For this session please do the following:

1. Consider the phrase “reading between the lines”: what does it mean? what is between the lines in a text? All art begins with nothing: a blank page or screen, an empty canvas, an empty stage. How does this “nothing” become “something”? What are the critical elements of creation?

2. Read the following (included) readings: Shakespeare’s sonnet 20, the first scene of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, Diane Ackerman’s poem “We Are Listening,” Jorge Luis Borges’s “Everything and Nothing.”

   In the sonnet and *King Lear*, pay particular attention to the word *nothing*: what does it mean in the context of the poem and the play?
   When you read Ackerman’s contemporary poem, how do you respond? What feelings do her words evoke?
   In Borges’s parable, Shakespeare the writer ultimately has no individual identity: he is what he has created. Is such an identity with their creations confined to artists, or do you see analogies in other disciplines? What theological point is Borges making in the parable?

3. (optional) Read the attached essay by Ben Brantley about contemporary playwrights Tom Stoppard and Edward Albee (*NY Times*, 2.18.08).

William Shakespeare, Sonnet 20

A woman’s face, with Nature’s own hand painted,
Hast thou, the master mistress of my passion;
A woman’s gentle heart, but not acquaintance
With shifting change, as if false women’s fashion;
An eye more bright than theirs, less false in rolling,
Gilding the object whereunto it gazeth;
A man in hue all hues in his controlling,
Which steals men’s eyes and women’s souls amazeth.
And for a woman wert thou first created,
Till Nature as she wrought thee fell a-doting,
And by addition me of thee defeated,
By adding one thing to my purpose nothing.
But since she pricked thee out for women’s pleasure,
Mine be thy love, and thy love’s use their treasure.
King Lear, Act 1, Scene 1 (http://shakespeare.mit.edu/lear/ lear.1.1.html)

SCENE I. King Lear's palace.

Enter KENT, GLOUCESTER, and EDMUND

KENT
I thought the king had more affected the Duke of Albany than Cornwall.

GLOUCESTER
It did always seem so to us: but now, in the division of the kingdom, it appears not which of the dukes he values most; for equalities are so weighed, that curiosity in neither can make choice of either's moiety.

KENT
Is not this your son, my lord?

GLOUCESTER
His breeding, sir, hath been at my charge: I have so often blushed to acknowledge him, that now I am brazed to it.

KENT
I cannot conceive you.

GLOUCESTER
Sir, this young fellow's mother could: whereupon she grew round-wombed, and had, indeed, sir, a son for her cradle ere she had a husband for her bed. Do you smell a fault?

KENT
I cannot wish the fault undone, the issue of it being so proper.

GLOUCESTER
But I have, sir, a son by order of law, some year elder than this, who yet is no dearer in my account: though this knave came something saucily into the world before he was sent for, yet was his mother fair; there was good sport at his making, and the whoreson must be acknowledged. Do you know this noble gentleman, Edmund?

EDMUND
No, my lord.

GLOUCESTER
My lord of Kent: remember him hereafter as my honourable friend.

EDMUND
My services to your lordship.

KENT
I must love you, and sue to know you better.

EDMUND
Sir, I shall study deserving.
GLOUCESTER
He hath been out nine years, and away he shall again. The king is coming.

Sennet. Enter KING LEAR, CORNWALL, ALBANY, GONERIL, REGAN, CORDELIA, and Attendants

KING LEAR
Attend the lords of France and Burgundy, Gloucester.
GLOUCESTER
I shall, my liege.

Exeunt GLOUCESTER and EDMUND

KING LEAR
Meantime we shall express our darker purpose.
Give me the map there. Know that we have divided
In three our kingdom: and 'tis our fast intent
To shake all cares and business from our age;
Conferring them on younger strengths, while we Unburthen'd crawl toward death. Our son of Cornwall,
And you, our no less loving son of Albany,
We have this hour a constant will to publish
Our daughters' several dowers, that future strife
May be prevented now. The princes, France and Burgundy,
Great rivals in our youngest daughter's love,
Long in our court have made their amorous sojourn,
And here are to be answer'd. Tell me, my daughters,—
Since now we will divest us both of rule,
Interest of territory, cares of state,—
Which of you shall we say doth love us most?
That we our largest bounty may extend
Where nature doth with merit challenge. Goneril,
Our eldest-born, speak first.

