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Violence in *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*: A Study in Tragic Antitheses

Serjeant Musgrave's Dance is largely an exploration of the place of violence in society and our varying responses to it. Although the setting of the play is nineteenth-century England, the contemporary relevance of Arden's theme is obvious as increasingly in our twentieth-century society violence is becoming accepted as an inescapable mode of political expression by extremists whose political dogmas provide passion and conviction, or by those who, bitterly frustrated or alienated, can find no more satisfactory outlet. Arden is very much aware of the dilemma facing many thoughtful and morally responsible persons in a liberal society: on the one hand, they are inclined to accept the ultimate objective of the rebels and to share, uneasily and reluctantly, the view that violence is in fact a more effective moving force for rapid and radical change away from present immoralities than rational debate and moral persuasion; on the other hand, they are unwilling for humane, moral reasons to pay the price that violence requires for the change, an unwillingness that is reinforced by the fear that the means will taint and corrupt the ends, so that, even if successful, the revolutionary force will succeed only in establishing a new form of tyranny. It is with this dilemma and the consequences of the tragic antitheses of our responses to the social challenge that Arden is primarily concerned.

The moral-political question is given sharpest focus and most acute and challenging dramatic expression through *Serjeant Musgrave*, a zealot so convinced of the absolute rightness of his cause that he is willing to adopt horrifying means to achieve his goal, and so unswerving and single-minded in his devotion to his avowed purpose that he refuses to be distracted by any consideration not immediately relevant. The source of his fervent certitude is that of the religious prophet, the man 'possessed' by what he believes is the Divine Word. His clear vision of the iniquities of the established order and the moral force that he exerts to destroy the conditions that make them inevitable arouse our respect for his heroic

stance, but his narrow, concentrated vision of his goal, which makes him exclude broad areas of human experience with their particular values, his intractability and ruthlessness, which give tremendous and perhaps essential force to his endeavours, alienate from him those who recognize and accept the moral validity of his objective, and upon whose support the success of his enterprise depends.

Arden does more than set out the problem, though he offers no happy resolution. The critics who regard the author's refusal to make a simple, obvious commitment as evidence of inconsistency or irresolution, or admirable detachment, seem to miss or underemphasize what there is of affirmation and hope in the play. Thus John Russell Taylor criticizes the preconceptions of the audience who have come to expect the dramatist in the course of a play dealing with social issues to come down on one side or the other—either for law, order and convention or for freedom and spontaneity, for pacifism or anti-pacifism. Arden, says Taylor, does not deal in blacks and whites; he makes a case for all sides, and though we get a presentation in which various attitudes are revealed on general social, moral or political issues, there are no causes, no possibility of heroism or villainy, and no general judgments. "The play is about individual, complicated human beings, and any simple alignment of character and concept is doomed to failure."¹ This is true as far as it goes for Arden does not side unequivocally with anyone. He is not didactic, and indeed in several interviews he expressly disavowed any didactic intent, but to go on, as Taylor does, to imply that Arden takes no position, that the actions do not take place within a system of stated or implied values, that Arden's view of his characters and situations is "unflinchingly amoral," is to make the play virtually though perhaps unintentionally an absurdist play, and to deprive it of its dramatic and moral force. Albert Hunt reaches a conclusion somewhat similar to Taylor's. The ambiguity of the presentation of Sjt. Musgrave, which is emphasized by the way in which he is parodied and ridiculed by the Bargee, his antithesis in every respect, raises the question for Hunt of how we are to respond, and his answer is that we must not identify with either. The danger, for Hunt, is that if we tip the balance in terms of sympathy or identification in favour of Musgrave, we lose the true statement of the play, which "lies in the way Musgrave's pacifist message is judged against the action of the play and found inadequate."² But to recognize the inadequacy of Musgrave's message and even to be shocked or repelled by his immediate purpose does not mean that Arden equates Musgrave with the Bargee with respect to balance of sympathy or iden-

tification with ultimate purpose. It is true that to achieve greater dramatic effectiveness and to explore more comprehensively and enable the audience to consider more critically the central issues, Arden tries to maintain in his play and transfer to his audience a high degree of objectivity. The songs which he intrudes successfully into the play and other non-naturalistic devices, derived largely from Brecht and perhaps Behan, are designed to make the audience aware that we are watching a play. Like the distancing in time of the contemporary episodes that provide the kernel of the plot,³ these devices help us achieve the psychic distance the better to enable us to avoid the kind of early commitment that would close our minds to points of view other than those we immediately sympathize with. But objectivity does not mean continuing detachment from the issues being dramatically unfolded. The fact that we must not identify does not mean that we do not sympathize, and the fact that we achieve a measure of objectivity does not mean that Arden does not have values to which he expects us to respond positively.

