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Politicizing Flight in Edward Albee's *Seascape*

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***Abstract*---**In recent years, scholars and critics have become increasingly interested in the view that art is a means to escape from the existent reality and the difficulties of modern civilization. Many writers emphasized in their literary works the need to be emancipated from the restrictions of modern society and underlined the idea that flight is the ultimate way to avoid the complexities of contemporary life. Edward Albee, for example, addressed the issue of flight in his drama, particularly the sociopolitical and artistic scopes of escape. In his *Seascape*, Albee presents a multifaceted perception of flight juxtaposing the social with the literary and the political with the artistic. In the postmodern political thought too, there is a similar tendency that valorizes the struggle for the liberation of the individual from all forms of repression and domination exerted by sociopolitical forces. Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari (2005), for instance, criticize the constraints and rules that power authorities use to control the individual and call instead for freeing humans from all authoritarian policies. This paper, then, seeks to examine Albee's staging of flight from the Deleuzo-Guattarian perspective in an attempt to elucidate his complex yet refined dramatization of escape in his play *Seascape*.

Keywords*---flight, politics, aesthetics, nomadology, rhizomatics.*

Introduction

Edward Franklin Albee III is an American playwright who was born in 1928 in Washington, D.C. and died in September 2016. Albee is a prominent American playwright as he received three Pulitzer Prizes for Drama and won twice the Tony Award for Best Play, in addition to other acclaimed awards. His second Pulitzer Prize–winning play, *Seascape*, opened on Broadway in January 1975 and was directed by Albee himself. This two-act play opens on a beach where Nancy and Charlie, a retired American couple, are discussing matters related to their life and relationship. Suddenly, they notice two human-sized lizards, Leslie and Sarah, appearing from the ocean. The second act begins with Leslie and Sarah approaching to examine Nancy and Charlie. The two couples, then, engage in an unusual conversation about ideas and concepts that the two sea creatures do not grasp. Nancy and Charlie try to explain those terms and clarify their meanings to

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the lizards. And the play ends with an offer of help from the human couple upon which Leslie and Sarah decide to stay.

The play centers around the human couple's physical as well as spiritual journey to an unfamiliar place that has not been affected yet by the human deeds. Nancy and Charlie take refuge in this uninhabited natural space in an attempt to go beyond the socio-cultural rules that modern society has imposed on Man. Their flight to the world of nature turns out to be not only an endeavor to escape the routine and restrictions of the civilized world but also an opportunity to face intellectually and morally challenging situations and discover their sophisticated human subjectivity. Accordingly, this paper seeks to study the political and aesthetic dimensions of flight in *Seascape* through the Deleuzo-Guattarian lenses and discuss Albee's aim behind staging such unusual encounters between the human couple and the two speaking creatures.

The politics of flight

The term seascape has been defined as "a view of an expanse of sea" (The Oxford English Dictionary, 2003). In the play, the word seems to refer to the couple's escape from civilization and the monotony of suburban life to the sea which is situated between the world of nature and human society. Nancy and Charlie realize that their freedom was restricted by social obligations and that their life used to be based on self-denial, so they decide to embrace a new experience. The couple's flight to nature alludes to their rejection of organized social life and their preference for natural freedom. The title of the play itself, sea-escape, embeds a criticism of the belief in the ideals of happiness and security that civilized life offers and casts doubt on the superficial materialistic comfort and satisfaction cherished by modern life. In reality, the human couple resorts to the sea in an attempt to escape what they believe to be a tiring life that has long been controlled and regulated by domineering sociopolitical forces that aim to preserve the status quo.

Nancy and Charlie live in the suburbs, but after spending their life working and forming their family they decided to take some rest in nature. Charlie and Nancy succeeded in accomplishing their main life objectives as they managed to have "the house, the kids, their kids, [and] friends" (Albee, 1975). Nevertheless, their escape to nature, particularly the beach, could entail a rejection of their civilized life. Actually, in the opening scene, Charlie and Nancy are disturbed by the noisy sound of a jet plane:

- NANCY. Such noise they make.
- CHARLIE. They'll crash into the dunes one day. I don't know what good they do (Albee, 1975).

The jet plane is "a contrary symbol signifying an artificial product opposing the natural scenery" (Chang, 2012). Charlie denounces the intervention of technology in the natural environment and asserts that one day the plane will fall. Their attitudes could embody a criticism of the advancement of human civilization and

modern technology at the expense of nature. They believe that after witnessing a long period of prosperity, civilizations will ultimately collapse.