GONERIL
Sir, I love you more than words can wield the matter;
Dearer than eye-sight, space, and liberty;
Beyond what can be valued, rich or rare;
No less than life, with grace, health, beauty, honour;
As much as child e'er loved, or father found;
A love that makes breath poor, and speech unable;
Beyond all manner of so much I love you.
CORDELIA
[Aside] What shall Cordelia do?
Love, and be silent.

LEAR
Of all these bounds, even from this line to this,
With shadowy forests and with champains rich'd,
With plenteous rivers and wide-skirted meads,
We make thee lady: to thine and Albany's issue
Be this perpetual. What says our second daughter,
Our dearest Regan, wife to Cornwall? Speak.
REGAN
Sir, I am made
Of the self-same metal that my sister is,  
And prize me at her worth. In my true heart  
I find she names my very deed of love;  
Only she comes too short: that I profess  
Myself an enemy to all other joys,  
Which the most precious square of sense possesses;  
And find I am alone felicitate  
In your dear highness' love.  

CORDELIA  
[Aside] Then poor Cordelia!  
And yet not so; since, I am sure, my love's  
More richer than my tongue.  

KING LEAR  
To thee and thine hereditary ever  
Remain this ample third of our fair kingdom;  
No less in space, validity, and pleasure,  
Than that conferr'd on Goneril. Now, our joy,  
Although the last, not least; to whose young love  
The vines of France and milk of Burgundy  
Strive to be interest'd; what can you say to draw  
A third more opulent than your sisters? Speak.  

CORDELIA  
Nothing, my lord.  

KING LEAR  
Nothing!  

CORDELIA  
Nothing.  

KING LEAR  
Nothing will come of nothing: speak again.  

CORDELIA  
Unhappy that I am, I cannot heave  
My heart into my mouth: I love your majesty  
According to my bond; nor more nor less.  

KING LEAR  
How, how, Cordelia! mend your speech a little,  
Lest it may mar your fortunes.  

CORDELIA  
Good my lord,  
You have begot me, bred me, loved me: I  
Return those duties back as are right fit,  
Obey you, love you, and most honour you.  
Why have my sisters husbands, if they say  
They love you all? Haply, when I shall wed,  
That lord whose hand must take my plight shall carry  
Half my love with him, half my care and duty:  
Sure, I shall never marry like my sisters,  
To love my father all.  

KING LEAR  
But goes thy heart with this?  

CORDELIA  
Ay, good my lord.  

KING LEAR  
So young, and so untender?
CORDELIA
So young, my lord, and true.

KING LEAR
Let it be so; thy truth, then, be thy dower:
For, by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate, and the night;
By all the operation of the orbs
From whom we do exist, and cease to be;
Here I disclaim all my paternal care,
Propinquity and property of blood,
And as a stranger to my heart and me
Hold thee, from this, for ever. The barbarous Scythian,
Or he that makes his generation messes
To gorge his appetite, shall to my bosom
Be as well neighbour'd, pitied, and relieved,
As thou my sometime daughter.

KENT
Good my liege,--

KING LEAR
Peace, Kent!
Come not between the dragon and his wrath.
I loved her most, and thought to set my rest
On her kind nursery. Hence, and avoid my sight!
So be my grave my peace, as here I give
Her father's heart from her! Call France; who stirs?
Call Burgundy. Cornwall and Albany,
With my two daughters' dowers digest this third:
Let pride, which she calls plainness, marry her.
I do invest you jointly with my power,
Pre-eminence, and all the large effects
That troop with majesty. Ourself, by monthly course,
With reservation of an hundred knights,
By you to be sustain'd, shall our abode
Make with you by due turns. Only we still retain
The name, and all the additions to a king;
The sway, revenue, execution of the rest,
Beloved sons, be yours: which to confirm,
This coronet part betwixt you.

Giving the crown

KENT
Royal Lear,
Whom I have ever honour'd as my king,
Loved as my father, as my master follow'd,
As my great patron thought on in my prayers,--

KING LEAR
The bow is bent and drawn, make from the shaft.

KENT
Let it fall rather, though the fork invade
The region of my heart: be Kent unmannerly,
When Lear is mad. What wilt thou do, old man?
Think'st thou that duty shall have dread to speak,
When power to flattery bows? To plainness honour's bound,
When majesty stoops to folly. Reverse thy doom;
And, in thy best consideration, cheque
This hideous rashness: answer my life my judgment,
Thy youngest daughter does not love thee least;
Nor are those empty-hearted whose low sound
Reverbs no hollowness.