A careful reading of *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* reveals that while Arden does not have a set of ready responses, quick solutions to current problems, the action of the play does take place within a framework of values. He recognized his kinship with Brecht and the tradition of the mediaeval morality play in Brecht.⁴ He is not concerned merely with "individual, complicated human beings," because for Arden the commonly accepted purpose of playwrights is "To use the material of the contemporary world and present it on the public stage" and his own deep concern was with "the problem of translating the concrete life of today into terms of poetry that shall at the one time both illustrate that life and set it within the historical and legendary tradition of our culture."⁵ In a review of Arnold Wesker's *Chicken Soup with Barley*, Arden praised the play because "at nearly every point in the play the personal situation is reinforced by, and reinforces, the public one."⁶ It is understandable that Arden should have replied impatiently to the comment by an interviewer that he tended to see both sides of questions."

I rather distrust your remark that I see both sides of the question, because that does imply perhaps a sort of wishy-washy liberalism that fails to make any values at all, to accept any values at all. In actual fact I think that most of my plays in the end do weigh to one point of view, but I think that in order to express a point of view one has to give the other side its due weight in the argument or else you don't get theatre at all, you get newspaper writing, editorial writing.⁷

Arden's sympathies and the values to which they are attached emerge clearly in the several conflicts that constitute the action of the drama. His realization of the inconsistencies and limitations in the points of view of his characters compels him, however, to check and qualify any tendency to over-simplify responses and prevents him from offering any dogmatic or even firmly conceived resolutions to the issues. The play is complicated perhaps unduly because Arden tries to convey too fully the inter-connected patterns of violence in our society as he explores the divergent elements in the conflicting groups, each with its own needs and responses.

The action of *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* at the outset involves three clearly defined groups: first, the Mayor, who owns the coal-mines and dominates the town, supported by the parson and the constable, who represent respectability and authority; second, in opposition to this group, are the colliers, who by means of a lockout are being starved into submission or futile violence; and a third group, who are the dramatic centre of the play, the army deserters, Musgrave and his followers, rebelling against the tyranny of the army and the callous inhumanity of the governments that use violence to exploit colonial peoples, a policy that tolerates and indeed creates a positive acceptance generally of violence as a means to an end. Apart from these groups, but involved in the antagonisms and suffering are three other characters, Mrs. Hitchcock the inn-keeper, Annie her servant, and Joe Bludgeon the bargee, who, indirectly and directly, by word and deed, comment on the action, further complicating and to some extent clarifying the issues. Though the groups are clearly defined, the characters within and outside their groups respond variously to each other, at times sympathetically, at other times antipathetically, as their motives overlap or conflict, or as misunderstanding or mistrust and temperamental differences and varying values determine their behaviour.

Of the several issues examined concurrently in *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance*, the simplest is the conflict within the town between the coal-miners, on the one hand, and those who, in current jargon, might be called the Establishment, on the other, a group consisting of the coalmine owner, who wields real power, economic power, in the town, the clergyman-magistrate, a rather sycophantic and blinkered traditionalist whose shallow conception of his duty as a man of God contrasts markedly with the fervent religious zeal of Musgrave, and the constable, whose conception of his duty is determined by those with power and who, therefore, identifies law and order with maintaining the status quo.

Behind the Establishment group stands the power of the State and its military machine, revealed at the end by the entry of the Dragoons. The threesome in the first group are fairly evenly balanced dramatically against the threesome in the other: the slow-witted and the pugnacious colliers, in their own ways, are in juxtaposition to the parson and the constable; the intelligent and strong collier, Walsh, who if necessary is willing to use violence to overcome the workers' disadvantages, is matched against the shrewd and ruthless mine owner who is willing to starve or freeze his locked-out miners into submission, or by bribery or trickery to get their leaders carried off by the army recruiting squad to remote colonies. Arden's sympathies are clearly with the miners in this confrontation.