Nancy and Charlie hold different attitudes towards their retired life and their existence in nature. While Nancy expresses her strong desire to live in nature forever, Charlie opposes her idea and affirms that he prefers a stable life. Nancy, on the one hand, voices her need to be emancipated from a civilized lifestyle and live by the sea as she tells Charlie: "it's so nice! Can't we stay here forever? Please!" (Albee, 1975). It seems that she needs to retreat to nature after a life dominated by family responsibilities and work ethic. Nancy wants to explore new natural places and experience new sensations as she insists: "I love the water, and I love the air, and the sand and the dunes and the beach grass, and the sunshine on all of it and the white clouds way off, and the sunsets and the noise the shells make in the waves and, oh I love every bit of it" (Albee, 1975). Nancy's listing of the elements of nature: the water, air, sand etc. reveals her deep attachment to the natural world of freedom and independence. Trying to convince her husband, she tells him "we could go around the world and never leave the beach, just move from one hot sand strip to another: all the birds and fish and seaside flowers" (Albee, 1975).

The wife recurrently expresses her thoughts and dreams of living in the natural environment and being united with the elements of nature. Nancy starts the play with a search for pleasure in living in nature and throughout the play she is engaged in a continuous search for an unconventional life. Her great love of nature induces her to adopt a *nomadic* lifestyle. She expresses her strong desire to become a nomad telling her husband: "I mean go from beach to beach … live by the water. Seaside nomads, that's what we'd be" (Albee, 1975). Nancy believes that the true meaning of life lies in living freely in the world of nature like nomads.

In their theory of Rhizomatics, Deleuze & Guattari (2005) focus on the concepts of *nomadology* and *nomad thought*. Their book *A Thousand Plateaus* examines the life of nomads in the desert, their constant mobility, and the flexibility of their lifestyle. Deleuze and Guattari maintain that unlike modern civilized people, "the nomad distributes himself in a smooth space" (A Thousand Plateaus, 2005). In their view, nomads tend to reject locative stability and adopt a dynamic way of life characterized by recurrent movements to different places. They insist that nomads tend to inhabit "*an open space*" and opt for living away from all the barriers and limitations of modern society (A Thousand Plateaus, 2005). Like the Rhizome, the nomad's thought rejects hierarchical and stable structures and believes in the values of multiplicity and change (Bollobás, 1981; Kumlu, 2013; Falck-Ytter & von Hofsten, 2011).

Deleuze's and Guattari's philosophy of Rhizomatics and Nomadology intends to attack Western tradition's belief in unity and hierarchical systems. In reality, Deleuze and Guattari criticize modern society and the State as they consider them as hierarchical systems. In this respect, they claim: "the modern State defines itself in principle as 'the rational and reasonable organization of a community" and add "in the so-called modern or rational State, everything revolves around the legislator and the subject" (A Thousand Plateaus, 2005). In other words, the

modern State is a structured system that assumes that its function is to organize society and to maintain its stability. In this hierarchical structure, the legislator is the real center that constantly attempts to exert power over the subjects. In a word, the Rhizome attempts to destabilize the centrality and hegemony of the Western culture and advocates diversity. Nomad thought, in its turn, tries to subvert the immobile and fixed ways of thinking that pervade Western tradition and sustain flexibility and adaptability.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that the nomad "does not ground itself in an all-encompassing totality but is on the contrary deployed in a horizonless milieu that is a smooth space, desert, or sea" (A Thousand Plateaus, 2005). They believe that nomads, like Nancy in the play, disregard fixedness and tend to live an active life that moves against all forms of regulations imposed on individuals by the political system. Albee's dramatization of the nomadic Nancy entails criticism of the laws and the restrictions imposed by mainstream culture on free individuals. The playwright appears to suggest instead the liberation of individuals from all barriers and limitations of modern society. Nancy's flight to the unpopulated world and adoption of nomadic lifestyle could be seen as an actual challenge to the socio-cultural standards and political restrictions established by society to control the individual and make him docile.

Charlie, on the other hand, seems to like a life of stasis devoid of adventures as he refuses his wife's idea of living in nature and prefers to live a constant life. Indeed, he tells her: "Nancy, I don't want to travel from beach to beach, cliff to sand dune, see the races, count the flies. Anything. I don't want to do … anything" (Albee, 1975). In effect, while Nancy expresses her desire to be near the water forever and to have an active retirement, Charlie refuses her ideas and claims that he wants to relax and do nothing. Charlie and Nancy, "who have worked hard, raised a family [and] seen their children establish themselves," in Gabriel Miller (1986) terms, "know that for them life is almost over, but […] disagree on how to spend their remaining years." It seems that, after leading a "conventional" life and making a family, Nancy and Charlie want to get some rest away from the complexities of the civilized life. But, their conflicting attitudes threaten to ruin their relationship.

