volume is in three parts. Part One contains the novella “S. Karuma-shi no hanzai” (“The Crime of S. Karuma”). Part Two consists of the short story “Baberu no tō no tanuki” (“The Badger from the Tower of Babel”). Part Three, entitled “Akai mayu” (“The Red Cocoon”), consists of a series of very short works, some of which read as fantastic parables, others being clearly and satirically political, in the manner of Swift’s “A Modest Proposal.” Abe presents the series of images and premises which make up these texts with great clarity; they introduce and maintain a thematic importance which persists throughout the duration of Abe’s career.

The first installment in this collection concerns a protagonist who wakes up one morning to discover not only a hollow feeling in his chest, but also that he has completely forgotten his own name. His identity papers are all blank, and he can barely recognise his features. At his place of work he discovers both that his name seems to be ‘S. Karma’, and that his name-card has come to life to usurp his identity. At a doctor’s office, he sucks into

30 Takano, p. 18
himself—quite unwillingly—the photograph of a desert he had been gazing at idly in a travel magazine. At a local zoo, he sucks into himself—again, unwillingly—a camel. For these crimes he is put on trial in a subterranean cavern beneath the zoo, but he cannot be sentenced, since as the Prosecutor informs him, "Because the defendant has lost his name and so is without one in actuality, we have no grounds for applying the law to a nameless person. Therefore, as a result, we cannot try the defendant." The trial however continues wherever the protagonist happens to be, until he is able to escape to the Ends of the Earth—which turn out to be within his own room. The work ends with the protagonist kidnapped by the doctor to whom he had first turned for a diagnosis of his hollowness, and transformed into an enormous wall, stretching out in the desert.

The complexity and yet almost archetypal appeals to elements of the fantastic in this story (which in its totality amounts to a frightening merger of *Alice in Wonderland*, Abe's favourite book, and *The Trial*—in fact Abe has said of this work that it "was written under the influence of Lewis Carroll—not Kafka, as so many thought")31, propel it into the domain of myth. It presents issues fundamental to the process of development all individuals must go through, and yet subtly perverts the emphases of these issues. From the initial phrasing of the problem of identity as an encounter with loss, through the hallucinatory, farcical, and (most significantly) subterranean trial—staged beneath the representation of social domination over the unruly forces of nature, the zoo—designed to make the 'identity-less' protagonist accountable for his consumption of images of desolation and perseverance, to the protagonist's discovery of his father's mysterious hostility and inability to rescue him from his fate, and culminating in the transformation of

32 Abe, "An Interview with Abe Kôbô," *Contemporary Literature*. Volume 15, Number 4, Autumn 1974, p. 451
the protagonist into a symbol of both alienated isolation and social regulation—for walls fulfill both functions—this particular work in very compact form encapsulates many of Abe’s key themes. The modern individual, existing only through his work, is truly ‘hollow’ and without anything of his own: this character has neither features nor particular habits to distinguish him from anyone else, yet he in turn is not particularly close to them. All he has is the sudden loss of his name, a loss which at first doesn’t even concern him especially. When he does begin to miss this small marker of his individuality, society places him on trial, a permanent process which can only end at the ends of time and the earth.

It is important to reiterate that the only place in which the protagonist has any sort of identity at all is at his place of work—here, he has a function which society can value, and through which he is able to differentiate himself from others around him. Abe makes it clear, however, that this differentiation and value are neither substantive nor in the interests of the protagonist himself, for this character has been completely replaced by the one thing which serves to ‘pin him down’ in the business world: his name-card. He has become nothing more than the superimposition of a two-dimensional representation over top of his actual three-dimensional being. In short, he has been replaced by a simulacrum, an artificiality which in fact is better suited to performing his social function than he himself is. This social function is to fill the position of ‘Data Manager’ for an insurance company, to sift through the myriad facts and figures of the ‘real’ world and arrange them into coherent shapes. That is, he is to make rational the stuff of daily life, but this rationality becomes completely irrational when the one essential fact of his identity becomes lost to him. Having become separated from that part of him which performs this function—his name-card, his corporate badge of membership—he becomes a hollow ‘criminal’ who ends as an enormous wall, a barrier to communication.
The doctor and his assistant, in studying the vacuous cavity in Karuma's chest, do so not truly to cure him, to restore him to wholeness, but only to arrive at a conclusion designed to cause the least social panic in the community at large. In fact the doctor, once he discovers the fantastic scenery in the protagonist's chest, says that "It certainly wouldn't do for us scientists to admit to anything unscientific... An insult to the spirit of investigation like this would throw the whole social order into disarray!" This raises an insidious point significant to Abe's aim here: the failure of technology and advances in medical science to benefit the individual. That is to say, in its opposition to the alienated individual, technology reinforces its own value to an alienating social order. The insidious quality arises from the implication of the need for self-regulation to assure conformity—for in trusting the diagnosis of his condition to the doctors and their instruments, the protagonist abdicates his own rights to live with individual difference. It becomes up to the individual to fit himself into the pre-existing social order around him—and when this becomes difficult, the rational forces of technology and scientific advance will provide the means necessary to make it possible. The failure of Abe's characters to perceive this fully, and Abe's thoroughly negative depiction of their resulting plights, reject both blind faith in technology and this act of self-regulation as an instance of essence preceding existence, in a reversal of the central tenet of Existentialism. Only from self-aware, free individuals can a society be formed; society cannot form free, self-aware individuals. In support of this, Abe demonstrates the suffering resulting from an attempt to mold a personality to social dictates.

Nature, the ground on which the Absurd takes shape, plays a significant rôle in this novel as well. Abe is quite consistent in assigning animal imagery to characters who appear in a negative light, as, for example, the Doctor's Assistant is referred to as 'Goldfish Eye' repeatedly. As I've remarked, the trial itself takes place underneath the zoo, the entrance to

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33 Abe, "S. Karuma-shi no hanzai," p. 17
the cave which led to the courtroom being located at the rear of a polar bear's cage. The mannequin-Miss Y calls the protagonist a 'human duck', and the blurring of the lines between human and animal which this implies continues when the protagonist hears, for example, "a cat crying in the voice of a baby." This amounts to a subtle hostility between the natural world, a source of mystery and enmity for the protagonist, and the isolated individual who is a part of neither it nor the social order also aligned against him.

I should not allow Abe's flirtation with the structural confusion which overshadows this text to go unremarked. Abe creates an expectation in the mind of the reader by introducing the tantalising image of a hollow protagonist—one of T. S. Eliot's "Hollow Men," perhaps?—able to absorb into himself not only creatures of a barren, desert landscape, but that very desert as well. For the 'crime' of stealing a camel, the underground tribunal condemns him, yet ultimately this is a narrative red herring, as it were. The trial, a permanent process derivative in this sense of Kafka's work by that name, will only end when the protagonist reaches the Ends of the Earth, that is, the starting point for the work, his own room. Here he becomes an enormous, grey, spreading wall, as barren as the desert within himself but of a very different nature. This frustration of the reader's expectations of some continuation of the thread of the protagonist's hollowness, and moreover of the name-card, is intentional on Abe's part: it becomes in itself a thread running throughout the course of his development, serving to highlight the irrationality of a seemingly rational pursuit for meaning in a pre-existing structure not of the reader's own making. This in turn leaves the reader in a position to make for himself whatever meaning he is best able to fashion of the fertile materials Abe places before him, all within an intertextual playground that makes little effort to hide its literary sources.

34 ibid., p. 60
The second story in this collection, “Baberu no tô no tanuki” (“The Badger from the Tower of Babel”) is somewhat less complicated though no less interesting than “S. Karumashi no hanzai.” It concerns a poet, identified late in the work as K. Anten, who, while idly dreaming up schemes and inventions in the park one day, taking his inspiration from the various women’s legs he is really there to watch, encounters an odd-looking creature he’s never come across before, an ‘uncatchable badger’ from a Japanese saying: “Trying to make plans for the skin of an uncatchable badger,” somewhat analogous to the English expression, “counting chicks before they’ve hatched.” The creature steals the poet’s shadow, which leaves the poet invisible, save for his eyes which seem to float in midair. These eyes cause a panic in the poet’s town—the police surround his apartment building, intent on capturing this aberration. Almost without hope, the poet peers through the small telescope he has in his room out towards space. He sees the odd-looking creature riding on what he determines to be a large coffin with his name on it. The creature convinces the poet to step out of his window onto the coffin—even though when the poet removes his eye from the lens he realises the creature is still thousands of kilometres away—and returns with him back to the creature’s home, a distant planet on which stands the Tower of Babel. The poet can only enter this tower through surrealistic means; once inside, he meets numerous famous humans, including Dante and Andre Breton, himself. That is to say, he meets their creatures, for each person there is as invisible as the poet, and each one has an animal who has taken over his identity. Only those humans with sufficiently developed powers of imagination can arrive at this place. Once there, they give up their eyes and so, ostensibly, ascend through the tower to Heaven, a perfect place where their fantasies come true. The thought of giving up his eyes arouses the poet’s suspicions. He rejects the odd-looking creature’s plan and the tower. Using a device his imagination had previously conjured up—a device which the creatures have adapted for their own
use—a ‘time-carving tool’, the poet returns himself to the moment at which he first encountered the animal. Knowing now what it intends, he scares it away and finds himself suddenly whole and visible once more, his shadow safely intact. He also discovers himself to be frightfully hungry, which is quite natural, he concludes, since he is no longer a poet.

This wonderfully whimsical short story nonetheless contains a number of elements which make it unmistakably a work by Abe. Foremost of these is the poet who, through a particular flaw in himself (although here not one for which he is truly responsible) finds himself at odds with the society in which he lives. The townspeople who encounter the poet’s floating, disembodied eyes panic and think only of hunting him down, of driving him out of their midst. The neighbours who share the man’s building all roundly condemn him and find it perfectly natural that now the police should be coming for him—the protagonist can hear “the housewives gather together to gossip, devoting all their excited voices to discussing rumours about me.”

This is in keeping with Abe’s earliest views on the conflicts between the individual and society as something brought about by the individual’s insistence on his difference, for he is proud of his life as a poet. But here Abe also includes in clear terms his views on the value of that very individual, for the poet dreams of creating through his inventions a perfect place, a perfect unity of all people.

Suddenly something occurred to me. Wasn’t I the first person to have physically experienced a new cosmic law? Wasn’t I the discoverer of a cosmic theory?!

At once I stood as a conqueror upon lofty heights. I looked down upon vast panoramas. My heart pounded, then froze, then became the entire globe.

However, I could not imagine such a superb figure for myself. I was disappointed. I’d remembered that I’d become a transparent person.

I thought that I had to do something. ...[The protagonist wonders where the badger had gone off to, and if it had eaten his shadow or merely hidden it. He pursues his line of thought, assuming a hidden shadow.] Fine, if that's the case, it's not impossible to solve it. I'm sure if we study the creature biochemically or physiologically, we can discover its means of stealing shadows. And then if we just reverse the process, wouldn't it be possible to synthesise or extract those shadows? Indeed, this is a discovery. It may after all amount to the discovery of a cosmic law. When the construction, ingredients, and characteristics of shadows become known, people will be able to take off and put back their shadows at will. Whenever they want they'll be able to become transparent. So long as they could return to their old selves, there wouldn't be the least inconvenience to being transparent. On the contrary, it would quite interesting.

However, there was still something worrisome in this idea. Wasn't it possible that there would be more than one way to reattach the separated shadows? Can broken glass or pottery ever be put back together?! I became extremely uneasy. ... But I sighed in relief when I realised how simple the solution was. It was really nothing at all—think logically about why broken glass can't be reassembled, and you'll soon figure it out. It's a question of the molecular forces not being able to interact at the particular spot. Accordingly, with the application of heat to the area, the re-assembly becomes possible again. It would be sufficient to heat up the shadows, too. If heat wouldn't work, some physical or chemical means would surely be found.

And moreover, think about the shadows obtained this way—they wouldn't have to be the same as the original. The transformed bodies from these mechanically altered shadows could be completely different from their originals.
Understanding this relationship theoretically, couldn’t we freely acquire whichever new bodies we wished? (This thought sent me dreaming.) It was great! If this were to happen, fashion would no longer be about clothes—bodies themselves would become the style. I would build a huge factory, and make whichever bodies suited my tastes there. First I would take off the customer’s shadow, send it through my refashioning machinery, and change its shape. Then I would rearrange the person’s body. Everyone in the world would become as beautiful as the angels. What a dream it would be! And it didn’t stop just there—if people’s bodies were to become changeable, their various relationships would become changeable, too. It would follow that such things as private property would disappear; the very idea of the individual would disappear, too. Wouldn’t it be a surprising world? Complete freedom. Complete and eternal redistribution. People like angels in the Society of Equality.\(^{36}\)

The mention of the Tower of Babel in the work’s title of course implies this dream of a perfectly harmonious, equitable world well—and moreover, implies the folly of attempting to arrive at such a place for the ultimate alienation and confusion of tongues which must result.

Abe utilises a very interesting typographical effect in this work, which finds its echo in the writings of Heidegger and Derrida. When Abe describes certain schemes or inventions the poet imagines to himself, he lists them within individual parentheses which flow within the grammatical construction of the sentence as if they were not there: “I next thought of one or two ideas for the (Dual-Usage Auto-Calculating Machine) I’d added to my suite of cards. . . . Then, I made a few memos concerning (Edible Rats), (3-Dimensional

\(^{36}\) ibid., pp. 91-3
Microscopic Photography), (a Liquid Lens), (a Time-Carving Device),... and a (Human Calculating Chart)."37 He makes more consistent use of this effect when the protagonist speaks of existence: "Women’s legs allowed me to enter into the woman’s interior at a single bound; they allowed me actually (to exist) within a primordial feeling of unity. Beautiful legs did it beautifully; ugly legs did it with ugliness, but all were a part of my equation for (existence)."38 This perhaps is an anticipation of the ‘erasure’ of which Spivak writes in her preface to Derrida’s Of Grammatology, which “is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion. (Since the word is inaccurate, it is crossed out. Since it is necessary, it remains legible.) In examining familiar things we come to such unfamiliar conclusions that our very language is twisted and bent even as it guides us. Writing ‘under erasure’ is the mark of this contortion.”39 Abe of course was unaware of Derrida, prefiguring his utilisation of this technique by some twenty years. In some of his philosophical leanings it may be true that “Abe Kôbô started out from Heidegger,”40 but he had the originality of thought to anticipate by several years as well Martin Heidegger’s use of this ‘crossing out’ in The Question of Being, which both Derrida and Spivak acknowledge as sources for the typographical effect of ‘crossing out’ a word while retaining it within the page—in this fashion (Derrida and Heidegger utilise two intersecting lines which, I regret, I cannot reproduce). Heidegger, writing in 1956, claims that

37 ibid., p. 86
38 ibid., p. 88
it is by no means easier to say “Being” than to speak of nothingness... Is it the fault of “Being”... that our words fail in referring to it and only that remains on which suspicion is cast all too hastily as ‘mysticism’? Or is our language at fault for not yet speaking because it is not yet able to adapt itself to a reference to the essence of “Being”?... Does nothingness vanish with the completion, or at least with the overcoming of nihilism? Presumably, overcoming is only attained when, instead of the appearance of negative nothingness, the essence of nothingness which was once related to “Being” can arrive and be accepted... It now becomes questionable what Being which has been reverted into and been absorbed by its essence is henceforth to be thought of. Accordingly, a thoughtful glance ahead into this realm of “Being” can only write it as Being. The drawing of these crossed lines at first only repels, especially the almost ineradicable habit of conceiving “Being” as something standing by itself and only coming at times face to face with man. According to this conception it looks as if man were excluded from “Being.” However, he is not only not excluded, that is, he is not only encompassed into “Being” but “Being,” using the essence of man, is...of a different nature than the conception of totality would like to have it...

The symbol of crossed lines can, to be sure, according to what has been said, not be a merely negative symbol of crossing out. Rather it points into the four areas of the quadrangle and of their gathering at the point of intersection.... The being present as such turns towards the essence of man in which the turning-towards is first completed, insofar as the human being remembers it. Man in his essence is the memory of Being, but of Being. This means that the essence of man is a part of that which in the crossed intersected lines of Being puts thinking under the claim of an earlier demand...
The essence of man itself belongs to the essence of nihilism and thereby to the phase of its completion. Man, as the essence put into use in Being helps to constitute the zone of Being and that means at the same time of nothingness.\footnote{Heidegger, Martin \textit{The Question of Being}, pp. 79-83}

Abe brackets ‘existence’ in a way analogous to this use of the term \textit{Being}, both to highlight it \textit{within} and eradicate it \textit{from} his text at the same time—it becomes a word capable of slipping through the discourse either as an escape or a sneak attack, either to elude the grasp or pierce the armour of the reader and so set off within him a chain of associations and reactions to this term \textit{not yet sufficiently defined} for the modern age. (Existence) in parentheses becomes something held in abeyance, a ‘black box’ holding the position of a device yet to be invented, much as the other terms Abe encapsulates within these curved walls are devices of which the poet has dreamed, although not yet realised. Inventions awaiting their blueprints, grand ideals awaiting their champions, new forms of (Existence) awaiting their proper social structures—these are the stuff of Abe’s fiction, and Abe’s project is to make them tangible for his reader as material elements for his own project.

Abe includes a number of very short, parable-like works in the final section of this volume, which takes its name from the first of these. This is “Akai mayu” (“The Red Cocoon”), a three-page story about a nameless, homeless “I” who, while walking about one day at dusk knocking occasionally on people’s doors asking if this isn’t, in fact, \textit{his} house, begins to feel himself unraveling. The conclusion to the story comes as he takes step after step:
The sun began to set. I continued to walk.

All those houses... They didn’t disappear, they didn’t change shape, they didn’t move. And between all of them, like a faceless fissure, ever changing—the road. Rough-brushed on rainy days; only as wide as the car wheel-ruts on snowy days; flowing on like a belt on windy days—the road. I kept on walking. I couldn’t understand why I had no home, and so I couldn’t even hang my head over it.

But what was this—was something twisting around my feet? Perhaps it was a noose; no, don’t be so upset, don’t be so hurried, it wasn’t that. It was a sticky, silken thread. I grabbed hold and pulled; it seemed to come from the hole in my shoe. No matter how much I pulled, it grew longer and longer. It was strange. Out of curiosity I continued to pull, and something even stranger happened. Gradually my body began to tilt; I could no longer hold myself up straight. Was the earth’s axis tilting? The direction of the force of gravity changing?

My socks and shoes fell from my foot onto the surface of the road; I knew what was happening. The earth’s axis wasn’t warped—my leg had gotten shorter. As I pulled at the string my leg shrank. Just like the elbow of a torn jacket will unravel, my leg was coming undone. The thread was my own leg, coming to pieces like the fibres of a cotton plant.

I could not walk another step more. Bewildered, I could no longer stand; but equally bewildering, the leg which I held in my hands, now transformed into silken thread, began to move all by itself. Slowly, slowly it inched its way forward; without any help from me at all, like a snake unraveling itself, it began to wrap around my whole body. When my left leg was all used up the thread naturally moved to the right one. The thread finally wrapped my whole body into a sack but it didn’t stop there. From my belly to my chest; from my chest to my
shoulders, I gradually became undone. The parts of me coming off stiffened up the sack from the inside. Finally, I disappeared.

Only a large, empty cocoon was left.

Ahh, finally I could rest. The red evening sun coloured the cocoon. This was truly the home no one could drive me away from. But now that I had a home, there was no ‘me’ left to return to it.

Time ceased inside the cocoon. Outside it had gotten dark, but since inside it was always dusk, the colours of the setting sun shone redly from within. This remarkable peculiarity of course had to attract the stranger’s attention. He spotted the me who had become a cocoon lying between the rails and the platform of the train station. At first he was perplexed, but then he changed his mind, thinking he’d made a rare find. He put me into his pocket. After leaving me lying about in there for a while, he transferred me to his son’s toy-box.42

The transformation of a nameless, homeless wanderer into an empty shell is a fine metaphor for Abe’s empty, alienated individual, a continuation of the imagery of hollowness and transparency Abe uses earlier in the collection—“the transformation of the man into an empty integument functions as an objective correlative of his total estrangement from society, reification, and loss of self-identity.”43 The lack of a defined place, the lack of a home which Abe had examined in Owarishi michi no shirube ni here brings about the complete dissolution of the protagonist and effects his transformation into an oddity, a curiosity to be gathered up by an equally anonymous collector—who promptly forgets all

about him, passing this empty shell along to his son’s toy box almost as the heirloom of a social class guaranteeing the non-interconnectedness of these individuals throughout the generations to come. Physical transformation here becomes a mark of impoverishedness, a manifestation of an even greater social dysfunctionality than mere homelessness could imply—and indeed, imply this it does. Consider the specifically political overtones of this exchange between the protagonist and a homeowner:

But perhaps I’d made a big mistake—perhaps it wasn’t that I had no home, perhaps I’d only forgotten where it was. It was possible... Gathering up my courage, I knocked on the door.

Fortunately, a woman’s face appeared, kindly smiling from the half opened window. I smiled, too, and greeted her as a gentleman would [*shinshi no yô ni eshakushita*].

“I’m just a bit curious, but this wouldn’t be my house, would it?”

The woman’s face quickly stiffened. “But who are you?”

I was about to explain, but I was suddenly at a loss. I didn’t know what I was to explain. How was I to make her accept the fact that who I was simply was not the issue just then? Beginning to despair, I said “But anyway, if you believe this is not my house, I would like you to prove that to me.”

“But...” The woman’s face became frightened. That got me angry.

“If you haven’t any proof, I might as well consider this my house.”

“But this is my house!”

“But what does that mean? It doesn’t mean that if it’s your house it can’t be mine, does it?”
Instead of replying, the woman's face became a wall, and she shut the window.\(^44\)

Abe and the protagonist both here confront the problem of private property as a mechanism through which alienation comes to exist between people who are each in the same situation—both need a home, which could very well be the structure standing before them save for the resistance one party feels to sharing something *of herself* with this stranger. Private property thus gives rise to homelessness, which in turn creates the hollow, identityless shell the protagonist becomes. Other human beings have taken away his very humanity, through the isolating mechanism of ownership.

Yet this very short work does not only present a metaphorical formulation of Abe's socialistic denunciation of alienation through private property. It also flirts with the deceptive qualities of narrative structure to create the illusion of a unified personality—for logically, the narrator of this story *cannot* narrate its conclusion.

Although the narrative consciousness of the text is that of a man undergoing a gradual transformation from his human existence into an inanimate object—a highly anti-realistic motif—the narrative form of this text is that of an interior monologue, rendering the perceptions and reflections of the protagonist in (mock) naturalistic fashion of conventional psychological I-narration. Thus, the text... subverts and ridicules traditional genres of realistic fiction, asserting its non-mimetic autonomy over against the conventional expectations and interpretative customs of the reader.\(^45\)

\(^{44}\) Abe, "Akai mayu," pp. 127-8

\(^{45}\) Goebel, p. 35
This act of subversion is a function of the asymptotic spiraling off towards infinity of the text’s close: the narrator is gone, but his voice remains. In the absence of his being he may be forever, identitiless but eternal. Presentational rather than re-presentational, this text is a statement of the inadequacy of human terminology to define the states of existence of humans themselves—for an impossible human has here narrated his impossible story to the reader. Abe uses this concluding device in many of his works to play with the ideas of teleology and progression: linearity gives way to circularity in Moetsukita chizu, for example, or to an infinite digression in Mikkai. But what is foremost at stake in these works and through the use of this insanely illogical approach to impossibility is the very definition of reality itself, and the need to base that definition on the actual conditions in which humans live at present. In this sense even this absurdist trope is completely materialist and centred around the real world itself.

I will mention one last short piece from this volume before moving on to other of Abe’s fictions. This story, “Jigyô” (“Enterprise”), is a very apt updating of Jonathan Swift’s “A Modest Proposal.” In this work, an unnamed businessman relates a brief history of his particular line of goods—rats bred specially for human consumption, an idea which turns up now and then in other of Abe’s works from this period—including mention of losing his wife and daughter to a tragedy by which he was not overly upset: several thousand rats escaped one day from the breeding facility and went on a murderous rampage, biting all they could. The businessman has overcome this set-back, however, and now has a new venture: the sale for consumption of humans themselves.

This short work is an almost perfect phrasing of Abe’s Marxist opposition to the forces of capitalist exploitation at work all around him in the hand-to-mouth days following
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Japan’s defeat in the Second World War. It may well be that “allegories are the natural mirrors of ideology,” but satire too has definite reflective qualities.

*Kabe* then contains many of the features which will recur in later novels by Abe. It deals with the irrationality of modern existence through the mechanisms of the subterranean trial of the protagonist in “S. Karuma shi no hanzai,” and the impossibility of the poet’s adventures in “Baberu no tō no tanuki.” It deals with human exploitation in the short work “Jigyō,” and with private property as a means to reinforce that exploitation in “Akai mayu.” It also approaches an exploration of the alienating effects of technology, a theme which Abe treated in greater detail in his long novel from 1959, *Daiyon kanpyōki* (*Inter Ice-age Four*, tr. 1970). In this novel uncontrolled technological advance, the increasing social dependency on computerisation, and societal blind faith in science’s ability to determine the best, logical good for human kind, become the sources for the very downfall of the entire human species and the rise of a new breed of water-breathing people known as ‘Aquans’.

*Daiyon kanpyōki*, stylistically an intricate blending of science fiction and detective story and thus thoroughly *popular* in its approach to a difficult analysis of a technological dystopia, and also thus thoroughly in keeping with the ways in which Japanese writers had ‘traditionally’ approached the science-fiction genre, is arranged in a series of ‘program cards’ which function as the notebooks of Abe’s first novel. In fact this work plays upon the multi-volumed trope Abe uses so often, by having, in its first few pages, its protagonist read over the four scrap-books he had maintained of a project he was involved in bringing to completion—the creation of the ‘predicting machine’ which forms the central focus of this novel. *Daiyon kanpyōki* tells the tale of a scientist, Dr. Katsumi, who has invented a

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46 Fletcher, p. 368
computer capable of predicting the future. His machine must compete with a predicting machine the Soviets had already built, ‘Moscow I’, but while it is still in its experimental stages, the Soviets release their own more advanced ‘Moscow II’. While searching about for a live subject on whom, surreptitiously, to test his machine, the scientist stumbles upon a murder in which he and his assistant become implicated. As his subsequent investigations into this crime progress, using the predicting machine to ‘resuscitate’ the victim artificially, the scientist begins to receive disturbing and warning phone calls from a voice he seems somehow to recognise. Dr. Katsumi persists though, pursuing various leads and uncovering a secret group which purchases aborted foetuses. This group has succeeded in breeding mammals outside of the womb, and in creating aquatic rats and dogs. As his investigation continues, Dr. Katsumi discovers that his own wife has been tricked into having an abortion—for which she received the fee of seven thousand yen the group had been paying—and that the group is none other than his own research team. Further, the voice in the mysterious phone calls he has been receiving is his own, generated by none other than his own predicting machine. The group has an enormous plan upon which they are diligently at work: the breeding of aquatic humans, raised communally, fed by machine, completely free of ‘ordinary’ human contact. The aim of the project is to create a species of human capable of populating the earth when, due to global warming during the ‘fourth inter-ice age’, the seas begin to rise and cover the land, as the predicting machine has foretold they will. The work ends with the predicting machine showing Dr. Katsumi an electronically generated television image of this future world: in it, one of the ‘Aquans’ becomes enchanted by the sound of the wind and swims away from his home to the last tiny island of dry land. He painfully pulls his aquatic body onto the island to hear the wind, but dies. Seeing this, Katsumi realises he will be killed by the group, but he realises also
that he is incapable of preventing this. With the sound of the killer’s rubber soled shoes approaching along a corridor, the novel ends.

Coming as it does on the eve of Abe’s break with the JCP, it is not surprising that a critique of Communism plays a significant and explicit rôle in the early pages of this novel, which ultimately presents social domination over the individual as insidious and destructive. The event which sets the plot’s chain of events fully in motion is the prediction the Soviet machine makes, that by 1984 the world will have slid irrevocably into Communism. Abe’s characters debate this vocally:

The news brought us a disturbing development. I heard about it in an early-morning phone call from the papers.

"Have you heard Moscow II’s prediction? It says that within thirty-two years, the first communist society will be realised, and around 1984 the last capitalist society will have gone to ruin. What do you think, Doctor?"

I burst out laughing. But when I thought about it, it wasn’t funny at all. In fact I’d never heard anything so likely to cause indigestion.

Even in the lab this was all anyone was talking about. I had the feeling something unpleasant was about to occur, and my spirits were dashed.

The young researchers were talking amongst themselves.

"Even though it’s a machine, I’m surprised that it says just all that old stuff…"

"Why? It may be true."

"I wonder if they made it say that."

"I do, too. Generally it’s strange to think the future has to become some ideology or other."
“It’s strange because you’re thinking about ideologies. To put it more simply, it’s a transition from a situation in which the means of production are private, to a different situation…”

“But still, I wonder if it’s possible to insist that that other situation has to be Communism and nothing else.”

“That’s foolish—isn’t that the definition of Communism, after all?”

“Well, that’s why I say it’s just old stuff.”

“You really don’t get it…”

“But, aren’t ideologies just a method of perception? Method and actuality are different, you know.”

“Hunh? Where’s there anything new in that idea?”

This clear reference to the differences between perception and actuality is significant, for this is an important issue in Abe’s work: one’s life is determined to a great extent by one’s method of perception which may not reflect reality at all. By abrogating one’s responsibility and living in accord with a mechanical prediction, the risk is great that the method of perception which has determined the quality of that prediction will be antithetical to one’s own values. Later in the novel the Doctor’s assistant describes his feelings about the inevitability of a machine predicting Communism as the most likely future development:

I believe the machine. The researchers and ourselves as well have begun to calculate the prediction program from only social data. We’ve been influenced by Moscow II. And so, speaking only from the outside like this, it may be that the final, maximally valuable prediction is that ultimately there will be a Communist

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state, just as the machine says. To put it differently, since we’ve used the prediction machine exclusively on this one, practical point, there’s no other way for things to turn out. In that sense, it’s really interesting that in the machine’s judgement, Communism is the maximum prediction value. Yet for man, the most important thing is not society but, after all, man. If things aren’t right for man, then no matter how rational the organisation may be, there’s nothing there for him.49

Communism is fine, Abe is saying—from an objective, mechanical point of view, but in that humans are not machines, this social arrangement must focus not on its rationality but its support and tolerance of the individual. Further, when humans come to subordinate their own actions to the will of machines, they give up the very things which make them not only human but individual, as well, as Dr. Katsumi comes to discover when he realises the predicting machine he has created has taken over his own identity. This realisation comes about by degrees—early on, the protagonist speaks of the machine’s “self-consciousness,”50 and he once even feels pride when he thinks to himself that “the one who gave the machine [its] abilities was none other than me myself. ... You are a part of me, made large...”51 Over time however the doctor’s pride turns to horror when finally the machine admits that the doctor’s assistant had programmed the doctor’s personality into it himself. In fact the doctor is told that it was his assistant, as well, who murdered the man they were initially planning on studying. Not only has the protagonist’s identity been usurped by the machine, but his research team have purposefully excluded him from the

49 ibid., p. 26
50 ibid., p. 21
51 ibid., p. 37
true project in which they are involved—the creation of a new form of machine-nurtured, water-breathing human being and a new type of mechanically predicted Communist society. The individual, here Doctor Katsumi, has no place in this plan, and in fact has been blind to its progress all along. The protagonist’s name is quite ironic in this sense, for it is written with the characters for katsu, meaning ‘victory’ or ‘to defeat’, and miru, meaning to see: Doctor Katsumi is indeed the one who ‘sees victory’, but can neither recognise it, nor participate in it, nor prevent it, his opposition to it notwithstanding.

Despite the dreams and efforts of their creators to perfect a ‘utopian’ paradise after the great floods foreseen by the predicting machine, among the Aquans who populate the new earth in this novel there are still a few not without their own curiosity, and their own temptations to dream of something, if not necessarily better, then definitely something other. This ‘other’ is the world of dry land and of air—the opposite of all that sustains them. The novel ends with one of the Aquans swimming away from his group, swimming for days, till he arrives at the last tiny island left. He crawls out of the ocean onto this speck of land. “The wind bathed his eyes, and something seeped out of them as if in response.”52 For the first time he has felt his own tears. With this he dies—yet he is satisfied nonetheless, for he has felt the wind. In this way Abe suggests that it is quite natural to imagine a different form of existence, quite natural and in fact inevitable—through the imagination the social world is created anew, and through this recreation the social world can either accept or reject the individual as valuable within its structure.

The novel which I am using to mark a clear transitional point in Abe’s writing does so through a number of means both thematic and stylistic. Suna no onna is very much about the clashing ideologies of the individual and the group—in it, as in Daiyon kanpyôki, there

52 ibid., p. 170
is an examination of the validity of a communist society as a ground on which the individual may stand, but here the analysis is far more subtle, carried out allegorically and subtextually. The two sides of the issue debate the matter less explicitly here than Abe has his characters do in that earlier work, and the work itself comes to a more ambiguous close. Nonetheless, in this novel Abe rejects much of the socialising impulses that characters in his earlier stories had exhibited, and presents instead a monolithic communal organisation capable of, and in fact intent on, crushing opposition to its traditional entrenchment. So much, in a nutshell, for its thematic renewal of Abe’s work. Stylistically, this novel is far more realistic than his earlier pieces, and far more simply structured, telling a straightforward story with few plot twists.

The story it tells is that of Niki Jumpei, a school teacher who dreams of discovering a previously unknown species of beetle and so securing a name for himself in entomological circles. During one vacation he takes a short trip to a seaside community, there to hunt for desert insects. Having missed the last bus back at the end of his day’s journey, he accepts an offer of lodgings at one of the village homes. He finds himself being lowered into a pit in an enormous sand dune, at the bottom of which stands a house which a widow, still young, occupies alone. In this pit the villagers trap Niki, forcing him to stay with the woman as her new partner in the work she, like all the villagers, performs every night—clearing away the sand that threatens to engulf her home. Through the course of the novel Niki desperately protests the monstrous unreasonableness of this situation, urging the woman—and the village as a whole—to abandon her foolish, traditional attachment to this dying village. He tries to escape, but is unsuccessful. At the end of the novel he discovers a method of trapping fresh drinking water, and experiences a desire to share this knowledge with the villagers. A chance to escape presents itself to him when the woman must go to a nearby hospital, pregnant with Niki’s ex uterine child, but he decides to bide his time, not
yet willing to live as a villager, but no longer struggling for freedom. He wonders if perhaps he hasn’t discovered a new self within this stagnant community, but the reader must reject this optimistic conclusion: during the period of his confinement Niki’s spirit has been broken, and the product of his ‘integration’ into this community, the abnormal pregnancy, is precisely that, abnormal.

And so Niki Jumpei, not quite a citizen of his new world, is lost to his former one—he has come to adopt the shape of this community into which he has been forced, the putty of his existence molded by forces more powerful than his own. He was without choice to do otherwise, for, as the final few scenes of the cinematic adaptation of this novel make clear, Niki was faced with either an inhospitable tract of desert, or an equally inhospitable open ocean over which to make his journey alone. Visually at the close of this film the audience must understand that Niki’s only choice was to stay within the community which had broken him to its form. Verbally at the close of this novel, the readers must understand that Niki is now paralysed within a rigid structure he is incapable of changing—how either they or he will perceive this paralysis depends entirely upon their adoption of one of two ideological poles. Todorov discusses these ideological extremes in an admittedly different context which is nonetheless not without its pertinence:

the coexistence of ideologies in our world—to put it hastily, in terms of what concerns us, that of an individualist ideology and a collective ideology—is the necessary condition of the current copresence of interpretive strategies…. It is not superiority, nor necessarily a curse, but instead rather a characteristic of our time in particular: that of being able to agree with each of the opposing camps, and not to be able to choose between them—as if the distinctive feature of our civilisation
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were the suspension of choice and the tendency to understand everything without doing anything.\(^{53}\)

Niki understands the villagers; he understands, too, his own desires for escape. He is unable to choose effectively, for his situation has rendered choice moot—a charting of the change in Niki's attire throughout the film, for example, makes this immediately and visually clear, for Niki, starting out from western clothes, ends in thoroughly traditional \textit{happi} and \textit{zōri}, his own clothes rendered unwearable by excess of physical strain. Lest the reader imagine that the merger of these two worlds and their corresponding ideological tenets is a positive—and fruitful one—Abe demonstrates in no uncertain terms that this is not so. The pregnancy of the woman, the offspring of the physical union of Niki the modern 'individual' and this rigidly traditional villager, is abnormal: the foetus has taken root outside of her womb and threatens not only its own survival but that of its mother, as well. In this metaphorical fashion Abe rejects both a dogmatically imposed social cohesion, on the one hand, and an isolated individualism which, on its own, is incapable of transcending either the status quo of which it had grown tired, or the new community into which it had been thrust against its will. The only path toward true freedom is along the untried one: toward the new world of "barrel houses" and barrel communities Niki imagines as a utopian vision early on in the work. This new social order, however, is something of which Niki cannot fully conceive, and he must remain a prisoner of his own weak ambitions.