At the dramatic centre of the play, however, are the issues arising out of the actions of Serjeant Musgrave and his band of deserters from the army. The common bond that unites this group under the authoritarian leadership of Serjeant Musgrave is their rejection of the army and its bloody purposes—war and the subjugating of colonial peoples. But theirs is not a simple or single-minded reaction; the issue is not merely pacifism versus militarism. Hurst, for example, embittered by his experiences and trained to kill, comes back to wreak vengeance on those who used him as they did—his response is personal and verges on the psychotic. He has a vendetta to settle with society and longs for violence to even the score. For Sparky the personal motive is also strong; but, unlike Hurst, he wants to protest against violence, not use it; he has seen his best friend Billy Hicks killed, shot in the back in a faraway land by natives who hated the presence of British soldiers on their land. He accepts the teaching of Musgrave that the army and the policy of colonialism that leads to violence are wrong. Attercliffe goes beyond the personal opting out of Sparky. Like Sparky, he wants no more violence, but his is the full pacifist position, the rejection on principle of violence as a mode of action, not just a personal rejection. Thus in the climactic scene of the play, when Hurst points the loaded gun at the throng, Attercliffe stands in front of the muzzle, prepared to receive the fire in his own body. Serjeant Musgrave, like Sparky and Attercliffe, has come to regard violence with horror, but unlike them, and like Hurst, he has returned to act violently. Unlike Hurst, however, whose personal violence is that of a dog driven mad who wants to bite, Musgrave plans a non-personal calculated act of violence that would serve a double purpose: to exact retribution for the lives of the innocents massacred by the soldiers—an act of justice that was necessary expiation for evil

perpetrated—and by the same act bring home the horror of violence so that the civilians far removed from war would experience it for themselves and reject it for evermore. Musgrave keeps his purpose hidden from his fellow-soldiers, compelling them by the force of personality and his quality of leadership to put their trust in him. Despite the differences, however, there is a common rejection of the army and of war as an instrument of national policy. Their rebellion against the army and the political establishment parallels that of the colliers against the social forces oppressing them. Here, too, Arden's sympathies, as he explores the motives and actions of the deserting soldiers, are obvious.

Basically, Musgrave's position, his ultimate objective, is seen as fundamentally worthy and commands our respect. This anti-militarist is ironically the most thorough-going soldier of all, emphasizing the soldier's virtues of discipline and duty, but he is also a religious man and has come to the pacifist position through his realization that war is hell and that at all costs one must end it. He responds to a situation that he regards as evil or menacing as one would expect a soldier to do—by direct action. He is something of a Shavian 'realist' accepting in effect Undershaft's challenge in *Major Barbara* "Dare you make war on war?" and like Ellie Dunn in *Heartbreak House* accepting, even welcoming, the violence of the bombs, or Shotover working on the Death Ray to bring death to the killers. Musgrave, like Shaw's religious militants—Barbara, Joan and later Shavian heroes—and like many political extremists today, accepts the rather grim belief that violence is a necessary prelude to peace. Musgrave is more than a soldier turned pacifist, not just another Attercliffe, and he is not merely a 'realist' who rejects the principle of non-aggression as a path to peace. Like Shaw's 'realists' he is also a genuinely religious man, and the realization of the evil of war comes to him with the force of religious conviction, compelling him to act in an unswerving course with a sense of his absolute rightness.

Complicating the plot in which we have a conflict within the town between the Establishment and the workers, and a conflict between the group of army deserters and their society that accepts and uses violence as a way of life, there is an overlapping conflict that embraces both, a conflict between the townspeople and the soldiers—that is, between the 'insiders,' the settled inhabitants, and the 'outsiders' who come into their midst and are regarded with mistrust. The initial response to their coming is clear and understandable, but ironically mistaken. The Establishment, regarding the army as an extension or reinforcement of