Unlike Nancy, who looks for living a new life, Charlie thinks that retirement is the appropriate time for rest. It seems that Charlie has already embodied mainstream culture's spirit of complacency and idleness. He rejects Nancy's dreams of living in a natural environment and insists that he wants to rest instead. He has been drained of any energy after living a life dominated by the American spirit of hard work. Charlie is not only retired from his actual job but also any engagement into active life. The American work ethic and family duties, therefore, have emptied his life as it is obvious that he has neither the power nor the willingness to live like a nomad.

Nancy and Charlie's conflicting desires allude to the breakdown of communication between them, as while Nancy is in search of an alternative to civilized life, Charlie is seen to internalize the spirit of satisfaction of modern culture. Nancy's strong connection with nature denotes her rejection of the rational and social aspects of life. She could stand for the free and natural side of human life,

whereas Charlie, who accepts the restraints imposed on him by the social structures, could represent its rational side. His conformism and complacency are clear manifestations of his subjugation to the regulations of society. Nancy, hence, appears to embody the instinctive side of nature, while Charlie represents the civilized and social view of human existence.

On the other hand, the animal couple Leslie and Sarah escaped the sea to the beach as they used to live in the ocean, and all of a sudden they felt that they no longer belong to the sea environment. Charlie and Nancy understand the abrupt emergence of the sea creatures in terms of the evolution process. The "two human-size lizard-like amphibians [...] have chosen this moment to evolve out of the sea" (Berkowitz, 1997). Charlie elucidates the evolution phenomenon to the beasts saying:

- CHARLIE. It was when some … slimy creature poked his head out of the muck, looked around, and decided to spend some time up here … Came up into the air and decided to stay? And as time went on, he split apart and evolved and became tigers and gazelles and porcupines and Nancy here …
- LESLIE. (*Annoyed*). I don't believe a word of this!
- CHARLIE. Oh, you'd better, for he went back under, too; part of what he became didn't fancy it up on land, and went back down there, and turned porpoises and sharks, and manta rays, and whales … and you (Albee, 1975).

Charlie explains to the animal couple that human beings and animals have evolved from the same species and emphasizes the idea that both human beings and animals have common origins. Indeed, "the random encounter of the two couples on the dunes symbolically reveals the connectedness of animal nature and human nature" (Roudané, 1987). Their mutual escape to the same place reflects the actual interrelation of the rational side of the human subjectivity to the irrational and animalistic side. The escape of the human couple from the civilized world and the two lizards from the ocean and their meeting on the shore allowed the humans to rediscover a hidden side of their subjectivity that has been repressed by the socio-cultural forces. Their flight hence becomes a journey beyond everyday life and a complex voyage of spiritual discovery. While the first part of this article has addressed the political scope of flight in *Seascape*, the second part shall tackle the aesthetic dimension of escape in Albee's work.

The aesthetics of flight

In *Seascape*, Albee departs from the traditional artistic conventions and norms of dramatic writing and uses instead a wide range of innovative techniques and styles. The concept of aesthetics of flight could be understood in terms of the play's use of unconventional language and mingling of different styles to convey the personal, social, and political meanings of flight. Indeed, the aesthetic dimension of escape could be revealed through the study of the atypical aspects of his language. In reality, "one of Albee's greatest contributions to American theater is the sheer cleverness and sharpness of his language" (Abbotson, 2005). The play departs from the conventional language and uses instead a means of

communication characterized by the fragmentation and discontinuity of the dialogue, the recurrence of three dots, pauses, clichés, and repetitive structures. All of these elements reflect the ineffectiveness of language as a means of interaction and indicate the absence of meaningful communication between the characters. Albee's work presents "a critique of modern society," argues James L. Roberts (1979), "by showing the total collapse of communication. The technique used is that of evolving a theme about communication by presenting a series of seemingly disjointed speeches." The stagnation of language that characterizes *Seascape* echoes the actual failure of communication and the loss of human contact in mainstream American culture. Albee examines this very breakdown of communication in the middle-class community through staging uncommunicative dramatis personae and using a fragmented dialogue.

The use of unconventional language in the play is noticed in their use of fragmented language, especially when the two couples talk about their children:

- NANCY. (*Puzzled at her question*) Well … We love them. (*Pause*)
- LESLIE. Pardon?
- CHARLIE. We *love* them…
- LESLIE. Explain…
- CHARLIE. What?
- LESLIE. What you said.
- CHARLIE. We said … we love them.
- LESLIE. Yes; explain.
- CHARLIE. What love means?! (Albee, 1975).