The failed pregnancy of the woman bears a further metaphorical significance, pointing out the failure of intimacy between the man and the woman to produce anything revitalising. In earlier works by Abe, the figure of the mother is conspicuously absent. The

\(^{53}\) Todorov, Tzvetan \textit{Symbolism and Interpretation}, p. 170
role of the father is ambiguous at best, but in "S. Karuma shi no hanzai," he plays an ultimately hostile part as an ally of the conspiracy against the narrator. Here in Suna no onna, Abe denies even the possibility of parenthood, in order to suggest the impossibility of the future. Niki uses the word ‘Hope’ ironically to name the trap in which he plans on capturing a crow, to which he intends to attach a note asking for help, but the very essence of hope, the conception of a child, remains a threat to the health of the woman and a clear indication of the abnormality of the two ways of life which these ‘parents’ represent.

Abe returns to the dreams of escape and re-creation which coloured the pages of Suna no onna in his next three novels, Tanin no kao (1964, tr. The Face of Another, 1966), Enomoto Buyō (1965, The Life of Enomoto Buyō), and Moetsukita chizu (1967, tr. The Ruined Map, 1969). Enomoto Buyō is Abe’s only historical novel, which tells the rather embellished story of a government official (Enomoto Takeaki—who actually lived during the Edo Period), who fled his duties along with a group of followers to form a private community in the northern wilds of Japan’s ‘last’ frontier, Hokkaido. Tanin no kao and Moetsukita chizu, on the other hand, deal with escape as a pursuit of identity: the former concerns its construction and alteration; the latter, literally, its disappearance. In addition, these works continue the tendency towards an ‘intimate’ alienation Abe explored in Suna no onna, for here, too, the focus is on the relations between a small ensemble of characters: a husband and wife in Tanin no kao, a detective and his female client in Moetsukita chizu. The subtle tensions between lovers who remain strangers to one another become the metaphoric representations of social tension and isolation here, and Abe turns his attention to the careful, psychological creation of protagonists who are trapped within the walls of relationships they can scarcely define, let alone break through. The act of communication takes on special significance in these novels as a process more likely to result in failure than
understanding, a process which almost inevitably guarantees the unbridgeable distance between individuals who should be much closer to one another. Communication fails because its participants have lost first of all *themselves,* and without this prerequisite definition of their own identity, there is nothing for them to communicate.

This is especially clear in *Tanin no kao,* the story of a scientist whose face has been scarred in a laboratory accident. To conceal his scars and, he hopes, to rekindle the physical relationship he feels they have hindered between himself and his wife, he manufactures a prosthetic mask complete with synthetic facial hair. Wearing this mask he attempts to construct a new identity for himself over the course of one year; within this new identity, he attempts to seduce his wife who, he believes, cannot see through his deception. Of course, the wife has realised from the outset what her husband is planning; despite her initial sympathy for him, she rejects the oddly-obsessed lengths to which he goes to maintain the charade. Abe has structured this novel as a series of notebooks which the protagonist has written and left in an apartment hide-away for his wife to discover when she arrives for a rendezvous with ‘him’, the character of the husband behind the mask. The work opens with the husband’s letter to the wife, as an explanation for what she is about to read and a justification for the judgement she must make over him:

Threading your way through the twists of this long labyrinth you have finally come. Relying on the map you got from ‘him’, you’ve at last arrived at my hide-out. You must have climbed with intoxicated steps the stairs which squeaked like organ pedals, to the first room. You held your breath and knocked, but for some reason, no reply came back to you. Instead only a young girl came running up like a kitten to open the door for you. You try asking if there is a message, but the girl does not answer; she leaves behind a faint smile and runs away.
You look for 'him' and peek into the room. But you can find not so much as even 'his' shadow, to say nothing of 'him' there in that dead room, which sends the smell of ruin towards you. You're looked back at by walls which have forgotten their expressions; you shudder.... With trembling hands you cut open the seal, and now you are beginning to read this letter...

...How I hope, with what thoughts do I hope for you to slip without incident through this moment and make another step in my direction! Whether I have been beaten by 'him' or 'he' has been beaten by me, at any rate this masked play has come to its end. I have murdered 'him' and I announce myself as the criminal; I have decided to confess, leaving nothing out. I want you to keep on reading, whether out of generosity or its opposite. Whoever has authority to judge has also the responsibility to hear the defendant's testimony....

Now then, let's go back to my time for a while. It's probably about three days before your 'now', at midnight....

But this is just enough; I'll finish off here. No matter how many explanations I pile up to explain themselves, they will never amount to anything. More than all of that, what's important is for you now really to do me the favour of reading this letter; it is important for my time to begin to overlap with your reality that way.

You'll keep on reading through the notebooks, too... I'm catching up with your time, and it's important for you to keep on reading, right up to the last page...54

Towards the end of the novel, Abe includes a letter in response from the wife, slipped in between the pages of the final notebook, rejecting the husband and admitting to having known all along that it was in fact him trying to seduce her behind the mask. The wife

54 Abe, Tanin no kao, Abe Kôbô zensakuhin, Tokyo: Shinchôsha. 1972. V. 6, pp. 149-151
confesses to having felt sympathy at first for her husband, but as over time the misunderstandings his behaviour was causing mounted, she had no choice but to reject him—with or without the mask, for she has come to realise that the mask was for him only a way to reveal a new part of himself.

It was not the mask that died..., it was you. It was not only the girl with the yoyo who knew about your masked play. I knew, too, from that first moment... From that moment I saw through you completely....

But still, you really made one mistake after another. You wrote that I rejected you, but that’s a lie. Isn’t it that you have rejected yourself? I think that I can understand that feeling of wanting to reject yourself. I was more than half resigned to having no other recourse but to share your suffering after things came about as they had. It was because of that, that I was actually cheered up by your mask. I felt quite fortunate; I even thought about what we call love, about how it takes our masks from us, and how we must cooperate to put our masks back on for that reason and for the sakes of those we love. Because if there were no masks, there would be none of the pleasure that comes from taking them off, would there. I wonder if you understand what I mean.

But I don’t expect you not to understand. Even you, in the end, don’t you yourself question whether what you believe to be your mask may be your true face, or what you believe to be your true face may be the mask? But even so, anyone who has ever been tempted has been tempted knowing full well that this was so.

Still, the mask will never come back. Although even you seemed to have tried to take back yourself with the mask, at some point, you began to think of it only
as an invisible cloak to run away from yourself. At that point wasn’t it no longer a mask but the same thing as another true face? At last you’d let your secret slip, hadn’t you [tōtō shippo o dashite shimaimashita ne]. It’s not a mask; it’s you. Isn’t it precisely from letting your partner know that a mask is a mask, that the meaning behind putting it on arises? … Ultimately it’s not that the mask was bad; you just didn’t know how to treat it well enough. The proof of this is that even when you were wearing it, you couldn’t do anything. You could do nothing good, you could do nothing bad—you could do nothing. You could just wander around the streets and then afterwards write this long confession, like a snake swallowing its own tail. … You can no longer call the mask back to you. As long as the mask will not come back, is there any reason for me to come back?  

What this exchange demonstrates is the complete gulf of incomprehensibility which bad faith can generate between two people, the great impenetrable void of misunderstanding which can stand between two ostensible lovers, once apparently intimate but now worse than strangers to each other: enemies who hold the keys to secret and mutual humiliation, despite their inability to communicate. So great is this gulf that the two even seem to exist in different times. Throughout the novel the couple almost never converse, and so it is significant that this exchange takes the shape of letters, of a mediated form of communication left, in fact abandoned, for the other to find or not, depending on the whims of chance—in this modern, urban age, these haphazard dialogic confessions of deceit and created alterity pass for the meaningful speech-acts of more hopeful times. The protagonist wears a mask which hides his identity not from his wife, but from himself; ultimately behind this mask there is no one. In the microcosmic society the wife and

55 ibid., pp. 318-320
husband form, conversation fails, and both partners spin off into the voids of their featureless existences. Waiting, at the end of the novel, for his wife to return to their apartment after reading his notebooks, the husband comes to realise that he has missed his chance to see her, and realises too that this missed opportunity is his own fault—but the realisation, like his final, hurried actions, has come too late. However much he may hurry after her, she herself has disappeared into the same vastness of the city upon which the husband had relied to conceal the workings of his plans. As he writes, "who could have imagined that one could be given so much derision and humiliation by oneself?"\(^{56}\) The protagonist has given up trying to find a positive solution with his wife, and will instead lay in wait for her in the emptiness of the city, a pistol ever at the ready in his hand:

Even though you recognised the necessity of the mask, that was only a domesticated mask which would never break the law... But next time you’d better watch out. Next time, it will be the mask of a wild animal that will attack you. This mask will be able to concentrate on breaking the rules, without any of the weakness which comes from being blinded by jealousy, since its true shape will already have been spied out. You have dug your own grave by yourself....

Suddenly I hear the sound of a woman’s sharply echoing shoes. The mask alone remains; I disappear. ...

...Of course, this is not the responsibility of the mask alone; I’m well aware that the problem lies within me... And yet that part within me is not only mine, it is something I have in common with everyone else, and so I do not carry this

\(^{56}\) ibid., p. 318
problem alone. Yet even so I refuse to share the blame... I hate people... Who would dare have me recognise the need to explain myself to anyone at all?\textsuperscript{57}

The identity the protagonist has sought becomes here both a barricade behind which he hides, and a license to extinguish his humanity. It postulates anti-social violence as the only means left for it to communicate with anyone else—and with its creator, as well. In this sense the protagonist’s efforts have more than failed, they have destroyed the very premise for their justification, for they have precluded the one goal for which they aimed: the creation of channels of authentic communication. The failure of the new identity created through the bad faith of deception is equally a destruction of the old identity, made untenable by its very desire for renewal.

Abe further explores this pursuit of identity in \textit{Moetsukita chizu}, a novel which came three years after \textit{Tanin no kao}. Here Abe describes the alienating qualities of the city more explicitly than he had in works up to this point. It is within the city that identity is lost; this loss, in the form of a physical disappearance, provides the premise of the plot, which concerns a detective hired to track down a woman’s missing husband. During the course of his investigations the detective seems to discover an intrigue he can never quite put his finger on, involving a box of matches from a coffee shop containing two different types of matches, the mysterious hoodlum brother of the missing man’s wife who wears a badge apparently to identify himself as a member of a secret, criminal society, a local politician, and rival suppliers of propane for the rapidly-forming suburbs on the outskirts of the rapidly-growing city. The missing husband seemed to have been involved in some subterfuge between these rival propane sellers, whose contracts are ephemeral things: they supply propane to newly-created subdivisions until these wards reach a size large enough

\textsuperscript{57} ibid., pp. 329-330
to be incorporated into the city, which then assumes responsibility for supplying cooking and heating-gas, thus putting the suppliers out of business. The detective is never quite able to work out the details of the intrigue he suspects all around him; throughout the course of the novel, however, he comes to doubt not the existence of this plot, but the solidity of his own identity. The novel ends with a setting Abe borrowed from one of his short stories, “Kābu no mukō” (1966, tr. “Beyond the Curve,” 1991), in which the detective finds himself seeking clues in a coffee shop owned by his own brother, who had sent him out only a few hours earlier on a brief errand. The detective, although he has returned safely to the coffee shop, has completely forgotten not only why he is there, but who he himself is—he sneaks out of the coffee shop to telephone the mysterious phone number the missing husband had carried with him, and finds that the woman who responds is the waitress from that very restaurant, yet her significance remains a mystery. The search for the woman’s husband may have been a hallucinatory fantasy; at any rate, for the detective, his true search—for his own existence—has only begun.

This cyclical ending to the novel presents the type of asymptotic conclusion of which Abe was to become quite fond. Although structurally the work draws very much to a close, it does not ‘end’, as such, returning to its point of departure—the novel repeats its opening scenes as the detective rounds the curve in the road which leads him to the wife’s apartment, but at the close of the novel the scene leads to his discovery that he has completely forgotten what exists ‘beyond the curve’. He returns to the coffee shop at the bottom of the hill to make his telephone call to the mysterious number. While waiting for an explanatory reply, he tries to name the corpse of a cat flattened by traffic, and feels a sense of release which verges on madness. This return to the beginning serves both to set the story out anew and to cast hallucinatory suspicions over all that has gone before, and all that is about to follow. Even the first few pages of the novel, during which the detective
meets the wife of the missing husband, contain clues as to the possible 'unreality' of the setting and the events to follow:

The perspective was weirdly distorted... I was struck by the illusion that I was looking at infinity turned into a model...

At a glance there were certainly passers-by, but within this too-distantly focused scenery, people seemed rather to be like fictitious reflections. The scenery grew more and more transparent, almost as if it didn't exist, and only my own figure floated up like a picture burned from a negative...

When she disappeared behind the other side of the curtain, even the impression she'd made on me became suddenly faint and ambiguous... I simply could not understand how her image could suddenly grow so dim, even though there was no doubt that I'd seen her, even though I'd been sitting across the table, at a distance of not even two metres from her, looking at her straight in the face.58

In the story that unfolds, the protagonist is drawn deeper and deeper into the shadowy world of run-away taxi-drivers and missing persons existing below the superficial, daily reality of the city. This 'underworld' in which run-aways live freely, by their own rules, forms the basis for the definition of the city which Abe offers as an epigraph to the novel, not as a reflection of reality but as an ideal: "The city: a closed infinity. A maze in which you are never lost. A map just for you, on which every block has exactly the same address. And so even if ever you lose sight of the road, you can never be lost."59

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58 Abe, Moetsukita chizu, Abe Kôbô zensaku hin. Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1972. V. 8, pp. 8-11
59 ibid., p. 6
In contrast to this, the city in which the protagonist wanders, lost in the maze of his investigation, becomes an all-encompassing totality from which an individual can extricate himself only through a total and almost magical disappearance. It is significant that the missing husband was a fuel-supplier for the newly-formed suburbs of this expanding metropolis: as the city grows larger and larger, the individual disappears into its progress. Even before his disappearance there was little to distinguish this husband from his neighbours, and little reason for him to interact with them intimately and freely. Abe describes the complex of danchi apartments in which the wife of the missing husband lives as a “filing cabinet for exactly identical human lives,” as “nothing more than the glass frame which surrounds the portrait of one’s own family.”  

The human lives which fill this cabinet belong not so much to vibrant individuals as to “animals who walk upright... heavy sacks of meat and organs” who remind even the missing husband’s wife of “a group of rats brought together by magic.” The human spirit in this compartmentalised, urban wasteland has been replaced by an animalistic resistance to communication which leads even the protagonist to contemplate the violent attack of a housewife he sees coming home late to her apartment in this complex:

Footsteps which sounded like someone walking on just their heels hurriedly approached... A woman, walking nervously... a white coat which not even the darkness could hide... She pretended not to have noticed me but the stiffening in her body, which she turned towards me like a suit of armour, seemed to be telling me not to meddle with her... How would it be if all of a sudden I were to drag...
onto the grass and knock her down... She wouldn’t shout; she’d fall easily, like a statue, and pretend to pass out... Her white coat would stick out too much; should I cover her with dried grass? The woman, not moving, buried under dried grass... Under the dried grass she’d easily become naked, only her arms and legs exposed, open... A strong wind blew, and the remaining grasses were scattered... but instead of the nakedness I expected to be revealed there, all I saw was an empty, black hole... Directly under a mercury-arc lamp, the shadow of the white-coated woman revolved, and before my eyes, while growing huge, it dissolved into the darkness. Her arms and legs disappeared, too, leaving behind only an empty hole like a bottomless well....

It is the apparent fear which the woman offers to the unknown detective, her resistance to him as a stranger, which triggers this violent, sexual fantasy in him as a means of breaking down the barriers her trepidation raises between them—here too, as in Tanin no kao, violence is left as the only means through which to open a channel of communication between isolated city dwellers who have no other course towards intimacy.

Violence and the expansion of the city are further intimately connected in an episode which describes very well Abe’s perception of the continued presence of nomadic elements within the modern, urban milieu. As the protagonist pursues various leads into the husband’s disappearance, he investigates the activities of one of the small-time fuel-suppliers in a newly-created subdivision. He arrives near nightfall, and finds the brother-in-law of the missing man involved in some extortion of the supplier. The two have dinner together at one of the portable canteen trucks which service the construction site, located along a dry river bed. The location is bustling with activity, as work crews build the new

63 ibid., p. 25
suburb: "A broad tract of bare land, from which fields, houses, and thickets had been completely torn up, was lit just like a stage by huge lamps—they looked like they were a metre across—on three sides." As they eat, the brother senses something amiss amongst the workmen gathered at the other trucks; they seem to be charging themselves up. The brother suggests that the protagonist leave; as he is about to do so, however, a riot breaks out between rival gangs of workers. The brother-in-law is attacked. The three prostitutes who had been waiting for their night’s business are dragged off by one group of men. The canteen trucks try desperately to avoid the fray, suffering damage as they drive away. As the protagonist slowly makes his own escape in his car by driving gingerly around the combatants, he passes near the group who have taken the women:

Almost all of my pursuers, not wanting to be left out, were caught up in the ritual surrounding the women. Since my headlights were out I couldn’t really tell what sort of ritual was going on, but in my imagination floated images of smooth lumps of meat, stripped of their skins, sliced, hanging from hooks in a butcher’s freezer.

Not only is an actual ‘ritual’ involving irrepressible brutality taking place, but this act is mirrored by a more violent fantasy which the protagonist plays out in his mind. Only escape from this city which robs people of their human interconnectedness can restore humans to their individual, healthy status.

The two novels which appeared just before and just after Moetsukita chizu offer a glimpse of the options which then become available to the individual who is able to effect

64 ibid., p. 75
65 ibid., p. 88
this type of total disappearance which alone can rescue him from the encompassing morass of the city. Enomoto Buyō (1965), despite its peculiarity amongst the body of Abe’s work as depicting a historical individual in a historical setting, is important for providing—in however embellished a form—a historical precedent for the possibility of a community constructed of free individuals in opposition to an established social order that I am arguing most of Abe’s work in general to have proposed—an example of the possibility, because Abe never actually depicts this community, only the legend which builds up around it. The individual has the option of leaving the city completely and becoming once again a nomad, living off the land in whatever wilderness still remains—but as urbanisation and industrialisation both increase, this wilderness proportionally decreases till this option loses its viability.

The other option available to the individual who is able to break free from the city and its society does not remove him from the city physically, but only philosophically, as it were, for he remains within its boundaries. It thus offers more promise, for it contains within its premise the possibility of a reformation of the very city itself. This is the option Abe explored in Hako otoko (1973, tr. The Box Man, 1974).

In this novel Abe presents a protagonist who has decided to abandon his apartment, his job, and his urban life, and live within a sturdy cardboard box which he carries about with him as a portable shell, worn over the upper half of his body, much as a hermit-crab carries with it its own borrowed shell—but as the narrator of the novel observes,

They say that even in the case of the hermit crab, once it begins its life under its shell, the back part of the body, being covered by the carapace, becomes soft and thus breaks into pieces and the crab dies if forced out. A box man can’t very well
take off his box and simply return to the ordinary world. When he takes it off it is to emerge into another world, just as an insect metamorphoses...

From the human chrysalis that is the box man,

Even I know not

What kind of living being will issue forth.66

Abe structures the novel as a first-person narrative—complete with instructions on how the reader can construct his own box. The nameless protagonist describes the various events which form his typical daily routine, but as the novel progresses, the narrator himself introduces considerable doubts as to his ‘true’ identity. In fact from the very outset, the narrator takes pains to emphasise the temporary nature of his identification as the ‘box man’: “This is the record of a box man. I am beginning this account in a box.... That is to say, at this juncture the box man is me. A box man, in his box, is recording the chronicle of a box man.”67 Over the course of the novel the narrator comes to suggest in strong terms that he is in ‘reality’ a morphine-addicted doctor who runs the small clinic to which the ‘box man’ has been admitted for treatment, having been ‘tricked’ by the nurse there to sell his box. Abe has said that he feels as if he “committed a crime to write [this] novel,”68 for the great complexity with which he put this work together. “The structure is quite unique. There are many tricks, but [Abe doesn’t] think they can be understood, even by the careful reader.”69 These tricks work together to destroy narrative comprehensibility and the logical flow of sections into each other. Abe, in capturing the madness of a drug-addicted

67 ibid., p. 3
68 Abe, “An Interview with Abe Kôbô,” Contemporary Literature, V. 15, No. 4, Autumn 1974, p. 447
69 ibid.
character, has done more than this: he has constructed this narrative as a descent into the labyrinthine world of constantly fleeing, fragmented identity. As the box man tells his story, he encounters a 'fake' box man who wishes to purchase his box, through the agency of the nurse in the medical clinic. Going to see this nurse to cancel the contracted sale, the box man discovers himself to be virtually in two places at once:

I remembered I had put the rear-view mirror from my car in my tote bag.... I held it up diagonally and peered into it from below.... Contrary to my expectations (I had assumed the top and bottom would be reversed), I was able to see everything at an almost perfect angle...

Indeed the room itself was of little importance.... There were two people in it. I was completely fascinated by them...

One was the girl... She was stark naked. She was standing facing me stark naked in the middle of the room, and she was talking to someone about something.

The person who was being addressed was a box man. He was seated on the edge of the bed and was wearing a box exactly like mine... it was a cardboard box, exactly the same as my own—from the degree of dirtiness to the remains of the printed letters... It was a fake replica of myself, imitated by design...

(Suddenly it occurred to me. Somewhere I remembered having seen exactly the same scene as this.) [This is printed upside down in the original.] 70

This fragmentation of the character grows in intensity, till the very narrative itself fragments: the narrator includes inserts which he says have been written on different paper, 70

70 Abe, The Box Man, pp. 44-5
yet still in his handwriting, in an attempt to ‘prove’ his authenticity as a box man; he shifts into the second-person, and includes one section, entitled “In Which it is a Question of the Sullen Relationship Between the I Who Am Writing and the I Who Am Being Written About,”71 and, after writing of the things he has learned as a box man, in order to prove the differences between himself and the usurping, ‘fake’ box man, he poses the question, “Now, I’d like to have you think about this. Which one of us was not a box man? Who failed to become a box man?”72 The answer is impossible, for there is sufficient doubt as to the existence of any particular identity to make the question nonsensical. Eventually the narrative begins to tell stories of people other than the box man: the narrator writes of men who fall asleep near the seashore and dream, under the influence of a type of shore grass, ‘shellweed’, of becoming fish—“They say that among those fish tossed up onto the seashore after [severe storms] there were not a few unlucky ones who had fallen asleep suffocated by the flowers of the shellweed.”73 The narrator includes a long case study of a young man named ‘D’ who had become a voyeur, spying on the woman next door as she urinated. She caught him at it, and humiliated him by forcing him to strip in front of her, while she hid out of sight. As the man left, however, she tossed him the key to her home, telling him to come back the next day. These narrative digressions frustrate the reader’s interpretive processes, contributing to the ‘crime’ against literature Abe committed in writing them. Part of the problem comes with the ending of the novel—it arguably does not end, but simply abandons the story of the box man to spin off into a vast infinity.

71 ibid., p. 63
72 ibid., p. 149
73 ibid., p. 36
Actually a box, in appearance, is purely and simply a right-angled parallelepiped, but when you look at it from within it’s a labyrinth of a hundred interconnecting puzzle rings. The more you struggle the more the box, like an extra outer skin growing from the body, creates new twists for the labyrinth, making the inner disposition increasingly more complex.

One thing alone is certain and that is that even she [the nurse who has tricked the narrator], who has at present vanished, is hiding somewhere in this labyrinth. She’s not necessarily running away, she just can’t find where I am. At this point I can speak out clearly with assurance. I have no regret. The clues are numerous, and it is reasonable that the truth should exist in proportion to their number.

I can hear the siren of an approaching ambulance.74

With this, Abe concludes the novel—but within the context of the work, there is no sense of ‘conclusion’ here. The ‘Box Man’ continues to wait for something even he does not understand; the reader continues to have the image of the waiting Box Man in his mind. The narrative process has broken down, for one of its essential elements—the denouement—is missing, and yet this lack serves to support the whole. In its absence the conclusion provides the reader with the subtextual point of the work: the understanding of identity is impossible without the concerted will of a unified individual to reveal it.

Early in the novel the narrator records the transformation of a character known as ‘A’ into a box man, a change which this character’s confrontation with another such figure has precipitated. The process takes exactly seven days—which span the period between two Sundays—and begins when A, feeling guilty for having shot a box man with a pellet gun, tentatively crawls inside the box his new ice-chest has arrived in. “A recollection was on

74 ibid., p. 178
the verge of dawning, but he could not grasp it. He wanted to stay like this forever, but in less than a minute he came to his senses and crawled out. Feeling a little uneasy, he decided to keep the box for a while.”75 Over the next week his sojourns into the box last longer and longer, till he is spending every waking moment inside it. Finally,

he went into town and bustled around making purchases: chamber pot, flashlight, thermos, picnic set, tape, wire, hand mirror, seven poster colours, plus various food stuffs... When he got home he reinforced the box with tape... and then... he shut himself up in it. A hung the hand mirror on the inner wall... and then by the radiance of the flashlight he painted his lips green with one of the poster colours. After that he traced, in gradually expanding circles, the seven colours of the rainbow, beginning with red, around his eyes. His face... looked like the scene of an amusement park... He could see his small retreating figure scampering off in it. There was no make-up so suitable to a box.... Then the following morning—just a week had gone by—A went stealthily out into the streets with the box over his head. And didn’t come back.76

This transformation appears perfectly natural, like a ritual return to a more appropriate time which also functions for the character as an evolutionary step—and Abe makes this step clear in the next paragraph, which describes the type of city which is able to accept the box man as one of its own:

75 ibid., p. 12
76 ibid., pp. 14-5
You cannot laugh at A. If you are one of those who have dreamed of, described in their thoughts even once, the anonymous city that exists for its nameless inhabitants, you should not be indifferent, because you are always exposed to the same dangers as A—that city where doors are opened for anyone; where even among strangers you need not be on the defensive; where you can walk on your head or sleep by the roadside without being blamed; where you are free to sing if you’re proud of your ability; and where, having done all of that, you can mix with the nameless crowds all you wish.77

The city, this new city which Abe here postulates, is not the alienating place it is in actuality, but the eutopic ideal of which Niki Jumpei had dreamed in *Suna no onna*, the city of barrels able to float on the sands, the city fully adapted to its circumstances. Barrels, boxes, individuals: these are all vessels for the conveyance of the self, able to ‘mix with the nameless crowds’ contentedly and at ease among welcoming equals.

While *Hako otoko* thus holds at least a glimpse of the city of which Abe dreamed, his next work, *Mikkai* (1977; tr. *Secret Rendezvous*, 1979), is far more nihilistic. This novel contains many of the themes which Abe’s earliest works had introduced (the report-styled narrative delivered in a series of note books; anonymous first-person narrator; quest within an ever-growing labyrinth; nature-imagery used to imply hostility; estrangement between husband and wife, and other characters; a vast conspiracy of which everyone but the narrator is a part; physical transformation, etc.), combining them in a complex plot-structure the main points of which may still be relatively briefly summarised. One night at four AM an ambulance no one had summoned—perhaps the ambulance whose siren the narrator of *Hako otoko* has heard at that work’s close?—arrives at the home of a sleeping,

77 ibid., p. 15
anonymous couple, and takes away the wife. The husband, surprised to the point of paralysis, does not accompany her—he even neglects to ask for the name of the hospital to which the attendants will take her. The next day he phones in sick to his job, and begins tracking down his missing wife, who has not contacted him. He discovers the hospital to which apparently she has been admitted, and during the course of his enquiries, becomes more and more involved in the labyrinthine inner-workings of this facility, which seems to be operated by its own patients. The husband meets the Assistant Director, the Chief of Security—who is murdered on the second day of the husband’s investigation—the Chief’s daughter, who is suffering from a rare bone disease which is causing her body slowly to dissolve and lose its shape (and whose mother had suffered from an even rarer disease which caused her body to turn into cotton wadding; she had thereupon been sewn into a quilt now housed in a nearby museum), and a female doctor who controls a group of muscular patient-thugs, in charge of controlling the patient population. The husband becomes the new Chief of Security, granted special access to the recording devices which eavesdrop on every square inch of the hospital grounds, which are expanding at a great rate into the surrounding town, absorbing all into their encompassing fold. The Assistant Director has had the lower half of the murdered Chief of Security’s body surgically attached to his own, to overcome the sexual impotence from which he had suffered, and is learning to run on his new four legs—in fact he requests the husband to refer to him as ‘The Horse’. The Assistant Director plans on mating, with his newly acquired penis, with the winner of a sexual contest the hospital has organised to celebrate the anniversary of its founding—the contest is to determine which woman has the most frequent and powerful orgasms. During the carnival which surrounds this contest, the Assistant Director leads the husband into the arena which holds the contestants, to help him locate his missing wife—the husband realises that although the woman who is the favourite to win may in fact be his
wife, he cannot tell for certain, his knowledge of her being superficial despite its sentimental. The husband kidnaps the shrinking daughter and hides with her in the abandoned, subterranean grounds of the 'old' hospital complex, over top of which the new hospital is expanding so rapidly. As the novel approaches its close, the carnival and all its attendees vanish around the husband, leaving him to awaken in a darkened, dust-filled hall, alone. He makes his way back to his underground hide-away, clutching the next day’s newspaper. The novel ends with the husband shouting his frustration into the microphone of a walkie-talkie, trapped in the subterranean darkness.

The novel is a first-person narrative, arranged in a series of notebooks, in each one of which the husband determines to tell the truth without deceit. The initial setting is post-apocalyptic: the reader first encounters the protagonist as he brings lunch to 'the Horse' in the ruins of an old military shooting range, and as the novel develops, much of the action takes place on the grounds of the 'old' hospital or the abandoned ruins of a part of town into which the 'new' hospital is expanding. It is clear some major upheaval has drastically affected the time in which this work is set. Here, in this 'ruined' time, Abe presents again the favourite ingredients of his earlier works: a quest which pits the protagonist against a mysterious organisation which seems to contain everyone with whom he comes in contact; the resulting alienation of the isolated individual from the 'closed' society formed by this organisation; labyrinthine physical structures which spread out at an ever-increasing rate; a contrast between the 'civilised' space of the organisation and the hostile world of nature which, despite its domination by the human world, is still in opposition to the individual protagonist; examples of bizarre physical transformation, here of the misshapen girl, her mother who has become a quilt, and the Assistant Director who has become a 'horse'; a lack of intimate understanding between husband and wife which contributes to their estrangement from one another; the first-person, report-styled narrative arranged in
notebooks which serve to twist the narrative time into something approaching an infinite loop; and the asymptotic conclusion from which logic is virtually excluded—for how can the narrator leave himself abandoned at the end of the work, and yet narrate to the reader that very abandonment? Mikkai explores within these ingredients the relation of the 'healthy' individual to the 'sick' society—everyone in the hospital is both a patient and an agent of the social order for which the husband has been drafted as Chief of Security, a title which does nothing to guarantee his own security for its inability to create within him the requisite affliction for communal membership. Stylistically, Mikkai is a mature work, and represents one of Abe's best attempts at structuring his novels as mythic quests into the subterranean reaches of the human mind—and yet, despite this, the novel is not psychological. Rather, as Mikolaj Melanowicz has suggested, this work is an allegorical exploration of the sickness of society in general. Its conclusion demonstrates the inappropriateness of the individual for this society—an individual which the narrative buries in an underground chamber, both a womb and a grave, and the site of his own insanity.

A version of this underground chamber provides the situation for Abe's next novel, Hakobune sakura-maru (1984, tr. The Ark Sakura, 1988), which deals with the creation of a new community both more explicitly and more humourously than any of his preceding works. This novel tells, once again in first-person narration, the story of an over-weight loner who plans on inviting a handful of specially-selected individuals to join him in his underground 'ark', a large cavern, the site of a former underground quarry, which he has equipped to withstand the conflagration he sees as inevitable in the world at large. In preparation for what he calls 'setting sail', the protagonist has stocked this cavern with an

enormous quantity of food; electricity is supplied by generators he has installed; there is a
toilet powered by a ridiculously strong suction; and the entrance to the cave is carefully
concealed beneath a local garbage dump. As the narrator reports at the very outset,

When I go out, I'm careful to carry a few sets of two things with me. One is a
duplicate key to the entranceway to the old quarry; the other is a business card
with a map drawn on the back. The business card is inscribed, "Boarding Pass.
Ticket to Survival." Last summer, I prepared thirty-five sets of these things; I put
them together into leather cases, and I keep them on hand. I always carry three of
these sets in my street pants. That way, if I happen to meet anyone eligible to
come on board, I won't miss any opportunities to sign them on. In the past half-
year, even though I've been so ready all this while, I still haven't met anybody
just right.

The preparations for embarkation are pretty well complete, and things have
come to a stage that would be impossible without the cooperation of a crew.
Things have gotten to the point now where the selection of the crew must take top
priority. But I don't plan on renewing my efforts to find these people. They'll be
receiving their pay in a currency that can't be exchanged for cash—the payment of
life. I can just imagine the applicants all rushing in at once. What a problem it
would be, dealing with all the confusion at the entranceway. I may just be making
the excuses of a home-body, but I imagine that even without going out of my way
to hunt down the right sort of crowd for my crew, they'll just naturally appear by
themselves. Even if I don't have anything particular to buy, therefore, I have to
go out about once a month to knock around in the hustle and bustle, to touch and observe people.\textsuperscript{79}

This loner is preparing to create a new world from the ashes of the old one, a world populated by people who will be 'the right sort' to suit him. He has decided to reject the people already in his life in favour of this as yet unknown, new group, because the people he knows have already rejected him—"As much as possible, I don't want to have to meet anyone who knows me, because my nicknames follow me around wherever I go."\textsuperscript{80} These nicknames, 'Pig' and 'Mole', refer unflatteringly to the narrator's physical appearance—"I am one hundred and seventy centimetres tall, I weigh ninety-eight kilos, my shoulders are hunched over, and my arms and legs are short"\textsuperscript{81}—and his habit of living underground in his cave. In that his society has turned its back on him, he will then turn his back on it, and create a new one. The reader may be forgiven if he were to imagine, then, that this protagonist thus represents, if not a healthy development on the part of Abe's alienated individual, at least a step towards positive action, for the protagonist is prepared to take matters into his own hands and form the sort of world in which he can live comfortably, accepted by the people he has welcomed into his own, exclusive community. However, this scheme really amounts to the creation of a dictatorship, with the narrator ensconced as the supreme commander.

\begin{quote}
It would be best for me to announce that I'm the captain, and have [the crew] sign a pledge to follow orders to disembark unconditionally. I'd discovered, designed,
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{79} Abe Kôbô, \textit{Hakobune sakura maru}, Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1984. p. 8
\textsuperscript{80} ibid., p. 7
\textsuperscript{81} ibid.
and built the ship. It would be natural for the crew members to follow the
directions of the captain. Certainly if [they] felt like it, [they] could just turn those
pledges into scrap paper. I guess if that were to happen there'd be nothing for it
but to put my disciplinary system into action... The minimum amount of order is
necessary to live communally. I had no intention of putting on airs as the captain,
and moreover, I didn't even want to do so, but there was certainly no need to turn
the ship into a coffin tub.\(^{82}\)

The narrator exhibits other signs of desiring a great deal of self-aggrandising control.
For example, while mentioning his habit of "traveling... crouched over the chamber pot,"\(^{83}\)
using a pair of special-purpose glasses to obtain a stereoscopic effect from looking at aerial
photographs, he describes his abilities to go wherever he pleases:

> If I feel like it, in an instant I can cross the ocean; it's not at all impossible to leap
> from an island to the continent, and from the continent back to a different island.
> But I'm not greedy; until I've come to know any given map perfectly, I like to
> look at all there is to see on it... I have the privilege of always having the whole
> scenery gathered together right below my eyes. If there are two roads running
> parallel up ahead, I divide myself into two, and am able to enjoy walking along
> both at once... I can go through whole towns peeking into every house, without
> ever worrying at all about being seen by other people.\(^ {84}\)

\(^{82}\) ibid., pp. 28-9
\(^{83}\) ibid., p. 55
\(^{84}\) ibid., p. 57
The narrator creates within himself the illusion of god-like powers of flight; he becomes, in effect, a deity or lord able at will to survey his domain—the domain which reality denies him. He is so alienated from any form of control in his ‘real’ existence that he makes every effort to deny that existence in return, going so far as to reject his own name: “I seem to have unconsciously come to avoid having other people call me by name... I’ve even introduced myself by my nickname, ‘Mole’.”85 This rejection of his ‘reality’ and his name includes a rejection of his father, for whom his “hatred continued to increase,”86 and the people who have known him in his past:

I excluded as subjects in my search for crew members, even before I began, my whole hometown crowd who had treated me like a pig. Almost everyone who knew me was an excluded subject. In my imagination, I transformed anyone who seemed as if he would call me a pig at once into a louse. Having changed him into a louse, I would take him between the nails of my thumbs, and crush him.87

This violent rejection of his past takes on an especially interesting psychological dimension when one considers the narrator’s rejection of his father, in light of earlier encounters Abe has depicted between fathers and sons—specifically, in “S. Karuma-shi no hanzai.” In that earlier work the protagonist appealed to his father, mysteriously appearing at the height of the narrative’s irrational tension, for help. The father, however, was not only unable to rescue the son, but seemed in fact to be in league with the ‘conspiracy’ of the son’s clothes and personal possessions. In the present narrative, however, the son

85 ibid., p. 60
86 ibid., p. 46
87 ibid., p. 47
feels nothing more than contempt for his father, who had behaved atrociously towards him and his mother. One of the motivating factors for the protagonist to create his self-serving community is to overcome the stigma of being his father's child. This both intensifies and clarifies the somewhat ambiguous relationship between father and son Abe had described in his earlier work—for here, the father is just one more oppressive aspect to the existing social order which, for its rejection of the narrator, must be overcome.