the local constabulary, an instrument for keeping law and order in terms of the status quo, welcomes the supposed recruiting force as an aid in the struggle against the colliers. To the colliers, the bloody red-coats represent the oppressive force of society that keeps them subjugated as it subjugates the colonials, that carries off the settled inhabitants from hearth and home and makes killers and victims of sons and husbands. They reiterate "These streets is *our* streets." Serjeant Musgrave understands this hostility and tries patiently to convince the colliers that their interests merge with his. Musgrave, however, sees the colliers and their plight only in terms of his purpose. The condition in the town—the cold, hunger and antagonism—though bitter to the colliers, pleases Musgrave for it makes "all fit and appropriate." But he does see that their quarrel with the authorities and his with his superiors are essentially one for "their riots and our war are the same one corruption"—the exploitation of human beings whether workers in the coal districts or natives in the colonies. The issues come together in another sense too: after all, who are the soldiers, "the bloody red-coats," if not townsfolk and villagers, who for one reason or another are forced or pressured into accepting the Queen's shilling. It is for this reason that Musgrave brings Billy Hicks 'home'—to impress Billy's fellow-townsmen that the issue of colonialism and violence affects them directly and that the separation between the two worlds, that of the settled townsfolk and that of the red-coats, is not real. Arden's symbolic use of colour to indicate the parallel between the colliers and the soldiers reinforces this conviction that their destinies intertwine. "In the ballads," writes Arden, "the colours are primary. Black is for death, and for the coalmines. Red is for murder, and for the soldier's coat the collier puts on to escape from his black."⁸ Musgrave, a red-coat, called Black Jack Musgrave, comes to avenge killing by more killing, and tries to make common cause with the blackened colliers whose lives are also metaphorically black. Musgrave almost succeeds in making the colliers see that his battle is theirs. In the climactic scene, however, Walsh, the colliers' leader, backs off, partly because he deeply distrusts soldiers and partly because he lacks the zeal of Musgrave that would permit the ferocity the judgment demanded—the execution of twenty-five persons. Though the miners pressed by hunger and cold, are willing to fight their local oppressors on the local issue they were not willing to see their fellow-townsmen mowed down by the 'outsider' element, especially since the shocking massacre would be for a cause somewhat abstract and remote. Musgrave fails to win their needed support and is defeated.

Underlying these conflicts which are provoked by social conditions is yet another conflict, perhaps even deeper in its implications and more universal, the encounter that Richard Gilman in an excellent study of Arden's plays has termed "the confrontation of a deadly impulse towards purity . . . and the impure, flawed, capricious, and uncodifiable nature of reality beneath our schemes for organizing it."⁹ The pure, Gilman goes on to say, are the enemies of the actual, and he sees *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* as a play about "the consequences of purity," one which profoundly "brings into question the nature of all abstract values, when they become embodied in a passionate urgency toward social reformation. . . ."¹⁰ Gilman's thesis focusses on and rejects the horrific and potentially disastrous aspect of the Musgrave or zealot response which "shoulders aside all phenomena that may impede his straight true course to his meticulously righteous objective." There is, of course, much in the play to support this rejection. The parodying of Musgrave's words and gestures by the Bargee at times has a comic deflating effect, and the inflexibility of mind and conviction of righteousness that make Musgrave regard himself as God's emissary and usurp in effect the role of God, are deliberately made frightening and unacceptable. However, the dramatic developments in the play make possible a strong and sympathetic case not only for Serjeant Musgrave, which Gilman and other critics are willing to do, but even for the Musgrave position. To be fully understood and fairly judged, Musgrave and his position must be examined in the light of the opposition between his viewpoint, that of the 'purist' or 'prophet', abstract though passionately dedicated, sacrificing and self-sacrificing, and that of Mrs. Hitchcock, which includes and articulates Annie's and Sparky's as well. It is the antagonism that sets duty, discipline and order, the values of the soldier, which here are virtues because they are intended to destroy violence, against the humane, less heroic attitude that cherishes tolerance, tenderness, love and life.

The responses of the soldiers to Annie parallel structurally their differing motives for deserting the army. Annie, a strange character, is a simple creature of nature, accepting sex as a part of the process of life. She gives herself when she is wanted and even more willingly when needed. Though not intelligent, she has a keen intuitive sense of need in others. Sensing Hurst's weakness, for example, she offers herself to him first. This intuition also enables her to recognize immediately in Musgrave what is hostile to that which she represents. This is made clear in her first song-comment to him:

The North Wind in a pair of millstones
Was your father and your mother
They got you in a cold grinding.
God help us all if they get you a brother.