The dramatic personae's minimalistic dialogue, recurrence of questions, and repetition of the word "explain" reflect their inability to comprehend each other. Charlie and Nancy fail to clarify many notions and issues related to human life, including feelings, and the sea creatures in their turn feel frustrated. The characters' exchange demonstrates that "language has its limitation as means to conveying abstract concepts" (Chang, 2012). Their failure to converse is mainly caused by their dependence on language as the basic means of understanding the world and communicating their thoughts.

This verbal tool can no longer represent the existent reality and help characters express themselves. Each one of the four dramatis personae tries to understand, and make meaningful contact with, the others, but only a few interactions could be perceived as successful ones. The play becomes, hence, an inspection of the idea of the breakdown of communication and the failure of the system of language as despite their incessant efforts to make their intentions and explanations clear, their fragmented dialogue shows a profound misunderstanding of each other. Their *linguistic flight* and adoption of an unconventional verbal system entail a rejection of the ordinary language used by common people and an attempt to evade the cultural norms and manners established by society. The couples, then, aim to subvert all linguistic systems that bind them to the civilized world and to free themselves from the rules of modern society through their deconstruction of the system of language.

Seascape also departs from dramatic realism and employs instead different writing styles, particularly the mixture of Absurdism, Surrealism, and Realism. The eradication of the boundaries between the real and the unreal is what mostly relates the play to this distinguished style. The dramatic situation appears to be realistic as it revolves around the human couple's journey and the discussion of their plans. The physical description of Nancy and Charlie, who "are dressed informally," suggests that they are ordinary people looking for some new experiences after their retirement (Albee, 1975). But, realism is disrupted as soon as the two sea creatures appear on the stage. The second act signals the breaking of the realistic frame as Leslie and Sarah, the fantastic creatures, emerge from the sea and head towards the human couple.

With the encounter between the realistic world of the human couple and the fictional world of the lizard couple, reality becomes problematic. What puzzles Charlie and Nancy further are that although Leslie and Sarah are lizards, they share many characteristics with human beings. Indeed, they walk like humans on two feet, speak perfect English, understand some aspects of human life and start interacting with them. Albee's "juxtaposition of fantasy and reality" challenges the dramatic norms and questions the reliance on realism and realistic techniques (Paolucci, 2003). This (un)realistic play involves a criticism of the assumption that realism provides a credible and faithful picture of reality and presents instead a confusing situation where the fictional coalesces with the real. Because pure realism is rejected, the whole work takes a fantasy structure foregrounding the illusionary nature of reality itself.

Since the play includes few events, like the other early works, physical action is replaced by the focus on the workings of the inner forces of the dramatis personae. The conventional perception of the plot as a set of organized physical events is called into question and the play becomes instead centered on the mental and psychic sides of the characters. The only remarkable physical happening in this work is the sudden emergence of the lizards from the ocean. The unknown creatures' encounter with the human couple, in the second act, becomes the turning point of the play. Consequently, the dramatic situation turns out to be an examination of the meeting between the inner and the outer aspects of the human beings' personality.

In the second act, Albee shifts to dramatize the ongoing conflict between the intrinsic forces within the individual and his rational faculties. Because physical events are exchanged for a staging of the fictitious on the one hand and the characters' psychic traits on the other, the classical conventions of realism and reality are debunked. The movement from realism, as the traditional form of representation, to the mixture of the real and the fictional and from the coherence of action to the stagnation of plot, mirrors Albee's disregard for the social as well as artistic norms.

In a few words, Albee's play is characterized by its unconventional language and the use of fragmented and incoherent dialogue. The recurrence of disjointed structures, repetitions, clichés, silence, and pauses is meant to indicate the failure of language in generating and conveying significance. His innovative composition style made critics claim that "language stands as the most

conspicuous feature of his dramaturgy as well as his major contribution to American drama" (Roudané, 1987). The coherence of common language has been replaced with illogical exchanges that put into question the usefulness of this medium of interaction and emphasizes the breakdown of communication. This very deconstruction of traditional language places the plays within a postmodernist context. The postmodernists Deleuze and Guattari believe that "the unity of language is fundamentally political" and the system makes use of linguistic means to guarantee the subjugation of individuals (A Thousand Plateaus, 2005). They contend that this discursive system is used by power structures as an apparatus of social control and political domination. The substitution of this politicized medium with silence and fragmentation highlights the work's nonconformist dimension and its challenge of the established artists as well as political norms. In adopting an unconventional linguistic means to communicate, the dramatis personae escape the existent reality and its complexities, and their linguistic flight becomes another strategy that they adopt during their spiritual journey away from the restraints of the modern civilized world.