KING LEAR
Kent, on thy life, no more.

KENT
My life I never held but as a pawn
To wage against thy enemies; nor fear to lose it,
Thy safety being the motive.

KING LEAR
Out of my sight!

KENT
See better, Lear; and let me still remain
The true blank of thine eye.

KING LEAR
Now, by Apollo,--

KENT
Now, by Apollo, king,
Thou swear'st thy gods in vain.

KING LEAR
O, vassal! miscreant!

Laying his hand on his sword

ALBANY CORNWALL
Dear sir, forbear.

KENT
Do:
Kill thy physician, and the fee bestow
Upon thy foul disease. Revoke thy doom;
Or, whilst I can vent clamour from my throat,
I'll tell thee thou dost evil.

KING LEAR
Hear me, recreant!
On thine allegiance, hear me!
Since thou hast sought to make us break our vow,
Which we durst never yet, and with strain'd pride
To come between our sentence and our power,
Which nor our nature nor our place can bear,
Our potency made good, take thy reward.
Five days we do allot thee, for provision
To shield thee from diseases of the world;
And on the sixth to turn thy hated back
Upon our kingdom: if, on the tenth day following,
Thy banish'd trunk be found in our dominions,
The moment is thy death. Away! by Jupiter,
This shall not be revoked.

KENT
Fare thee well, king: sith thus thou wilt appear,
Freedom lives hence, and banishment is here.

To CORDELIA

The gods to their dear shelter take thee, maid,
That justly think'st, and hast most rightly said!

To REGAN and GONERIL

And your large speeches may your deeds approve,
That good effects may spring from words of love.
Thus Kent, O princes, bids you all adieu;
He'll shape his old course in a country new.
Exit

Flourish. Re-enter GLOUCESTER, with KING OF FRANCE, BURGUNDY, and Attendants

GLOUCESTER
Here's France and Burgundy, my noble lord.
KING LEAR
My lord of Burgundy.
We first address towards you, who with this king
Hath rivall'd for our daughter: what, in the least,
Will you require in present dower with her,
Or cease your quest of love?
BURGUNDY
Most royal majesty,
I crave no more than what your highness offer'd,
Nor will you tender less.
KING LEAR
Right noble Burgundy,
When she was dear to us, we did hold her so;
But now her price is fall'n. Sir, there she stands:
If aught within that little seeming substance,
Or all of it, with our displeasure pieced,
And nothing more, may fitly like your grace,
She's there, and she is yours.
BURGUNDY
I know no answer.
KING LEAR
Will you, with those infirmities she owes,
Unfrieded, new-adopted to our hate,
Dower'd with our curse, and stranger'd with our oath,
Take her, or leave her?
BURGUNDY
Pardon me, royal sir;
Election makes not up on such conditions.
KING LEAR
Then leave her, sir; for, by the power that made me,
I tell you all her wealth.

To KING OF FRANCE
For you, great king,
I would not from your love make such a stray,
To match you where I hate; therefore beseech you
To avert your liking a more worthier way
Than on a wretch whom nature is ashamed
Almost to acknowledge hers.
KING OF FRANCE
This is most strange,
That she, that even but now was your best object,
The argument of your praise, balm of your age,
Most best, most dearest, should in this trice of time
Commit a thing so monstrous, to dismantle
So many folds of favour. Sure, her offence
Must be of such unnatural degree,
That monsters it, or your fore-vouch'd affection
Fall'n into taint: which to believe of her,
Must be a faith that reason without miracle
Could never plant in me.
CORDELIA
I yet beseech your majesty,--
If for I want that glib and oily art,
To speak and purpose not; since what I well intend,
I'll do't before I speak,--that you make known
It is no vicious blot, murder, or foulness,
No unchaste action, or dishonour'd step,
That hath deprived me of your grace and favour;
But even for want of that for which I am richer,
A still-soliciting eye, and such a tongue
As I am glad I have not, though not to have it
Hath lost me in your liking.
KING LEAR
Better thou
Hadst not been born than not to have pleased me better.
KING OF FRANCE
Is it but this,--a tardiness in nature
Which often leaves the history unspoke
That it intends to do? My lord of Burgundy,
What say you to the lady? Love's not love
When it is mingled with regards that stand
Aloof from the entire point. Will you have her?
She is herself a dowry.
BURGUNDY
Royal Lear,
Give but that portion which yourself proposed,
And here I take Cordelia by the hand,
Duchess of Burgundy.
KING LEAR
Nothing: I have sworn; I am firm.
BURGUNDY
I am sorry, then, you have so lost a father
That you must lose a husband.
CORDELIA
Peace be with Burgundy!
Since that respects of fortune are his love, 
I shall not be his wife.