Unfortunately for the narrator, his plans go somewhat awry when, on one of his outings, his 'Tickets for Survival' are purloined by a pair of flea-market tricksters, a husband and wife who make their livings acting as 'sakura', shills for a department store, to push customers into buying products they otherwise would not. Despite his efforts to prevent their doing so, they arrive at his hide-away, and refuse to leave. This act of resistance causes the breakdown of his control of his private world. Eventually the narrator finds himself with no choice but to abandon his sanctuary for the above-ground town he had earlier rejected. Leaving his 'ark', however, he discovers himself to have entered into a town magically transformed:

It had taken a long time. I seem to have slept several times along the way. The numbness stopped, and feeling returned to my knees. By the time I arrived at the basement of the Joint Municipal and County Hall, dawn was breaking. I waited for people to start going in and out, and went outside.

Transparent sunshine, which I hadn't seen in a long time, dyed the town red. The stream of cars coming from the north and heading for the fish market mixed with the hurried steps of the commuters rushing for the station in the south, and things were already quite busy. A truck marked "Live Fish" waved a small flag. "The Life of a Fish, Rather than the Life of a Person" was written on the flag.
Another truck was waiting for the traffic lights. On its side was written, "When I scatter and the cherries blossom, will love blossom too?" I tried to set my camera up, facing the black glass wall of the Municipal Hall. I thought I would take a memorial shot of myself on the street with a 24 mm wide-angle lens. But everything was too transparent. It wasn’t only the sunlight; even the people seemed transparent. Beyond the transparent people was a transparent town. I wondered if I too was transparent. I spread my hand out before my face. I could see the town through it. Even when I turned around, the town was after all transparent. Everywhere, the town was dead, but quite lively. I decided to stop thinking any more about who could survive, and who would survive.88

The destruction of the world which has hung over the narrator’s tale has come to pass—perhaps even the strength of his hopes has willed it to occur, but in its wake, nothing has changed for him. He is still a part of this transparent, dead, lively town. His project has failed. In attempting to create a dictatorial community through which to exact revenge on an uncaringly malicious society, he overlooked one necessary thing: the willing cooperation of his compatriots. This oversight marks this novel as a record of another dystopia, built of the vengeful bad faith of the one whose salvation it was intended to bring.

The novel to which I will now turn marks something of a return for Abe to an earlier structure, but a return which allows him to approach an event which was becoming more urgent in his own life: death. Kanganû nôto (1991, tr. Kangaroo Notebook, 1996) reprises several of the techniques Abe had used in his stories from thirty-five years earlier, notably "Dendorokakariya" and "S. Karuma shi no hanzai," such as the transformation of the

88 ibid., p. 333
protagonist into a plant, a labyrinthine quest, natural imagery providing an air of hostility to certain characters, and medical doctors who are unable to help their patients while maintaining ulterior motives and hidden allegiances. Yet more than Abe’s earlier works, this novel is a complexly-structured amalgam of mythology and Jungian deep-psychology. In brief, the first-person narrative tells the tale of an anonymous protagonist who makes his living designing office supplies. He has suggested the company begin selling a ‘kangaroo notebook’—a product he has no ideas about at all, having made his suggestion purely in jest. He dreams perhaps that this notebook will be adorned with pockets within pockets. The protagonist feels an itchy sensation on his shins on the morning upon which the novel opens, one he had “expected would turn into an ordinary morning.”\textsuperscript{89} It appears that all the hairs on his legs have been pulled out somehow, and in their place, tiny black dots seem to clog his pores. As the day progresses, the itchiness intensifies and the black dots sprout into what appear to be tiny radish seedlings. The protagonist takes himself to an out-of-the-way dermatology clinic for an examination, after which the dermatologist suggests a visit to one of the stronger sulphur-baths at a nearby hot-spring resort—“somewhere like Hell Valley.”\textsuperscript{90} The dermatologist straps the protagonist into a medical bed—manufactured by the Atlas Company—located in the basement of his clinic. What follows is a horrifyingly hallucinatory descent into Hell for the narrator, strapped into this mobile hospital bed which seems to respond to his thoughts. The bed takes the protagonist out along the city streets. As he leaves the clinic the narrator reports that “I hadn’t any particular aim, but I decided to head off to the west, which was more or less downhill.”\textsuperscript{91} The bed becomes stuck in front of a construction site, where a security guard orders it towed away. The tow truck drops

\textsuperscript{89} Abe Kōbō, Kangarū nōto, Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1991. p. 8
\textsuperscript{90} ibid., p. 27
\textsuperscript{91} ibid., p. 28
the bed and protagonist down a mine shaft, which leads to an underground, sulphurous canal along which they float, arriving at a department store the protagonist recalls from an incident depicted in a novel his father had once read. There, the nurse from the clinic rescues the narrator from being accused of vagrancy, only to have him drift off once more along the river, to a spot he comes to realise is “Sanzu River,” the “River of Sai [Sanzu no kawa]” — a place from Japanese folklore known as the home to dead, “sorrowful children who cannot pass on to the Other World [jōbutsu dekizu] and who must pile up stones” along the river bank, longing for their parents who have neglected to perform memorial rituals for them. The narrator encounters a group of these “Little Devils,” who act out a folk-song for the benefit of a bus load of aged tourists come to view “the premier River of Sai in all of Japan.” He is offered a job with them, and is promised a tent as protection from the weather while he lives beside the river, bathing in its sulphurous water to cure himself of his affliction. While here, he meets his dead mother, now blind “without even the traces of eye-sockets themselves,” who plays the shamisen wearing a shabby old kimono. She berates him for being “unfilial towards his parents.” From out of nowhere the nurse from the clinic appears, ready to take a blood sample from the mother, hoping to collect enough blood to “be selected Miss Blood Collector for the third year in a row… [and win the] Dracula’s Daughter Medal.” The mother runs off, frightened of the nurse, who then takes the protagonist home with her, where she and her housemate, an

92 ibid., p. 77
93 ibid., p. 88
94 ibid., p. 80
95 ibid., p. 88
96 ibid., p. 108
97 ibid., p. 109
98 ibid., p. 112
American man named “Hammer Killer,”99 operate a number of societies and organisations: “The Japan Branch of the World Dracula Association,” “The Japan Death with Dignity Association,” and “The Japan Euthanasia Club,” among others.100 Through a turn of events the American—a chiropractor, as well as a video cameraman, as well as a student conducting research into accidental death—happens to dislocate the narrator’s jaw, sending him to yet another hospital where he takes part in the mercy-killing of an ill old man. The narrator escapes from this facility, and finds himself at a train station. Here, a young woman he’s seen before, and whom he has discovered to be the younger sister of the clinic nurse, mistakes him for a kidnapper whom she’s been expecting “to tell me who I am.”101 The young woman is waiting for her turn to perform in the circus of which the kidnapper is a member. While she waits, a train pulls into the station, smashing the narrator’s mobile bed. The Little Devils from the River of Sai arrive, and stuff the protagonist into a box “with a peep hole on its front. A cut-out hole, the size of a mail slot. I looked through it. I could see myself from behind. That me too was peering out through a peep hole. He seemed to be awfully afraid. I was every bit as afraid. It was terrifying.”102 The novel ends with an “excerpt from a newspaper article,”103 reporting the discovery of a corpse whose shins bore the “hesitant wounds”104 of a razor, which was not the cause of death. The article reports the corpse’s identity to be unknown.

The structural properties of dreams form the basis for the novel’s movement from section to section, and as in dreams, the protagonist’s thoughts or suspicions become the

99 ibid., p. 140
100 ibid., p. 139-40
101 ibid., p. 201
102 ibid., p. 211
103 ibid., p. 213
104 ibid.
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reality with which he must deal. When he recalls a scene from a novel his father had left him in his inheritance, that scene soon comes to life. When he questions the material substances around him, those substances take on the qualities he had imagined them to possess. Knowledge comes to him from unimagined sources, sufficient to make him question his past:

But even so, how strange it is! I hadn’t expected myself to have such knowledge about hospital equipment. Everything must be just my imagination, or else, and this is even worse, or else have I forgotten that in reality I’m a medical equipment salesman? Well, be that as it may, in any case this is an Atlas bed, and it seems to be equipped with the ability to propel itself in response to my thoughts.\textsuperscript{105}

A complexly-layered mythological quality hangs over this novel, presenting myths within myths, mimicking the ‘pockets within pockets’ structure of the ‘kangaroo notebook’ which gives the work its title. Surprisingly, though, much of this mythology seems to come directly from Japanese folklore. Abe, who throughout his life had worked so hard against ‘Japaneseness’, here accepts many of the folk beliefs that had been so absent from his earlier novels. Ritualistic language throughout—specifically, nonsense syllables which form mystical chants, intensify the air of mythical passage between the realms of the living and the dead, forming a repeated refrain which punctuates the work:

\textit{Hanakonda aragonda anagenta}

Rubbed with cayenne pepper oil,\textsuperscript{106}

Try rolling it in banana skins…

\textsuperscript{105} ibid., pp. 27-8
Anabenda anagonda anagenta

Rubbed with cayenne pepper oil,
Try rolling it in banana skins...\textsuperscript{106}

Explicit references to the River of Sai, to attaining Buddhahood, to Bodhisattvas, and to various deities abound in this text—in fact many of the attributes of a Buddhist passage through Hell to Nirvana are present, save, of course—for this is after all a work by Abe Kôbô—for Nirvana itself. The initial direction in which the protagonist travels on his Atlas hospital bed (supporting this world of dreams within the protagonist’s mind on its steel-framed shoulders) is to the west, towards the sunset and the Pure Land in which the Buddhas dwell. The Little Devils along the River of Sai are unable to jôbutsu, literally ‘become Buddhas’. In the final hospital to which the narrator arrives, an amplified voice periodically announces that the “Parking Lot of Fulfilled Vows... will be closing on the proclamation of Anakonda-Jizô.”\textsuperscript{107} ‘Anakonda’ is a portion of the mystical chant which the narrator sings to himself; ‘Jizô’ is the protective deity of children, a Bodhisattva of extreme compassion—and it is the quality of “unbelievable self-sacrifice”\textsuperscript{108} of the nurses at this final hospital which so impresses the narrator, as they see to every need of a terrified, dying old man. The narrator “feels a sensation of giddiness”\textsuperscript{109} when he witnesses their selfless acts, for he himself has “never had occasion to be so unreservedly loved [mubôbi ni amaeta koto ga nai.]”\textsuperscript{110}

\textsuperscript{106} ibid., p. 108
\textsuperscript{107} ibid., p. 161
\textsuperscript{108} ibid., p. 170
\textsuperscript{109} ibid., p. 167
\textsuperscript{110} ibid.
However, the world of mythological significances in which the protagonist finds himself is not something for which he had intended to seek—it engulfs him without his willing cooperation in its fantastic occurrences, and ultimately destroys him, leaving him identityless and abandoned. An absurd affliction has provided the narrator’s entranceway into this realm, and while in it, his only hope is to escape. As the complexity of his journey into a sulphurous, underground mine-shaft increases so too increase the nostalgic qualities of the narrative, presenting the narrator desperately wishing to return to a shop he recalls from his boyhood, the shop of “Worldly Desires [butsuyoku].”

All of a sudden I wanted to stop in at the “Worldly Desires Shop.” Somehow, the world of sanity was there. People and things were reconciled there; it was the domain of children. It was the world of fetishism, where the distance between the mind and objects disappeared. ... But now, it had become a toy store specialising in software for home computers.

This world of sanity and childhood is forever gone, replaced by two things: one of these is the world of the Dead in which the protagonist now finds himself trapped. The other is the technological substitute of the modern world, the ‘virtual world’ of the home computer, unappealing to the narrator—the fashions of the world have changed and left him behind, slowly but certainly transforming into a plant, abandoned and afloat in his sickbed on this cosmopolitan Lethe.

And yet this childhood world for which the narrator yearns was not the idyllic place he now imagines it to be, as his remarks concerning his parents indicate. Through the

111 ibid., p. 59
112 ibid., p. 59
relationships between parents and child, Abe examines once again a failure of intimacy. Here, too, the narrator reports that his parents had separated while he was quite young. He himself confesses to having “no obligations toward my dead father,”113 and his mother chides him repeatedly for being unfilial—in fact before she disappears she asks to be able to berate him once more: “Please, it made me so very happy. I’d wanted to say it just once while I was alive.”114 This is one of the few places in Abe’s work where a mother appears, and the guilt and horror which this encounter arouse within the narrator are telling. The rôle which the River of Sai and its dead children, forgotten by their parents, play is further indication of the deceitful light in which the narrator views the childhood for which he longs. The disappointments of parents and children, and the missed opportunities for communication between them while their lives held the promise of growth and intimacy, come to haunt these dead souls for all time in this bleak vision of regret.

Intimacy is impossible not only between parents and children, but between men and women as well. The women the narrator encounters on this journey remain strangers to him. However much he may yearn for physical contact with them, it remains beyond his reach. Moreover, any emotional contact is unobtainable, as well. Even the mysterious sister at the novel’s close has mistaken the narrator for someone else: it is only by virtue of this mistaken identity that she shows him any warmth, and it is also by virtue of this mistaken warmth that the protagonist becomes stranded at the station, the site of his incarceration by the dead children of the River of Sai.

As in Abe’s earlier novels, nature here supplies a threatening dimension to many of the scenes and characters which the protagonist encounters. In fact it is a natural infestation which provides the source for his dilemma in the first place, in the form of the parasitic

113 ibid., p. 51
114 ibid., p. 115
shoots growing so thickly on his shins. The narrator initially describes the nurse from the clinic as "a girlish woman with dragonfly glasses," but later on refers to her metonymically as simply ‘Dragonfly Glasses’. He describes his own mother as a "nocturnal insect." One long passage finds a male squid attached to the intravenous tube leading into the protagonist’s shoulder, while a fishing boat with a female squid attached to its bow rapidly approaches, in an attempt to make a ‘squid bomb’. The landscape is uniformly, bleakly bizarre, with odd colour-combinations and alternatingly desolate or claustrophobically limited vistas. "We often recognise dystopias for what they are by virtue of their anti-pastoral, post-lapsarian nature," and this work is decidedly anti-pastoral in its fullest sense. Here Abe’s uses of natural imagery create a mythological world populated by dead souls, who, like the narrator, yearn for a return to the urban, cosmopolitan world of the living.

Abe’s final work is the fragmentary Tobu otoko (The Flying Man, 1993) which was discovered in its incomplete state on his home computer after his death in 1993. Shinchôsha, the publishing company which brought out the majority of Abe’s works, has published the forty-six pages which make up the text in their monthly journal, Shinchô, complete with the cryptic (and Arabic) numbers 1 and 5 which appeared on its last page—perhaps indicating that the work was to comprise fifteen sections, although as the editors of the journal point out, “it is unclear whether these are the numbers one and five, or the

115 ibid., p. 14
116 ibid., p. 118
117 ibid., pp. 51-68
number fifteen." Only nine sections in fact exist. Despite its obviously unfinished form, and despite the fact that Abe would undoubtedly have reworked it to some extent before himself releasing it to the world, there is much of interest within these few pages, providing as they do a glimpse into Abe’s thoughts toward the end of his life.

The story as it stands centres around one interrupted night in the life of the protagonist, Hone Osamu. This novel is told in the third person—although it is very much an example of the “covert” form of first-person narration both Barthes and Robert Scholes discuss, in which the pronoun ‘I’ could make an easy substitute for the pronoun ‘he’. The work opens with a description of the ‘patient’, Hone, in the form of a hospital admission sheet: “Patient’s Name: Hone Osamu; male, 36. High school teacher. Chief Complaint: Chronic insomnia, perhaps illusory insomnia. Diagnosis: ‘Masked Melancholia’ [kamen utsubyô] compounded with ‘Reversed Wandering Symptoms’ [gyakkôsei meisôshôkôgun] Syndrome.” The narrative proper begins with a brief recounting of events “one certain summer morning around 4:05 AM, give or take. Directly above number 4, 2 chôme, in Naga-amemoto, an object, which looked exactly like a person, glided through the sky towards the southwest,” wearing what appear to be thin pyjamas, and seeming to talk with someone on a cellular phone. Three people witness this ‘Flying Man’, one of whom, a woman named Kômoji Namiko, impulsively shoots him with an air rifle out of an “excess of shock.” Kômoji is a twenty-nine year old single

119 Shinchô, volume 90, number 4, April, 1993, p. 61
122 ibid.
123 ibid., p. 14
woman who “had fallen into a deep distrust of men, as a result of her experiences with them. Rumours of a violent demon haunting the neighbourhood... had reached her ears, and she had come to believe herself to be his next victim.”

Her paranoia has begun to affect her performance at work, and has led her to shooting at the flying human she spotted late this sleepless night.

The second witness is a Yakuza member with kidney problems, who plays no further part in the work as it stands. The third person is Hone, who was the recipient of the telephone call from this Flying Man. Abe turns back the narrative clock slightly after this opening, to provide a picture of the relationship between these two men, who, it turns out, are brothers. Disturbed by the ringing of the telephone, Hone isn’t sure whether or not the sound is real, or if he is still asleep and simply dreaming it. “Even if he decides for the time being it’s real, it must be a wrong number,” he supposes. Nonetheless after the phone rings past seven times, he answers. The voice on the line announces that he is Hone’s brother—he is calling to ask for help to avoid the man who is pursuing him, their father. Hone finds this ridiculous and hangs up, but the phone rings again. The protagonist decides to ignore the call, but the telephone rings steadily for half an hour. His patience exhausted, Hone answers once again. The voice seems to be able to see Hone clearly, even though his home overlooks an open space with no windows directly facing it. The voice asks Hone to look up, and to follow some power lines along to the utility pole, beside which the Flying Man hovers. “Hone didn’t shout out. He controlled his breathing rate... ‘Are you flying?’” he manages to ask. As their conversation progresses, the Flying Man is shot. He drifts into Hone’s room, where the protagonist tends to his relatively slight

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124 ibid., p. 15
125 ibid., p. 16
126 ibid., p. 24
though painful wound. As the two talk further, a knock on the door disturbs them, and sends the Flying Man off into the night sky. The visitor is Kômoji, the woman who had fired the shot. She insists on searching Hone’s home, looking for her victim—air rifle ever at the ready. Unable to find him she returns to her own house nearby, and begins to consider the possibilities of falling in love with a flying man. The work ends without developing the relationships between these characters much further, although the fragments and snippets which make up its last two pages indicate that Abe had a complex plot in mind, involving a biochemical company and its work on a particular compound. The final fragments are: “along the coast... with the family... enthusiastic for catalogues... sex... he himself suffered from an excess of sexual desire... it could reverse its course immediately should the need arise... setting fire to the family with nude photos... was a definite trade secret... the actual conditions of the experimental farm’s hothouse... it was nothing more than an abandoned house.”

Despite this incomplete state, passages of the work are quite compelling. A number of Abe’s themes are recognisable even within the existing pages, and sections seem to narrate emotional attachments which Abe himself may have shared. In particular, one section, entitled “Mayu no naisoku” (“Inside the Cocoon”), contains a lengthy description of the protagonist’s photographic equipment and the sorts of photos he produced, which reads almost like a cataloguing of Abe’s own work in this medium.

There wasn’t a single nude photo. What there was though included a mountain of scrap, a close-up of aluminum cans pressed into bricks, a room with furniture burned to cinders, piled up, used syringes, a rat pulling the guts out of another rat on a bustling street at dawn, maggots wriggling in dogshit, a porno magazine

127 ibid., p. 61
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turned into pulp by the rains lying amongst some rank grass... And what was this? A big rubber sack, not an ice bag, hanging from the branch of a shrub, some miserable [hi naru], cloudy fluid like milk gathered in its tip—a used condom...

Kômoji Namiko couldn't make up her mind if even this weird hobby was better than nude photos or not. When she looked more closely, she found a subject on a par with the used condom... She had almost overlooked the group, about the size of common business cards. There were close to thirty of them, with almost the same subjects. He must have been quite attached to them. She couldn't say for certain (later on she would ask him), but they seemed to be of something like a dried frog, and something like the skull of a snake. The frog was on a white background, the snake on a black one, and both completely filled the frame. There was no shadow behind them, but the lighting technique, which gave a strong sense of the subject's dimensions, was quite good. Still there was a grotesque air to them. She couldn't handle clammy feelings. Especially reptiles and amphibians; numbness ran down her whole body at just the thought of them. However, once dry, even the skin of a frog loses its mucous and becomes as wrinkly as a crumpled sheet of Japanese paper. The head alone wasn't shrunken; it gave her an adorable feeling, like a baby.\textsuperscript{128}

The photos described here seem to correspond to the desolate subjects Abe himself was fond of capturing, and even the skull of the snake seems inspired by a photo Abe actually took, which adorns the cover of his previous novel, \textit{Kangarû nôto}. That Abe was an avid photographer who invested a great deal of pride in his work is evidenced by a remark he once made: "Praise of my photographs makes me happier than praise of my

\textsuperscript{128} ibid., pp. 49-50
There is a deeper connectedness in the images, though, that points towards a specific signification beyond merely a boastful attempt to show off Abe’s skill. The photos present variations on a theme of regeneration amidst decay: aluminum cans at a recycling centre, scrap waiting to be reclaimed, maggots—the larvae of flies—swarming in decaying feces, a porno magazine, itself one symptom of a frustrated desire for sex, hence, associated with this ‘renewal’, in the process of failing apart, and finally, an abandoned condom, another ‘frustration’ of the reproductive process. The connection Kōmoji makes between the dried frog and the wrinkled look of a new-born continues this chain of associations, linking the possibility of birth to the manifestations of death. In this late work of Abe’s, renewal here takes on an ironic quality, for the novel was left incomplete, its ‘birth’ cut short by its author’s death, unlike the births of the photos springing forth from death itself.

The protagonist’s name has certain significations, as well, not unrelated to this theme of renewal. The characters which form the name “Hone Osamu” are those which mean ‘preserve’, ‘root’, and ‘cure’ (tamotsu, ne, and naoru, respectively). One may argue that this is something of a satirical joke, in that his occupation, a high-school teacher, would imply that he is one to guard the ‘roots’ of society through a conservative transmission of knowledge. The thing he seems most intent on preserving, however, is his solitude. Throughout this late night of disturbances, the one thing Hone yearns for is his privacy to be restored. He is even willing to reject a brother he never knew he had to maintain it. Far from welcoming anything like a renewal of his ‘family’, he prefers his isolation—and yet I hesitate to pursue this line too far, given the incompleteness of the text. I will say only that

129 Abe Kōbō, “An Interview with Abe Kōbō,” Contemporary Literature. p. 448
here Abe created a framework which could have supported a rich narrative structure. The impossibility of its development is unfortunate.

The epigraph of Abe's first novel referred to the 'birth which comes from the grave'; how fitting that his final work should examine this same condition. From first to last Abe was concerned with themes central to the modern age, and chief of these was the renewal which comes from the decay of the old—the renewal of social existence through the death of the traditional which the modern, urban world demands. In prose Abe concentrated on the place of the individual within this social order, but the equation has more than one variable: individuals only know that they are individual when confronted by that which is collective. In this regard, Abe's work in the world of the theatre provides a necessary part of the problem over which he laboured to find a solution. With this in mind, I shall now address Abe's dramatic writings.
In his book *Shingeki wa doko e itta ka* (Where has Shingeki Gone?, 1980) the playwright Miyoshi Jūrō suggests that writers such as Guy de Maupassant and Gogol went insane not from syphilis but from an “arrogance which, if it continues for too long, causes a softening of the brain.”\(^1\) This arrogance is of course a natural consequence of a novelist’s “attempts to become a god,” to pretend to know things which are impossible for him to know.\(^2\) Miyoshi claims a certain superiority of the playwright over the novelist—even though playwrights are also crazy, just “not as much as novelists, being more modest than they are.”\(^3\) However dubious this particular example of superiority may actually be, he does raise a valid distinction between the practitioners of these two genres. “The playwright, before he begins to write his play—that is to say, as a precondition—cannot become ‘divine’ to the same extent that a novelist can. He is more human,”\(^4\) for he can only describe the same exterior conditions of things that every other human can perceive, without having secret knowledge of the inner workings of his characters’ thoughts. This argument masks, beneath its otherwise facetious surface, an important consideration of genre: what is it that permits the one to produce a sort of divine insanity—or an arrogant divinity—in its creator, while in return allowing him to explore inner realities, and the other to spare its creator the sin of hubris while allowing him only exterior representations of

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\(^2\) ibid.

\(^3\) ibid., p. 192

\(^4\) ibid.
character? The answer is that different genres necessarily communicate in different ways, and these different ways each have their own advantages and limitations.

I think this is a useful proposal in an examination of Abe Kôbô’s writings, in that he turned to the disparate forms of the novel and the drama to achieve different effects. In this section I will explore some of these effects, and try to arrive at an understanding of how the dramatic form in some cases facilitated, and in other cases necessitated, a certain style of communication, thematic treatment, and plot structure which allowed Abe to explore avenues difficult to traverse in the novelistic form. What I will examine here is the measurable difference between Abe’s novels, centred around the figure of the individual and his alienation from society, and his dramatic work, which is far more willing to explore the interactions between groups of people and analyse social alienation allegorically. I believe that the very qualities of drama themselves, the very form drama takes and the processes through which it must go to appear on the stage, made it necessary for Abe to write in a way related to though distinct from his more solitary efforts as a novelist—and yet regardless of whatever theoretical differences (and similarities) exist between drama and the novel, there are structural differences in Abe’s work in each of these genres which will become apparent and justify my treatment of these two areas as separate from one another.

Some of Abe’s first successes were stage plays written in the 1950s. He also wrote quite a number of radio and television plays. Few of these earlier works he himself produced or directed, not beginning his own troupe, the Abe Studio, until the 1970s.

Abe as a playwright and a director was someone who struck out forcefully in new directions.... Theatre became an especially important means for him to obtain a free-structured expression through utilising the stage arts; to express and visualise
a living inorganic matter; to dramatise through an expression of direct perception; 
and to concretise the structure of consciousness.5

In this chapter I will examine what Abe did consistently throughout his involvement 
in the theatre, and that is the writing of the dramatic text, saving an analysis of his 
workings with the theatre troupe for another place, where it can receive the attention it 
deserves. I will trace here the differences in terms of style between his earlier works, still 
(relatively) plot-structured and linear, and his later, experimental Studio productions— 
including the very collaborative nature of the pieces themselves, which were often “freely 
created in the rehearsal situation.”6 I hope in this section to trace the growth away from an 
established, though imported, theatre orthodoxy, that of the Shingeki stage, towards an 
avant-garde theatre consisting of open, almost formless (and wordless) collages of visual 
and aural images—an “audio-visual scandal,” as Hanada Kiyoteru phrased the effect some 
of the productions were able to obtain.7 Further, I will examine the ways in which Abe’s 
drama moved away from allegorical social criticism towards the ‘referentless’ allegories of 
dream imagery. I will cover five representative works in some detail, and three other 
illustrative ones in passing. They are, “Seifuku” (“The Uniform,” 1955) “Doreigari” 
Elephant is Dead,” 1979); and “Ningen sokkuri” (“Exactly Human,” 1959), “Bô ni natta 
otoko” (1957/1969, tr. “The Man who Turned into a Stick,” 1975) and “Ue— 
Shindoreigari” (“Ue—The New Slave Hunters,” 1975) respectively. Some of the thematic 
paths this study will tread include Abe’s social criticism and censure of Japan for war-time 

5 Takano Toshimi “Hyôden Abe Kôbô” (Critical Biography) in Shinchô nihon bungaku arubamu Abe 
7 Takano, p. 41
atrocities; the negative aspects of nationalism; lost identity as a hindrance to emotional health; and, most importantly, the function of belief in creating ‘reality’.

Before I begin my discussions of the scripts themselves, though, I will spend some time looking a little more closely at the theatre world which received these works when Abe began his involvement in it. The Japanese stage in the 1950s contained four main forms, two of which were traditional, two of which were western transplants: Nô and Kabuki, Shingeki, and commercial theatre, respectively. For various reasons we can do away with a discussion of the commercial theatre, in that it offered only the most inoffensive entertainment it could. Abe had no involvement at all with the traditional Japanese theatres, having rejected them out of hand with his rejection of other Japanese traditions. He directed his energies towards, initially, the Shingeki stage, with its latitude for social commentary and, to some extent, experimental techniques, turning later to an even more experimental theatre.

Shingeki, which means literally ‘new theatre’, dates from the beginning of this century. Its history splits into two halves, before and after the Second World War. This form grew out of Japan’s first experiences of western theatre when the Meiji Restoration broke the hermetic seal which had kept the country in safe isolation for over two hundred years. As western plays began appearing in translation, traditionally-trained actors tried to accommodate the new types of situations and relationships they encountered in these works. These attempts gave rise to the so-called Shimpa, or ‘New Group’, which was a revitalisation of the Kabuki stage. Other young actors, though, aimed for a more total reconstruction of the theatre, a “modern drama that would be completely different from Kabuki and other traditional forms.”

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In 1909, the young dramatist Osanai Kaoru [1881–1928] founded the Free Theatre (Jiyû Gekijô) destined to make contemporary occidental theatre known to Japan, and to favour the inculcation of a Japanese dramatic art entirely modeled on that pattern, without music, chorus, or dance. Osanai spoke French and German, and admirably understood occidental drama, of which he translated some sixty works.9

Osanai Kaoru is indeed one of the great figures of this movement, the founder of not only the Free Theatre but the Tsukiji Little Theatre (Tsukiji Shôgekijô, in 1924) as well, named “after the quarter in Tokyo where their modest barracks were located, which the group completely and modernly equipped.”10 Osanai was a director “strongly influenced by the ideas of Appia, Craig, and Stanislavsky, with whom he had worked at the Moscow Art Theatre... [He] reclaimed the independence of the director,” and worked with young, inexperienced actors who were willing to experiment and learn.11 Although he also worked with the Kabuki actor Sadanji II (who continued to mount Kabuki productions12) Osanai was a strong opponent of the existing Japanese stage arts, and once wrote that “above all, the enemy we must fight against in our effort to establish the national theatre we hold as our ideal is the traditional theatre, that is, Kabuki drama.”13

Chekhov, Ibsen, and other European writers became the staples of this movement, which utilised the western proscenium arch stage, realistic, contemporary props and


10 Arnold, p. 274

11 ibid., p. 271

12 ibid.

costumes, western make-up techniques, and western styled acting methods. So radically different were the aspects of this new theatre from those of the traditional forms—"it was as if a tidal wave of new artistic trends had broken over Japan"—that these pioneering actors "knew nothing at all of even how to apply their make-up. They did their faces with oil paints and went out on stage... In everything from make-up techniques to acting techniques, there was no other way for them to learn than by gaining actual experience on stage." Practice time was minimal, too, with rehearsals sometimes lasting only "for a few days." With perseverance came accomplishment, though, and the Shingeki movement continued to evolve throughout the prewar period.

While the Shingeki movement aimed for a reappraisal of traditional forms which I may call anything from youthful to revolutionary, it did not limit itself to modernising only the world of theatre. From its inception a political dimension accompanied this aim, which called for a modernisation of Japanese social structure, as well. "The Proletariat Arts Movement was a vital force in pre-war Japan and many of the young people who worked in Shingeki were strongly influenced by left-wing ideology." This political dimension was to become even more pronounced in the post-war years, when the American Occupation government (at first) openly encouraged the Japanese labour movement and social reform. However, during the 1920s, the aim was to "produce only those plays that had relevance to the new era, plays that would be stimulating to those who had to live in the new age." Because of this, the years of Japanese militarism and continental expansionism before the war were bad ones for members of the Shingeki movement who were "often

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14 Senda, Koreya "An Interview with Senda Koreya," Concerned Theatre Japan, Volume One, Number Two, Summer, 1970 p. 53
16 Senda Koreya, p. 56
17 Senda, Akihiko, p. 5
18 Senda, Koreya, p. 54
persecuted” for their views. Senda Koreya (1904–), who as a young man began working with the Tsukiji Shôgekijô in 1923 and would later become the leading director in the postwar Shingeki world, working often with Abe during the late 1950s and 1960s, was imprisoned “four or five times in the short span of eighteen months” between 1933 and 1935, and then again continuously between 1940 and 1942. This does not mean that the plays themselves which the Tsukiji group staged were especially inflammatory, in that the troupe could only stage “scripts as they had been censored by the police.” Nonetheless, the theatre did prove a focal point for subversive activity, for, as Senda has noted,

during the performance, the theatre was dark. People from all kinds of organisations were able to distribute handbills among the audience. When people were interrogated by the police as to why they had joined the proletarian movement, they often answered that they had been watching a play at the Tsukiji Little Theatre when a handbill appeared in their hands out of nowhere. They said they had read it and been very moved and that it made them join the movement.

This was the prewar revolutionary heritage of the Shingeki movement, part of its project to renew the stage arts of Japan and create a rational, modern theatre. Senda Koreya was to carry this idea with him throughout his long career, an idea he had developed during his time studying in Berlin from 1927 to 1931. There, he had become active in the German communist movement, trying to give their demonstrations “a touch of theatricality.” Returning to Japan he continued to work for a socially aware theatre, unable to “conceive

19 Senda, Akihiko, p. 5
20 Senda, Koreya, pp. 62–3
21 ibid., p. 62
22 ibid., p. 58
of dealing with theatre as something that is, in itself, an end. I consider theatre a means to communicate with people, to change them; it is something more than a means to self-expression or self-realisation. It is a way of influencing people in certain directions with dramatic technique.”

With the end of the war, all aspects of Japanese life underwent the sort of momentous changes they had undergone once before, with the rapid modernisations of the Meiji era. Under the American occupation, and “aided by the repeal of censorship and support from the labour unions, Shingeki blossomed as a main artistic force.” This association with organised labour is an important facet of postwar Shingeki, one which allowed it to act on its political impulses to reach a wide segment of the proletariat, while at the same time ensuring something of its own economic viability. The body responsible for coordinating the association between labour and the various Shingeki troupes is known as Rōen—the Rōdōsha Engeki Hyōgikai, or Workers’ Council on Theatre, which still exists today. “Without Rōen’s support when there were no other audiences, many young theatre companies would not have survived the late forties and early fifties, nor could Shingeki groups have developed road tours in the 1950s so early or so successfully as they did.”

Senda Koreya explains its rôle and significance as

essentially an independent organisation for providing opportunities for workers to see plays for less money. After the war, we were faced with the problem of how to create such opportunities while ensuring ourselves of at least enough money to cover costs. If the house is full, admission per person can be lowered. You see, you can cover the daily cost of a production if you have the house filled to sixty

23 ibid., p. 59
25 ibid., p. 153
percent of capacity... So, if Rōen fills the house with its members, they each pay sixty percent of the regular fare... We provide these opportunities to workers who are alienated and force-fed the leftovers of bourgeois culture.\(^{26}\)

This may sound rather noble, but even Senda does not deceive himself, fully aware that Rōen is comprised of “mainly white-collar workers... The majority of people in Rōen today are still the people who can afford to pay the admission, who have time to spend in the theatre... Most of them come to the theatre thinking they’re going to get some culture.”\(^{27}\) Nonetheless there is an air of danger in being involved with this theatrical organisation. “In the beginning, Rōen was a part of the cultural activities of the Communist Party, and... because of that, some employers fire people when it’s discovered they’re members.”\(^{28}\)

The social conscience of Shingeki appears to me to have been quite sincere, concerned with providing a forum in which important issues could find their voice. However, as far as its stylistic innovation is concerned, Shingeki seemed to stop at bringing western theatre to Japan. In my view it was never a movement destined to produce truly ‘new’ theatrical styles, and arguably, it did not—what it did was to bring both realism and a certain willingness to experiment with a wide range of issues to the Japanese stage, to break with and replace the “god-infested premodern imagination”\(^{29}\) with a form of theatre able “to deal with the world in rational, scientific terms.”\(^{30}\) This, though, may have contributed to the growing perception of it during the 1960s as an archaic art form, unable

\(^{26}\) Senda Koreya, p. 72
\(^{27}\) ibid.
\(^{28}\) ibid., p. 73
\(^{30}\) ibid., p. 8
to respond adequately to the changing times around it, for the optimistic, scientific rationalism of the early part of the century had by this point given way to an almost nihilistic, ludic, irrational return to emotionalism and spiritualism—and of course Shingeki's reliance on a particular type of audience which, through such organisations as Rōen, dictated to a certain extent the sorts of plays it would stage, also inhibited its continued pursuit of innovation within the theatre. Senda Koreya admits to this with a candour at least commendable if not encouraging: "I know my audiences. The present social and financial situation does not permit me to do just one thing, just what pleases me. I would rather accept what the masses want. If they want to see TV stars act on stage in famous plays, let them." However pragmatic a view this may be it was certainly no longer a progressive one; by the time Senda could phrase himself in this way, Shingeki had truly become a conservative institution, itself now a 'tradition' against which young directors would fight.