And later, in response to Musgrave's order that she stay away from his men, her comment reveals a significant flaw in his plan—his failure to allow for the unpredictable and the uncontrollable in life. "A little bit of wind and a little bit of water—. . . But it drowned threescore of sailors, and the King of Norway's daughter."¹¹ Musgrave, however, with his soldier's emphasis on duty, which for him is "drawn out straight and black for us, a clear plan," and his religious passion to fulfill God's aim, is convinced that the force Annie represents is anarchy, and that her actions relating to life and love, which he terms indulgence, are a scribbling over God's plan, making it "crooked, dirty, idle, untidy, *bad*." Hurst, too, rejects Annie, but not for Musgrave's reason, not because she interferes with God's plan. His behaviour towards her, like his rebelling against the army, reflects bitter frustration, a personal failure that leads to violence and hatred, not love. When Annie turns to Attercliffe, offering herself to him in turn, he, too, rejects her, though, unlike Hurst, he responds sensually to her and recognizes the value of love and life that she represents. He is obsessed by the idea of blood on the hands of soldiers, the conviction that a soldier cannot give a girl love and life. His experience with his wife convinced him of this. At this point, abandoned, Annie feels useless. Then Sparky, the counterpart of her former soldier-lover, Billy Hicks, who got her with child and left her, only to get killed in the army far away, comes to her, laughing and frightened—"A man can laugh, because or else he might well howl"—and offering his loneliness and simple affection, reveals his need of the love and life that she has to give. His rather bantering references to Musgrave as God has an underlying seriousness as he accepts uneasily but without question Musgrave's leadership and unrevealed purpose, and Musgrave's concept of duty and obedience. But he has in him also what Musgrave lacks and what Billy Hicks and Annie expressed, a need and a capacity for love and tenderness, and when Annie in a sudden outburst tells her story of her lover killed and her baby dead, revealing her need, Sparky after a momentary confusion rejects the Musgrave view and finds an alternative. "It *wouldn't* be anarchy, you know; he can't be right there, All it would be, is: *you* live and *I* live—we don't need his duty, we don't need his Word—a dead man's a dead man. We could call it *all* paid for. Your life and my life—make our *own* road, we don't follow nobody." His story of the four boozers, that follows this state-

ment, illustrates his conviction that when someone else makes the rules, and the rules lead to death, then one should not abide by those rules. He decides to desert Black Jack Musgrave and run off with Annie. He reverses the action of his counterpart, Billy Hicks, the yellow-haired singing boy, who ran away from love and the life it generated to the army, the red-coats, to war and his death, which in turn generated many deaths. Sparky, also a young singing boy, deserts the army and turns to love, but ironically he too is killed and his death contributes to the failure of the mission.

The Sparky-Annie attempted resolution fails, just as earlier the Annie-Billy Hicks relationship failed, because it is attempted in a general context of violence. It is with this general context that Serjeant Musgrave is concerned and which he is determined to destroy. He sees himself as God's emissary the divine scourge, and he is genuinely convinced that his mission is holy and that his authority and power stem from God. "Our message without God is a bad belch and a hiccup," he asserts. Because of his high-minded devotion to service, he holds our sympathy for much of the play. But our sympathy is mingled with fear and doubt, a confusing ambivalence. His policy of using violence to overthrow violence raises the very difficult moral question: are we justified in using violence, the end we abhor, as a means to destroy that end? Will we be contaminated by the instrument? Even if we sincerely believe our action to be in God's service, how can we be sure that it is in fact God's purpose? The frequent half joking, half sardonically serious references by Musgrave's men to Musgrave as God remind us of the danger that those who presume to act in God's name, who take unto themselves God's task, may come to regard themselves as God, or endowed with God's absoluteness. But Musgrave is not God, and ignoring his limitations believes that he has everything figured out and that nothing can go wrong. He is blinded either by his faith that because he serves God, God is with him and he cannot do wrong or fail, or he is blinded by his arrogance, a danger to which everyone who assumes the mantle of the wrathful prophet is exposed. Even the sincere servant of God is mortal and limited. But, on the other hand, should this realization and the dangers that the intended action involve, deter us from doing our duty as we see it? No easy answer is possible. Human nature, that is common humanity, rebels against such action as Musgrave contemplates, but the hero or prophet goes beyond common humanity and only through daring effects great change. The difficulty even for the hero in transcending his common nature is evidenced in Musgrave himself. The nightmare scene indicates that the calm, orderly air, the