**KING OF FRANCE**

Fairest Cordelia, that art most rich, being poor; 
Most choice, forsaken; and most loved, despised! 
Thee and thy virtues here I seize upon: 
Be it lawful I take up what's cast away. 
Gods, gods! 'tis strange that from their cold'st neglect 
My love should kindle to inflamed respect. 
Thy dowerless daughter, king, thrown to my chance, 
Is queen of us, of ours, and our fair France: 
Not all the dukes of waterish Burgundy 
Can buy this unprized precious maid of me. 
Bid them farewell, Cordelia, though unkind: 
Thou losest here, a better where to find.

**KING LEAR**

Thou hast her, France: let her be thine; for we 
Have no such daughter, nor shall ever see 
That face of hers again. Therefore be gone 
Without our grace, our love, our benison. 
Come, noble Burgundy.

Flourish. Exeunt all but KING OF FRANCE, GONERIL, REGAN, and CORDELIA

**KING OF FRANCE**

Bid farewell to your sisters.

**CORDELIA**

The jewels of our father, with wash'd eyes 
Cordelia leaves you: I know you what you are; 
And like a sister am most loath to call 
Your faults as they are named. Use well our father: 
To your professed bosoms I commit him 
But yet, alas, stood I within his grace, 
I would prefer him to a better place. 
So, farewell to you both.

**REGAN**

Prescribe not us our duties.

**GONERIL**

Let your study 
Be to content your lord, who hath received you 
At fortune's alms. You have obedience scanted, 
And well are worth the want that you have wanted.

**CORDELIA**

Time shall unfold what plaited cunning hides: 
Who cover faults, at last shame them derides. 
Well may you prosper!

**KING OF FRANCE**

Come, my fair Cordelia.

Exeunt KING OF FRANCE and CORDELIA

**GONERIL**

Sister, it is not a little I have to say of what
most nearly appertains to us both. I think our father will hence to-night.
REGAN
That's most certain, and with you; next month with us.
GONERIL
You see how full of changes his age is; the observation we have made of it hath not been little: he always loved our sister most; and with what poor judgment he hath now cast her off appears too grossly.
REGAN
'Tis the infirmity of his age: yet he hath ever but slenderly known himself.
GONERIL
The best and soundest of his time hath been but rash; then must we look to receive from his age, not alone the imperfections of long-engraffed condition, but therewithal the unruly waywardness that infirm and cholerick years bring with them.
REGAN
Such unconstant starts are we like to have from him as this of Kent's banishment.
GONERIL
There is further compliment of leavetaking between France and him. Pray you, let's hit together: if our father carry authority with such dispositions as he bears, this last surrender of his will but offend us.
REGAN
We shall further think on't.
GONERIL
We must do something, and i' the heat.

Exeunt
We Are Listening

As our metal eyes wake
to absolute night,
where whispers fly
from the beginning of time,
we cup our ears to the heavens.
Avid, we are listening

on the volcanic lips of Flagstaff
and in the fields beyond Boston
in a great array that blooms
like coral from the desert floor,
on highwire webs patrolled
by computer spiders in Puerto Rico.

We are listening for a sound
beyond us, beyond sound,

searching for a lighthouse
in the breakwaters of our uncertainty,
an electronic murmur
a bright, fragile I am.

Small as tree frogs
staking out one end
of an endless swamp,
we are listening
through the longest night
we imagine, which dawns
between the life and time of stars.

Our voice trembles
with its own electric,
we who mood like iguanas
we who breathe sleep
for a third of our lives,
we who heat food
to the steaminess of fresh prey,
then feast with such baroque
good manners it grows cold.

In mind gardens
and on real verandas
we are listening,
rapt among the persian lilacs
and the crickets,
while radio telescopes
roll their heads, as if in anguish.

With our scurrying minds
and our lidless will
and our lank, floppy bodies
and our galloping yens
and our deep, cosmic loneliness
and our starboard hearts
where love careens,
we are listening,
the small bipeds
with the giant dreams.