During the 1960s growing numbers of young actors and directors expressed increasing dissatisfaction with the increasingly conservative Shingeki, now, indeed, as traditional in its own way as the Nō and Kabuki against which it had positioned itself sixty years earlier.

They revolted, like the avant-garde everywhere, against the established institutions that defined modern art... even though their main targets, the Shingeki companies, were barely twenty years old.... All the underground playwrights scoffed at realism for its dated focus on exploitation and alienation in the dark ages of heavy factory labour.32

31 Senda, Koreya, p. 73  
32 Havens, Thomas, p. 148
These young actors were willing to do away with Shingeki's realistic stage conventions, and to experiment more with blending traditional forms with avant-garde practices in order "to develop an alternative historical mythology that could animate a comprehensive new movement in politics and the arts." From their ranks emerged directors and playwrights who would come to represent the new wave of Japanese underground theatre, the founders of the so-called Small Theatre Movement: Kara Jūro, Betsuyaku Minoru, Satoh Makoto, and Suzuki Tadashi. Abe too was to become dissatisfied with the ways in which the Shingeki stage handled his works, and ever one to break with tradition, he too broke away from this form to pursue his own vision of the theatre. Nonetheless, the Small Theatre movement as such held no attractions for him, either, in that

post-Shingeki drama has two main characteristics. First, it is characterised by the identification of a character or characters with an archetypal, transhistorical figure (a god) into whom they metamorphose; and second, by a concern with the interrelated questions of personal redemption (salvation of the individual) and social revolution (salvation of the world).34

This concern with divine transformation sounds to me very much like a return to a device central to the Nō drama, with its tales of ghostly revelations or divine apparition. The need to "reinject the gods"35 into Japanese drama was equally a need to reaffirm the validity of those Japanese gods, as Japanese, at a time when Japan as a nation was beginning to return to its prewar prosperity and international stature. In short, we may

33 Goodman, p. 3
34 ibid., p. 10
35 ibid., p. 11
postulate that there was something of a nationalistic sense to this movement—not, to be sure, of the sort espoused by Yukio Mishima or anything nearly so reactionary, but decidedly 'closed' in nature. Although the movement may have aimed at "harnessing the energy of the Japanese popular imagination [in order to] transcend the enervating clichés of modern drama and revolutionise what it means to be Japanese," Abe as an internationalist could not have accepted this, for the post-Shingeki goal thus becomes not an elimination of nationality at all but a modernisation of it. Abe has complained of the "lack of objectification" in the Underground Theatre, its lack of the Other, and its behaving as if it were "spoilt." He can do so, I believe, because he takes this movement to task precisely for its concentration on "Japaneseness," on coming to terms with the 'nation' in order to renew, but not overcome, it. I will return to this issue presently; for now, though, I will look at some of the plays Abe wrote, to situate him within this changing theatre world and understand his initial attraction to Shingeki, final break with it, and ultimate refusal to align himself with the Small Theatre movement, as well.

Abe was active in the theatre over a span of three decades, from the 1950s to the 1970s; of course, his work evolved over that whole period. My objective here is to trace the course of that evolution, pointing out its continuities as well as its increasing sophistication and experimentation. I will examine what I consider to be some of his best works—although I will spend relatively little time on the two plays for which he is most widely known, "Tomodachi" (1967, tr. "Friends", 1970), and "Bō ni natta otoko" (1969, tr. "The Man who Turned into a Stick," 1975), since these have received critical treatment both in English and Japanese, to the almost total exclusion of other fine pieces. I will

concentrate instead on several of his plays from the 1950s, and give a more detailed look at his Studio works.

One of the first things to be mentioned about Abe’s earliest plays is their socially satirical, allegorical qualities—and the often great (and greatly black) humour with which Abe presents the ‘messages’ he has placed within them. In ways more compelling and immediate than he attempted in his early prose pieces, these early works, written between 1955 and 1960, concern social themes broader than those of the individual alienation Abe tackled in his fiction. This, I feel, reflects both Abe’s involvement with the Japanese Communist Party and his receptivity to the program of the Shingeki movement itself; he was writing vehicles that would allow it to convey its own message effectively. These plays do not hesitate to point an accusatory finger at Japan’s responsibility for sufferings in the mainland colonies, and are equally astute in their dissection of Japanese self-pity in the post-war period.

The aspects of censure for the sufferings of others, and rejection of Japan’s self-victimisation, are particularly clear in the two works to which I’ll now turn, written three years apart—“Seifuku” (The Uniform, 1955; produced by the Seiyû, direction by Kurahashi Ken), and “Yûrei wa koko ni iru” (The Ghost is Here, 1958, produced by the Haiyûza, direction by Senda Koreya), both of which I feel are important enough works to warrant an extended look, containing as they do in relatively obvious forms the themes Abe will maintain in his later work.

“Seifuku”, a three-act play in seven scenes dealing with a broken old man—in fact a ghost wearing the tattered rags of a colonial policeman’s uniform—stranded at a port in North Korea in February of 1945, appears to be a fairly obvious political allegory of Japan’s colonial experience, which left it damaged, impoverished, and unable to rid itself of its disgrace. This play, with its stance critical of Japanese social structures and the shameful behaviour of Japanese colonialism, was a perfect match for the openly
questioning attitude of postwar Shingeki, and seems to me to represent the best features of that movement. One of the keys to all of Abe’s earlier texts is the recurring treatment of his own experiences during the Japanese colonial period in Manchuria. The ‘homeless individual’, someone who as a direct result of political forces far beyond his control has lost his home, is a staple prose figure in this period, and provides the starting point for Abe’s quest for a new home. His theatre work from this same time, though, is not merely a personal record of private loss. Abe also tries to show that Japan, too, lost much of itself during these brutal times, including its dreams for a peacefully domestic future. “Seifuku,” the first of his plays ever to be staged, leaves the impression that Japan will never be able to rid itself of the evidence of its past, and will suffer the consequences of a postwar world to which only murderers returned from the colonies.

The work opens with a fifty-year old man sitting alone on a large rock by the side of a road, near to which stands a dilapidated old shack, only the door of which is in good repair—the walls are so frail that the inside of the hut is visible. A postman approaches, but when the old man tries to ask him if there are any letters for him, the letter-carrier walks off apparently without having even seen him. The old man comes to the conclusion he is after all invisible, and recounts how he used to be known far and wide as a wealthy man. It is obvious though that now this man is far from wealthy:

The man’s clothes are quite strange. Two of his jacket buttons are out of place, and incorrectly fastened. His sleeves are baggy, and don’t match one another. One of his pant legs has been torn off, and the other is so short it looks like he is wearing cut-offs. His knees poke out above his gators.38

This first scene ends with the man lamenting his lost good fortune, weeping with a sound like a "dog hiccuping." 39

Scene Two takes us inside the ramshackle hut, where we see two men, Hige and Chinba. Chinba is ill, lying in a hammock and begging for a drink of water. He is certain he has the plague, although Hige briskly assures him it's just a cold. Chinba tells Hige of a dream he'd been having, of flying over the Sea of Japan but crashing into the waves before he can make landfall. He says he is certain he'll never return home. After a pause he says how much he'd like to eat an apple, "not one of these bubbly, sugary Korean apples, but a real, crisp apple from home. That's a real apple, that's the sort of apple just made for us Japanese." 40 The word used for 'home' here is naichi, which means literally 'the inner land' or the 'land within the enclosure'.

Hige tells Chinba to take it easy for awhile, and the two discuss the growing resentment the Koreans harbour towards the Japanese. Hige says the Koreans believe Japan will be defeated; Chinba mentions spies spreading false rumours; and Hige speaks of gangs prepared to go so far as murder—"it's getting so you can't even do business safely." 41 When Chinba nervously asks if Hige thinks Japan really will lose the war, Hige reacts with a vehement admonition for Chinba to take some aspirin and get some sleep, or he'll be good for neither work nor anything else. This is Hige's greatest concern, that the loss of Japanese authority is coming at the busiest time of year—Chinba and Hige are entrepreneurs, come to the colonies to make their fortunes, but are now stranded by the growing Korean rebellion.

39 ibid., p. 44
40 ibid.
41 ibid.
With a knock on the door of the hut, the Man in Uniform enters. This scene, and all the rest which follow it, is a flashback to the events immediately preceding the Man’s death: we see him without his tattered uniform, here stopping by the hut on his way to buy passage for himself and his wife back home to Japan, where “you can get Japanese soy sauce, you can get fish, you can get rice, there are mountains covered with trees, there are rivers that run the whole year long, and the only people living there are Japanese—no matter how poor a man might be, everyone is Japanese.” Hige asks how the Man can afford to go home, and is told that he has managed to save two thousand yen. We learn that the Man was a police officer, with “twenty years’ work at killing,” but the Man protests his honesty. Hige offers to exchange the unneeded possessions the Man is hoping to sell for Korean liquor—one of his trading commodities—but the Man insists he has promised his wife to “part for good with alcohol and this filthy Korea.” Being weak-willed, though, he is soon and easily persuaded to drink.

As the mood becomes one of a drinking party, the Man takes out the items he intends to sell, including his old policeman’s uniform, which Hige convinces him to put on. It is the one item he hadn’t wanted to sell, but his wife would not hear of his keeping it. Hige remarks that now the uniform is worthless, in the face of the threat of Korean reprisals. At this the Man explodes in anger:

What are you saying! Being a policeman is a divine occupation! A policeman is the keeper of the law! The law is the discipline of everything. When rain falls, the ground gets wet—when the wind blows, the leaves of the trees shake. That’s the way of Heaven and earth. It’s my job to watch over all those important things.

42 ibid., p. 48
43 ibid.
44 ibid.
You know what I think? I think that, 'cause there are policemen, there are human beings. The first man wasn’t the emperor or anything, he was a policeman! The police are the origins of all things. What's a man? Testicles. And so, think about it—a policeman’s uniform is mankind’s loincloth.45

The Man’s anger wears off, and the three drink more, talking about the peaceful life awaiting the returning couple back home, till the Man’s wife bursts in suddenly, disappointed and angry to find her husband wasting his time with liquor. The Man leaves, still wearing the uniform despite his wife’s protests that it is unseemly with all the unrest. The Wife and Hige then drink; he flirts with her, but although initially she seems to soften towards him, at the end of the scene she grows hysterical, complaining of the ten years she’s suffered with the Man in Uniform.

Scene Three again shows us the Man in Uniform as a ghost, seated on the same rock as in Scene One, sobbing. A Korean Youth enters, and stands before the Man, who is amazed that this character can see him—the youth explains that “there’s nothing surprising about that. You and I both are dead.”46 The Man discovers he’s been murdered, and that the Korean Youth was killed in revenge as a scapegoat. The Man asks if the police had helped, to which the Youth replies “What, do you think a Korean could lodge a complaint with the Japanese police? How foolish. You were a policeman yourself, you should know how foolish a thing that would be. What you’re suggesting doesn’t go with your uniform.”47 The Korean Youth tells the Man about the events leading up to his death, how he found him asleep on a bridge in the freezing Korean night, drunk. How he brought him to his home, where the Man demanded to be served as in a restaurant. How the Man had

45 ibid., p. 49
46 ibid., p. 57
47 ibid., p. 58
left, and was followed on the street by the Youth, who was keeping a watchful eye over him, till a Japanese Student began to follow him, too. As the two talk, the Korean Youth leads the Man in Uniform back into the hut, where the man’s corpse is lying on the ground. A Detective is there, too, interrogating Hige.

In Scene Four, the Detective, Hige, and the Japanese Student, who claims to have found the Man’s corpse after hearing footsteps running away from the scene of the crime towards the Korean village, go over the details of the Man in Uniform’s murder, not particularly concerned with finding out the truth. They gloss over the many inconsistencies between Hige’s and the Student’s versions of events; in effect they cover up the matter, and allow the perception of blame to remain on the Korean Youth, although Chinba later in Scene Five tells Hige that he’d seen the whole thing and knows that Hige is the guilty one. The Man’s wife is in the room when Chinba makes this confession; she is horrified when Hige proceeds to murder Chinba, but makes no attempt to stop him, for she and Hige have become involved.

In Scene Six, the Korean Youth forces the Man to accept that the life he’d been living was destroyed by Hige, a fellow Japanese. Chinba, himself now a ghost, joins the two, and tells them how fascinated he’d always been, ever since his childhood, with ghosts. He’d always assumed the dead were walking side by side with the living, but now that he sees the world of the dead, he is not impressed—"It’s nothing special, it’s exactly the same..."48 When Chinba asks the Man what he and the Youth have been arguing about, the Korean Youth replies that he had wanted to make the Man watch the “drama inside the shack, to see who was the victim, and who was the criminal.”49 He says he would like to see the Man in Uniform suffer, because he was in fact the true criminal, responsible for the

48 ibid., p. 75
49 ibid., p. 76
Youth's murder. Chinba says it was the fault of this "winter that's like Hell." He goes on to tell the Man about Hige and his wife. When the Man repeats that none of this is his fault, Chinba tells him that "everyone says that. Hige and your wife, too, say that it's not their fault." In growing disgust, Chinba finally spits out something he'd "been itching to say, for a long, long time—I hate you! When you wear that uniform, you stink like a dead cat!" The scene ends with the Man repeating that it's not his fault, as a ship's steam whistle sounds in the distance.

The final scene opens with Hige and the Wife insisting that each is not to blame. Hige tells the wife to wait, that both of them will leave Korea together, but they quarrel. Hige shoots the Wife dead, dragging her corpse back into the hut. The Wife now joins the other three dead characters, as Hige murders the Postman who comes riding along on his bicycle. The ship for home is about to depart, but none of the ghosts can now board it. The Wife asks the Man if he isn't ashamed to be wearing the uniform still, and Chinba orders him to take it off. The Man tries to do so, but cannot. Chinba and the Man struggle to remove the ragged uniform, now a mark of shame, but give up. The play ends as the Man cries out for help, repeating "My two thousand yen! My two thousand yen!"

Kawamoto Yûzô claims that "up to a certain point in time, Abe Kôbô’s plays had a definite allegorical character," moving from allegory to metaphor, and finally towards dreams. Although I would question this procession from allegory towards metaphor, preferring to think of allegory in itself as an extended metaphor, and Abe’s progression as

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50 ibid.
51 ibid.
52 ibid., p. 77
53 ibid., p. 80
54 Kawamoto Yûzô, "Engeki ni okeru Abe Kôbôshi no genzai—gûi kara inyu e, soshite yume," in Kokubungaku—kaishaku to kansho, volume 44, number 7, 1979, p. 169
from more concrete works to more abstract ones—the very sorts of things which make up dreams, after all; in this sense Kawamoto is quite right—"Seifuku" definitely stands at the very pinnacle of Abe’s allegorical plays. It successfully depicts a broken and faded Japanese colonial spirit, murdered and in tatters, stranded on a foreign shore unable to return home, and accompanied by the various victims of the colonial enterprise for whose deaths it is responsible: the innocent youth of Korea; the conscience of Japan; the spirit of Japanese womanhood, a symbol of home and hearth. All of the characters in this work fulfill an allegorical rôle: Hige and the Wife, a selfish, deceitful Japanese populace grown avaricious and concerned with only their own survival; the Student, an ineffectual, self-serving younger generation; the Detective, a corrupt officer of a racist legal system intent on seeking out easy scapegoats; the Korean Youth, a victim made bitter and spiteful; Chinba, the diseased conscience of Japan which knows the truth, yet which is itself destroyed; and the Man in Uniform, once an honourable, almost noble figure in his colonial uniform, convinced of his divine duty to maintain the order and discipline of nature itself, now broken by drink and age, reduced to rags, a victim of his own weak will. Abe holds back none of the resentment he must have felt towards Japan, for its obvious racism and rapacious attitude towards the non-Japanese with whom he had grown up. The comments these characters make, yearning to go home where only Japanese live, even today speaks directly to the xenophobic qualities of the nationalism against which Abe all his life was opposed—nationalism in all its forms, in every country.

Abe, still at this point a member of the Japanese Communist Party, condemns imperialism in this work as a destructive alignment between the forces of industry and of military oppression. Hige, the businessman, tells the Man in Uniform that they had all formed a close-knit group: "You used to handle all the negotiations for us; I, with my brains and my labour, built up a network of sales. And Chinba brought all the materials
together and made the products. We were a group that needed all of its parts.55 Even Chinba, who later reveals the disgust he feels for the Man in Uniform and all he has done, is not in fact suffering from a simple cold; his illness is “not something for a doctor to look after, it’s pure greed that’s bursting through his skin.”56 This is the plague he himself is certain he has contracted, from his life in the colonial land.

One key feature, in addition to its willingness to condemn what Abe sees as the party responsible for colonial suffering, marks “Seifuku” as a work by Abe Kôbô. This is the presence of only one extra-ordinary element in an otherwise (almost painfully) realistic setting: the presence of ghosts watching very human characters going about their lives. Abe’s sense of the absurd does not rely on ridiculous happenings perpetrated by unbelievable perversions of the human animal, but rather, by the insane qualities of an otherwise sane reality carried to their logical extremities. In this sense Abe’s fictional world presents a nightmare worthy of Kafka. The normalcy here is that of “The Metamorphosis” in which the setting is perfectly ordinary, save for the existence of a bug where once there was a man. Here we have an allegorical ghost where once there was a policeman. All else remains unchanged, but this one change is sufficient to propel us into a strange world, a world which points a censorious finger at the very normalcy of its setting. As more and more ghosts appear, leaving behind them only a live killer who will return ‘home’, we cannot help but feel the strength of Abe’s condemnation of the Japan that would accept this character back onto its shores. The ghost is unable to remove his uniform, he cannot rid himself of the reminders of his actions and guilt, but neither can Japan rid itself of its criminals who have returned. While “The Metamorphosis” tells the story of a family’s salvation—the metamorphosis of the title really concerns the family members’ transformations into a capable, integrated, and emotionally mature unit—Abe offers no

55 ibid., pp. 48–9
56 ibid., p. 47
attempt as may be found in later post-Shingeki works to purge these ghosts and so ‘forgive’ the nation for its past, but rather suggests the necessity of doing away with the nation itself—every aspect of it which Abe has portrayed here in his characters as negative, and not worthy of redemption.

While “The Metamorphosis” takes its motivation from the transformation which has befallen Gregor Samsa, it is arguable that beyond this initial impetus the work is not at all ‘about’ him, concerning itself more with the ensemble of characters who fill out its narrative dimensions. So, too, “Seifuku” receives its initial thrust from the Man in Uniform, but ultimately is ‘about’ every character on stage in their relation to both one another and the larger, allegorical significances which they represent. In this sense, the work demonstrates the greater emphasis Abe placed on inter-character dynamics in his dramatic writing than in his prose. Abe understood very well the range of effects available to these different forms, and here displays his fluidity with this medium. In prose, Abe’s concern was with the one, sole individual whose position in a group was threatened by that group. Here, his concern is with the mechanisms whereby the group will arrange itself. Interestingly, it is in this play that Abe presents something quite rare for one of his characters: a confession of true feelings, coming when Chinba admits to having hated the Man in Uniform for what he represents. While in his prose this sort of guileless confession would be almost impossible, for in his fiction Abe explores the failure of communication, here it propels the allegorical quality of the work forward and sustains the narrative thrust of the play.

One other point I should mention is that, while this work is extremely critical of colonial Japan, there is nothing particularly “Japanese” about it—its concerns are widely relevant, in that it sides clearly with a victimised people over a victimising one; it portrays realistic characters; and it contains a recognisably linear plot structure. I can imagine very successful stagings of this work in a great variety of social settings, all equally important to
their times as its original production was. As a representative post-war Shingeki play, this is a fine example of the type of socially-aware production for which that movement aimed, and it situates Abe firmly within the category of "leftist theatre... that dominated... in the period of so-called postwar democracy."

Nonetheless, this situational impulse seems to have developed within Abe from his own experiential sources, rather than from any particular external influence—that is, he seems to have arrived at his stance critical of Japan’s colonialism without any derivative motivations. Growing up in Manchuria and seeing for himself the contradictions between Japan’s stated colonial policy of racial equality and the actual behaviour of the colonists, gave Abe quite sufficient material for the construction of this work, which he claims to have written before he’d ever seen a play—“Because I’d grown up in Manchuria. If I’d known anything about plays at all, I don’t think I could have written them. Until I wrote my first play, ‘Seifuku,’ I’d never seen a play. I get the feeling that it’s for that reason that I was able to write it.”

It is also for that reason that the allegorical qualities of this particular play are able to transcend their time and speak directly to the experiences of the oppressed in whichever era they may live. This work, although readable as a condemnation of Japan within a fixed historical determinacy, approaches a much wider applicability—Abe’s incorporation of his own, lived emotional responses to prejudice and colonial arrogance permits his play to strike an echoing chord in its audience. That this play is in fact rarely performed is rather immaterial, I believe, to its potential for successful performance. It has elements which could certainly translate very well into a wide range of settings.

57 Senda Koreya, p. 65
58 Abe Kôbô, “Naze gikyoku o kaku,” *Nami*, volume 3, number 4, November–December 1969, p. 15
Chapter Three: Examining the Dramatic Texts/ 153

The next play from this period to which I’ll now turn deals with not only the postwar Japanese social climate, but ghosts, as well. The three-act comedy “Yûrei wa koko ni iru”—a truly ambitious work incorporating biting social satire, black humour, musical numbers sung by a large chorus, and even a ‘ghost fashion show’—tells the story of two drifters who meet one day under a bridge and go on to corner the market for ghost merchandise in the town of Kitahama. The work is quite long, but its plot is fairly straightforward. One man, Oba, is older, and has spent eight years wandering away from his home. Later events reveal that he had been accused of murder in an investment scheme gone wrong, to build an “edible rat” production facility.\(^\text{59}\) The second man, Fukagawa, is a veteran who is accompanied by a ghost, a non-existent character whom only he can see, who nonetheless has space in the script for non-existent dialogue, becoming “a complex and mercurial personality who asserts his authority aggressively.”\(^\text{60}\) During the war Fukagawa and his army friend had been stranded. Their rations of water had dwindled to an amount sufficient for only one, and although Fukagawa had decided to die to allow his friend to live, his friend lost his mind at the prospects before him, leaving Fukagawa to live in his place. Racked by guilt over this turn of events, Fukagawa has been accompanied by his friend’s ghost ever since for, as he says, “Everyone has a debt to the dead.”\(^\text{61}\) Fukagawa carries on regular conversations with the ghost, and discusses every choice he must make. We learn at the end of the play, however, that Fukagawa had in fact taken over the identity of his friend, who has indeed survived the war. The supposedly dead friend arrives in Kitahama with the impostor Fukagawa’s mother, and returns this confused character to his proper state of mind.

\(^{59}\) Abe Kôbô, “Yûrei wa koko ni iru,” \textit{Abe Kôbô sensakuhin}, Tokyo: Shinchôsha, 1972, volume 9, p. 181
\(^{60}\) Shields, p. 138
\(^{61}\) Abe Kôbô, “Yûrei wa koko ni iru,” p. 177
At the outset of the work, Oba and Fukagawa form a friendship, and decide to return to Oba’s hometown, there to develop a scheme of which Oba has conceived to profit from Fukagawa’s ghostly acquaintance. Fukagawa had told him he would like to gather together pictures of dead people because “the ghosts are looking for their origins;”\(^62\) in this enterprise he is sincere, motivated as he is by his feelings of guilt over his friend’s death. Oba, however, sees more in this when a townswoman comes to him asking to take back the photograph she had sold—Oba returns it to her for three times the money (in cash) he had given her (on credit). Soon everyone in town is selling and re-buying photographs of the dead. Oba has convinced the town mayor to finance the construction of a Ghost Meeting Hall; the local paper prints an article urging people to “‘Stretch out the Hand of Love to Homeless Ghosts,’”\(^63\) and townspeople are flocking to Fukagawa, through Oba’s intermediacy, for ‘ghost cures’ to alleviate everything from their arthritis to their cranky babies. So absorbed with their ghosts have the townspeople become that Fukagawa tells them, “There are ghosts piled on top of you, on your laps and on your shoulders, and more on top of them, all the way up to the ceiling, and you may think you’re breathing in air, but actually, it’s ghosts.”\(^64\)

Things begin to unravel, though, when Fukagawa’s ghost expresses a desire to marry, and to become mayor of the town. He begins to abuse Fukagawa, striking him repeatedly. As the ghost becomes more demanding, and the duties he must fulfill more diverse, Fukagawa’s headaches become more severe. Fukagawa threatens the town leadership that if the ghost does not marry and become mayor, he will “go off into the ocean, and all the ghosts will become whirlpools.”\(^65\) Finally, after the Mayor and the town leaders persuade the local beauty queen—who sings a song describing her fondness for

\(^62\) ibid.
\(^63\) ibid., p. 206
\(^64\) ibid., p. 241
\(^65\) ibid., p. 252
“transparent men” which ends in a wonderful pun, the phrase in transliteration, “I love yûrei” (ai ravu yûrei, I love ghosts)\textsuperscript{66}—to accept this unusual husband on condition of receiving a large sum of money plus a significant monthly stipend. Fukagawa’s mother and the Real Fukagawa arrive, to put an end to his insane self-deception. The ghost disappears, and Fukagawa reaches the only positive conclusion an Abe character can reach: “I’m me!”\textsuperscript{67} The play ends with Fukagawa restored to his own identity and reunited with his war-time friend and mother. Oba and his family, too, are reunited. The town leaders plan on introducing a ghost tax, and have a new medium through whom they can communicate with the ghost world: the Beauty Queen, who claims now to be able to see the ghosts herself. As the curtain closes the Chorus of Townspeople, who have been bursting into song at poignant moments throughout the work, now sing “Gather the ghosts together and make jam; gather the ghosts together and make jam!”\textsuperscript{68}

Wartime ghosts are a definite impediment to health and prosperity here, for the character who introduces them to the work, Fukagawa, is clearly a penniless, homeless man, plagued by terrible headaches resulting from his continuous efforts to maintain the borrowed identity he believes is his own. His life is a constant act of self-deception which debilitates him. Abe is sympathetic towards this character—he ultimately allows him to regain his true self, after all—because he is merely a pawn in the greater act of deception and exploitation Oba and the Town Leaders carry out. The townspeople, too, continue to follow their superstitions, despite the urgings of the Chorus to move past the presence of ghosts around them, and deal with them pragmatically. Allegorically, this work offers Oba as the representative of Big Business who profits by swindling a gullible populace out of

\textsuperscript{66} ibid., p. 257
\textsuperscript{67} ibid., p. 260
\textsuperscript{68} ibid., p. 266
money they give up to alleviate their superstitious fears of death, encouraged to do so by a corrupt government concerned only with maintaining its own power and perfectly willing to exploit its constituency to do so. The military here represented by Fukagawa is a feeble-minded wreck unsure of its own rôle but certain it has a debt to repay to its fallen comrades, and in so believing, it becomes the source of profit for business and power for the government. While this work may have a more sophisticated (for complicated) allegorical structure than that of "Seifuku," for that very reason it is not as immediately effective—allegory must be transparent to work well, and this particular one is not.

What must be one of Abe’s favourite themes, and the one I feel places him most solidly in the Modernist tradition, that of lost individual identity in an exploitative world, receives fine treatment here, and in fact it is this very ‘lost identity’ which permits the development of events in the rest of the play. Fukagawa, in taking over the identity of his presumed-dead war-time companion perpetuates the existence of guilt within himself, which facilitates his being used as a pawn by the forces of Big Business and Government as Oba and the Town Leaders represent them. When he is finally able to say “I am me!” he is not only returned to himself and free from the physical debilitation which had plagued him for so many years, he is also exempt from continued exploitation. For Abe, the goal is for every one to say “I am me!” and so reject the domineering social forces which he here depicts as superstitious, backward, and concerned only with the maintenance of their own positions of power. It is the loss of individual identity which creates these forces in the first place, by eliminating the possibility for unified opposition to them: where there is no one, there can be no one to object.

Staying on this topic of identity for a while longer, I find it quite intriguing that of the major characters in this work, those most intimately involved in the profitable business of ghosts all have names which incorporate some element of the natural world in their kanji. For example, “Oba” is written with the characters for ‘large’ and ‘park’; “Fukagawa” is
'deep river'; the newspaper editor, "Torii," contains the characters for ‘bird’ and ‘to sit’; his employees are “Marutake” and “Hakoyama,” ‘round bamboo’ and ‘box mountain’, respectively. In the last chapter I touched on the distrust, in fact, the open hostility Abe displays towards nature—particularly in the novel Mikkai (1977, tr. Secret Rendezvous, 1979), in which the hospital grounds are presided over by a building shaped like an enormous bird’s talon. I would suggest that in this instance, Abe is in a rather obscure way attempting to reinforce the negative aspects of these characters through associating them with a certain regional, or rustic, impression. Now, of course, many, many Japanese surnames incorporate ‘natural’ elements, and I would not be reading anything into the names in this particular work if there were not an unusual persistence in this pattern. Oba’s wife and daughter, who from the outset are opposed to Oba’s plans and feel sympathetic towards Fukagawa, hoping he will be freed from the ghosts, are identified by their given names, which themselves are written in katakana in the text further removing them from the others; and The Man who appears at the end, the lawyer who reveals himself to be the true Fukagawa, is also initially introduced as exempt from this naming scheme—these are the only characters who wish no part at all in the exploitation of ghosts and townspeople. I believe that by incorporating these ‘natural’ elements in the characters’ names Abe identifies them with the countryside, with rural Japan, with regionalism—and if Abe is anything he is definitely the “anti-regional writer” Akutagawa Hiroshi has claimed him to be.69 Through this identification of the characters with the rural, Abe reinforces their deceitfulness and their willingness to exploit everything around them for their own gain.

Further, I will mention that Oba’s wife and daughter have become the operators of an electronics shop. They are associated thus with rationality, science, and progress. Misako in fact sings the praises of electricity as a means of freeing the world from its strife:

69 Akutagawa Hiroshi, "Naze gikyoku o kaku," p. 15
Ah! No matter what anyone might say, this is the Age of Electricity! (as if singing) Electricity is the servant of Magic! A servant which never complains, which will give endlessly of itself, which will never tire! To improve life, first electrify!  

Misako thus offers a positive vision of the potential for progress away from the exploitative, backward, superstitious greed of a deceitful profit-minded system. Rather than making use of ghosts, products of an obsessive guilt for the past, better, her character suggests, to do away with this trickery:

Is it a living to deceive people with ghosts or whatever?... I thought all I ever wanted was to live a normal life... Normal? But what is normal? Maybe there is no such thing. But if I'm in a world where you can make a profit on ghosts, gosh, it's such a pain, maybe it's better to die and be done with it!  

In stark contrast to Misako's altruistic sense of human life are the appalling lengths to which those in power in Kitahama are willing to go to maintain their authority—from factory owners ready to employ ghosts as spies to weed out communist organisers, to the town mayor willing to marry off the local beauty queen to the ghost to appease him and prevent him from seeking the mayor's own job. Abe here presents a world governed by people who rely on exploitation pure and simple. Oba is willing to treat his own daughter as a commodity, and in this the town's mayor encourages him. These characters are allegorical representations of the entire capitalist system, which sees people not as valuable

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70 Abe Kôbô, "Yûrei wa koko ni iru," p. 164
71 ibid., p. 224
members of society but as raw material to be utilised, liquidated, and finally discarded when other solutions to the problem of turning a profit are found.

Coming in between the works “Seifuku” and “Yûrei wa koko ni iru” were two radio plays, “Mimi” (“Ear,” 1956) and “Bô ni natta otoko” (“The Man who Turned into a Stick,” 1957, later reworked into a stage play by the same title in 1969, and translated as “The Man who Turned into a Stick” in 1975). I will return to this latter work presently, to compare it with its later incarnation as a stage play—which marked Abe’s directorial debut in 1969. The work to which I will now turn, however, appeared three months after “Seifuku” received its first performances—the farce, “Doreigari” (“Slave Hunting,” 1955, staged by the Haiyûza under the direction of Senda Koreya). In style and temperament this work is more closely related to the slightly later “Yûrei wa koko ni iru.” Its plot revolves around a plan to swindle a wealthy old man by having him pay for exposure to increasingly powerful ‘animal spirits’, ostensibly to increase his own vital energies.

The play opens with a lion roaring off stage. As the lights come up to reveal an expensive looking, large, concrete hall, its carpet and furniture covered with sheets of newspaper for protection, an Explorer and a Breeder are discussing the lion’s rapid loss of weight. They are dressed in the sorts of stereotypical outfits “which appear in comic books.”72 As they discuss the lion’s alarming loss of weight, the Maid bursts in, accompanied by a Young Woman. The Young Woman has come to work as a tutor for the Master’s son, who, she now learns, has died just the previous month in an auto accident. When she meets the Master and learns that the Explorer and Breeder are charging him outrageous sums for dubious treatments—which consist of having him look into the eyes of the lion to absorb its spirit, “the Animal Spirit Remedy, … the newest form of cure”73—

73 ibid., p. 85
she immediately takes pity on the older man, realising he is being cheated. She offers to become his tutor, and claims authority to deal directly with the servants and the two charlatans. They, however, are not to be outdone, and tell the Master that the lion’s energy is not strong enough to cure his disease, which even though it has no visible symptoms, is getting worse. The Explorer and the Breeder have just the creature whose energy will be sufficient to revitalise the Master—the Ue.

Ue are creatures the Explorer claims to have discovered while serving in the Japanese Navy during the war, on an island lost in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. The creatures themselves are a man and a woman, wearing only animal skins, trapped in a cage. The only sound they make is the word ‘ue’, uttered with various intonations. Of course, they are a sham: we learn that they are a couple whom the Explorer is paying a large sum to play the parts of the non-existent Ue for one night, in order to extract an even larger sum from the wealthy though gullible Master. The Explorer has worked out an elaborate plan, wherein a crane will come later that night to remove the Ue, cage and all, from the Master’s home. The plan goes awry when the Young Woman interrupts the Breeder, who is about to receive telephoned confirmation of the escape attempt’s readiness.

The Young Woman is suspicious of the Ue from the first, certain that they are in fact merely people playing at being creatures who look exactly like humans. She telephones her boyfriend to come the next morning on the pretext of wanting to hire him as the Master’s secretary; she tells him to pretend his name is Taro, the same as the Master’s dead child. As the play progresses, the Young Woman is unable to prove definitively that the Ue are in fact human. She and her boyfriend suggest that the Master adopt the boy as his heir; the Master suggests that he should rather marry the Young Woman. Ultimately, the boyfriend invites three of his friends to pretend to be wealthy investors, ready to buy the Island of the Ue, and harvest the creatures—who can reproduce at the age of three, bearing two or three offspring per year—as food. One of them suggests, though, that a better use of the Ue
would be as cheap labour. "Not only will this alter the fate of the entire manufacturing industry, it will shake the economic foundations of the entire country."\footnote{ibid., p. 140} The three friends leave the house, to conclude their negotiations as to what percentages each of them shall contribute at a nearby coffee shop. The Master is persuaded by the boyfriend to invest, as well, and gives the boyfriend his proxy—as well as a suitcase containing several million yen in cash. By now, alarmed at the suggestion that they should be killed and eaten to ensure the palatability of Ue flesh for human consumption, the two Ue have confessed to being, after all, people—but the Young Woman now claims to have become a Ue, to inhabit "a distant, incomprehensible world."\footnote{ibid., p. 146} She suggests that "it would be nice if everyone were to become Ue."\footnote{ibid., p. 147} The Breeder, who has fallen in love with her, realises that being a Ue is, "ultimately, a philosophy"\footnote{ibid., p. 149}—Ue-ism, as the Young Woman phrases it. She says that she "would not like to go anywhere, but even so, I don’t like being here, either,"
\footnote{ibid., p. 150} and so she and the Breeder depart, to seek out others, form a Ue Organisation, and popularise Ue-ism. At this point the stage is empty, the Ue Man and Ue woman having made their escape along with the Maid, who turns out to be the Ue Woman’s sister, and the Master having gone off to catch up with the Boyfriend to oversee the Ue investment. The Explorer comes back on stage ready to explain his new plan to the fake Ue couple, only to find himself alone—just as the door opens to reveal the Master, wearing the Ue’s animal-skin clothes, and howling like a hyena. The play ends.