conviction of outward certitude is not reflected inwardly. Musgrave's nightmare is a compound of his sense of guilt and his apocalyptic vision of doomsday, and the need to be properly prepared, in control. At the same time he expresses to Mrs. Hitchcock, when he wakened from his nightmare, his inward fear that the orders he hears and obeys may not be the true orders. He dredges up from his memories his traumatic experience as a raw recruit when, not hearing the proper order, he made the wrong turn and marched away from his Company. This inner schism is evidenced also by his failure to use the Gatling gun when he had the chance. Jack Richardson in his review of the play misses this point when he describes the scene, inaccurately, stating, "one of Arden's not altogether successful characters, a sort of devious Everyman, is the one finally to hold a bayonet to Musgrave's throat and deliver him over to the military authority."¹² In fact, when the Dragoons enter, Musgrave, who was, according to Arden, "temporarily at a loss," suddenly seizes the machine-gun and covers the Dragoons, in effect commanding the situation. At this point the Bargee seizes a rifle and sticks it into Musgrave's back, commanding him to put his hands up. But as Arden carefully points out in the following stage direction, "Musgrave is pushed forward by the rifle, but he does not obey." Musgrave knows that surrender means conviction and death, and holding the Gatling gun he can still act violently, but he does not do so. Instead he submits quietly to the trooper when called on by him to surrender. In a sense Musgrave fails in his immediate mission because of his inner division, this scruple which holds him back. In another sense he fails because his view of life is too constricted: he does not realize that the common man from whom his support must come, cannot kill in cold blood for a more or less abstract principle, even when that principle is made visible by the dangling skeleton of a fellow-townsmen; and he does not recognize that the particular plight of the colliers is more immediate and pressing to them than the long-range though probably more important ideal of non-violence. In part, too, Musgrave fails because his single-minded and narrow-minded, though righteous, obsession leaves no room for still other human qualities, and needs, and for the element of chance, the unpredictable in life. He is austere, Puritanical, in his divine service in which love and joy have no place. In his vision of life, all must be orderly, duty and obedience paramount, as on the parade ground. But life is not like that. There is spontaneity and irregularity, individuality, growth, crossing of lines, and there must be tolerance for error, mercy, forgiveness, a place for love and life. These aspects of human experience are brought out by Mrs. Hitchcock, who comes closest to expressing what appear to be Arden's outlook and positive values.

Early in the play Mrs. Hitchcock's sympathy with the colliers and their plight and her dislike of the Establishment figures who harass her are made evident. Though the part she plays in this conflict is minor, her views on it and her treatment of Annie and of the soldiers when they appear, reveal her to be a strong, intelligent character, one whose views on persons and events we can respect and share. When, after the death of Sparky, Musgrave appeals to her for help, "Missus, come here. There's things going wrong, but don't ask me what. Will you trust me?" she looks at him searchingly, Arden says in a stage direction, and agrees, recognizing in him his deep, basic probity. "I've got to trust you, haven't I? I've always praised religion." But in the final scene she makes explicit the flaws in Musgrave's position which caused his failure and made him responsible for the death of Sparky. When he fails to understand why his plan, carefully worked out in terms of numbers and order and Logic, collapsed, she tells him that he failed to take into account Annie and her role in life, and the fact that there existed love and life even in a town where cold and hunger prevailed. His sense of duty and divine mission were inseparable from his pride in himself as a commanding soldier who at the end of the world could call a parade and be in control.

Mrs. Hitchcock: . . . It's time your learnt your life, you big proud serjeant. Listen: last evening you told all about this anarchy and where it came from—like, scribble all over with life or love, and that makes anarchy. Right?

Musgrave. Go on.

Mrs. Hitchcock. Then *use* your Logic—if you can. Look at it this road: Here we are, and we'd got life and love. Then *you* came in and you did your scribbling where nobody asked you. Aye, it's arsy-versey to what you said, but it's still an anarchy, isn't it? And it's all your work.

Musgrave. Don't tell me there was life or love in this town.

Mrs. Hitchcock. There was. There was hungry men, too—fighting for their food. But *you* brought in a different war.

Musgrave. I brought it in to end it.

To this agonized justification Attercliffe replies with the conventional pacifist argument: "To end it by its own rules: no bloody good. She's right, you're wrong." And he supports Mrs. Hitchcock's accusation that