—Diane Ackerman
Everything and Nothing

THERE was no one in him; behind his face (which even through the bad paintings of those times resembles no other) and his words, which were copious, fantastic and stormy, there was only a bit of coldness, a dream dreamt by no one. At first he thought that all people were like him, but the astonishment of a friend to whom he had begun to speak of this emptiness showed him his error and made him feel always that an individual should not differ in outward appearance. Once he thought that in books he would find a cure for his ill and thus he learned the small Latin and less Greek a contemporary would speak of; later he considered that what he sought might well be found in an elemental rite of humanity, and let himself be initiated by Anne Hathaway one long June afternoon. At the age of twenty-odd years he went to London. Instinctively he had already become proficient in the habit of simulating that he was someone, so that others would not discover his condition as no one; in London he found the profession to which he was predestined, that of the actor, who on a stage plays at being another before a gathering of people who play at taking him for that other person. His histrionic tasks brought him a singular satisfaction, perhaps the first he had ever known; but once the last verse had been acclaimed and the last dead man withdrawn from the stage, the hated flavour of unreality returned to him. He ceased to be Ferrex or Tamberlane and became no one again. Thus hounded, he took to imagining other heroes and other tragic fables. And so, while his flesh fulfilled its destiny as flesh in the taverns and brothels of London, the soul that inhabited him was Caesar, who disregards the augur’s admonition, and Juliet, who abhors the lark, and Macbeth, who converses on the plain with the witches who are also Fates. No one has ever been so many men as this man who like the Egyptian Proteus could exhaust all the guises of reality. At times he would leave a confession hidden away in some corner of his work, certain that it would not be deciphered; Richard affirms that in his person he plays the part of many and Iago claims with curious words “I am not what I am.” The fundamental identity of existing, dreaming and acting inspired famous passages of his.

For twenty years he persisted in that controlled hallucination, but one morning he was suddenly gripped by the tedium and the terror of being so many kings who die by the sword and so many suffering lovers who converge, diverge and melodiously expire.
That very day he arranged to sell his theatre. Within a week he had returned to his native village, where he recovered the trees and rivers of his childhood and did not relate them to the others his muse had celebrated, illustrious with mythological allusions and Latin terms. He had to be someone: he was a retired impresario who had made his fortune and concerned himself with loans, lawsuits and petty usury. It was in this character that he dictated the arid will and testament known to us, from which he deliberately excluded all traces of pathos or literature. His friends from London would visit his retreat and for them he would take up again his role as poet.

History adds that before or after dying he found himself in the presence of God and told Him: “I who have been so many men in vain want to be one and myself.” The voice of the Lord answered from a whirlwind: “Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one.”

February 18, 2008
THEATER
Language, the Muse That Provokes Stoppard and Albee

By BEN BRANTLEY

Do you know what it’s like to be deeply, unbearably in love, all the while aware that you can never completely trust the object of your affection? I would wager that Edward Albee and Tom Stoppard do, almost to the point of delirium.

Don’t misunderstand me. I have no intimate acquaintance with the personal lives of these dramatists. It’s just that their ruling passion, jubilant and exasperated, proclaims itself publicly in pretty much everything they write, including their new plays of this season (“Rock ’n’ Roll” from Mr. Stoppard, and “Homelife” and “Me, Myself & I” from Mr. Albee).

How could it be otherwise, when it’s the most basic tools of their trade that they so adore? The faithless lovers of Tom Stoppard and Edward Albee are, in a word, words.

Or to quote one of the interchangeable title characters in “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead,” the 1966 play that made the young Mr. Stoppard famous: “Words, words. They’re all we have to go on.”

It is one of the livelier paradoxes of the English-speaking theater today that its two most dazzling wordsmiths are incurably suspicious of the language they ply with such flair. No other living playwrights give (and, it would seem, receive) more pleasure from the sounds, shapes and textures of their lavishly stocked vocabularies. And none is more achingly conscious of the inadequacy of how they say what they say.

This contradiction is not just an element of their style; it’s the essence of it. It’s what gives that distinctive, heady tension to their plays, the friction that sends the minds of receptive theatergoers into exhilarated overdrive. It is also what makes actors say that mastering these playwrights’ ornate, fast-footed language requires the sort of hard study demanded by Shakespeare.
Inordinately slick and fleet of tongue, Stoppard and Albee heroes — from the 19th-century Russian philosophers of Mr. Stoppard’s “Coast of Utopia” to the battling husband and wife of Mr. Albee’s “Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?” — are forever trying to pin down chameleon words, like so many adrenaline-drunk Ulysseses wrestling shape-changing sea gods. (Words, as one character in “The Coast of Utopia” puts it, “just lead you on” and “arrange themselves every which way.”) These heroes may not stand a chance of winning but, oh, what a beautiful fight.