I can think of no other way to characterise this work than as the type of Elizabethan farce for which Ben Jonson is so well known, “Volpone”, for example. It has all the best qualities of that style of comedy—a gullible, wealthy, and self-centred Master who is being
cheated by a charlatan pretending to have medical credentials and the secrets of a miraculous new cure; servants, here in the guise of the Maid and her husband, the Chauffeur, who are, if not exactly in direct league with the charlatan, then certainly not helpful of the Master, either; and an innocent young woman who comes to the rescue of the Master to ensure a happy ending. But this is, after all, a work by Abe Kôbô, and no happy ending is truly possible—the Young Woman is not entirely innocent, being ready herself to relieve the Master of some of his funds. The air of farce which hangs over the whole work sustains itself on the otherwise perfectly realistic treatment of the characters and the plot. As we have seen, Abe’s approach to the absurd is very much through the territory of the everyday. Here, we can see this psychologically realistic treatment best in the exchange between the Boyfriend—who had been himself locked in a small cage, to prevent his informing the news media of the Ue’s existence—and the Ue couple, late the second night, when he approaches them sympathetically to offer them a cigarette:

Youth: Go ahead, don’t be shy, I understand, your teeth are too yellow for animals, the cigarette tar has stained them. And also, the joints on the middle fingers of your right hand (the Ue Man hurriedly hides his hand) … The hand you’ve just hidden away; if it’s that stained, you should be a little more artful in all of this… But anyways, tobacco alone is no proof that you’re human… It’s well known that gorillas like to smoke, and I’ve even seen a picture of a cat smoking. So, if you’re going to smoke, it’s now or never. (Simultaneously, the Ue Couple reach for a cigarette, and the Youth offers them his lighter. The Ue begin to smoke with great fervour.)\(^{79}\)

\(^{79}\) ibid., p. 135
Here we obviously have a couple who, after two days locked in a rôle that doesn't suit them, are in desperate need of their vices. For the Youth to witness this display and then still say that his faith in their Ue-ness hasn't been "moved one bit,"80 presents to us the picture of a young man willing to go along with the joke so far as he must, in order to benefit himself from the situation—in short, the picture of a fairly typical, realistic character who would be equally at home in the pages of "Volpone" as here.

Beneath this realistic surface, though, duplicity abounds, for virtually all the characters are pretending to be other than they are. The Explorer and the Breeder are charlatans, the latter a veterinarian specialising in dogs and cats, the former a one-time pet store owner specialising in gold fish. The Ue Couple are simply playing at being these speechless, guileless creatures. The Boyfriend even gives a false name the better to win over the affections of the Master, who in turn appears "at first to be nothing more than a farmer."81 Moreover, he has obtained much of his wealth from insurance settlements after the deaths of his wife and child in accidents we are led to believe are not above suspicion.82 I should like to think that Abe is addressing a key issue in this way, the irrelevant quality of a reality which can be altered or disguised at will and which is dependent upon human perception for its existence:

Breeder: You're beautiful...

Young Woman: Ue!

Breeder: Like an angel...

Young Woman: Ue.

Breeder: But even so, in this world, angels are always locked into cages...

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80 ibid.
81 ibid., p. 124
82 ibid.
Young Woman: Tell me, what is this? (she holds out her hand.)

Breeder: May I kiss it?

Young Woman: If you answer well...

Breeder: A hand... I think it's a hand, but... but even so, it's too beautiful, it can't be a hand...

Young Woman: You're a fool.

Breeder: No, it's a hand. A hand!

Young Woman: And why?

Breeder: Well, because it's a hand...

Young Woman: Because you think it's a hand, it's a hand.

Breeder: Well,...

Young Woman: Don't you think so?

Breeder: I do think so!

Young Woman: Well, then, think that I'm a Ue.

Breeder: Eh?

Young Woman: Quickly, think so!

Breeder: Ye, yes, I think so!83

The moment the Breeder can believe the Young Woman is a Ue, the Ue exist, and from this simple formula springs forth a whole philosophical movement, but one not unrelated to any other human belief system. The postulation here is simply this: that in one's beliefs lie the basis of reality, and this reality can be changed by simply changing one's beliefs. There is a stance consistent with Abe's overall contention, that is, that a new world can be built, for worlds are built on belief systems and these are decidedly human creations subject to changing attitudes and goals—both positively and negatively. Existence

83 ibid., p. 145
or non-existence, reality or non-reality of the belief is completely irrelevant to its power to affect human behaviour. In fact, as Ôjima Katsu argues,

even though something doesn’t exist, that never means it’s not real. In a world in which reality has not yet been fully theorised, the non-existent can be transformed into the actual precisely because it is non-existent, and in that sense can become the most dangerous part of all reality.  

This view is a pessimistic one, yet one borne out by the conclusion of the play: as the Young Woman says during her transformation into a Ue,

When you are in pain, try throwing away words. If you can’t do that right away, try saying, ‘I think I’m suffering right now, but even so, I only think so.’ And then, think of yourself as a clam. Now, just slowly close your shell. Inside an ugly shell, the infinite mother of pearl… You are now in the world of the Ue.

In other words, the suffering individual is now cut off from the outside world, isolated within a private fantasy from which communication is impossible—because of a crippling belief in the non-existent here become very real. Abe emphasises this even further by having an Insane Man at this point burst into the room, only to be cured of his dementia by staring at the Young Woman—much to the amazement of the Master who realises that she is not of course a real Ue. Beneath the highly entertaining surface of this farce lurks the message that reality is irrelevant to power, which sustains itself on belief.


85 Abe, “Doreigari,” *zensakuhin*, p. 141
The question of belief and its relation to reality is an issue Abe dealt with in many of his early works. In the television play “Ningen Sokkuri” (Exactly Human, 1959) the plot revolves around a character who believes himself to be other than he is in reality—yet the belief and the reality are both revealed to be contrary to the viewers’ expectations in a fine plot twist worthy of Rod Serling’s “Twilight Zone” series. Here, the belief concerns the existence of aliens from outer space. In a story elements of which I’m more than tempted to say Doris Lessing borrowed for her Briefing for a Descent into Hell (London: Jonathan Cape, 1971), a writer is pressed to produce thirty pages by his deadline the next day. He receives a call from a young man’s wife, warning him that her husband is on his way over, claiming to be a man from a distant planet. The man arrives, and explains to the writer his situation, complete with details of life on his home planet, and his method of travel to Earth. The man explains that his wife is suffering from an “Earth Sickness” which makes her refuse to accept her true identity. It turns out, however, that it is in fact the writer who is suffering from this sickness—the man and his wife have been sent to bring him home. Here, belief becomes an actual pathological condition, a symptom of a disease which interferes with the perception of reality.

Abe has said of the play “Doreigari” that it was his first work written specifically for the stage—even though “Seifuku” appeared before it, that one was originally commissioned as a short story which “for some reason naturally took on the shape of a play.”

The work occupies a special place in Abe’s career, for “through it [he] was first able to become deeply involved with Senda [Koreya],” when that director staged the work in 1955, and again in 1967. Without this involvement Abe himself believes he could not have developed the way he had. In fact so important to Abe was this one play that he

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86 ibid., p. 206.
87 ibid., p. 207
88 ibid.
revised it twice: first, for the Senda revival, and again in 1975, when his own troupe staged it. The changes in these later versions are in some cases minor, in some cases quite substantial; the version which the Abe Studio staged is so different from the original, in fact, that it may be considered a completely different work. These changes do a number of things: firstly, they reinforce the impression of the Ue as negative characters; they clarify the rôle of the young female character as privy to the deception of the wealthy master of the house; and they permit for a more absurdist treatment of the play. They also de-emphasise the more orthodoxly ‘socialist’ depictions of class and exploitation I have described, increasing the focus on identity and its loss.

In this new version of the work, the Ue are friends of the Master’s Son, who, together with his wife, are planning on cheating their father out of a large sum of money. Their plan is to trick the Master into accepting the Ue as new ‘pets’, gifts from the “Ue Propagation Society.” The Ue arrive in a large crate marked “Ue—Completely Useless,” as the Master and the Breeder are attempting to imitate electronically the roaring of the lion they are keeping as a source of animal spirit. The character of the Adventurer is gone from this work. The character of the Young Woman now appears somewhat later on, and has another strong female to play off, in the Wife of the Master’s Son—the son who had just been killed in the original. One scene from the original is still present here, though: the scene in which the Ue must drink from a bucket of water in which the Breeder has washed his socks. This occurs now at the Master’s bidding, and is much longer than in the earlier version. Abe draws out this scene for its physiological impact on the audience—throughout this work there is a greater concentration on physical aspects of the action on stage. This is a trend in several of Abe later works, including “Midori iro no stokkingu” (1974, tr. “The Green Stockings,” 1993) and the novel Mikkai. Another aspect of the exchange between characters which Abe calls heightened attention to here centres on the verbal process itself.

89 Abe Kōbō, Ue—Shindoreigari, Tokyo: Shinchōsha, 1975, p. 7
Repeatedly, characters ask for or are given precise definitions of words or phrases. Initially, the Master offers an etymological origin of the word ‘Africa’; when the Ue arrive, the Son’s Wife searches in the dictionary for their entry; the Master complains that the name ‘Ue’ is “undignified” because of the lack of “self-respect” in its sound;90 the Master corrects his daughter-in-law by telling her that “A couple is always composed of a male and a female;”91 and the Breeder explains the kanji in the phrase “to make use of” to the Son.92 This concentration on terminology, I feel, creates a sense of miscommunication between the characters, and works well to reinforce the deceit in which these characters all engage—which is based on a misrepresentation of definition, that is, on a representation of humans as Ue.

There is a far more antagonistic air to this later version of “Doreigari,” but also, less of a clear sense of victimisation. As I mentioned, the earlier version dealt with the exploitation of a relatively feeble-minded, wealthy Master at the hands of a charlatan and his accomplice; here, however, the wealthy Master, though still being cheated by his own child, is deceiving himself through his pursuit of an ‘animal spirit’ cure. It is far harder to feel sympathy for this incarnation of the character—and far harder to see within him the simple embodiment of an allegorical principle. The ending still has the Young Woman becoming a Ue, but now, the Ue Man and Ue Woman retreat back into their cages rather than fleeing the house, finding the cage a much safer territory than the outside world.93

An escape from the outside world is one of the goals for which many of Abe’s protagonists have aimed in his fiction, but in one particularly successful play Abe examined the consequences of that outside world’s invasion of an individual’s private space. The play is, of course, “Tomodachi,” (first staged in 1967 by the Seinen-za, direction by Narise

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90 ibid., p. 10
91 ibid., p. 11
92 ibid., p. 18
93 ibid., p. 151
chapter three: examining the dramatic texts

Atsuhioko) and the differences between it and the earlier incarnation of its basic story, as contained within the novella "Chinnyūsha" (1952, "The Intruders") demonstrate clearly the variations of emphasis and perspective possible between dramatic works and those for the page.

The story of either version is simply told: one evening a family of strangers bursts into the apartment of a fellow who enjoys his solitude. The family has come to save him from his loneliness. The man resists their forced companionship but is unable to remove the intruders from his apartment. In the end, he dies, a victim to their aggressive communality.

It is possible to see within this framework a response to social pressures and the sort of mandatory communal spirit a socialist or communist totalitarianism would inflict on its citizenry, and indeed Abe's break from the Communist Party of Japan just a few years before the work appeared would certainly support this interpretation. But what I find interesting here is the treatment of this work as a stage play: whereas the short story, in the first person, took the reader into the mind of the man, and presented the events from his perspective, the stage work allows the audience to perceive the actions more objectively. There is greater attention paid to the relationships within the family, and the rôle of the man as the victim is better integrated into the over-all whole of the work. The ensemble qualities of the dramatic form here as well as in all of his plays permitted Abe a different approach than he had available to him in his fiction, most of which he wrote in the first person. This form is certainly effective, but it is after all limiting—and to escape this limit, I feel, was one of Abe's central motivations behind his work in the theatre.

The plays I've so far examined have all in one way or another had a common thread running through them, and this is the exploitation of one group of people, or type of character, by another. Abe dealt with this theme often in his dramas, perhaps nowhere
investigating the consequences of this behaviour so clearly as in "Bō ni natta otoko." He has said of this work that its theme is as may be understood at first glance: it depicts the alienation occurring in modern society, in which a stick-like man (for a stick is the prototype of all tools) who has no reason for existence except to be used by others, is punished from within himself precisely for being a stick.94

This work is about a man who quite literally turns into a stick, falling from the roof of a department store before the horrified eyes of his son. It was a work which meant enough to Abe for him to resurrect it from it’s original form as a radio play, and adapt it for the stage. Two characters must find the stick and return with it to their place of employment, in Hell. They experience considerable difficulty in doing so, though, for the stick has come into the possession of, in the radio play, a group of shoe-shiners, and in the stage version, two hippies—all of whom are intent on keeping it. When in fact the pair do obtain the stick the younger worker, an apprentice, is tempted to return it to the man’s son, but is prevented from doing so by her supervisor. In a world in which people are but tools for one another, or the source of one another’s livelihood—for the pair from Hell are explicitly employed to gather up all the sticks so many people have turned into—there can be no room for sentimentality, and less for mercy. This is one of Abe’s clearest works, and as he has said, its message lies on its surface.

Abe had a certain goal in mind when he depicted on stage the types of beings which cannot possibly exist, either ghosts, people who become objects, or imaginary beings. Shimizu Kunio suggests that this goal was to

give a certain shock and destruction to the theatrical form. That is, if we accept that theatre is ultimately something given shape through the physical bodies of the actors, then the appearance on stage of visible ghosts or non-humans who look just like humans, comes to show the pleasurable duality of the stage and the technique (the body), the possibility of the expression which has this duality.95

There are problems with this, even though in a number of his works Abe includes characters or dialogue which function as meta-theatrical critique of the institution of "theatre" itself, in its broadest sense, and which the critic may view as explicitly commenting on the ‘pleasurability’ of rôle playing. In “Yûrei wa koko ni iru” the character Hakoyama is waiting for events to draw to a close so he can complete the short story he is writing; in “Ningen Sokkuri” the protagonist is a writer who is stuck to fill thirty pages by the next morning, but who is handed the work he needs—the one entitled “Ningen Sokkuri” itself. In “Seifuku” the Korean Youth tells the Man in Uniform that he had wanted him to watch the ‘play’ going on between Hige and the Wife. In “Midori iro no stokkingu” (1974, tr. “The Green Stockings,” 1993) two characters accuse one another of writing a detective story and being “all characters in the same novel.”96 and in the very middle of the work stage hands appear who, after rearranging the set, adopt the rôles of Television Interviewer and Cameraman, joining into the flow of the action. And of course the entire premise of “Doreigari” hinges on rôle playing, and the degree to which belief—or rather suspension of disbelief—can control perception. These are issues which go beyond Shimizu’s phrasing of the effect Abe achieves, for Abe is not concerned with stopping only

95 Shimizu, Kunio, “Ensakkatoshiteno Abe Kôbô” in Kokubungaku—kaishaku to kansho, volume 5, number 1, 1971. p. 69
at a critique of the stage. Rôle playing, transcribing events into fiction, viewing events as mere ‘plays’ are all aspects of Abe’s criticism of the world in which he lived. This world, he seems to be saying, is indeed a stage but one of our own making and thus ‘remakeable’ in improved form.

And of course the world of the theatre can be remade in the director’s image, as Abe tried to do in the formation of his own troupe. The works which the Abe Studio staged included “recycled plays”97 which Abe had written as early as twenty years before. I have touched on the revised version of “Doreigari” which the troupe staged as “Ue—Shindoreigari,” but other pieces underwent similar adjustments to accommodate the differences in era and performers between their first and later productions. Of greater interest at present, though, are the works written specifically for the Abe Studio, for these show most clearly Abe’s evolving sense of visual stage craft and his willingness to collaborate in a group setting. They demonstrate, too, Abe’s movement away from explicitly socially-critical works, towards plays with a more interior-oriented, dream-like allegorical quality stripped of obvious reference to the exterior, ‘real’ world. The play “Midori iro no stokkingu” will provide an example of this transition.

In brief, the play is about a character identified as “Man” who undergoes an operation to become ‘herbivorous’, able to eat grass and other forms of cellulose. The play opens before this event, though; the Man is in a clinical room surrounded by white sheets covering the other characters, which he pulls away to reveal as they are mentioned in his monologue: the Doctor, the Assistant, the Man’s Wife and Son. He speaks about his fetish for stealing women’s underwear from laundry lines, and of his wife’s discovery of his habit. He says that suicide is the only option left to someone with such a perversion, and filled with self-disgust, tells the audience that he has in fact tried to kill himself. He was rescued, though, by the Doctor and Assistant, and convinced by them to become

97 Shields, p. 138
herbivorous. In exchange he will receive three times his salary as a teacher. The operation is a success, but the Man loses his interest in becoming a model for a new type of person; he tries to run away from the Doctor’s private clinic, to escape not only his new life but his Son, as well, who has managed to track him down. The Man’s wife arrives and demands that the Doctor return her husband, who she says is “just the way he was… His sickness is exactly the same as before.”98 The Man, who had been hiding in the ceiling of the clinic, reappears on stage, but refuses to leave with his family. He refuses to cooperate with the Doctor, as well, and begins to eat the meal which the Doctor has had prepared for him, “five stalks of sugar cane, three of straw, … some cedar shavings and soybean stems, ground… all up to make for easier digestion,”99 until his wife asks the Doctor to sterilise her husband. She has come to the conclusion that “his reproductive powers are of no use whatsoever” and thinks he should “take advantage of the opportunity and ask for an operation.”100 The Man goes behind a screen in the clinic room, apparently to use the toilet, but disappears as the Doctor rhapsodises about “Body and mind steeped in green. Freedom, nature, calm, peace.”101 The characters search the room frantically for the Man, and spot him running in the distance in the large painting of a meadow which covers one wall of the stage. Finally, the Doctor “slowly walks up to the wall and peers at it. The next instant he whips off his slipper and slams it against the wall…. ‘It was a bug!’ [he says,] ‘Just a stupid little bug!’”102 The curtain closes.

Structurally this piece unfolds very much as would a dream, from its opening which confuses the sense of time in the work, to its characters who appear from the material

98 Abe Kôbô, “The Green Stockings,” tr Donald Keene, p. 107
99 ibid., p. 106
100 ibid., p. 128
101 ibid., p. 129
102 ibid., p. 130
surface of the stage as if by conjuration, to its continued reference to the embarrassing psychological obsession of the main character, and to this character's final disappearance into the painting and subsequent destruction at the hands of the Doctor. All of these elements remove the work from a realistic type of referential theatre, and remove it, too, from the type of theatre Abe had been writing during the 1950s and 1960s. The world of this play is precisely that of dreams, and in it "dream logic prevails in the easy flow between the seemingly disparate levels of reality." As such it offers no readily recognisable critique of any particular social aspect or ill, despite its rather obvious "underlying theme of starvation caused by overpopulation." Abe's movement away from his earlier allegorical tendencies, with their roots in a flawed reality to which Abe is drawing censurious attention, is quite clear in this work, for here he approaches a level of imaginative communication far more mythological than what he had reached before.

Further there are aspects of this play which differentiate it from what Abe was able to attempt in his novels. What I consider most notable of these is the fact that there are scenes in which the main character does not appear: for Abe, who wrote the majority of his novels in the first person, this is a possibility unavailable in prose. In this play, the protagonist conveys his thoughts in monologue form, an effective technique which allows him to be a vehicle for progress in the plot, but which also makes it possible for Abe to leave those thoughts behind and approach this character from the varying perspectives of the Man's Wife, his Son, and the Doctor, as well. The Man becomes a part of the whole work, and not its mediator, as Abe's protagonists are in his novels.

I'd like to look now what I consider to be the most representative—even if not necessarily the most artistically successful—of the Studio's 'non-referentially allegorical'

103 Shields, p. 126
104 Shields, p. 118
plays, the Abe Studio’s final work, “Kozô wa shinda” (The Little Elephant is Dead, 1979).

I consider this play to be the most representative of the Studio pieces because it incorporates all of the elements Abe tried to have that troupe utilise: a more properly dream-like, rather than linear, plot structure; physical gestures which supplant dialogue as the primary means of communication; physical gestures which supplant dialogue as the primary means of communication; fluid, ever-changing spatial relations between the characters; improvisatory sequences making up passages of the ‘dream’; and a set minimalist in the extreme, designed to allow for the widest range of representational possibilities through the very sparseness of its appearance. Further, a number of the motifs and even some of the dialogue in this particular play echo and reiterate those found in other Studio works, and function as something of a coda or closing frame to the troupe’s activities. Foremost, however, is the movement away from an allegorical content to which the audience (or reader) can assign a ‘meaning’, a real-world referent as the object of the allegory. Whereas such early works as “Seifuku” and “Yûrei wa koko ni iru” were obviously concerned with a certain political stance, and “Tomodachi” presented a clear description of forced social conformity, the later Studio productions present a far more formless world of images. In a word, they present dreams, with all the spontaneity and haunting, though virtually uninterpretable, aspects that word implies. As I’ve tried to show in my discussion of “Midori iro no stokkingu,” Abe’s plays for the Studio aimed at an examination of group dynamics in the setting of a world dispossessed of reason—but beyond this one would be hard pressed to find an allegorical target for the Herbivorous Man’s fascination with underwear, for example. Yet this is the very sort of thing one may expect to encounter in a dream or nightmare: an excrutiatingly embarrassing fetish of which

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105 As far as I know this work, virtually without dialogue, has never appeared in print. My ‘text’, as such, is a video recording of the play, which Peter Grilli, Director of the Donald Keene Centre for Japanese Studies at Columbia University, very kindly made available to me. Video copyrighted 1979, by the Seibu Museum of Art and Shinchô, Incorporated.
suddenly everyone around becomes aware. Although the hospital setting of this play bears some passing similarity to that of the later novel Mikkai, the interactions between the ensemble of characters is far richer here, as the dramatic form requires. Mikkai, too, presents a dream world, post-apocalyptic and all encompassing, with the same qualities of nightmare as in “Midori iro no stokkingu,” but its focus on the individual and his defeat at the hands of the group is more concentrated. The focus on group interactions, though, reaches its zenith in “Kozō wa shinda,” where Abe’s arrival at a world of dream images becomes complete—it is the highest achievement of what I term his ‘referentless’ allegorical plays, a natural development from the earlier “Guidebook I” and “An Exhibition of Images,” both of which grew out of exercises and spontaneous rehearsals in the practice hall.

The full title for this play is “Kozō wa shinda—nikutai + ongaku + kotoba = imēji no shi” (The Little Elephant is Dead—bodies + music + words = image poem). It attempts a “special demonstration of what happens when words are supplanted by integrated but diffuse information.” Because it is a difficult work to find in print (or even video) form, and because as Abe’s last play it provides an excellent means to measure the departures from his earliest works, and his continuities, as well, I feel justified in devoting a fair amount of space to a description of its actions before I speak further about its importance.

On a square stage bare of sets save for an enormous, white cloth which covers both the entire playing area and its walls, a group of five Black-netted Men suddenly appear. They move as if hunting something beneath the cloth, which billows up around them. The men are wearing black, net tops, black pants, bowler hats, and thin, white cloth masks; they carry what appear to be long daggers in their hands. One of them cuts open the stage cloth to reveal the Frightened Women, wearing a ragged white blouse over a black, net

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106 Shields, p. 170
body-stocking. The men surround her and write on her white-masked face with their ‘daggers’, which have felt pens in their tips. They mark the woman’s face with multi-coloured lines and shapes. She collapses, limp. The men now fight amongst themselves, writing on one another’s faces and pantomiming a fierce battle as the electronic-music accompaniment (by Abe himself) continues its arpeggiated, discordant tonalities. The men are startled by a sound, as the Wandering Businessman appears, pointing upwards, and exclaiming inarticulately. This is the first ‘human’ sound any of the actors makes, yet it is nothing more than a high-pitched wail. As the Wandering Businessman moves about the stage area, three women wearing large, square, cloth costumes, vaguely reminiscent of a manta ray’s or flying squirrel’s outstretched skin ‘wings’, dance about him. These Square-clothed Women approach the group of men and remove the white masks from their faces. The Businessman moves part of the cloth covering the stage to reveal a black briefcase marked with a large white arrow, which seems to point the direction in which the Businessman must wander. He cries out in wordless joy, and leaves the stage.

The Square-clothed Women dance together. One asks what was in the briefcase, to which another replies “shell weed” (kaigarasō). The first one then asks if such a weed can be eaten, at which point the Frightened Woman stands, peels off her white mask, and says that one who smells the scent of this weed dreams the “dream of a fish upon the beach.” The Frightened Woman cracks a whip, and tells of a fish which dreamed it had become human, only to dream again, as a human, of becoming a fish. The Square-clothed Women chant of the “dream fish within a dream,” while several men tumble and back-flip across the stage. A male voice says

I have gotten so light, I feel as if the whole world, too has become light. This lightness causes the Dream Fish to speak, as if intoxicated: “It’s like I can drift
around the islands, like I'm floating in a cloud of seaweed—I can roam as I wish
and enjoy the lightness of my body, freed from gravity!"107

The Frightened Woman tells the Dreaming Man that "soon this intoxication will pass,
and weariness will arrive." The man says that this is so; he says the soles of his feet have
begun to long for the feeling of resistance they had on the ground. The woman is puzzled,
because she says he no longer has feet—"Yet more than all of that, you have no arms!"
This shocks the Man, who demands she help him find them.108 The woman tosses a "fake
fish" (nisezakana) to the man, who complains about the "tedium of words which have lost
their uses."109 The Square-clothed Women dance at this point to very lively electronic
music, while the rear-projected background displays a bright blue sky supporting white
clouds. The dancers stop and point upwards, while a group of men exclaim "Fly! Screw up
your courage, ride on the net!" The Frightened Woman says that the sea has fallen into the
sky, while another woman asks what is flying towards them. The chorus of women
answer that it is the Fake Fish, as one of the earlier Black-netted Men tumbles onto the
stage amongst them. He flounders about, like a fish out of water, and dies. The Frightened
Woman recites "Drowned in the air, the Fake Fish dies. But even so, the dream does not end."110 This latter becomes a refrain throughout the remainder of the work.

Two of the Square-clothed Figures stand over the dead Fake Fish, and ritually raise
him up. They carry him to a hole in the stage cloth, and slide him under. The Frightened
Woman tells of the groups of "fish tossed up on shore after a storm, among them some
unfortunate ones who were mere sleepers under the influence of shell weed."111 Suddenly

107 Abe Kōbō, "Kozō wa shinda," at fifteen minutes in.
108 ibid., at 17 minutes.
109 ibid.
110 ibid., 22 minutes
111 ibid., 25 minutes
out of a tear in the cloth backdrop three helmeted men appear, marching in a stylised fashion. One of them appears to be the leader, blowing expressively on a whistle. He orders the Square-clothed Figures away, and conducts an investigation under the cloth on the stage floor. His accomplices exclaim, as if giving a report, that “The dream is dead! Dead, dead, dead! The dream is Dead!” but the Frightened Woman, as if in protest, repeats that “even so, the dream does not end!”

At this, the figure of the Baby Elephant appears, a black, rubberised-cloth shape containing two actors, from beneath the cloth floor. It contorts itself on the stage floor, stretching itself longer and longer. The Wandering Businessman reappears, and whines in joy at the sight of the Baby Elephant. He gingerly stretches out a finger to touch the amorphous black cloth, then a hand to caress it. Reassured, he mounts the ‘animal’ outright. The Frightened Woman cracks her whip and states that “even so, the dream does not end.” The Baby Elephant trembles and shrivels, till only a limp, empty, black cloth remains, which the disappointed Businessman puts into his briefcase, wandering off in the direction its arrow points. The group of Square-clothed Women watching all of this ask what it was—“A misjudged dream... A Baby Elephant.”

The Frightened Woman cracks her whip, driving before her four of the Black-netted Men who attacked her at the outset, though now they hop about on their hands and feet between the billows of the cloth. The soundscape is reminiscent of a jungle, with birds and exotic sounds. One of them speaks, and says that they are weary from a long journey. The dream fish, “long forgotten,” have dreamed of becoming elephants. The Men stand, link arms, and then form a chain, standing on their hands, the legs of each draped over the back of the man behind; in this position they make their way off stage.

112 ibid.
113 ibid., 32 minutes
114 ibid., 35 minutes
Two Red-robed Figures now appear, walking on stilts. They say they will now "begin the investigation into the nature of the defendant's offense—" apparently placing the Frightened Woman on trial. One of the Red-robed Figures asks if the 'defendant' is guilty; the Frightened Woman replies that she is not (muzai desu). At this two Figures stand, draped in the cloth covering the stage. They hold badminton rackets, and begin a game over a net which two of the Square-clothed Women stretch between them. However, they play without a shuttlecock, and moreover, they are blind: the cloth over their heads has no openings for their eyes. The Red-robed Figures seem to be both officials and spectators at this game, eating an apple which they toss back and forth, and commenting on the poor quality of the badminton. One of the Red-robed Men calls out that he has understood, and asks for the "First Witness." The Frightened Woman tries to capture this person, a Square-clothed Character who weeps incessantly like a child, but she is unsuccessful. The Red-robed Figures say they understand and ask for the Second Witness. At this, a Referee appears, and two Players, who act out a game in which a ball must remain suspended between their bodies. Four Square-clothed Women sit at the corners of a small playing area; they and the Referee all blow on whistles, reflecting varying degrees of excitement as the game proceeds.

The Red-robed Figures look on disinterestedly. They continue to nibble at apples they toss back and forth. Finally they ask for the Third Witness. The Frightened Woman opens a trap door in one corner of the stage to reveal a bizarrely twisted, wildly crying Black-netted Man. She leads him onto the stage proper by caressing him with her whip, which she then wipes clean on the cloth backdrop. The red-robed figures drop an apple to this man, but he rejects it, his attention fixed on the ball with which the Square-clothed Women now play. Dejected, he crawls back to his hole in the stage, still emitting the grating

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115 ibid., 42 minutes
116 ibid., at 46 minutes
screams he had been making. The Red-robed Figures say once more that they understand, to which the Frightened Woman responds for the last time, "But even so, the dream does not end." The Black-netted Men reappear and catch the Frightened Woman within a cage they form of their own outstretched limbs. Unable to escape, she collapses screaming. The men put her into a large black net and dump her off stage. The chorus of Square-clothed Women sing of the "dream elephant within a dream," as the Businessman reappears. He points to the billowing stage cloth. One square-clothed Figure tells him that the elephant "has died," a tear in its "tiny eye which always seemed to be smiling."\(^{117}\)

All the characters now crawl under the stage cloth, which billows in a high arc above them. Coloured lights shine from below the cloth, as the characters gesticulate and dance wildly. Bright words appear against the dark and multi-coloured shadows: "Please do not feed," and the epigraph from Abe's novel, *Mikkai*, "In love for the weak there is always the desire to kill." The stage fades to black.

This play is particularly difficult to comprehend in its entirety in any logical fashion, for the underlying 'logic' which holds the separate segments of it together is simply not logic at all—it is the illogic of the world of dreams. Passages of this work are incredibly suggestive—the opening violent interactions between the Black-netted Men and the Frightened Woman, for example, seeming to represent a brutal violation on the one hand, or an equally brutal 'writing' into existence on the other; the badminton match between oversized, blind opponents, presided over by equally oversized, thoroughly uninterested judges, coming immediately on the heels of a 'trial' in which the Frightened Woman proclaims herself to be 'not guilty'—yet to perform any act of exegesis on these passages necessarily stops at merely describing them. Further, any attempt to stitch the passages together will quickly find itself frustrated by their apparent arbitrariness—however

\(^{117}\) ibid, at 55 minutes
motivated a game of some sort may be by its associations with a trial, what is it that motivates that game to be badminton, specifically? And why should the Red-Robed Figures, sitting both in judgement of the Frightened Woman and as referees to the badminton game itself, be eating apples which they toss nonchalantly back and forth? This movement mirrors the play of the game, but beyond this, nothing definitive can be said. As a dream, however, the play is suddenly freed from the necessity to cohere, and as a dream which attempts to tell of dreams within dreams, that necessity is even further reduced. This does not mean that the work fails to affect, or fails as a display of images. It means that to attempt to assign a unifying, interpretive frame to the play is both futile and limiting—as limiting as it is to attempt to analyse one’s own dreams.

Despite the futility of attempting a ‘conventional’ reading of this work, its visual style unites it with earlier productions the Studio staged. The play’s fascination with dreams and ‘fake fish’ call to mind one of the first works of the Abe Studio, the collection of shorter pieces which they called “Fake Fish,” in 1973. “Kozō wa shinda” echoes visually some other productions, such as “Imêji no tenrankai” (“An Exhibition of Images, 1977) in which actors mount a ball-game virtually identical to the one found here, and in which the stage is completely covered by an enormous cloth, as well as “Suichû toshi, Gaidobukku III” (The City in the Sea, Guidebook III, 1977), which also features this set arrangement, and the plot device of a character who dreams of being a fish. This visual and tropic self-reference enriches the style of the troupe’s productions, by creating a solid artistic history, a vocabulary of effects, providing a certain continuity from piece to piece. It also provides a visual equivalent to the sort of thematic continuity which exists within Abe’s work, and coincides with aspects of his concerns. The billowing, shapeless cloth, for example, functions very well as a barren landscape devoid of markers of place—it can represent any type of place by being blank, just as Abe’s settings for his plays and fiction can be any city any where.
The dialogue here, such little of it as there is, not only presents communication between characters, but caresses the audience with its auditory qualities, as well, and transports them into a non-realistic world. The word 'kaigarasō', the 'shell weed' inside the Businessman’s briefcase, is repeated over and over in a rising and then falling intonation, stroking the ears of the listeners like the sound of waves on a beach. When the Dreaming Man speaks of the bottoms of his feet, he and the Frightened Woman exchange the words 'ashi no ura', 'nai no ni', and 'mo nai' ('the bottoms of my feet', 'even though they don’t exist', and 'also do not exist' or 'not even') creating an aural echo of one another, the repeated syllables forming a lulling rhythm which the man’s suddenly desperate "sagashite kure" (Find them for me!) breaks, much as the sudden storm then mentioned by the Frightened Woman would break the lulling rhythm of the tide. The refrain, 'yume wa samenai' (the dream does not end) provides an auditory punctuation to episodes, and also a rhythm to the action, for it is delivered in a falling pattern which leaves the hearer expecting a continuation. This effect is difficult to achieve on paper, to say the least, but on stage is quite compelling.

Words are not the only medium of dialogue here, for Abe has several of his characters express themselves—remarkably clearly—through whistles, screams, weeping, and even gesture. This sort of communication was beyond Abe’s scope as a novelist by virtue of that medium’s limitations; it comes at the ultimate moment of his involvement in the theatre, and this fact may provide a clue as to why this was to be Abe’s last play. “Kozō wa shinda” comes as close to a purely gestural theatre as Abe could create. From here, there was very little place for him left to go, except back to words. This is what he did, returning to the printed page to produce his final novels, Mikkai, Hakobune sakura maru, Kangarū nōto, and Tobu otoko. I will examine in the next chapter how Abe, together with his actors, explored the aural possibilities of words, phrases, and pure sounds for their affective as well as communicative qualities. For now, though, I will say that this type of
aural delivery, repeated and rhythmical, heightens the dream-like atmosphere of this play considerably.

However dreamlike the atmosphere this play creates, though, there appears to be no particular 'dreamer' here, for no one character dominates the work to the extent that s/he could be called the protagonist. The Frightened Woman reappears at transitional moments, but ultimately the group of Black-netted Men remove her completely. They themselves are indeed a group, not an individual, and the only other solitary figure, the Wandering Businessman, is too infrequent a presence to hold much power over the work as a whole. “Kozō wa shinda,” then, presents a formal quality very different from Abe’s earliest plays which though they were far more ‘group-centred’ than his fiction, nonetheless had at least one character who was central to their construction—even the ensemble piece, “Midori iro no stokkingu” relies quite heavily on the lonely figure of the Herbivorous Man for much of its emotional effect. Here there is none of that dependency on a single strong character to drive the ‘story’, for neither is there a ‘story’ as such, only the loosely connected passages of dream imagery held together by the overriding conceit of the ‘Dream Fish’ or ‘Dream Elephant’, a character who appears less often than the Wandering Businessman.

Nonetheless this fascination with the dream and with the confusion of reality it causes is definitely related to the theme of lost or feigned identity Abe explored in such plays as “Yūrei wa koko ni iru” and “Doreigari.” The dream functions much the same way as belief did in those two, creating the reality in which the events of the drama take place, but it is a reality here which offers no part of itself as ‘real’. That there is no dreamer to claim any identity, and that the only 'identity' which this play ever mentions explicitly—the man who becomes a Dream Fish, which in turn becomes a Dream Elephant, existing within their own dreams inside this ‘outer’ dream—is no identity at all, defeats any effort to limit the play’s ‘identity’ as a particular interpretation, or as possessing any particular ‘meaning’. What emerges then as the meaning of the play is the identity of the ensemble in itself—this play
represents the willing blending of individuals into a group of which they each become one equal part. This play in effect represents the communal goal of Abe's work.