Further, the use of a distinct language could be linked to Deleuze's and Guattari's notions of Rhizome and Nomadology. Indeed, Albee's characters turn out to be *linguistic nomads* who have transcended the limits of reason, logic, and society and so they seem to exist only verbally. Albee, therefore, de-centers the traditional language and undermines its centrality in an attempt to encourage readers/spectators question the conventional literary standards and resist the rigid sociopolitical regulations imposed on them. Deleuze's and Guattari's conception of Rhizomatics finds its echo in *Seascape*. Effectively, the style of Albee's play resembles the Rhizome in its rejection of unity and support of multiplicity. Albee's adoption of a plurality of writing styles, particularly Absurdism, Realism, and Surrealism, parallels Rhizome's tendency to be multiple and to reject unity. In this respect, Roudané (1987) states that Albee "uses a wide range of theatrical styles and technical devices to present naturalistic and satiric images as well as expressionistic and absurdist images of the human predicament." The mingling of different styles in Albee's play, which reflects Rhizome's embodiment of the ideas of multiplicity and plurality, aims at examining and commenting on the belief in conformity and centrality in contemporary American culture.

In *Seascape*, Albee calls attention to the artificiality of the dramatic situation through the use of self-reflexive language that accentuates the idea that the dramatic text is a mere literary construct. Indeed, throughout the play, the four characters demonstrate a critical distance from language and repeatedly comment on its use and efficiency. Discussing aspects of human language with Charlie, Nancy tells him: "you have no interest in imagery" and adds "it was hyperbole" (Albee, 1975). Her claims touch upon the symbolic dimension of language and emphasize their awareness of the theatricality of their performance. In another exchange with her husband, Nancy reflects on the self-reflexivity of the verbal medium saying: "words are lies; they can be, and you use them" (Albee, 1975). She asserts that language sometimes loses its function as a means of communication to become a tool manipulated to mislead people. Nancy's use of meta-language and her recurrent references to the illusive and artificial scope of

language indicates her knowledge of the limits of this linguistic tool and reveals the character's awareness of the staginess of the whole dramatic situation.

Albee's interest in the functionality of art, and especially in raising awareness about the functionality of drama/theatre, is detected mainly in his most unconventional play *Seascape*. The work pictures an unusual encounter between a human couple, who is seen relaxing on a beach, and two creatures who emerged suddenly from the sea: "While Nancy speaks, Leslie and Sarah com up on the dune, behind Charlie and Nancy, but some distance away. They crawl up; then they squat down on their tails" (Albee, 1975). Leslie and Sarah are described as human-size lizards who used to live deep inside the ocean and now have evolved out of the sea to settle on the land. Albee models the two characters as strange creatures that resemble animals but share many traits with human beings. The introduction of fantastic elements into a plausible dramatic situation, then, aims to disrupt the conventional consideration of drama as a realistic depiction of life and to raise awareness about the theatricality of what is presented on stage. With the unexpected apparition of the two lizards, reality becomes problematic for the human couple and readers/audiences as well. The violation of the realistic frame that distinguishes this play induces the viewer to examine this amalgamation of the real and the fictional and to question the hidden aspects behind the two couples' encounter. The dramatization of extraordinary creatures as dramatis personae, who engage in a lengthy conversation with a human couple, is meant to highlight the constructiveness of their characters and the situation as a whole and push readers/spectators to perceive what is staged critically. The play, then, engages readers/audience in the dreamlike journey that the characters embark on and entices them to transcend the cultural norms and sociopolitical regulations that govern their lives. Albee dramatizes the two couples' physical, linguistic and spiritual flight as a way to push spectators out of the seemingly comfort zone offered by modern civilization, and encourage them to search for freedom and find their true selves.

Conclusion

Albee stages in *Seascape* idiosyncratic individuals who have escaped their world to the realm of nature in an attempt to free themselves from the restrictions of society and repressive power structures. Despite their differences, Nancy and Charlie left the civilized world and took the first step in their trip towards freedom. Even the two human-sized lizards seem to embrace a journey out of the ocean to discover unfamiliar situations and meet unknown creatures. With the encounter between the human couple and the animal couple, the concept of flight acquires a unique dimension that mingles the political with the aesthetic. The four characters turn to be nomadic figures that react against the established conventions and attempt to debunk the very artistic and sociopolitical norms that modern society uses to control the individual and domesticate him.

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