Musgrave is responsible for the death of his men. Musgrave stands convicted and the path he chose rejected. He is willing to accept their view, but he realizes that he is right only if God was with him, and hence the recollection of how his frenzied, holy dance of God's Word was followed by failure and the dance of the linked oppressors and oppressed, plunges him into utter despair. But Arden refuses to regard the Musgrave position, terrible as it is in its acceptance of violence, as evil or even meaningless. Though Musgrave's militancy involves a limited vision and brings death, since it is in a good cause the ultimate consequence is martyrdom, which has a positive outcome. Mrs. Hitchcock, knowing the townspeople, and understanding and sympathizing with Musgrave, comforts him. The joint dance of the oppressors and the oppressed, the anti-dance of God's Word, she assures him, is "not a dance of joy. Those men are hungry, so they've got no time for *you*. One day they'll be full, though, and the Dragoons'll be gone, and then they'll remember." The importance of remembering is stressed throughout the play. Though Musgrave is doubtful about Mrs. Hitchcock's reassurance, he drinks from the glass which she puts to his lips, an act which, seen in the light of his refusal to drink from it at the beginning of the scene, must now be regarded as an act of acceptance and reconciliation, a sharing of her hope, a partaking in a ritual of fellowship. This symbolic affirmation or rather suggestion of the possibility of salvation through sacrifice, for it is not much more than a suggestion, is reasserted in Attercliffe's song which ends the play.

For the apple holds a seed will grow
 In live and lengthy joy
 To raise a flourishing tree of fruit
 For ever and a day.

The symbol of the apple and its seed, which suggest continuing life, reinforces the theme that even though violence may be inescapable and must have its place for the present at least, love, too, must be recognized and have its place, and though death is present, life is paramount and ultimately will prevail. In effect the symbol justifies the wife who betrays the husband who has joined the army and gone far away for glory or, like Billy Hicks, to escape from the responsibilities of life. Attercliffe, who has chosen the life of the blood-red roses, admits the rightness of his wife's sharing her bed with the greengrocer. (One is reminded of Shaw's antithesis of cabbages and roses in *The Apple Cart*.) "I saw him," says Attercliffe of his wife's lover, "four feet ten inch tall and he

looked like a rat grinning through a brush; but he sold good green apples and he fed the people and he fed my wife. I didn't do neither." Unglamorous though he may be, the greengrocer provides sustenance and companionship in a lonely, cold bed, and life. Only by sharing her bed can he put the seed into her. The soldier-husband, thousands of miles away, cannot do that.

The symbol of the apple and its seed suggests more. Ideas and visions and heroic deeds of martyrdom are also seeds. This hopeful reminder, though put in the form of a question, closes the play, as Attercliffe, after his song, says, "They're going to hang us up a length higher nor most apple-trees grow, Serjeant. D'you reckon we can start an orchard?" Up till this concluding scene the answer would have had to be a clear 'no,' but by the end, a tentative 'yes' is possible.

The action of the play ends with the entry of the Dragoons and the re-establishment of order by force, the force of the Establishment and the restoration of the *status quo ante*. The colliers, through the 'bribe' of free drink, acquiesce, and Walsh, with a sense of frustration, joins the dance, commenting bitterly, "The community's been saved. Peace and prosperity rules. We're all friends and neighbours for the rest of today. We're all sorted out. We're back where we were. So what do we do?" Musgrave and Attercliffe are in prison presumably facing court-martial and death. The final situation in terms of the action is not hopeful, certainly not for the present or immediate future. Musgrave's despair parallels the disgust that Walsh felt earlier when he viewed the antics of his drunken mates. Together, they suggest the futility of effective action. In the light of this situation, it is not difficult to understand the problem experienced by critics who tried to place *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* in one of the recognizable categories current in the drama of the 1950's and 1960's. Insofar as Arden dramatizes the conflict between the Establishment and the workers and repeatedly refers to the army massacre as the motive for Musgrave's action, and he indicates his sympathies with the exploited workers and colonials, showing how harsh inequalities and injustice grow out of the existing industrial-military complex, and implies at least that action is necessary, he identifies with the left-wing dramatists. But at the same time, in his unromanticized portrayal of the colliers who are easily led and misled, and in his evident reluctance to accept the consequences of the condition he outlines—the need for action—and in his sense of the futility of violent action, he departs from the left-wing position. This attitude towards violence and the anti-war theme led many critics to regard the play as a dramatized assertion of the pacifist position. While here, too, Arden's sympathies are with the

pacifists, his depiction of the divisiveness in the anti-war faction and his awareness of the need for action, evidenced in the frustration felt by Walsh and in the concluding lines of the play which restore sympathy for Musgrave, reveal that Arden's position cannot be equated simply with the pacifists'.