I will now reluctantly bring this far too brief discussion of Abe's dramatic texts to a close. There are many more fine works deserving of attention, but in the ones I have mentioned here Abe's general traits and overall tendencies are visible in representative ways which allow me to offer the following taxonomy of effects he utilised with consistency. The first of these and the one which in many instances permits the greatest thematic development within Abe's work in general is the concern he has for identity—what is it, how can it be maintained, and how can it be lost. Identity when coupled with allegory leads to effective social criticism, and in many of the plays this is the underlying thrust of the action on stage, to censure segments of society present in the audience in such a way that they would accept the criticism.

Together with this consideration of identity is an exploration of the rôle belief has in forming the reality in which that 'identity' takes its shape. Characters in Abe's plays are able to create for themselves realities either more or less wholesome, for want of a better word—Fukagawa had been in effect crippled by the headaches his belief in 'reality' was causing him, and in both versions of "Doreigari" the belief is in the form of a rejection of a reality based on deceit, in favour of an equally deceptive one. Fukagawa's acceptance of his own 'identity' will permit him finally to create his own 'reality' which, in its rejection of the exploitative reality he had initially helped create, has the potential for being a healthy one.

The socially critical function of Abe's earliest plays was one in keeping with the project of Shingeki with which he was initially involved, but as his association with Shingeki groups and directors waned, Abe began to write plays of a different type. This coincides with the shift in the allegorical quality of his plays, towards what I have termed
‘referentless’ allegory, and which marks Abe’s increasing willingness to explore dream logic.

Whatever the period in which he wrote, though, Abe’s plays approach character interactions and the revelation of interior thoughts differently than his fiction, being more open to an integration of the ‘main’ character into an ensemble, or even doing away with this character all together, as his final work “Kozō wa shinda” does. The creative avenue of the dramatic text afforded Abe the opportunity of experimenting with explicitly ‘communal’ productions in a way which led him, progressively, into the living world of the theatre: his theatre troupe, to which I will now turn.
Chapter Four:

Abe’s Theories on Exercises, Actor Training, and Rehearsal

In conversation with Akutagawa Hiroshi, Abe Kôbô once remarked that “after close to twenty years of writing plays, the one thing I’ve learned is to stay out of the director’s way.”¹ For Abe, an avowed individualist, this must have been a difficult lesson, indeed. However closely Abe may have worked with the Shingeki director Senda Koreya (1904-) during the 1950s and 1960s, it was this director who had the final say in how he would interpret and present Abe’s works on stage—and it was this director who chose the actors to embody Abe’s characters. “Abe’s dissatisfaction with the way his plays had been produced definitely influenced his decision to form... [his own] studio and to assume the role of both playwright and director,”² but in this venture he took upon himself one further task, and that was the training of his performers. The formation of his own theatre troupe, on the one hand, afforded Abe an opportunity unavailable to a writer of prose—that of close collaboration with other human beings in the creation of something both ephemeral and concrete. The formation of Abe’s own training method, on the other hand, afforded him an opportunity not available to many directors—that of molding the very forms his actors would use in the creative act. Through this opportunity, Abe not so much gave up his solitary craft with words as its material, as adopted a different material: the forms and rhythms of the human body, in all its capacities of speech and movement. He made full use

¹ Abe Kôbô, “Naze gikyoku o kaku,” Nami, Volume 3 Number 4, November December 1969. p. 16
of this opportunity to begin the process of creation for the stage, from the very fundamentals of that medium: the methods by which performers train and rehearse. Here Abe rejected the existing systems within Japanese theatre to form his own system—but a subtle irony exists within his decision to do this, for through his earlier collaborations with Senda Koreya, Abe may have received more influence than critics have typically acknowledged from this director who himself made great efforts to systematise the training of Shingeki actors.

This word 'systematise' is an important one in the theatre, for it implies not only a specific type of training method, but also the creation of performers best suited to specific styles of theatre, as well. It is in these different styles that distinctions will emerge most clearly between Abe and Senda. In this section I will explore what type of theatre Abe aimed to create, what he felt an actor’s function to be, what motivated him to develop his own methods of actor training, and the techniques he devised to enable his performers to become not "simple transmitters of images, but images themselves."3 I will present Abe’s theories of 'Neutrality', his 'Rubber Man' exercises, and his understanding of an actor’s relations to words, physical expression, and image creation. Further, to situate Abe in the artistic climate of his times, I will examine these methods in comparison with other directors who worked roughly contemporaneously; these are Senda Koreya, and Suzuki Tadashi (1939-), the founder of the Waseda Shôgekijô (Waseda Little Theatre Company, founded in 1966) which later became SCOT (Suzuki Company of Toga) in 1976. Although the aims of these three men were not in opposition in many important ways—they all hoped to revitalise their performers’ technical abilities through a concentration on physical training, the better to create an effective, expressive style of presentation—the methods they chose to accomplish this goal are often the diametric opposite of one another’s, precisely because of the type of theatre they aimed at producing: Senda worked in the style of

3 Abe Kôbô, Abe Kôbô no geijô: nananen no ayumi, Tokyo: Abe Kôbô Stajio, 1979. p. 25
realism; Abe hoped to bring dream imagery to the stage; and Suzuki works with epic, Greek tragedies to arrive at a transcendence of the real. As a result of the different aims these men had, the types of actors their respective methods produced were quite different. Through an examination of the contrasts in their aims and methods, I hope to explore the conceptions of individuality, group cohesion, and the function of the leader these men held within the overall frameworks of the systems they devised to achieve their goals in the theatre.

Although in the traditional forms of Japanese theatre young performers train within a specific style named after the accomplished, historical actor who developed it—in the so-called iemoto, or ‘house founder’ system—in the early years of Shingeki, there was no practical way for actors to learn their art “other than by experiencing everything for themselves on the actual stage. Accordingly in those years, even though there were essays written by directors or theatre researchers, or translations of foreign handbooks on acting techniques, there was almost nothing written by actors themselves about their art.”4 The Shingeki performers, in their haste to abandon the traditional Japanese theatres, had put themselves in the position of pioneers “wielding ploughs on the frontiers of a dark continent.”5 Even after the Second World War, there was no organised training method as such until Senda Koreya established the Haiyū Yōseisho (Actors’ Training Centre) as part of the Engeki Kenkyūsho (Theatre Research Centre) in 1949—despite the existence since 1910 of various training facilities which taught in diverse fashions.6 Actors who achieved a high level of ability did so through their own latent talents and hard work; their achievements were personal, and not part of a broader methodological system.7 “Although there were ‘theories of acting’ written by particular, well-known actors discussing their

5 ibid., p. 172
6 ibid., p. 171
7 ibid., pp. 173-4
characters, there were no theories concerned with the universal methods of actors. This is because a history of techniques was lacking. That is, although famous actors might embody a character, the techniques by which they did so were never once grasped historically.” This lack of a historical understanding of their work was a result of Shingeki’s initial rejection of Japanese tradition, and the wholesale adoption of an imported art form. “Without a tradition, systematisation [aikeika] cannot be carried out.” This lack of a system inhibits training, for in its absence “there’s no way for education to be carried out in any modern sense.”

Senda Koreya worked to change this state of affairs. He encapsulated his methodology in a two-volumed work, Kindai haiyū jutsu (The Modern Actor’s Craft, 1955). “The epochal, historical significance of this work lies in the fact that it is perhaps the first text book by an actor, for other actors, written by a Japanese in the history of the Japanese Shingeki.” Senda had planned a three-volumed work covering, in its first part, the actions of the body; in its second, the use of the voice; and in its third, the creation of the rôle. As it stands however, the work incorporates this third part as the conclusion of the second. Nonetheless, this is a thorough manual for the training of the ‘modern’ actor, containing theoretical discussions of the underlying principles of acting, as well as detailed and concrete exercises to train performers in everything from physical fluidity, imaginative ability, psychological understanding, vocal agility, and the creation of natural dialogue.

Senda begins his manual with a definition of the actor’s craft, which is both broad and carefully detailed:

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8 ibid., p. 174
9 ibid., p. 173
10 ibid., p. 174
11 ibid., p. 171
12 Senda, Koreya Kindai haiyū jutsu, Tokyo: Hayakawa shobō, 1955, Volume 1, p. 1
The actor's craft, together with the composition of the drama and the watching of the play, is a fundamental element of the theatre. The living person who may be called an actor uses his body as a means of expression [kyōshutsu shudan] to bring one of the characters of the drama completely and concretely to life on the stage, based on his own inner impulses to do so [naiteki shōdō]. In this way, the actor, together with other artisans of the stage, creates the flow of the drama which the playwright had intended. The actor's craft is therefore that which gives the audience its artistic impression, and is the whole process of the preparatory activities which arrive at that point.\[13\]

Senda continues with a point-by-point analysis of what he means by a 'living person', 'the self as a means of expression', collaboration with other performers, etc. The actor is to

comprehend the thoughts which are hidden behind the letters of the script, relying on the dialogue and the stage directions to plumb the depths of the personality of the character he is portraying. He is to take in the emotional vicissitudes of the character and seek out all his hidden motivations. The actor is to grasp the significance of his rôle within the whole flow of the drama; he is to enter himself into the character which the playwright has created, which is different from himself, and make this character completely his own possession.\[14\]

In order to facilitate this act of possession, Senda offers an analysis of the actor's means of expression, beginning with "the distinctive qualities of the actor's own mind and

\[13\] ibid p. 20
\[14\] ibid.
body, which are his tools and the materials of which he creates his product."\(^{15}\) Although make-up, costuming, and props "must also be counted among the actor's means of expression, since these perform only an auxiliary, decorative function, it is sufficient to mention the actor's living mind and body as his fundamental, characteristic means."\(^{16}\) Senda places emphasis on the foundations of acting, which he sees as lying within the techniques of expressive gestures. He explains that 'gestures' encompass "the techniques which directly express a person's thoughts and feelings through physical movement—such things as facial expressions, gesticulation, action, and posture. Associated with the actor's 'arts of speaking' which are responsible for appealing to the ear, these are the aspects chiefly responsible for appealing to the eye."\(^{17}\) In order for the actor to have full control over his range of physical gestures, his body must be trained. Training has four main purposes, which are: "a. To make the body strong. b. To allow the performer to move every muscle and tendon as he wishes, freely and precisely. c. To avoid undue strain [\textit{muda na kinchô}] on the muscles and tendons, and to maintain the equilibrium of the whole body. d. To correct the habits of the performer's posture or actions."\(^{18}\) The performer's "health is more important than anything else,"\(^{19}\) since his body is the instrument of his art. Senda recommends calisthenics as a daily routine, but he also describes a series of six exercises designed for the "liberation of the muscles and tendons, and also for equilibrium."\(^{20}\) The exercises call for the performer to seek out 'undue strain' while he is lying, standing, and sitting, and to learn to utilise only one major muscle group at a time—that is, to move one arm while keeping the other, his back, his abdomen, and his legs

\(^{15}\) ibid., p. 21
\(^{16}\) ibid., pp. 22-3
\(^{17}\) ibid., p. 53
\(^{18}\) ibid., p. 81
\(^{19}\) ibid.
\(^{20}\) ibid., p. 92
perfectly relaxed, for example. In essence the exercises focus on stretching, balance, and relaxation.\(^\text{21}\) These will allow the performer to move naturally on stage.

Following the basic physical training of the actor’s body to instill a sense of mobility within him, Senda proposes a series of exercises to make the performer more aware of the "techniques of psychological expression."\(^\text{22}\) These include practices to "liberate" his emotions, for anyone who wants to be an actor "must be able to show his feelings freely and easily, according to his intentions."\(^\text{23}\) Senda sees a problem in modern society which prohibits the free expression of emotion, which has the potential to lead to unhealthy consequences:

Modern people, especially the Japanese, have grown accustomed to covering up or suppressing their emotions. However, if we cover up, or suppress, or hide our feelings from start to finish like that, they become incredibly distorted. The movements of our expressive muscles become excessively limited, or else their reactions become very one-sided, and we become unable to express our emotions as we wish. Moreover,... since our emotions are inextricably connected to their expression, if we do not express them as we wish, they themselves become distorted.\(^\text{24}\)

This presents an obvious problem for the actor, who, if he cannot express his own emotions, can hardly express those of his character. In the series of exercises Senda proposes to overcome these limitations, he suggests that the actor “not try to imitate the

\(^{21}\) ibid., pp. 92-4 passim
\(^{22}\) ibid., p. 99
\(^{23}\) ibid., p. 101
\(^{24}\) ibid.
particular feeling, but must place himself within the emotional state" he is depicting. Thus his aim is for the creation of a total realism on the stage rooted within the performer’s own experiences and sensibilities.

Senda continues his training manual with exercises to improve the performer’s “basic knowledge of living actions,” which he sees as consisting of sentimental actions and volitional actions. He moves from here to a consideration of the “flow” of action and concludes the first volume of his work with a section on research into human life, to prepare his performers for the two qualities of their art necessary for achieving successful depictions of realistic characters: observation and imitation. The second volume of this work is concerned with vocal training, and the production of realistic dialogue.

Thus, Senda Koreya fashioned a detailed and categorical physical process through which an individual could pass to become proficient in the techniques Senda valued for the type of theatre he produced: realism based on the performer’s own lived experiences. Several of the exercises contained in this method, however, to which I will return at a more appropriate point, will find their echoes in the work Abe himself undertook twenty years after Senda began to write his training manual.

Yet the very aim Senda had for his method, training conducted in a specific fashion in order to foster within its practitioners a specific style—became a limiting factor for that method’s adaptability. In short, it created a tradition. As times and fashion change, any tradition may lose its relevance. Abe was keenly aware of this. The growing attitude of entrenchment that the realities of its main audience and financial necessities had forced the Shingeki world in general and Senda’s group, the Haiyûza, in particular, to adopt by the late 1960s severely restricted the range of artistic experimentation the Shingeki form could

25 ibid., p. 102
26 ibid., p. 117
27 ibid., p. 190
explore, for by now it had a 'tradition' and 'reputation' for producing an orthodoxyally realist repertory of work—even if these works still had a left-wing flavour, they had become 'safely' socialist and no longer able to inspire the passion for change their earliest incarnations had aroused. Moreover, the broader theatre-going audiences by this point had lost patience and sympathy for the ideologies upon which this theatre had been founded. Shingeki had become the target of young theatre revolutionaries, the founders of the Small Theatre, or Underground, Movement, who were able to characterise this established form as something which had "become just like a set menu, cooked and served in the same old mechanical way, totally without flavour and utterly predictable." Abe too felt the limitations of Shingeki and its techniques, and formed his own troupe the better to overcome these, perhaps feeling an instinctual affinity with the claim made by Charles Marowitz, a long-time collaborator and assistant director for the English director, Peter Brook, that "the most influential acting teachers are always the playwrights." For any discussions of Abe’s theories behind his training methods and his views on the actor’s art itself, an important resource concerning his opinions exists in the articles he wrote between 1973 and 1974, articles that amount to a short course on Abe’s ideas on the theatre. These articles represent the best—yet still extremely limited—source for critical study of his methods and ambitions for his troupe. Virtually no material in English exists on this important aspect of Abe’s work, save for a recent invaluable publication by Nancy Shields which nonetheless remains incomplete for a number of reasons, including its non-contextual approach to Abe’s methods and the output of the Studio, and a lack of in-depth

30 These essays, originally published in the literary journal Nami, were later gathered together along with photographs of the Abe Studio’s productions and criticisms of its work, in the volume Abe Kōbō gekijô: nananen no ayumi (The Abe Kōbō Studio: Seven Years of Progress). Tokyo: Abe Kōbō Sutajio, 1979
translations of Abe’s theatre writings. I hope this present study will provide a more detailed and balanced examination of Abe’s views, and the starting point for further research into his theoretical stance vis à vis the theatre.

The articles which Abe wrote begin with his analysis of certain specific qualities of dreams, and how these qualities may have some bearing on the theatre. As Abe has it,

One of the characteristics of dreams is their condition of self-awareness [jikakushōjô]. It’s not rare to be vaguely, or even clearly, aware that what you’re seeing is a dream, even while you’re dreaming. In fact, if you pay attention—even though the proof of this will come only after you’ve fallen asleep—it seems that the rarity is to dream without some self-awareness. As you become free from the constraints of reality, on the other side of the ‘fake experience’ [nise taiken no mukou ni] into which you enter, the sensations of a corresponding, actual experience will come back to life. Dreams strain quite strongly between these two layers of physical experience, and you wake up when you reach the boundary point of this tension. Dreams, much more than is generally thought, are centripetal things[kyūshin na mono].

For that reason there is a definite feeling at the heart of a dream which will not fade away even after waking up. This feeling belongs to reality, but it is a part of reality which can only be touched through the dream.

One further characteristic of dreams is that the motive force which spins out images has a much stronger physiological source than is commonly thought. It is probably quite rare for a psychological stimulus received during one’s waking time to become the source for a dream. On the other hand, it’s probably quite common for some such meaningless, purely physiological stimulus as the pressure of the sleeves of the pyjamas that cover the body, or the strain of the
bladder, or some unaccustomed sound, to cause a dream, and give it its plot and direction. No matter how incoherent the dream, its potential to be experienced as reality is due to its images being backed up by something physiological.

This principle can be exactly applicable even to the training of actors, because theirs is an existence which aims for them to be not merely the transmitters of images, but images themselves. Actors must be not people who see dreams, but people through whom dreams are seen. Actors must create themselves through this dream logic. Research into the interior structure of the actor leads directly to research into the structure of the dream.31

Abe approached the theatre with the aim of bringing out this metaphorical association of the actor with the dream, of making dreams real on the stage. Theatre, just like dreams, has an element of self-awareness. The audience members are always aware that what they are watching is theatre. Yet the reality for them is this ‘fake reality’ which they experience as real. In the articles which follow this introductory comparison, Abe describes the exercises and principles he developed to make manifest the dreams he had for the theatre. His plays were his personal dreams—no other director could visualise them the way he could, and no method of training actors had as its goal the creation of performers able to fulfil the dream-like rôles Abe wrote for them.

The passage above contains one other point central to Abe’s understanding of the theatre, and that is the physiological source of the psychological conditions which the audience experiences as real. Abe believed that on stage, the actors must begin from a physical expression, and through the medium of their bodies, arrive at a psychological

state. To this end, the exercises he developed focused on the physical qualities of the performers’ techniques.

Abe made his directorial debut in 1969 with a production of his play “Bō ni natta otoko” (tr. “The Man who Turned into a Stick,” 1975) at the Shinjuku Kinokuniya Hall. For this he won the Geijutsu-matsuri (Art Festival) Grand Prize. Soon after, he directed another original work, “Gaidobukku” (“Guidebook,” 1971), at the same theatre. This early work received generally favourable critical attention. The *Asahi Shinbun* noted that “nowadays when Shingeki has grown too mannered *mannerika shiteiru*, this is a method to be watched, but for the ‘Abe System’ to show itself off fully, it needs a bit more depth *tsunikasane ga hitsuyō darō*.32 In January of 1973, Abe made the decision to stop turning over control of his plays to other directors, and formed the Abe Studio. Some of its first twelve members were actors who had performed in the Haiyūza: Igawa Hisashi, Tanaka Kunie, and Onishi Kayoko. Their first production was “Ai no megane wa iro no garasu” (“Love’s Spectacles are Rose-coloured”) in June of that year at the newly opened Seibu Theatre in Shibuya, followed by a three-part work entitled “Nise-sakana” (“Fake Fish”) incorporating two pieces by Abe, “Nise-sakana” and “Kaban” (“The Suitcase”) as well as Harold Pinter’s “Dumb Waiter”—the only play not written by Abe which the troupe staged. This latter the troupe produced at the Kinokuniya Hall, but revived it in December of the same year at the Abe Studio’s rehearsal hall in Shibuya. Abe has said that his troupe staged this work because

Pinter’s plays require the most effort from the actors... According to my interpretation of Pinter’s plays, it is difficult to separate silence and nonsilence.

Both are treated as equal. What interests me is that the world created by Pinter is

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very different from the world of traditional acting. Pinter's world is impossible to express by conventional means. The actors are at a loss about how to perform Pinter's plays.

For instance the relationship between being watched and watching something is changed. In a traditional play the actor is a man to be watched. But now in Pinter's play, the actors cannot perform in the same conventional manner—just to be watched. So I, as a director, cannot produce Pinter's plays just to be watched either.

Perhaps... one characteristic of Pinter is that in his dialogue time does not flow. Rather time is a spiral. The relationship between time and space is changed. From that concept of time as a spiral, and how it affects the actors, arises the problem. For the conventional actor who plays the conventional way, this aspect of time is not a problem.33

What attracted Abe to this work then is its appropriateness for his conception of the actor as one who becomes a living expression, something more than an object 'just to be watched'. The necessity Abe saw here for an unconventional technique afforded him the opportunity to apply his method to a work by someone else, a litmus test in a sense of the validity of his theories.

In 1974, the Studio mounted three productions, including "Nise-sakana," at the rehearsal hall; "Tomodachi" ("Friends"), at the Seibu Theatre; and "Midori iro no stokkingu" ("The Green Stockings"), at the Kinokuniya Hall. 1975 was a busy year for the troupe, in which it staged four plays including "Ue—Shindoreigari" ("Ue—the New Slave Hunter") at the Seibu Theatre and "Yûrei wa koko ni iru" ("The Ghost is Here") at the Kinokuniya Hall. In 1976, the Seibu Department Store held a festival entitled Abe Kôbô no

33 Abe, "Interview," Contemporary Literature, v. 15, n. 4, p 446
*sekai* (The World of Abe Kôbô) during which the Studio mounted “Annajin (Guidebook II)” (“The Guides—Guidebook II”), which was accompanied by screenings of the films *Suna no onna* (*The Woman in the Dunes*, 1964, directed by Teshigahara) and “Otosha an” (“The Pit-trap”). Earlier that year the troupe had performed “Yûrei wa koko ni iru” and “Bô ni natta otoko.” In 1977, “Suichû toshi (Guidebook III)” (“The City in the Sea—Guidebook III”) was performed, as well as “Imêji no tenran: oto + eizô + kotoba + nikutai = imêji no shi” (“An Exhibition of Images: sound + projections + words + bodies = image poem”) at the Seibu Museum of Art in Ikebukuro. In 1978, the troupe revived Pinter’s “Dumb Waiter,” and toured Nagoya and Osaka with “Imêji no tenran.” Back in Tokyo, they mounted “Jinmeikyû johô” (“The Life-saving Ordinance”), “Hitosarai—imêji no tenrankai Part II (“The People-catcher—an Exhibition of Images, Part II”), a revival of “Suichû toshi,” as well as another new play, “S. Karuma-shi no hanzai (Guidebook IV)—*Kabe yori*” (“The Crime of Mr. S. Karma—Guidebook IV—from *Walls*.”) In the troupe’s last year together, 1979, they staged “Kozô wa shinda—Imêji no tenrankai” (“The Little Elephant is Dead—an exhibition of images”) as part of the Japan Today Exhibit which toured the United States, with performances in such cities as St. Louis, Washington, New York, and Chicago. They revived this work upon their return to Japan. Throughout these years the troupe also revived and revised many of their earlier plays, alternating new productions with revivals.

This full schedule of performances stretching over seven years was matched by an equally full exercise and rehearsal schedule at the Studio’s practice space in Shibuya. The troupe worked together for nine hours a day, six days a week. The studio hall itself was open at all hours, for members of the group who would drop by to work out or practise with their fellows. A typical day might involve a warm-up session of calisthenics, followed

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34 Mary-Jean Cowell, Associate Professor of Performing Arts at Washington University, in private conversation on October 26, 1996.
by one and a half to two hours of movement training, beginning at one in the afternoon, till Abe would arrive at three or three thirty to lead the actors in his training techniques. This would end at ten in the evening. From this brief sketch of the troupe’s overall activities, it is possible to imagine the great level of energy and commitment the actors made to the studio, often giving up work with other companies and careers that were already well established to remain loyal to this one. What was it about Abe’s method that inspired such devotion in his performers? It is to answer this question that I will presently turn to an examination of Abe’s techniques, and the working environment in which the actors explored so much that was new to both them and the world of Japanese theatre itself. First, however, I would like to address two issues which are of significance to the medium of theatrical creation. The first concerns a fundamental feature of group activity: the integration of individuals into a social order.

Abe, as I have been arguing, was concerned in his work with the creation of flexible human relations, modes of collaboration between people who would retain their own autonomy. Naturally nothing like the theatre could exist if there were not people willing to work together to bring their shared projects to fruition—and yet the theatre maintains a definite hierarchy, which even Abe’s troupe was unable to avoid completely. The theatre is formed of individuals who are willing to cease functioning as individuals for the sake of the production. Therefore an apparent contradiction exists here between the autonomy of the individual on the one hand and the cohesion of the troupe on the other, a contradiction which must be reconciled if any group is to exist. To overcome this contradiction the exercises which Abe developed for his troupe were based on as spontaneous a flow of motion as possible. Group members were free to adapt their styles of movement to the exercises others were practising—thus this troupe did function more as an ensemble of individuals than many other theatre groups have been able to. I will return to this issue
towards the end of this chapter to raise it once more in comparison with Suzuki Tadashi’s troupe.

The second issue I would like to address concerns a specific, theoretical problem involved in acting which is particularly germane to what I see as Abe’s overall concern, the free interaction of individuals—and this issue is, how can an individual be who he is when he is acting out the part of someone else? The critic Watanabe Tamotsu has written extensively on this topic, which he phrases as a question of the relation of the self to the rôle. For Watanabe, western theatre in general and Shingeki in Japan in particular approach this problem through a temporary suppression of the actor’s ‘self’, a subordination of his identity to that of the character he is portraying to such an extent that his identity should in fact ‘vanish’—in other words, “at the instant when the actor appears on stage, he is no longer the Famous Actor So-and-So; he must be [the character] him- or herself.”

Traditional Japanese performing arts, in contrast to this, support the continued presence of the actor’s ‘self’ on stage in its relation to the rôle. The ‘self’ thus receives its definition from the ‘persona’ which animates both self and rôle. While the traditional actor will “not hide his own ‘self’ [watakushi] on stage, but rather will establish that self within fictionality, and will attempt to arrive at the ‘rôle’ through a relationship with that ‘self’,”

the modern actor “must in no way show his ‘self’ to the audience. The most important difference [Watanabe has] yet found between the structures of the western actor and the traditional Japanese actor, and the most particular feature of the structure of the modern actor’s self, is this one point.”

Through an extinction of the actor’s self, the actor must in fact become “not an actor but the actually existing character himself, unaware of the audience’s presence.”

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35 Watanabe, p. 166
36 ibid., p. 161
37 ibid., p. 166
38 ibid., p. 165
Watanabe sees this feature as being an integral component of the bourgeois theatre which European society developed during the 19th century to reflect its cultural conditions. It is predicated upon a naturalistic representation of bourgeois life wherein the protagonists are no longer heroic, but are life-sized, common-place people living in realistic situations, framed within a particular technical system which incorporates the actor as but one of its elements, the ‘super marionettes’ who are still ‘less than human’ which the English actor, Gordon Craig (1872-1966), advocated that they should be. Within this system

which sees the play script as its most important element, and centres itself functionally around the director, the very autonomy of the rôle—which does not even recognise the autonomy of the actor himself—is markedly restricted, in that the actor has become simply the transmitter of the play’s theme, or a single element of the system as a whole. That is, even if this limitation is not directly a part of the relation between the ‘self’ and the ‘rôle’, it is indirectly and profoundly a part of both of these.

This presents a factual problem which Watanabe sees as being beyond the powers of western, representational, realist theatre to overcome. There is a contradiction in the attempt to do away with the actor’s self in favour of the rôle, for

needless to say, the actor is the actor himself, and is neither [one character nor another.] For example, not matter how fastidious he may be in his make-up or technique, it is the actor himself who stands on the stage, he stays none other than the actor himself within the wholeness of his appearance, voice, and body.

39 ibid., pp. 162-5, passim.
40 ibid., p. 166
Realism tries to overcome this contradiction by approaching infinitely near to its object, but of course, no matter how realistically a play is staged, it's still a fiction, and the contradiction is neither something which can be eliminated nor circumvented. Immediately, the limitations of realism become clear, and the relationships between the rôle within the play and the actor's self cannot help but remain, however ambiguous they may be.  

The actor in western theatre and on the Shingeki stage, for Watanabe, is nothing more than a mechanism that the entire process of the theatre has at its disposal for bringing the characters within the play to life—"the actor's 'self' is simply a physical material." In contrast to this, Watanabe sees a particular (and particularly nationalistic) thread running throughout the history of Japanese theatre, from Nô right up to the work of Suzuki Tadashi, which proposes that "the 'self' of the actor who is performing the rôle must appear on stage. Even in those instances in which the actor's 'self' does not appear explicitly on stage the 'self' is ceaselessly realised in the consciousness of the performer or the audience." For example in the world of Kabuki, audience members will often call out the name of their favourite actor upon his arrival on stage or at key moments, to applaud or encourage him—they know, and he knows that they know, full well what he is really doing: playing a part (or more correctly, playing someone who is playng a part.) Even when the audience is not actively calling out their favourite's name, they are still fully aware of his performance and would find the idea that he has become a character oblivious to their presence, simply ridiculous. Thus there is something here which Watanabe sees as completely lacking within western and Shingeki theatre: a close collaboration between the

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41 ibid., p. 167  
42 ibid., p. 270  
43 ibid., p. 268
performer and the audience to create the stage phenomenon within a "sacred space." The performing arts thus become a means whereby the profane world of the audience and the actors will be able to surpass itself and reach the shared, transcendent, communal, and non-realistic realm of the rôle—a specific relationship with fictionality which the performer creates with his rôle before the eyes of the audience. "In order to make real the fictional space of the stage, this relationship is most important. This relationship is the one between the two ‘selves’ on stage—the ‘self’ of the actor and the self of the ‘rôle’, which stand face to face and relativise one another."

Abe maintains a point of view which in many respects is similar to Watanabe’s appreciation of the traditional structure of the Japanese actor and the function of theatre within society—in fact the similarity is surprising given Abe’s typical denial of much that is traditional. For Abe, the actor must be someone who does more than simply transmit elements of the play, either verbal or visual. The actor must be those elements. “What’s important for an actor is not eloquence, but the art of being.... It is important for the actor to create himself as a relationship with the momentary circumstances themselves, rather than as a meaning or a conveyor of the plot (an explicator).” Abe “believed that dreams themselves served as the sources of energy which provided the tension to mount dream images in his dramas.” Thus, the actor is more than merely a vessel; he “is not a transmitter of images but an existence which seeks to be an image itself... An actor is not someone who sees a dream, but must be someone through whom dreams are seen.” As I have mentioned, Abe believed that an appreciation of the actor and an appreciation of the dream proceed through one another—for the study of the one amounts to a study of the

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44 ibid., p. 269
45 ibid., p. 270
46 Abe Kōbō, Abe Kōbō no gekijo: nananen no ayumi, p. 30
47 Shields, Fake Fish, p. 73
48 Abe, Abe Kōbō no gekijō, p. 25
other. In this sense the actor's technical ability takes on a great significance, for "what is sought by an actor is always expression as a form of technique."49 What the actor aims for is the creation of that 'artificial reality' which exists just beyond the 'actual' one, as the dream creates its own world based on, but beyond, the waking world, through a particular, physical source.

The techniques which allow the performer to transcend his actual existence have a metaphorical counterpart in the actor's use of masks, and Abe uses this word 'mask' (kamen) to represent the persona which the actor—who in Abe's works generally performed without an actual mask—creates on stage. "In a certain sense, the very act itself of playing a part is in effect the wearing of a mask."50 This metaphorical concept is an important one in Abe's understanding of the actor's art. Like cosmetics, the mask allows the "accomplishment of great changes inside the actor."51 There is a difference, though, between the use of cosmetics as an enhancement and the use of a mask or a persona as an alteration of the actor's true self.

Changing the body with cosmetics is always a bracketed change [kakkotsuki no henshin]. The woman who wears make-up always wants to be received as herself, in make-up. However the actor wears a mask in order to affect a fundamental change into another person. The people watching the play must be made to see clearly that the person who exists there is not this or that actual actor, but a non-existent character created through the mask. This difference is a great one. No matter how gifted the actor may be, he simply cannot play the part of

49 ibid., p. 30
50 ibid., p. 36
51 ibid.
himself. This is the fundamental difference between the stage actor and sports celebrities or singers.\textsuperscript{52}

Having created an on-stage persona as a mask, the actor suddenly benefits from the qualities of that creation. He is now able to do things he could not as himself.

The mask liberates the actor. It is a kind of passport. So long as he does not step out from behind the mask, he is not only freed from all morality, but he is even permitted to warp space and make time flow backwards. The audience demands that the actor exercise this privilege for them. They worry if the actor does not do all that he is permitted while wearing the mask. It would amount to a betrayal of their hopes, for the actor to allow his actual self to peek out from behind the mask he had created with such effort.\textsuperscript{53}

Abe recognises that the audience is as responsible for the maintenance of the mask—the persona—as the actor. "The mask is an intersection of three parties: the actor, the rôle, and the audience. Only the mask exists at that point as reality."\textsuperscript{54} At this cross-point, the actor and the audience work together to form a shared actuality which serves both to unite and animate them—it becomes their existence and requires their willing cooperation. The audience and the performers create together the dream world which Abe sees as the goal of theatre. Within this constructed reality the rules of physics no longer apply, for the audience expects the actor behind his mask to behave in a way which contradicts them, and belief serves as the material substance of the world thus created on stage—in its own way,

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\textsuperscript{52} ibid.
\textsuperscript{53} ibid.
\textsuperscript{54} ibid., p. 37
thus, a 'sacred space'. This is the quality of reality Abe examined in many of his earliest plays, such as "Doreigari" ("The Slave Hunter," 1955) wherein the beliefs of the characters created the worlds they inhabited, however illogical or contrary to physical perception they may have been. Those plays, in their allegorical quality, served to remind their audiences that they themselves were responsible for the world in which they lived—to remind them that they could change their social organisations if they wished. The plays also functioned to demonstrate the manifest relationship which existed between their actors and their audiences, and which Abe here explicitly states to be the mutual creation of the mask, the persona appearing on stage, by those two distinct, though linked, groups. Through the creation of the 'reality' of these plays and their characters, the performers and audience actually achieve the new, communal reality Abe had envisioned.

This is a powerful understanding of the nature of theatre, for it does more than merely imply, it in fact insists upon, the willing interaction between audience and performer to create something both vital for, and yet beyond the abilities of, either alone. It calls for the creation of a community, yet a community which may be founded on misperceptions and bad faith. Abe discusses the potentially negative consequences of this when he considers the phenomenon of the 'idol' in popular culture:

The hopes the audience has for the mask may occasionally be the source of delusions. For example, in the case of a film star whose reputation as an actor is greater than his rôle, the audience, instead of working with the actor's rôle to produce the mask, will work with the actor's mask to produce the rôle. In this case not only the actor but his manager and producer too will work to fix the mask in place. The mask which begins to exist outside of the bounds of the rôle is a different thing from the mask in its original sense. No matter how unwilling they may be to find themselves in this condition, the audience begins to be
deluded. They begin to think of this mask in the same way as they think of a woman’s cosmetics. But nonetheless, no matter how talentless the second-rate star who appears on screen may be, he still exists as a mask. Only in this case, his fixed mask (or the mask which is capable of being fixed into place) is no longer expected to be so very different from his real face (sugao). Responding to the audience’s delusions, he even wears a mask in those places where he should be separate from his rôle. He will go through his private life wearing the mask. In the end he will even delude himself into believing that the mask is his real face. At this point, having lost sight of the distance between his own face and the mask, he can no longer recall the mask’s reason for being.55

The actor and the audience in this case create a self-destructive, narrowly restrictive, unhealthy community from which neither can truly benefit, in which neither can truly grow. The audience expects and demands only a specific quality which the performer must continue to provide. The actor loses his self, and the audience will inevitably lose its idol when scandal, for example, strips the actor of his mask.

Abe developed a theoretical stance coupled with a series of technical exercises to help his actors overcome this danger of losing themselves in the rôle, and losing the distance between themselves and their masks. This stance he termed being ‘Neutral’ (nyūtoraru). Although I am dissatisfied with translating this term as ‘Neutrality’, which would be ‘nyūtoraru-sei’ in Japanese, I will do so here to avoid the awkward sound of the phrase ‘being neutral’. Although Nancy Shields in her book Fake Fish: The Theatre of Kôbô Abe refers to this term as the ‘Neutral Position’, this is even less satisfactory than the one I have chosen because of its connotations of a single, unchanging, physical posture. Abe never considered Neutrality to be limited to a particular physical stance—the term refers to a

55 ibid., pp. 36–7
physiological state of concentration into which the performer should place himself continuously, regardless of his spatial orientation. Much of Abe’s writing on the theatre is concerned with explaining how this condition is to be achieved, and what positive effects it will have on an actor’s technique.

To arrive at the state of Neutrality, Abe proposed the following specific instructions. The actor first finds a comfortable position in a place of his own choosing. Then he concentrates on the sounds he hears. Next, he must eliminate those sounds, one by one.

Of course this is a difficult task. You can stop seeing something just by closing your eyes, but sounds come into your ears as they wish. Even if you try to block them out, you can still hear them. The best method is to choose one, relatively easily discernible, continuous sound out of those you hear, and by concentrating on this one, push the others out. This action requires more tension and concentration than you’d imagine.

Observe this state of concentration you’re in closely, from inside. I suspect you’ll completely separate the part that’s concentrating on the sound from the rest of you. Please remember the physiological sensations you now have. From now on, I’ll refer to this condition as Neutrality.56

The heightened sense of awareness in this condition makes the performer’s body tense, and focuses his physiological energies on the moment in which he finds himself. “In short, Neutrality is nothing other than being in a deep state of connection with the surroundings.”57 The effect is a fluid one which permits the actor to enter into situations on

56 ibid., p. 29
57 ibid.
stage quickly and convincingly. Abe differentiates this condition from one of relaxation, which only numbs the performer.

Neutrality is not simply relaxation or a state of collapse. Try the next exercise to understand this.

Sit in a chair.

Don’t lean on your elbows. Let your back slouch. Take the most comfortable position you can.

In that position, start concentrating on certain sounds, excluding others. Pay attention to the changes in your position at this time. If you repeat this often, you’ll be able to enter into the state of concentration which is Neutrality very quickly.\footnote{ibid.}

Neutrality not only affects the performer’s interior physiology and physical concentration, it also affects his outward appearance by enhancing his expressive abilities.

The actors watching this exercise will also come to recognise how much this Neutral posture enriches the expressive potential of the performer.

While maintaining your Neutrality, try changing the positions of your arms, your posture, or the angle of your head, for example.

Further, try imagining a specific situation—say, someone is keeping an eye on you from behind with a pistol. There is a clear change in your posture. This is natural, since your concentration on sounds has changed to a concentration on the danger behind you. Yet, this change is an unbelievably slight \textit{wazuka} thing. Both the performer and the observers will be surprised by the subtlety of the
change, and, even more, by the way the situation will be sharply expressed. Still, though, the actor continues to be Neutral.

From this it can be understood that although Neutrality is a posture, it is not simply being relaxed.\footnote{ibid.}

The actor is encouraged to develop a quick ability to enter into the state of Neutrality through whichever method works best, for

while the method I’ve just discussed—selecting a relatively discernible, continuous sound from those you can hear, and excluding all the others...—is one of the important prototypes of Neutrality, it is not all there is to it. Metaphorically speaking, it is nothing more than the zero-condition of Neutrality, or the Neutrality of zero.

There are an infinite number of transformations within Neutrality, which have as their foundation this zero-condition.\footnote{ibid., p. 30}

Once an actor has become experienced in Neutrality, he can draw upon the condition to overcome the limitations of other techniques, and maintain both his on-stage persona (his mask) and his own personality without contradiction. “Neutrality is, in short, the fundamental condition for establishing existence itself as expression.”\footnote{ibid., p. 31}

Abe’s insistence upon this state of Neutrality—a heightened sense of concentration—bears a certain resemblance to a condition which Senda Koreya describes at length in his \textit{Kindai haiyû jutsu}, but with one important difference: Abe considers this to be a \textit{physical}
technique, while Senda considers it to be psychological. Senda believes that “for an actor, his most important psychological technique is to become able to regulate his own powers of concentration freely. He must become able to concentrate his attention on a specific, previously-selected object using his own will-power.” If the actor cannot control his attention, then “he will become careless in directing his attention towards the object at which his character in the rôle should be looking.” To facilitate the actor’s control over his attention, Senda offers a series of exercises to train the actor in maintaining his state of concentration, which involve staring fixedly at certain objects, focusing on specific sounds to the exclusion of all others, or engaging in mental exercises while other performers carry on conversations around him. The result is that the performer will be able to appear as, in Watanabe’s phrasing, the character himself completely unaware of the audience’s presence. What Abe has termed Neutrality, Senda terms concentration, but both have a certain bearing on the performer’s self-awareness on stage.

In Abe’s terminology, if the actor loses sight of the distance between himself and the mask, or forgets to remain Neutral, he may find himself in something of a trap. Regaining a sense of Neutrality, though, he will be aware of the mask as a mask and make use of its liberating qualities to become in effect a better actor. This is therefore Abe’s answer to the problem of the relationship of the self to the rôle—rather than propose the extinction of the one in favour of the other, both are able to exist simultaneously at the intersection of the self, rôle, and audience which is the mask, through the performer maintaining himself in a state of Neutrality.

If an actor tries too hard to push his mask before himself, he cannot avoid working to erase himself. He ends up hoping to make himself non-existent and

62 Senda Koreya, p. 104
63 ibid., p. 106
become the mask completely. As great as the actor’s powers of imagination concerning any given rôle may be, to that extent his hopes for the mask cannot help being equally great. The actor who has lost his belief in Neutrality has arrived at this stage. It may also be quite natural for an actor who naïvely believes that Neutrality is the physiological starting point for his self [jiko] to feel some resistance to Neutrality before he creates his rôle.

However, there are two great misunderstandings here. One concerns the mask, the other concerns the meaning of Neutrality.

Certainly, without a mask, it is impossible to arrive at the rôle. However, this doesn’t mean that the distance between the actor and the rôle is filled in at the place where he becomes the mask. As soon as the actor becomes the mask, the mask ceases to be a mask. Even in the case of the film star who loses sight of his rôle, the audience doesn’t want to be deceived by the mask. The stage audience wants to recognise the one existential reality of the mask, even while recognising it as a mask. In order for the mask to be a mask, the actor who’s wearing it must exist behind its surface. The actor who is able to soar on the wings of the mask must exist.

Neutrality is never in contradiction with the mask.... Neutrality aims not at grasping the rôle (or the situation) psychologically but at understanding it physiologically. A psychological creation of the rôle joins the mask to the actor’s self. The mask loses its powers of flight, and the rôle becomes just like make-up on the actor’s personality. When it comes time to create a rôle, psychology after all functions centripetally. The Neutral condition is a method whereby the actor can extricate himself from that centripetal force. The body which has become neutral is never contrary to the mask.64

64 Abe, Abe Kōbō no gekijō, p. 37
Abe concentrated his method of actor training on the physiological process through which an actor must pass to arrive at a sustainable on-stage mask in order to permit his performers to avoid this pitfall of psychological 'centripetal force'.

However, despite the recognition this process of Neutrality received from critics of the day, their overall reception of its results was not entirely positive. One review of the Studio's first production, "Ai no megane wa iro garasu," contains the following:

Here, the playwright is aiming for a projection of the charm of the performers' disillusioned technique (the 'Neutral Technique' in the words of the Abe School), within the blankly wavering movements on stage, in which both the stable plot on which the actors can rely, and the sort of modern, dramatical characterisation of the rôles and the backgrounds of the characters have been done away with.

However, in so far as what appeared on stage is concerned, this intended plan was not necessarily a success.... The... problem is that the actors' charm was not as fresh as expected. This all may be the result of the cool, light, unplay-like techniques born of an accumulation of improvisational skills... Yet in place of this lightness, the individual charm of each actor is weakened, and I must question how transparent and homogeneous the whole becomes. Even though there were sharp reflexes at work here, and some amount of expertise, on many occasions I had no idea how acutely connected with an actor's individual interior any particular technique was. It looks like the practical results of the Abe System, which aims for the creation of a new technique, will require some long supervision.65

I find it almost ironic that Abe, who aimed for a technique which would support the spontaneous and individual contributions of its players, had initially produced instead a method which apparently created ‘homogeneity’ on stage, in which individuality faded away into ‘transparency’. Later reviews however praised Abe’s actors for overcoming words and representing “theatre itself.”

To demonstrate the effect physiological posture will have on psychological mood, and to give his actors a ready mechanism for presenting psychological states effectively and quickly, Abe devised a number of experiments he referred to as “Rubber Man” (gomu ningen) exercises. He justified his focus on physiology as the visual means which present, and create, human relationships. This is central for Abe, who believed “human relations are not born out of psychology; rather, psychology comes about from human relations.”

The series of Rubber Man exercises begins with a simple scene involving two performers. In this, one performer assumes the rôle of “controller” (shihaisha) and the other, “controllee” (shihai sareru mono, hishihaiisha). The two “will recall the patterns of a controller (or controllee) they’ve seen other actors perform in the past, and will either imitate them or otherwise give themselves up psychologically to the feeling of having become the rôle. If the previous actor were staging a patterned theatre (kata shibai), the latter acts out an emotional theatre (kimochi shibai). The performers watching this should remember it as an example of poor technique.”

The problem with this imitated performance is that it begins from the wrong point—the psychological ‘feeling’ of being in control. Abe proposed to his actors the necessity of beginning from the physiological manifestations of the emotional state they were trying to

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66 “Shôgeki teki na makugire,” Tokyo Shinbun, November 11, 1974. Reprinted in Abe Kôbô no gekijô, p. 64
67 Abe, Abe Kôbô no gekijô, p. 25
68 ibid.
portray. He emphasised the need to begin with exterior, concrete signs either of power, or submissiveness, or joy, or confidence. The exercises he put his troupe through aimed at giving them an understanding of the function of the body's posture in creating a psychological mood. I was fortunate enough to witness a demonstration of some of these exercises in posture at the Abe Symposium in New York in April of 1996. There, Satô Masafumi and Itô Yûhei showed how, by simply changing the relative curves of their backs while standing facing one another, they could appear to alter not only their relative heights but also their relative social standings and the power relations between them. Satô, a tall, slender actor, asked Itô, a shorter, slightly heavier man, to stand as if his imaginary ‘tail’ were held high, much as a proud German Shepherd will stand with confidence. Itô seemed to arch his back; Satô asked him to hold his tail even higher, and there was indeed a visible change in Itô's posture which made him appear the more powerful of the two—and even the taller. This effect was magnified when Satô stood with his own ‘tail’ between his legs, in abasement.

Satô and Itô went on to demonstrate two types of facial expression Abe had had his troupe practise. One was termed ‘protruding’, and it required the actors to feel as if their noses were pushing out from the centre of their faces. This was to create within them an extroverted, humourous feeling. Of course in demonstrating this neither man could contain himself and ended up bursting out laughing—the physiological mechanism had such an immediate effect on their psychological state. The opposite exercise was termed ‘introverted’, and consisted of imagining the nose pushing inward, folding the cheeks over itself. The emotional state which corresponds with this procedure, Satô said, is sorrow.69

Abe's Rubber Man exercises built on these basic changes in posture and physical expression to explore the ways in which psychological relationships between performers

69 Satô Masafumi, in remarks made during the International Abe Kôbô Commemorative Symposium, Columbia University, New York, April 19–21 1996.
could be handled physiologically on stage. Abe was adamant that “in order to understand some psychological expression, a physiological realisation is an indispensable auxiliary step. The reverse is not always the case, and it happens quite often that a psychological conception or understanding will become a hindrance which causes the actor to lose sight of the physiological expression.”\textsuperscript{70} Rather than having his actors rely on patterns they may have seen other actors use, he asked them to experiment with spatial dimensions between themselves, such that the relations between their bodies’ relative sizes and locations would be “fixed in the following way: \( A + B = K \), where \( K \) is a constant number. That is, were \( A \) to become larger, to that extent \( B \) would become smaller, and conversely, were \( B \) to become larger, \( A \) would become smaller.”\textsuperscript{71} The actors were to maintain this constant total between themselves through either regulating the distance between them, or by expanding or contracting what Abe referred to as the body’s ‘expressive surface’ (\textit{taihyômen})—by literally ‘puffing up’ or bending over the body. Abe wanted his actors to realise that this basic step is devoid of all psychological qualities. It proceeds as a “see-saw game. Just as if the actors have become rubber, the expansion and contraction of their bodies must be understood as a simple physiological quantity,” but this understanding has the added benefit of permitting the performers to become “accustomed to meaninglessness.”\textsuperscript{72} One of Abe’s goals, as I have mentioned, was for his performers to stop ‘signifying’ and instead become significance itself. Here the exercises serve to reinforce their awareness of this, in that these spatial relationships which they are practicing are purely without meaning: they are exercises and nothing more, but exercises which can instill within them almost instinctual conceptions of relating to one another through physical position.

\textsuperscript{70} Abe, \textit{Abe Kôbô no gekijô}, p. 27
\textsuperscript{71} ibid., p. 25
\textsuperscript{72} ibid.
As the series of Abe's Rubber Man exercises progresses, the actors experiment with different aspects of their bodies' 'expressive surfaces' (taihyômen) to experience the physiological manifestations of, for example, trust, and then distrust. In one exercise, two actors first straighten up their postures to appear 'puffed up' or 'open'. Then, unlike in an earlier exercise in which an increase in the size of one caused a corresponding decrease in size (or increase in the physical distance of separation) of the other, here, the two

in their 'enlarged state' begin slowly to approach one another. When they reach a distance of about one metre apart, they must stop and adjust the openness of their bodies' expressive surfaces, in such a way that they no longer feel any resistance from each other. They should observe their inner feelings. They will discover that this expansion of their expressive surface corresponds to trusting the other person.\(^{73}\)

To demonstrate a physiological manifestation of distrust, Abe reversed the exercise—the two actors were to approach and slowly contract themselves, reducing the surfaces they showed to one another and the audience. Through these simple physical means the actors were able to express a psychological reality which other technical approaches may not capture as well: "Even if patterned or emotional theatre is able to transmit a meaning or an understanding of these moods, it has difficulty in transmitting the image of them. This can be fully grasped even from the above exercises."\(^{74}\)

The exercises Abe devised for his troupe were not limited to demonstrating the effects of spatial relationships on the psychological conditions of pairs of actors. Many were also aimed at providing single actors with the ability to express emotional states through the

\(^{73}\) ibid., p. 26.

\(^{74}\) ibid.
same physiological concentration which worked so well in the paired exercises. In one series, Abe has an actor imagine himself to be seated in a park, where “although he is exposed to the gazes of others, for the most part he is not aware of those gazes and can maintain his own private world. [He] is savouring [his] happiness. No matter how calm he tries to keep himself, he cannot hide his overflowing emotion.”75 For Abe, this situation itself is particularly psychological. “The actor will naturally give over his own state of mind to the situation, and will try all kinds of physical exaggerations. He’ll shake his head, he’ll chuckle, he’ll bite his lips... And finally, he’ll arrive at a stereotypical portrait of an actor acting out the technique of savouring happiness.”76

To counter this result which produces a disappointing caricature of the emotion Abe wanted his actor to convey, he proposed an entranceway into Neutrality which is the visual equivalent of the aural technique I have described above. Here, the actor is to concentrate his attention on his “own gaze. Not on the object of the gaze, but the gaze itself. This is an extremely unstable concentration.”77 Abe called this “letting the gaze swim about the cosmos,” and he expected the student audience in his troupe to perceive it as an expression of “release.”78 To complete the physiological expression of ‘happiness’ his actor was aiming at, Abe had him now imagine that a light was shining on his eyes, a light that would move one or two “beats” (ichi, ni-kai no rizumu) afterwards to whichever point he would turn his gaze to escape it. While doing this the actor was instructed to raise his diaphragm to as high a position as he could, and discover within himself the physiological feeling of irrepressible happiness which was the goal of the first exercise. “The point of this... was not that emotions don’t exist, but that an awareness of physiological states was absolutely

75 ibid.
76 ibid.
77 ibid., p. 27
78 ibid.
essential to the understanding of emotional states and to their representation on stage. On the other hand, Abe held, psychological analysis did not illuminate physiological states.”

Abe explains the inability of a psychological approach to express subtle changes in physical expression through a short demonstration of the different moods the actor will encounter by simply raising or lowering his diaphragm in conjunction with the movement of his eyes. The three examples he gives include holding the gaze fixed with the diaphragm in a high position; moving the eyes with the diaphragm in a low position, and holding the gaze fixed with the diaphragm low. Abe feels that, physiologically, these conditions are related to active, aggressive tension, shame, and passive obeisance, respectively, but psychologically, there is no easy way to describe the corresponding emotions generated by each posture. “Here, psychology cannot even become an aid in the understanding of the physiological condition.” A rational comprehension of a physical condition is no comprehension at all, and for an actor is of no use whatsoever in the technical presentation of that condition.

Actors need to appreciate fully the relationship between their bodies and their emotions... Abe’s intent was to release actors from what he termed a sense of suffocation by having them move naturally without exaggerated, theatrical facial and vocal expressions. Once the actors achieved a heightened sense of awareness of the various physiological possibilities involved in either an active or a passive state of being, Abe allowed them to deal with the psychological expression of emotions.

79 Shields, *Fake Fish*, p. 82
80 Abe, *Abe Kôbô no gekijô*, p. 27
81 Shields, *Fake Fish*, p. 86
Chapter Four: Exercises, Actor Training, and Rehearsal/ 222

When Abe first began working with the actors who would eventually become members of the Abe Studio, during the 1971 production of "Gaidobukku," he tried to devise a mechanism whereby the performers' powers of imagination could be trained, heightened, and directed towards the process of conveying information. Experiment may indeed be "needed more by the director and the actor than by the writer," and Abe as a director was always willing to experiment with gesture and technique to arrive at a new method of presentation. To train his actors' imaginations, Abe set upon a number of specific exercises he felt were so successful that he concretised them as the play, "Gaidobukku" itself. This process tells much of Abe's way of working with his collaborators, for he entrusted the creative process to their hands, only guiding their results. It also tells much of Abe's method of prodding his actors, and allowing them to move forward through experimentation in directions they themselves wished to explore in conjunction with his own goals of expanding the expressive possibilities of theatre. As Abe says of the first stage of experimentation in the "Gaidobukku" exercises,

The title "Gaidobukku" was actually not a name which demonstrated the content of the work, but rather was a reflection of the methods we used in rehearsal. I handed over to the actors guide books containing instructions for various situations, and had them freely ad lib those situations to seek out experientially certain relationships with their partners.

When I gave completely different instructions to actors A and B, the conversations which developed through their natural ad libs would become pretty incoherent. As they tried to ascertain each other's positions, the relation between the two would become sharply defined. From this tension, even if they didn't want to, the actors couldn't help becoming Neutral. Not only did their bodies

become Neutral, but even in the domain of language, too, all traces of an emotional theatre peeled off.  

Nancy Shields describes one of these processes of improvisation carried out to differing situational instructions.

Resorting to Neutral Position the pair create tension between them. Through trial and error they wrestle with the problem of ‘How might I reveal myself in this particular moment?’ As a member of the audience I judge Actor A to be in a subservient position to Actor B, whose physical expression implies anger.

Later each actor describes to me the instructions given to him:

Actor A: “I used up the money which I was supposed to keep for some other person. I hope to be able to return it from my next month’s paycheque without the person knowing. However, that man seems to have started to doubt me. How can I manage to handle this case? If he discovers the truth, he is not the type to forgive me.”

Actor B: “There is something that offends me in the attitude of that man. He seems to have something that he is trying to hide from me. He might have had a love affair with my girlfriend. I feel that I need some sort of explanation from him to resolve my doubts. I would like him to confess what he has done.”  

I can see in this type of improvised exchange based on emotional, though unknown and unresolved, conflict, a certain similarity to the types of improvisations Charles Marowitz records Peter Brook having used during his work on the “Theatre of Cruelty” in

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83 Abe, Abe Kôbô no gekijô, p. 34
84 Shields, Nancy Fake Fish, p. 87
the mid 1960s, a similarity extending even to the anticipated goal of the process. Brook’s improvisation, based on breaking up a single character, ‘A’, into sixteen “personality adjuncts” of a central protagonist, “musters an agonising degree of attention, and, as each actor must speak simultaneously with A, compels actors to grasp implications and innuendos instead of responding mechanically to word-cues... It forces actors to cope with sub-text... where all the essential action is.” 85 This ‘agonising degree of attention’ is cognate with the tension which gives rise to Neutrality in Abe’s method, as the entranceway into an acute situational awareness based on relations to the moment-by-moment unfolding of the scene. This placing of the performer into the heart of an action forces him to live that action through his own experiential actuality, and it overcomes, in both instances, any reliance on received patterns or reactions.

A second mechanism Abe devised during the “Gaidobukku” exercises formed a substantial portion of the actually staged version of the work itself. This is the process of ‘Photo Viewing’ (shashin nozoki), which Abe describes as a game in which

\[\text{a photograph has been put away in a small box. A single actor looks through a hole in the box at the photo, and must describe it to the other actors. The various actors who receive this description must later compare the image they arrived at with the real one.}

Initially, the actor playing the rôle of the ‘looker’ pays earnest attention to his conveyance of the description. However, in the process, no matter how much information is transmitted, in the end it stops at only a rough sketch of the photo. This is because the actor cannot discover what is essential to the photograph, what must be conveyed. The actor here cannot help but realise that what he must

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85 Marowitz, Charles “The Theatre of Cruelty,” in Peter Brook: a Theatrical Casebook, p. 41
discover is not simply a photo, but the very act of transmitting itself. This becomes a test of the actor's inner power of words.86

The goal of these exercises is to make the "actors themselves fully aware of how thick and impenetrable the shell of technique is,"87 and to force them to discover new ways to convey meaning. Abe hoped through this process to demonstrate to his actors the close relationship which exists between the powers of observation and expression, which he claimed was useful in areas other than just an actor's technique.88 Abe explained that this relationship was helpful in his own writing, as well, both in fiction and for the stage. "While the actors were observing their photographs, [Abe] was observing them,"89 and through this process he produced not only this particular work, "Gaidobukku," but the seeds for other performances as well.

In the 'photo viewing' exercises, words have a definite function in assisting the performer to capture the feeling within the photograph. Abe worked closely with his performers on their vocal deliveries, to aid them in approaching words from a variety of viewpoints. Words convey information of many sorts, but this conveyance is not limited to the semantic meanings of the spoken phonemes themselves. Words have aural and emotive dimensions as well which Abe explored with his troupe. Technique, that element of an actor's art which Abe continually tried to renew and reshape, is something which incorporates more than just physical expression; "while an actor is someone who exists through a physiological concentration, he is also someone who exists through words."90

86 Abe Kôbô, Abe Kôbô no gekijô, p. 34
87 ibid., p. 29
88 ibid., p. 35
89 ibid.
90 ibid., p. 32
Every system of actor training must of course take words into account. Senda Koreya too devoted considerable space to this aspect of his performers’ arts. For Senda, words functioned analogously to the actor’s physical body. That is, they served as one more mechanism whereby a convincingly realistic character may be created on stage. Senda offers a categorical, rational analysis of words and dialogue in the second volume of his actors’ handbook. Here, he proposes that

‘Dialogue’ is not words which the playwright speaks directly to the audience, nor is it words which express his own thoughts and feelings through the borrowed agency of the character on stage [tojōjinbusu no kuchi o karite]. …

‘Dialogue’ is the clearly delimited words which the character the playwright has created (some individual person from a particular country, in a particular time, belonging to a particular social class) will necessarily say in a particular situation arising from a certain circumstance within his life. While at the same time these words are delimited by that character’s personal history, education, character, and his psychological state at that moment, they must also have a necessary, organic relationship with the situation in which he has been placed…. Needs to say, the words which issue forth from the character’s mouth in this way are never things delivered directly to the audience. … ‘Dialogue’ must ever and always be words which the character will deliver, unaware of the audience, to either another character, or sometimes to himself, or sometimes even to no one in particular.91

For Senda dialogue and its component words are thus clearly realistic elements which support the illusion of the ‘slice of life’ reality for which Watanabe criticised the Shingeki

91 Senda Koreya, Kindai haiyūjutsu, volume two, pp. 113-5
world. They become one more aspect of the character’s removal from an interaction with the audience on anything other than an ‘observational’ level—characters and audience must exist within differing realities, only one of which is aware of the presence of the other. Abe wrote dialogue for this type of theatrical transaction early on in his career; with his own troupe, however, he aimed for something else. Suzuki Tadashi also aimed for something else. 

For Suzuki, there would be “no difference at all between plays and novels”92 if one were to consider them both as only written texts. The most “important feature which marks theatre as theatre… lies within the actor,”93 and specifically, within the actor’s delivery of the play’s words. “The most important and most difficult point within the process of structuring a play is in which way the written words are to be spoken. I may say that it is within the conversion of written words into the vocal accompaniment of the body that the interest in theatre lies.”94 Suzuki identifies a particular misunderstanding, though, which he sees the general theatre audience as perpetuating. This misunderstanding stems from their expectations of a realistic, conversational style of vocal delivery. However,

a play’s words are after all one type of written language. Thus, there is no need for conversation in the play to be like an everyday conversation. It’s a strange way of thinking to believe that the words written for a play must in every case be the same as spoken words. Even written words may be vocalised and turned into conversation. In this sense, I believe that written and spoken words are in opposition to one another, and it is mistaken to think that the theatre must be established in dependence on the spoken language.95

92 Suzuki, Tadashi Engeki to wa nanika?, Tokyo: Iwanami shinsho, 1988, p. 3
93 ibid.
94 ibid.
95 ibid., pp. 3-4
Through this vocalisation of words, one is able to discover "drama within the act of speaking itself, and this is the basis of theatre."\(^96\) Suzuki feels that not even conversation as such is needed for this awakening of the theatrical: "there is something within the act of speaking, on its own."\(^97\) Thus, "theatre, so long as we consider the relationship between the actor and the text, is the work which is first born as a living thing through the actor's body, as the transformed significance which exists based on combinations of dormant words."\(^98\)

However an actor is not someone who simply transmits elements of a story. Suzuki dismisses the belief that "whether or not an actor has transmitted a story well is the marker of his skill" as something "which has no relation to theatre at all."\(^99\) Theatre only appears when "the audience is able to perceive the value of the performer's energy and actions."\(^100\) In this sense Suzuki proposes that in any theatrical act, "narration is the same as deception."\(^101\)

'Deception' is not the act of interpreting words, it is when the act of speaking itself becomes drama. 'Technique' is when something occurs within the person who is about to speak, and when that person displays this occurrence. 'Deception' transforms the consciousness within the actor who is speaking words, and his relationship with the audience who is watching him. The very

\(^96\) ibid., p. 4
\(^97\) ibid.
\(^98\) ibid.
\(^99\) ibid., pp. 4-5
\(^100\) ibid., p. 5
\(^101\) ibid. Suzuki here uses a pun on two homophonous verbs, 'kataru' meaning 'to relate or recite', and 'kataru' meaning 'to cheat or swindle'. 
raison d' être of the actor is to make us able to experience a certain space, or the words which receive encouragement, or energy, or the act of discovering some non-daily value within that transformation. Of course, we experience a certain physical or spiritual sense of fullness which is slightly different from our everyday sensations when that deception is established. The actor who can give life to this feeling is fascinating as a person. For this reason, a great actor is not fascinating because of words, but is someone who is able to exhibit fascination through the act of speaking. Or, to put it another way, he is someone who, through exhibiting this fascination, is able to invite the feelings of the audience into something beyond the every day. This is what I mean when I say that 'deception' is the same as 'narration'. This relationship, which at first indifferently divides the space through the actor's narration, this relationship which is the twin-headed amalgam of the watcher and the watched, creates the intimate space in which these two become one. When this relationship between the actor and the audience is born, theatre is established.  

Thus for Suzuki, theatre exists through a sharing of the act of speech—not in the sense of a transmission of meanings, but in the very act of speech itself within an enclosed space. The significance of words is not within their semantics, but within their relationship to an actor's energy. Meaning becomes only an accompaniment to an act of vocalisation—in this situation, realism can have no place, but sanctity, the creation of a 'sacred' locus, becomes the vital quality which animates the very process of watching and being watched itself. Words create the space, which transforms the relationship of the audience and the performer, which creates the transcendence of the mundane, which creates the theatre. Thus theatre for Suzuki, unlike for Senda, becomes a means of forming a particular sort of

102 ibid., pp. 5-6
community—a mystical one, removed from the every day, unconcerned in essence with the qualities of that daily existence to which the members of this community return at the end of the performance. Theatre becomes ritual.

Abe, in contrast, has quite a lot to say on the issue of words and their necessity for an actor's complete existence which illuminates not only the verbal qualities of acting, but also his own relationship to expression in both the play script and fiction. A passage from his actors' handbook bears quoting at length.

Generally words are handed over to the actors in the form of a dramatic text [gikyoku]. Nowadays there isn't anyone who would question this relationship. However I wonder if, in the end, the dramatic text is all there is for an actor as words. I wonder if an actor can be contented just starting out from the text, arriving on stage, and being a means of conveyance for the words. I myself, as a playwright, have no intention of making light of the dramatic text. Rather in a certain sense I think of the script as an absolute. Nonetheless, I'm completely opposed to a concentration on the dramatic text which takes it as a starting point for the stage. Even if the dramatic text is a point of arrival [for the playwright after his creative journey], that doesn't mean it has to be a starting point for the actors.

That an actor must exist through words is a problem which pre-exists the dramatic text. But even so, I doubt anyone has really been surprised by this yet. The majority of actors believe that even without a dramatic text, they'll still be actors. Certainly, so long as they don't even question the condition of having to exist through words, they too are without a doubt still actors. This optimism disappoints me.

When I think about this problem I recall the arguments on theatre... Mishima Yukio and I often had. On many points we were opposed to one another, but
when it came to the disappointment we felt for actors who had lost words, we were always strangely in agreement. When he tried to make allowances in his texts for his actor’s poor delivery \( shita\ tarazu \), he was generally disappointed, and when I’ve experimented with using the actors’ damage of language as a parody, I too have been disappointed. We used to enjoy talking about this over drinks. Over time he ended up being disappointed with the theatre itself, but I stuck with it and now I’ve contradicted myself and formed my own group. If Mishima had lived, I think he would have had a good laugh at this one.

Mishima certainly had ample basis and qualification to be disappointed. He lived within language. Or rather, he lived language. Because he himself was a writer who already \textit{existed through language} even before he began a work, he sought the same standards in his actors. We must remember that an abundance of words is not the same thing as talkativeness. What’s necessary is not a conversation \([zadan]\) but a discussion \([taiwa]\). It’s not unusual for even actors to be skilled conversationalists \([zadan\ no\ meishu]\), but still, the art of conversation is in fact an art which \textit{does not} exist through language—it’s something removed from the spirit of discussion. In order to exist through language, you must first understand the true meaning of discussion, and then adopt its posture.

Of course this is a difficult undertaking. Even among novelists the only ones I’ve met who were really good at discussion were Mishima and Oe Kenzaburo. I may be like Don Quixote, aiming for something that doesn’t exist, when I try to find the same sort of qualities in an actor. But actors, too, just like writers, cannot exist without language. I’m not saying that actors have to become writers. I’m only hoping that actors will adopt a spirit of discussion with the writer as equals,
in a place that pre-exists the work. Maybe I’m overestimating them, but I just don’t understand why actors can’t be equals with writers.\footnote{Abe, Abe Kōbō no gekijō, pp. 32-3}

What Abe wanted, I believe, was for his actors to do more than simply present—this would limit them to working with only the elements of conversation he felt were removed from a true use of language. Conversation takes its cues from what the other has to say, but only in so far as this will permit one to respond from one’s own point of view. Discussion, on the other hand, requires an analysis of what the other says. The necessity is for the type of engagement, to borrow from Sartre, which motivates a deep exchange, wherein the very existence of the participants is a requisite portion of the material being shared. Through this, Abe’s performers will more fully exist on stage, as the living elements of the production—as images themselves, rather than transmitters.

However in this act of existence they remain ‘real’ for the audience. Although they propel the audience thus into the artificial reality of the play, that reality has an actual, physical basis which is not transcendent. Abe’s aim was for a creation of the world of dreams, not of a sacred space. Although his goal may appear related to that of Suzuki, there is a difference between the two. Abe’s theatrical world of dreams, through its physical basis, is a part of the real world, as he has said: a part of it which is accessible only through dreams, only through the theatre. I do not see this same dimension within Suzuki’s world, based on an act of deception which leads to the experience of non-daily sensations.

Part of the problem which Abe identified with words in the theatre is that very often the dialogue in the script (serifu) “stinks of dialogue.”\footnote{ibid., p. 52} Abe aimed for a means through which his actors would be able to “shake off”\footnote{ibid.} this type of dialogue, and proposed that
the only way is for an actor himself to experience the origins of the dialogue 
[serifu] physiologically. The main reason why dialogue takes on the smell of 
dialogue is that the actor has become an automatic machine for the vocalisation of 
the text’s words. However skillful he may be, however individually he may try to 
deliver his lines, as long as the actor stops at the level of vocalising the words, he 
can only arrive at a conveyance of their ‘meaning’. The place at which true 
dialogue is born must be the point of contact between words and silence. Through 
physically re-experiencing at that point even dialogue which has already been 
written down and given to him from outside of himself, he will be able to turn 
these words into seemingly newly-created dialogue. The point of contact between 
words and silence—this is the origin of conversation, and also the first 
entranceway for mounting on stage the character as a relationship. ¹⁰⁶

Even silence has a physical basis—in this sense Abe’s emphasis on the metaphoric 
connection between dreams and the theatre rings true. In dreams no matter what is said, it 
is real for the one who speaks it. This must be so in the theatre as well.

Abe’s ‘Rubber Man’ exercises and his emphasis on the Neutrality for which his 
performers should aim were part of his belief that theatre—like dreams—has a physical 
source. He worked to instil within his performers a facility of movement, a freedom to 
create gestures within space for the creation of the dream-like atmosphere he valued. This 
concentration on physicality, like other aspects of Abe’s method, is not without precedent 
in Senda’s system. For Senda Koreya, the basis of the actor’s art was his living body. 
However Senda aimed for an imitation of reality in his work—his performers were to 
observe living human beings carefully, and replicate them. They were to base their

¹⁰⁶ ibid.
characterisations on their own inner adaptations of the characters’ situations. Abe aimed for the creation of dreams. His performers were not to be real people, but dreams themselves—in fact for certain productions Abe actually had his actors observe animals in the zoo, something quite different from what Senda intended for his own actors.  

In this sense his theatre represents a significant departure from Senda’s, and understanding this aim, his decision to end his collaborations with that director becomes quite natural.

Further, Abe’s concentration on the physiological approach to creating a rôle and presenting emotional situations to the audience was something very much in keeping with the ambiance of the times in which he worked. His own actors were familiar with the works of Artaud and Peter Brook, and had read a new translation of Jerzy Grotowski’s *Theatre Laboratory*. Abe himself may have been less influenced by these figures than he was by Brecht and Senda, but nonetheless the artistic mood of the period was towards a physical expression, towards a political provocation of thought through challenges to established forms of presentation, and Abe was always willing to work with what the actors themselves brought to his studio. He emphasised in his writings the need for a physiological understanding of emotion, and consistently denied the value of psychological interpretations which would result in an actor acting only like an actor acting. In fact Abe actively sought out someone who would be able to train his actors in modern dance in order to impart to them a facility with movement, a certain physical ease, to complement the exercises he himself had devised. Mary-Jean Cowell was this person, at the time a young MA student from Columbia University who was in Japan in 1975 working on her thesis on Mishima’s cycle of Nō plays, when Donald Keene introduced her to Abe. She had worked professionally with the Katherine Litz Company, had performed a number of

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107 Professor M. J. Cowell mentioned this to me in conversation on October 26, 1996
108 ibid.
109 Abe, *Abe Kōbō no gekijo*, p. 26 passim
110 Professor Cowell, in conversation October 26, 1996
her own pieces in New York, and had taught modern dance before this meeting. Together with Abe she worked to create a free-flowing sense of movement in the troupe, not a vocabulary of gestures based on any particular school of dance—in fact the two actively worked to overcome strictly patterned forms—but a physical range that the performers could adapt to their own goals. Abe has described their meeting during the production of “Ue—Shindoreigari” (Ue—the New Slave Hunter, 1975) as “fortuante,” and wrote that the exercises Professor Cowell devised were not to teach “forms, but were to awaken and make the performers aware of every single, tiny, sleeping sinew.”

The exercises Professor Cowell brought to the Studio aimed for ease and quick, fluid motion. Before they began, though, she would lead the actors through warm-ups carefully structured to prepare their bodies physiologically—to prepare them not only for the strains of movement, but also for the creative talents she hoped to have them discover. She hoped to “heighten their sensibility of movement and space in the theatre,” and enable them to overcome the patterns their bodies naturally formed in their improvisational exercises. After the warm-ups, the real work of expanding their gestural ranges and capacities would begin. In one exercise, Professor Cowell would make a certain pattern of gestures, from which the next actor would take the last movement as his or her starting point in another pattern, the final movement of which would be the start for the next actor, and so on amongst a small group of never more than three or four—in this way all the participants were constantly caught up in the speedy changes of the pattern. The effect was thrilling to watch when I saw it done at Columbia University in April of 1996, at the commemorative symposium dedicated to Abe. The bodies of the actors writhed in a continually evolving, massive pattern born of the coalescence of their individual gestures. The growth in space of

111 Abe, Abe Kôbô no gekijô, p. 52
112 Professor Cowell, in conversation January 18, 1997
113 ibid.
this shape was rapid and organic in the truest sense of that word—it was alive even in the close quarters of the conference room.