In some respects *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* can be seen in terms of the theatre of the absurd. The need for action and the seeming futility of action, with more death the only apparent consequence of action; the way in which the end of the play seems to bring us around again to the beginning, with the present situation basically unchanged; and the ironical comment provided by the linked dance of the miners, mine-owner, clergyman and constable, all convey a sense of the absurdity of the human scene. Above all, the role of the Bargee, Joe Bludgeon, reinforces this element of the absurd. He mocks Musgrave and his values and he mocks the Establishment; he takes malicious delight in setting one side against the other, taking care always to be on the side from which he can gain personal advantage. A man of no faith, in whom one can place no trust, he, nevertheless, undercuts both the representative figures of the present power group in our society and those whose ideals lead them to oppose this group, and no matter what turn events take, this mis-shapen and contemptible rascal whose cynical, quick wit makes him contemptuous of others and their values, safely emerges a gainer from the conflicts—a comment on the absurdity of our aims and stances. And Arden underlines and extends the role of the Bargee, emphasizing its importance, in the stage directions preceding Act Three. "The role of the Bargee in this scene is important. As there is no crowd, the speeches are delivered straight out to the audience, and the Bargee acts as a kind of fogleman to create the crowd-reactions." And insofar as the Bargee acts as a Chorus, an Everyman, commenting on the crisis action that follows, Arden seems to heighten this element of the absurd in life. But even this interpretation has limited validity if we use it to identify *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* as an absurdist play. In the first place, even the Bargee, repulsive figure that he is made out to be, is not entirely a negative force. He helps us to see the empty pomposity of the Establishment figures and by his pantomimic gestures and ironic echoes deflates and at the same time alerts us to the dangers of the dogmatic absolutism of zealots like Musgrave. Life for him is not absurd. Most people in it may be absurd, but life has in it such good things as beer and music, and it is meant to be enjoyed. His acceptance of life as he finds it, is, on the whole, cheery, and indeed he defends the drunken colliers when Walsh becomes disgusted at their behaviour.

Bargee (kindly). Ah well, they're drunk. . . . They won't stay drunk all week. Oh the soldiers gives 'em sport, they *need* a bit o' sport, cold, hungry. . . .

Furthermore, the Bargee represents only one aspect of Everyman. Mrs. Hitchcock, standing outside the conflicting forces and commenting on them in recognizable human and humane terms, sounds the closing note with her affirmative, reassuring statement.

Arden, then, very much aware of the complex factors that make up the contemporary scene with all its brutalities and inequities, has no easy answer. On the surface at least, at the end of the play, social conditions remain unchanged. But Arden is reluctant to end on so pessimistic and hopeless a note. He is aware of the possibility of change. He acknowledges the role that increasingly enlightened and bold leaders like Walsh might play, and more important, he reminds us that the dramatic martyrdom of a dedicated hero like Musgrave may have incalculable significance. Though Arden's complex exploration of the place of violence in life and the various responses to it is not encouraging, his vision certainly is not bereft of hope. The ground on which the seeds fall, life, is not barren, and the seeds, slow though the process may be, will fructify.

NOTES

1. John Russell Taylor, *Arden and After*, 82.
2. Albert Hunt, "Arden's Stagecraft," in John Russell Brown (ed.) *Modern British Dramatists*, 102.
3. The episode that sparked Musgrave's mission, Arden has stated, was based on an atrocity carried out by British soldiers in Cyprus, and the idea of a group of 'outsiders' taking over a town was suggested by an American movie *The Raid*. Arden, "Building the Play," *Encore*, July-August 1961.
4. Frank Cox, "Arden of Chichester," *Plays and Players*, Aug. 1963.
5. John Arden, "Telling a True Tale," *The Encore Reader*, 125.
6. *Ibid.*, 92.
7. Cox, *op. cit.*, 16.
8. Arden, *op. cit.*, 127.
9. Richard Gilman, "Arden's Unsteady Ground," in John Russell Brown (ed.) *Modern British Dramatists*, 107.
10. *Ibid.*, 113.
11. The frequent references to cards reinforce this idea. Cards, arch-symbols of chance, are used in various ways: in card games, where skill can be offset and defeated by chance; in card tricks, such as Sparky plays, where the chance factor is manipulated and by sleight-of-hand made to appear controllable; and in fortune-telling, where the attempt to predict the unpredictable in effect emphasizes the latter. In *Serjeant Musgrave's Dance* the card episodes include all three uses, and Serjeant Musgrave's nickname 'Black Jack' suggests not only an instrument of violence, but also, ironically, chance.
12. Jack Richardson, "Musgrave's Dance and Azdak's Circle," *Commentary*, June 1966, 75.