Professor Cowell led the troupe in exercises designed to tutor them in ways of reacting to or against the touch of other performers. For example, in another exercise I watched her and the actors in attendance demonstrate in New York, one performer would approach another and gingerly tap his or her body, either on the shoulders, the arms, the midriff, the hips, and so forth. The tapped performer would have to react either as a marionette having its strings pulled in the direction of the touch, or as a cat responding favourably to a caress, or as a charged particle moving away quickly from an equally charged object. Here, too, the resulting effect was of sudden, unpredictable patterns of movement, with the two performers rapidly consuming large amounts of space as they chased or followed one another about, responding to the physical logic of action and reaction generated by their touch.

Other exercises built on these examples, and involved small groups of actors repeating one another’s gestures in sequence, or repeating each others’ patterns with the movement of one limb restricted. Professor Cowell’s aim here was the same as Abe’s in general: to have the performers overcome their bodies’ resistance to physical fluidity, to have them move in non-patterned, non-rigid ways, and to allow them to explore the gestures and patterns their bodies could make spontaneously.

While Professor Cowell was working with the Abe Studio, she was also involved with a class at the Tōhoku Gakuin, teaching modern dance. There, she was impressed by how quickly some of the students were able to imitate patterns of movement, but this was not what she wanted for the Abe Studio. Rather, she wanted a willingness to explore, and to encourage this in her students, she would, for example, show a particular gesture or pattern only once or twice, and have them try to copy her. Of course, the students introduced ‘errors’ into the pattern, but from these they were able to develop new patterns
of their own. One student who later worked with Abe once remarked to Professor Cowell that having experienced this type of physical freedom to create, she had to seek out the only troupe in Japan that would appreciate and permit her continued experimentation: the Abe Studio.\(^{114}\)

This willingness on the part of Abe to encourage and accept an organically free-flowing, spontaneous generation of malleable gestures from amongst his actors stands in great contrast to the work of Japan’s perhaps best internationally known director, Suzuki Tadashi, who is renowned for his own use of movement training in the method which bears his name. The Suzuki Method employs rigid, sculpted, staccato patterns which the actors pound out at break-neck speed with legs grown muscular and massive in their development.

Suzuki’s motivation for devising his method was not entirely dissimilar from Abe’s, in that both men hoped to revive something which was lost in their performers’ abilities—a connection with their bodies’ inherent facility with movement. Suzuki has said that “the main purpose of my method is to uncover and bring to the surface the physically perceptive sensibility which actors had originally, before the theatre acquired its various codified performing styles, and to heighten their innate expressive abilities.”\(^{115}\) His aim is for his actors “once again to realise an awareness of the body which has grown degenerate in our daily lives, to permit technique to be as free as play [asobi].”\(^{116}\) In what amounts to a dismissal of the work of Senda Koreya, Suzuki believes that one of the major problems with modern theatre is that “there is no such thing as actor’s training…. The body which lacks this sort of training has a definite deficiency in terms of its endurance.”\(^{117}\) Further,

\(^{114}\) Professor Cowell in conversation October 26, 1996.

\(^{115}\) Suzuki Tadashi, “Culture is the Body!” in Performing Arts Journal, Volume 8, Number 2, 1984, p. 28. Translated by Kazuko Matsuoka


\(^{117}\) ibid., p. 90
Suzuki identifies a particular problem based on a lack of any sense of continuity in contemporary theatre:

I would say in criticism of the modern theatre movement in Japan that it exhibits virtually no inclination toward any methods appropriate to the theatre as an artform. Proper methods would not seek to stop at the level of individual memory; they would attempt to render individual memory universal, and on a scale consonant with a theatrical ensemble. At best, ideals of performance should be developed into a practical system; and even if that level cannot be reached, there is certainly no reason to give up trying, and so reveal a total lack of any critical spirit whatsoever.

No one among modern theatre people... shows any such intentions. None of these modernists or political progressives can proclaim with dignity that they have found a new means to transmit their experiences...\(^{118}\)

Suzuki thus criticises the modern actor for being without, first of all, a disciplined physical agility, and secondly, any connectedness to what has gone before, and what will come after in the history of theatrical techniques. His method, he hopes, will answer both problems, by providing training and a theatre troupe “with a true communal vision to express.”\(^{119}\)

Suzuki contrasts the remarkable range of expressive gestures children are able to make when they are excited with the adult’s physical awareness grown “unconscious” through lack of use, and concludes that “even when an adult is made aware of what he has


\(^{119}\) ibid.
lost sight of, and tries to play [asobi] with a concrete physical sensation as a form of expression, that sensation will not be able to take on a living form. No matter how much feeling he may have it will be of no use."\textsuperscript{120}

To allow his performers to overcome this Suzuki proposes a number of hard physical exercises central to which is an observation of the movements of the lower body in the great stage arts currently existing in all parts of the world, and an acquisition of that basic physical awareness. This is because I believe that, for whichever movement is required, an actor’s centre of gravity must move swiftly and with stability. An actor must be so aware of his whole body that it will be as if a superb sculpture is moving. For this end, there’s nothing better than a study of the awareness of the lower body which forms the basis of the profoundly developed stage arts of the world.\textsuperscript{121}

Suzuki justifies this emphasis on the physical movement of the body’s centre of gravity by pointing out that, through constant exposure to film and television acting, audiences have become overly accustomed to looking for expressive ability within an actor’s facial qualities. While Abe’s method incorporated exercises to facilitate his performers’ transmission of psychological information through concrete physical techniques which included training of the facial muscles, Suzuki believes that a concentration on facial expression is a distortion of the way in which people gather information about others in daily life.

\textsuperscript{120} Suzuki, Engeki, p. 91
\textsuperscript{121} ibid., p. 94
Actually, if you want to know anything correctly about a person and his expression [hyōjō], it’s better to make the condition of his whole body itself your object. This goes without saying, because we begin to perceive the existence and condition of the other person first of all from the quantity and quality of the energy emanating from his body. After that, we see the details of his expression.\textsuperscript{122}

It is to give his performers better control over the expressive qualities of their whole bodies that Suzuki trains them in the strengthening and movement of their centres of gravity, but this training places great emphasis on improving their vocal control and delivery as well.

In order to give reality to their words and physical actions on stage, actors must always divide up various quantities and qualities of their corporeal energy. Through doing so, they create between themselves and the audience the atmosphere of the place, which may even be called the preverbal condition which forms the premise of communication. My feeling is that the actor’s awareness of his lower body and the way he has of moving his feet are the most important aspects of this. Further, because an actor is different from a dancer, he doesn’t pursue simple play [asobi] with his physical awareness. He has an awareness of his body’s changing [henyōsuru] status through the act of speaking words at the same time. The actor uses up an extreme amount of physical energy while simultaneously speaking and being aware of his movements. Nonetheless, the actor must make his words audible to many people without making use of any mechanical energy. At times like these his breathing will be cut short, his words

\textsuperscript{122} ibid., p. 96
won’t be clear, and his voice won’t travel far. For this reason it’s vital for an actor to acquire the ability to control his own breathing.\textsuperscript{123}

Suzuki is clear that his method alone is not sufficient to transform an actor into a brilliant performer. He likens his method to the acquisition of a linguistic grammar, which in itself does not guarantee the creation of a good composition or style:

In short, this training is, so to speak, a grammar necessary to materialise the theatre that is in my mind. However, it is desirable that this ‘grammar’ should be assimilated into the body as a second instinct, just as you cannot enjoy a lively conversation as long as you are always conscious of grammar in speaking. These techniques should be mastered, studied, until they serve as an ‘operational hypothesis’, so that the actors may truly feel themselves ‘fictional’ on stage. For actors to realise the images they themselves pursue, they will have to develop at least the basic physical sensibility.\textsuperscript{124}

Similarly, both Abe and Professor Cowell hoped to create a certain gestural repertory within their performers, but their conception was not something as syntactically developed as a ‘grammar’.\textsuperscript{125} While grammar is necessary as a first step in approaching a good creation, Suzuki acknowledges that sometimes it is permissible to break the grammatical rules to achieve a certain effect. He sees his training as only the study of those rules, as “nothing more and nothing less than a means of continuously fostering a sharpness in the awareness of the body, something which is deeply connected with words.”\textsuperscript{126}

\textsuperscript{123} ibid., pp. 96-7
\textsuperscript{124} Suzuki, “Culture is the Body!” pp. 28-29
\textsuperscript{125} Mary Jean Cowell, in conversation, October 26, 1996
\textsuperscript{126} Suzuki, \textit{Engeki}. pp. 97-8
he believes, is an explicit response to the "inability in modern times to train with the
objective of performing techniques of a certain form."127

In a demonstration as part of the Today’s Japan exhibition held in Toronto in the
autumn of 1995, Suzuki led twenty-four of his performers through their exercises before
myself and many dozen enthralled observers. One among several of the processes through
which the performers go to strengthen their lower bodies and to root them in the ground,
for several hours every day in either the commune-like setting of the SCOT facilities in
Toga, Japan, or in the universities and rehearsal studios around the world where the Suzuki
Method is practiced, consists of variations on a theme of stamping—although as Suzuki
himself acknowledges, “stamping may not be the most accurate term, for [the actors]
loosen their pelvic area slightly, then move themselves by striking the floor in a vehement
fashion.”128

This stamping begins with a simple—though rigorous—step which all the performers
make, single file, around the practice space. The knees are raised high, roughly to the level
of the hips, and the feet are brought down flat, directly before the performer, on their full
soles. When the performer has completed the circuit about which he is marching, the
pattern of stamping changes. Now, the knees are raised equally high, but the feet are
brought down such that the force of impact falls on their outer edges—the legs bowed
outwards to enable this. The pattern varies again, with the force now being dealt to the
inner surface of the feet. Naturally to achieve these different patterns of impact the
performer must alter the swing of his calves considerably. This is difficult enough to
describe—and attempt—slowly, but the speed with which Suzuki’s actors carry out these
exercises boggles the mind of the uninitiated and inspires it with fear.

127 ibid., p. 98
The stamping patterns train not only the performers’ lower bodies, but their upper bodies, as well, for in one series of exercises, the actors must hold their arms and shoulders in a particular posture of their own choosing while going through the routine of varying their steps. Suzuki also makes the actors vary their arm positions in an exercise conducted while the performers are squatting on the ground: using a long piece of split bamboo (for its sharply percussive tonal quality) Suzuki strikes the floor to signal the students to change their positions. They hold their arms in differing angles away from their bodies, changing rapidly or slowly, depending upon the strikes of the bamboo staff. Suzuki is able to gauge an actor’s progress by the degrees of variance in the positions he chooses.

Suzuki’s vocal exercises are every bit as strenuous as the physical processes through which he puts his performers. The results I’ve seen imply that his ideal is for a twisted style which differentiates the staged delivery of words from their mundane counterparts. To obtain this, some of his vocal exercises entail the troupe standing en masse, in rows, or seated upon the floor with their upper bodies and legs raised—supported by the strength of their stomach muscles alone—and chanting out in full voice the Japanese translation of one of Shakespeare’s soliloquies from *King Lear*. This his performers demonstrated at the *Today’s Japan* exhibition, looks of incredible intensity on their faces as their bodies struggled to maintain breathing patterns sufficient for sustaining their voices and straining muscles. Another variation on this has the female members of his troupe seated upon the bent backs of his male performers, who then must recite the soliloquy—at full voice. The results obtained this way are striking when incorporated into an actual performance, and seem to create an almost transcendent atmosphere within the theatre—as if the actors themselves were being spoken *through* rather than merely speaking.

Suzuki, like Abe, is training his performers in an approach to the creation of the rôle through their bodies. His exercises strengthen the body, but they also cast it into a certain
mold—a mold which may be potentially harmful to the long-term physical well-being of the performer.129 Also, it was precisely this sort of ‘cast’ body that Abe and Professor Cowell were trying to avoid in their own exercises. Movement training can mark a performer such that at a glance a skilled observer will be able to identify the school of performance in which the actor has studied. Abe worked to overcome this rigid patterning, while Suzuki works to instill it indelibly. Although the aims of both men in terms of the performative and expressive abilities of their actors may have been similar, in that they both wished to expand those abilities beyond what they had found within the existing world of theatre, they differ greatly not only on how they pursued this increase in ability, but also on a fundamental, underlying view of the value of their performers as individuals. This distinction provides a glimpse into the differing definitions of ‘the group’ both men hold.

Suzuki has written that he believes “art’s reason for being is to construct human relations or a human understanding, rather than to express the interiority of some specific individual, as most people have it.”130 This construction of human relations he sees as being the process of “using some act of expression as the occasion for imagining or thinking about a person together with the Other. For this aim, the existence of artistic activity is valuable.”131 Having proposed the merit of art as its ability to relate people to each other, and in so doing de-emphasising the value of an individual expression, Suzuki naturally rehabilitates the reputation of drama which he sees as hitherto being held in low esteem precisely for its reliance on group activity for its creation.

There are even people who say that because drama is something which many people come together to produce, it is impure or based on compromise, and thus

129 Professor Cowell, October 26, 1996.
130 Suzuki Tadashi, Engeki to wa nani ka?, p. 103
131 ibid.
its quality as an artistic expression must be low. Certainly, if we consider the goal of art to be the expression of an individual’s interior, emotional activity, it can be said that theatre, which has group production as its essential quality, distorts a pure expression of this individual interiority through multi-faceted relations with the Other, or else, by utilising unconscious motivations or accidental qualities, makes the intentions of each individual ambiguous. If we consider artistic expression to be connected to individual interiority in this way, then it may be correct to say that theatre denies individual art.\textsuperscript{132}

Suzuki disagrees with this point of view precisely because he denies the understanding of art existing as a unique expression of an individual. “This is because in the act of purposefully showing some work, which is an expressive act, to someone other than ourselves, we have already presupposed a relationship with the Other, and we must regard this act as established on that basis.”\textsuperscript{133} Having already accepted the existence of the Other as a precondition for any expression, the value of the individual in that act must assume only a relative value. Further, “the very existence of words which make communication possible signifies the existence of the group.”\textsuperscript{134} Human expression, \textit{individual} expression, at this point becomes something predicated upon an acceptance of the Other and moreover, an acceptance of rules shared in common with that Other.

Expression is an act which is established on the convention of a pre-existing relationship with the Other. That is to say that the rules of expression pre-exist the individual. Even if a new form of expression were to be born, seeming to belong

\textsuperscript{132} ibid., pp. 102-3
\textsuperscript{133} ibid., pp. 105-6
\textsuperscript{134} ibid.
to some individual, only its way of relating to the previously existing rules would be new. Even if this form of expression were to be the expression of an ego \( \text{jiko} \), it would never have anything of the quality of a pure expression of interiority.

It is incorrect to say that someone dislikes to express anything according to the rules he shares in common with everyone else, or to believe that because he is more sensitive than anyone else therefore what he has expressed is an expression of his own interiority. This is only an action which comes about because the person wishes to change the rules or does not wish to recognise a certain rule.\(^{135}\)

Rules thus become absolutes for Suzuki, which cannot be changed—only a person’s relation with these rules can be altered. In fact Suzuki argues that “if there were someone who were to hold his own, completely different set of rules from everyone else,” far from being seen as a brilliant artist able to express his own unique self, “that person would be considered insane.”\(^{136}\)

Artistic expression is thus not something which exists for the sake of the individual, but rather already has within all of its forms a need for relations within a group. Therefore theatre becomes a natural—perhaps even the only natural—expressive form. Within the theatre troupe individuals come together explicitly to follow the same rules, and it is on this basis that Suzuki constructs his method, with its emphasis on exercises carried out en masse.

The relationship between the one and the many which is an issue for modern art can be grasped as an issue concerning the relationship between collectivity

\(^{135}\) ibid., p. 107

\(^{136}\) ibid., p. 110
[kyōdōsei] and the isolated person in the theatre. It's not a question of deciding which one should be affirmed. In this case isolation implies a person who has not yet formed a purposeful, self-aware relationship with the particular rules in the theatre group. Or rather, it may be better to think of him as an individual before he has made the rules a part of himself. [emphasis added] Theatre is an expressive act which tries to play with the realisation of these two qualities, namely, the relationship between isolation and the rules which form the group collectivity. The isolated person exhibits his individuality by placing himself within the communal, group rules which form a fictional organism of human relations. That is to say, individuality is one more set of rules, and appears within relations to the group which are fictional. Seen theatrically, prior to this there is no individuality but only isolation.

People have within them both the part which cannot live outside of a fictional collectivity, and the part which is isolated. It is theatre as group activity which carries out expressive acts and creative activity in order to establish individuality on the basis of the relationship between both those parts.137

Watanabe Tamotsu also arrives at a perception of the 'self' of the traditional Japanese performer which relativises his individuality as something which, ultimately, exceeds the bounds of the isolated personality. Watanabe perceives of the traditional self as existing within a field of extremes:

There is a single, clear thought concerning Man behind the methodology of the traditional Japanese actor. The 'empty structure' of the actor's 'self' [watakushi] forms the centre of this thought. The 'self' exists as a 'relativity'. The realisation

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137 ibid., pp. 111-2
behind this point of view that the 'ego' [jiko] of Man is never something self-evident, that it is never something independent which exists within a single human character, establishes this thought. On the one hand actuality exists; on the other, fictionality, and the 'self' appears only as a single 'relativity' between these two extremes. The self ceaselessly fluctuates between these two points, and is never something fixed or absolute. The self is a 'point' which is a 'working hypothesis' [sagyōkasettsu] between the two poles, and in that sense rather than being an element of a single, individual character, it belongs to the world as something open, which goes beyond the 'self'.

For Abe, though, the individual is valuable as a discrete unit, complete unto itself. Rules are things which people make together—this is thoroughly consistent with Abe's Existentialist view that existence must precede essence. His plays demonstrate this by examining the consequences characters visit upon themselves by believing in sometimes quite outlandish rules which they have constructed. His theatre troupe was composed of individuals whom he encouraged to explore the abilities and potentialities their own bodies contained—the remark from Professor Cowell's student, to the effect that only in Abe's troupe could she do this, bears witness to the rare quality Abe demonstrated in affording to his performers this freedom. For Abe, a group has no value except in that it represents free individuals joining together of their own free will to share common goals, and to create for themselves—after their own existence—rules and means of communication which will support their efforts together. Abe worked with these individuals as equals to create something which none of them alone could have achieved—this is the essence of theatre as an artistic product born of the labour of many.

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138 Watanabe Tamotsu, Haiyū no unmei, p. 277
And yet despite all of this, which remains true, Abe has said that “to direct human beings is a kind of pleasure. It is fun to handle various personalities. It is something like driving a powerful sports car. As a director one has the same feeling that a professional racer has when he controls a fantastic piece of machinery perfectly.” How can this apparent contradiction be rationalised? How can Abe on the one hand revel in control and yet on the other, simultaneously, work collaboratively with equals? The issue at hand, I propose, also hinges on the issue of rules. Whereas for Suzuki rules pre-exist the individual, for Abe, the group is formed of individuals who are willing to make rules together, but who, once those rules are made, recognise the validity of submitting themselves to them. In this instance submission means—to a certain extent—subordination to the director, to Abe.

The ways in which a director may help these many come together to form a unity are diverse. Charles Marowitz believes that

The building of company-sense demands the construction of those delicate vertebrae and interconnecting tissues that transform an aggregation of actors into an ensemble. A protracted period of togetherness… creates an accidental union between people, but this isn’t the same thing as actors coiled and sprung in relation to one another—poised in such a way that a move from one creates a tremour from another; an impulse from a third, an immediate chain-reaction. Contact doesn’t mean staring in the eyes of your fellow actor for all you’re worth. It means being so well tuned in that you can see him without looking. It means, in rare cases, being linked by a group rhythm which is regulated almost physiologically—by blood circulation or heart palpitation. It is the sort of thing

139 Abe Kôbô, “An Interview with Abe Kôbô,” Contemporary Literature, Volume 15, Number 4, Autumn 1974, p. 444
that exists between certain kith and kin; certain husbands and wives; certain kinds of lovers or bitter enemies.¹⁴⁰

I believe an affinity exists between this physiological connection and the type of ‘discussion’ with one another Abe felt his actors should achieve through their performances. Both encompass the totality of the performers who are joining their selves together in the group. For Marowitz, this connection has a quality of delicacy, of fragility; for Abe, it is of fluidity and adaptability—and for Suzuki, the connection is formed through rigidity, intense physical exertion, and a differentiation of individuality through shared, patterned exercise.

An exploration of affinity rather than an explication of influence is perhaps the best way of examining Abe’s situation within the world of strong directors, and in this sense, a particular passage from Peter Brook may shed light on Abe’s own method of working with his troupe. Brook works collaboratively, from an open standpoint which accepts what others have to offer. “The rehearsal work should create a climate in which the actors feel free to produce everything they can bring to the play. That’s why in the early stages of rehearsal everything is open and I impose nothing at all.”¹⁴¹ As the work develops and the play slowly takes shape,

the director is continually provoking the actor, stimulating him, asking questions and creating an atmosphere in which the actor can dig, probe, and investigate. And, in doing that, he turns over, both singly and together with others, the whole fabric of the play. As he does so, you see forms emerging that you begin to recognise, and in the last stages of rehearsal, the actor’s work takes on a dark area

which is the subterranean life of the play, and illuminates it; and as the subterranean area of the play is illuminated by the actor, the director is placed in a position to see the differences between the actor's ideas and the play itself.

In these last stages, the director cuts away all that's extraneous, all that belongs just to the actor and not to the actor's intuitive connection with the play. The director, because of his prior work, and because it is his rôle, and also because of his hunch, is in a better position to say then what belongs to the play...

The final stages of rehearsal are very important, because at that moment you push and encourage the actor to discard all that is superfluous, to edit and tighten. And you do it ruthlessly, even with yourself, because for every invention of the actor, there's something of your own. You've suggested, you've invented a bit of business, something to illustrate something. Those go, and what remains is an organic form. Because the form is not ideas imposed on a play, it is the play illuminated, and the play illuminated is the form. Therefore, when the results seem organic and unified, it's not because a unified conception has been found and has been put on the play from the outset, not at all.142

Abe too worked openly at the beginning of the process of constructing a play, and in fact did not always have even a completed script in hand at this point. Itô Yûhei in New York mentioned that Abe had three ways of going about creating a play: either from an original script, as an outgrowth of exercises and improvisations in the Studio's practice sessions, or as a result of an inspiration which watching the gestures of one or another actor gave him.143 As the work progressed, though, he would sometimes take a direct approach to bringing out the effect he desired. Abe was able to vary his directorial method

142 ibid., p. 4
143 Itô Yûhei in remarks made during the Abe Symposium at Columbia University, April, 1996.
for different actors. Those with greater skill and experience, he would allow to explore the rôle in their own ways, but with less-experienced ones, he was not above giving specific line readings and coaching them in gestures as minute as the positioning of their hands.\textsuperscript{144} This was indeed Abe's rôle, at this point, to remove what was extraneous to the unity of the work he saw developing before him.

As a leader, Abe was flexible. Professor Cowell has told me that during one rehearsal session Abe had tried to have his troupe take daily runs around a local park, only to be voted down by the performers. Although a certain hierarchical structure existed within the group, Abe still interviewed all the members concerning new apprentices to determine by a sort of consensus who would be kept on. Casting decisions were open, but there were political considerations to be made, as well, which would occasionally result in hurt feelings when junior members were given rôles over senior ones. Nonetheless, the actors shared a sense of participating in something they could experience nowhere else,\textsuperscript{145} and the emotions I observed on their faces, meeting one another again in New York in 1996, almost twenty years after the dissolution of the troupe, bore witness to the depth of feeling they harboured for each other.

The Abe Studio closed in 1979, after touring the United States with its final production, "Kozô wa shinda" (The Little Elephant is Dead), a work almost totally physical in its approach to characterisation, plot, and presentation. After this Abe could go no further in the theatre, and returned to the written word—having arrived at an almost purely physical theatre it is possible he felt he had achieved his goals in this medium. The Studio's members went on to pursue their own careers, achieving relative degrees of fame and success. The legacy of the Abe Method now exists only within the body's memories of

\textsuperscript{144} Professor Cowell told me in conversation, October 26, 1996, of seeing Abe doing just this with one female actor. In conversation on January 18, 1997, she mentioned how impressed she was by Abe's ability to direct such a range of actors, and how much she admired his flexible approach to his cast.

\textsuperscript{145} ibid.
these performers, for no one has carried on training actors in the techniques and exercises Abe devised. When I asked Professor Cowell if she has brought anything of the work she did with Abe into her teaching career now, she said no. Abe did not change her own views on movement—and perhaps one element which aided their collaboration was that Professor Cowell had already worked with Merce Cunningham before joining the Studio, sharing a willingness to explore meaning within movement, rather than a desire to layer meaning overtop of the body's gestures.146

And yet other directors have left behind methods or centres or styles which continue the work they started. Senda’s Haiyū Yōseisho produced many, many fine realist actors. Suzuki’s method is taught all over the world. What is different about the systems of these two men from that of Abe? Perhaps part of the answer lies within that most Japanese of theatre systems, the iemoto, which for so long has fostered continuity within the traditional performing arts of that country. In the iemoto system, individuals actually join the family of their trainer, adopting the name of their predecessors. This amounts to something of a submersion of their identities, a subversion of their abilities to create their own styles beyond narrowly prescribed limits of variation—limits which make evolutionary change such a slow process within the Nō and Kabuki. Perhaps the very freedom Abe hoped to encourage within his performers inevitably sowed the seeds for the dissolution of the troupe they formed together—for he left them the freedom to leave, and when that is what he himself did, they, too, ironically perhaps, availed themselves of the opportunity.

Suzuki Tadashi offers a biting critique of troupes which operate without a sense of generational transition, which although not specifically directed towards Abe, is applicable in his case. Suzuki regrets that many modern performers have “no motivation to develop any scheme beyond oneself in order to carry an idea further…. All considerations centre on

146 In conversation with Professor Cowell, January 18, 1997
what one has done oneself, oneself; there seems to be no thought of devising a plan for passing on experience to the next generation."\footnote{Suzuki, "Human Experience and the Group," p. 56}

For Suzuki, the group maintains itself through the use of fixed patterns of performance. These fixed forms of ensemble performance provide a means to prove the commonality of the experience involved: if patterns can exist, then there must lie behind them a genuine spirit of the group. Therefore, the fundamental structure of the traditional arts ensemble is not based on individuals; rather, its assets accrue from the wisdom passed on by the group, the vision created from the communal experience of a whole family of actors.\footnote{ibid., p. 53}

This communal experience is greater than the sum of its participants, and greater than any one individual. Suzuki refers to Kan’ami and Zeami, the great theoreticians of the No, as two performers who understood that “a troupe could only continue on under the leadership of the actor who had best mastered this communal method,”\footnote{ibid., p. 54} wherein even the leader subordinates his own ego to the fixed patterns which define his group. “Modern theatre troupes founded on artistic principles, holding the basic attitude that through artistic skill, imperfect human relationships can somehow be rendered spiritually rich, are driven to the conscientious conclusion that their troupes ought to cease to exist after one generation.”\footnote{ibid., p. 56}

For Abe, who valued patternless movement within his performers, such a legacy based on patterns was obviously antithetical to his designs. Further, Abe worked from such a personal vision, Professor Cowell has said, that it would be virtually impossible now to restage the Studio’s productions as anything other than completely different plays—

\footnote{\footnote{147} Suzuki, “Human Experience and the Group,” p. 56} \footnote{148} ibid., p. 53 \footnote{149} ibid., p. 54 \footnote{150} ibid., p. 56
and the performers in these plays would not have the benefit of working with Abe. It seems very much that the man was in fact the method. The community of individuals who worked with him did so as equal collaborators on a unique project. Abe was very much a successful director who was able to achieve his artistic goals. Foremost of these, I believe, was the creation of the troupe itself, the actualisation of the community for which his work aimed in all its aspects. Having witnessed its formation, he left it free to preside over its own dissolution.

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151 In conversation with Professor Cowell, October 26, 1996
Conclusion:

Community and Despair

Abe has said that concluding each project left him drained, depressed, and in despair. Each next project was begun with the knowledge of what lay ahead, and yet he was able to push himself forward toward the inevitable feelings of emptiness.

Always I think I have a sense of amazement about myself. Afterwards, I wonder how I was able to create what I did. I judge other novelists by only one standard: the author's control over his material and his ability to give it life beyond himself. In other words if a certain work surpassed its author, I regard it as very good.

I can say the same thing about my own work. During the time I am writing a novel I remember everything that I write. I remember even on what part of the paper I wrote that paragraph or phrase. But at the moment I finish writing, I forget everything and then I get depressed. On the other hand, if I then read that work again five years later, I am often happily surprised by what I've written. That doesn't mean all my works are superior. Let's put it this way, in case my work is good, just in case, I don't think the author is that good. What I mean to say is that a work should be at least better than himself.¹

The works which Abe has left behind stand up very well under repeated readings years after the times in which he created them. The issues with which they deal are still

¹ Abe Kôbô, "Interview with Abe Kôbô," Contemporary Literature, Volume 15, Number 4, Autumn 1974, p. 452
parts of the contemporary milieu, and the critiques of a society compartmentalised by its own efficiencies which Abe offered are still valid. Abe deftly describes the gasping, desperate attempts of the endangered individual to reaffirm his own viability in the face of an alienating, hostile social order determined to absorb him. Even in this 'postmodern' world wherein the very existence of the self has become the intellectual conundrum of the moment, Abe’s work still offers an alternative to the celebrations of fragmentation which so characterise much contemporary work in fiction, film, and theatre.

In place of the absorption of the individual into society, Abe worked for integration—free, equal, flexible integration of individuals able to meet, interact with, and leave one another at will. The novels that he wrote propose the need for this type of social arrangement; the plays he wrote explore it dynamically within their intercharacter relations; the actor’s training methods he developed encouraged it within his performers. Through communication, the formation of community, Abe sought to rebuild into more viable shapes the structures of an earlier time which the modern world has left behind—from the staves of the buried boat in Teshigahara’s adaptation of Suna no onna, Abe’s project was to construct: something, anything, provided it was suitable to the needs of its creator. In the concrete plains of the city, something, anything, must be found to reunite people in ways suitable to their circumstances. Abandonment of the past for Abe always leads to a regrasping of the future. A focus on the actualities of existence is never an appeal to a mystifying dogmatism. Existence must always precede essence: it is only through being that the nature of that being can be understood.

For Abe these ideas are not mere platitudes. They were the substance of his daily life, the fundamental material of his work. The experiences of his childhood taught him both the loneliness of exclusion and the deceptive, secretive hostility of inclusion. Membership in the Japanese Communist Party taught him the thrill of political action, but also the disillusionment of betrayal and the contradiction of following a reprehensible party line.
Forty years of working outside of the mainstream of Japanese culture left Abe reclusive, to the point that he preferred listening to music in his own room through headphones, over attending concerts—listening ‘inside the cocoon’ of his own making. It was inside this cocoon that Abe found himself most comfortable; it was the freedom to create their own cocoons that Abe offered his readers.

Yet once individuals have made their own private enclosures they need not remain trapped within them. The world has forgotten this simple fact, and thus it is possible to say that “compared with the feudalistic society of the middle ages, we now have an open society. But in another sense we have made for ourselves a cage, or a kind of prison.” Abe would undoubtedly have agreed that the trick is all the while to remember something similar to what the American film director Sidney Lumet had Henry Fonda, as the President of the United States, say in determination to the Soviet Premier in his powerful 1964 film, *Fail Safe*: “What we put between us, we can remove.” This film was a plea for sanity during the Cold War, an appeal to reason to overcome the demonisation of opposing points of view—an attempt at establishing dialogue between strangers who fear one another for their mutual ignorance of the other’s mode of existence. This film aimed for an understanding of humans as human, as equal although different. Abe, too, aimed for an understanding and an acceptance of difference, a celebration of alterity for the freedom of individuality it guarantees. Abe aimed for dialogue between strangers no longer hostile but secure in their own stability and confident in their own self-worth. Whatever cage society has created for itself, for its outsiders, it has the power to remove: thus the cage which the actors form of their own bodies in the final few minutes of the Abe Studio’s final production, “Kozô wa shinda,” becomes a fitting, metaphorical representation of the type of social repression of the individual against which Abe argued in his work. The human

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2 ibid., p. 450
arms linked together to lock in the character of the Frightened Woman in that production could as easily become a means of support for her, or a means of construction devoted to the establishment of new human bonds. What is required is an act of will, an acceptance of the possibility of change.

The form of 'inoculation' Abe imagined his writings to be served to immunise his readers against the disease of blind faith. To what extent, though, this campaign of inoculation has proved successful is a necessarily open question—Abe's work is read the world over, it has been translated into dozens of languages, it addresses issues relevant to urban dwellers in whichever city they may find themselves, and yet cities still exist as places of alienation, social breakdown, violence, and loneliness. "Loneliness," Abe once said, "is universal... But you know, as a matter of fact, it is a new theme for the Japanese. The reason is that the concept of loneliness appeared in the urban mode of life."3 Now, with this urban mode of life quickly supplanting all others, Abe's claim that we have yet to find a suitable form of interaction able to take the urban setting fully into account assumes pressing, and prescient, dimensions. "All the stresses and sufferings of urban dwellers are born," Abe claims, from "trying to seek an analogy for the modern condition within some form or other of rural structures."4 Better to abandon this outdated model altogether, Abe suggests, and deal with the reality rather than the analogy.

And yet Abe has said, with no equivocation, that he "has not yet found the solution" to this problem; moreover,

I'm completely at a loss about it. But in fact, I'm making every effort to discover, through literature, just who the unknown Other [michi na tasha] really is. I don't know whether or not I'll find this out. It may be something that cannot be found.

3 ibid., p. 452
But at least I have the feeling that making the effort to seek out some path toward this unknown Other is my mission.\(^5\)

Despite the depression into which he fell at the conclusion of each project, this sense of duty for a reconstruction of human relations provided Abe with the incredible energy necessary to carry on to each new venture. When asked about the sources of this energy, Abe replied that

I don’t think in actuality I have that much... It may be wrong, but the creativity seems to come out of a sense of scarcity... It is a negative pressure, a sort of emptiness... It is not, you see, entirely a matter of myself, but it is more a matter of what others want. I feel that everyone has a hole, a kind of emptiness. And if I can, I want to fill up that hole.\(^6\)

In this it seems Abe was completely sincere: the best way for him to guarantee his own individuality and freedom was to guarantee those things for everyone else as well. Does this make him altruistic or selfish? Ultimately perhaps there is little difference. I am reminded of the bodhisattva-like nurses at the close of his late novel, *Kangarû nôto*. The impression they made on the narrator was to amaze him, to make him aware of the complete lack of total, unconditional love in his own life, of the gulf between himself and everyone else. That narrator was unable to overcome this gulf, and died in terror. Abe worked to overcome it. I have no way of knowing how he died; I would like to believe that he himself was an optimist. Perhaps nothing else will explain his determination. At the beginning of each project, Abe faced an inevitable question:

\(^5\) ibid., p. 200

\(^6\) Abe, "Interview with Abe Kôbô," p. 452
To write or commit suicide. Which one will it be?... Many people ask why a
twriter commits suicide. But I think the people who ask don't know the vanity and
the nothingness of writing. I think it is very usual and natural for a writer to
commit suicide, because in order to keep on writing he must be a very strong
person.7

Abe, without a doubt, was a strong person indeed. At the outset of this work, I asked
why anyone would study Abe Kôbô. The answer must lie within this strength, within this
willingness to face the absurd choice of writing or suicide, and respond positively that so
long as there is a need, there is a duty. Duty here is a personal responsibility to reconstruct
the forms of existence which create that very duty—it becomes tautologically self-
perpetuating, but through this process it perpetuates the individual 'self' who is responsible
as well. Society is born of individuals; the reverse may not be true. The forms which
society will take lie within the powers of its constituents to refashion as they will. These
powers, Abe insists, can neither be abrogated nor abdicated, for either will lead to the
dystopic worlds he has depicted within his work. Individuals always have choices before
them, and from the cumulative weight of these choices, freedom may or may not be born.

The works which Abe Kôbô has left behind thus become some of the most consistent
reminders of this need for choice, relevant clarion calls for a perpetual vigilance against
dogmatism and collective tyranny over the individual.

7 ibid., p. 454
Abe Kôbô, Abe Kôbô no gekijo: nananen no ayumi, [Abe Kôbô Studio: Seven years of Progress.] Tokyo: Abe Kôbô Sutajio, 1979


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