And the love-hate matches show no signs of abating. Mr. Albee turns 80 next month; Mr. Stoppard turned 70 last year. Yet if anything, their sense of true communication as a valiant and impossible dream has only intensified in the decades since they made their names, Mr. Albee with “Zoo Story” (in 1960) and Mr. Stoppard with “Rosencrantz and Guildenstern.”

In “Rock ’n’ Roll,” Mr. Stoppard’s cross-cultural story of love and revolution in Prague and Cambridge, England (on Broadway through March 9 at the Bernard B. Jacobs Theater), the possibilities for misunderstanding are multiplied by the different languages in play: not only Czech and English, but also ancient Greek, Fleet Street journalesque, governmental bureaucratese and the mystical poetry of Pink Floyd lyrics. The penultimate scene is a combative dinner party that might as well be set in the Tower of Babel.

In Mr. Albee’s “Me, Myself & I,” which closed on Sunday at the McCarter Theater in Princeton (with a New York run planned later this season), words erupt like exploding cigars in the mouths of their speakers. Almost all words — including personal pronouns and proper names — tremble with multiple meanings in this philosophical farce about a mother of identical twins who can’t tell them apart. (The idea of twins, superficially the same yet internally dissimilar, becomes a physical pun.)

“Rock ’n’ Roll” and “Me, Myself & I” found ideal embodiments for their authors’ semantic perplexity in two very different performances. As the rock-loving Czech dissident in the Stoppard play, the British actor Rufus Sewell seems to exist in a state of eternal bafflement, squinting warily at the sentences lobbed at him by academics, politicians and journalists. (The play is filled with simple misunderstandings of words: “bold” for “bald,” for example.) When he speaks, it is as if he expects what he says to bite him.
In “Me, Myself & I,” Tyne Daly played the mother with an aggrieved, ineradicable question mark on her face. On some level she has resigned herself to not knowing which twin is which and which meaning is meant by which word. But she has managed to incorporate her doubts into how she talks, to make them part of a game that she plays aggressively. Small wonder that an outsider to the family, listening to Ms. Daly’s Mother volley and dissect clichés with her doctor-companion (the wonderful Brian Murray), feels compelled to ask, “Is this English you’re speaking?”

That state of questioning every word can paralyze. There’s the sense with Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard that their characters keep talking as fast as they can because otherwise they would sink into silence and all the terrifying questions that lie within.

They are heirs to the feverish logorrhea that afflicts Winnie, the (literally) earthbound heroine of Samuel Beckett’s “Happy Days,” brilliantly rendered by the Irish actress Fiona Shaw in Deborah Warner’s traveling production, recently at the Brooklyn Academy of Music. Buried up to her solar plexus in a mound of dirt, Winnie does her best to sustain a blithe, chattering monologue. But every so often she grows still and fretful, as the terror descends that the day will come when “words fail” and “there’s nothing left to say.”

Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard are directly descended from Beckett. Like him they consider the meaningless of a life that knows its own extinction, of being in the face of nothingness. They share this worldview with that other great successor to Beckett, Harold Pinter.

As the splendid new Broadway revival of “The Homecoming” makes clear, Mr. Pinter too is obsessed by the unreliability of language. It’s not so much what the fractious and possibly murderous family members of “The Homecoming” say — which is often impure invention — as the intentions that lurk beneath. Silence is the only form of honesty. And Mr. Pinter’s famous pauses are cut from the same dark cloth as the stillnesses that increasingly took over Beckett’s later plays.

Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard respond to the echoing silence by talking a purple streak. That doesn’t mean
that they don’t know that unfathomable quiet will always vanquish the sound and fury of speech, however impressively loud and polysyllabic.

It’s telling that in the debate-driven nine hours occupied by the trilogy “The Coast of Utopia,” the most endurably theatrical image summons the noiseless world of a deaf child, who can’t hear the philosophical arguments of his elders but can feel the thunder of change.

Similarly, while “A Delicate Balance,” Mr. Albee’s Pulitzer Prize-winning drama of 1966, has the structure and finesse of a drawing-room comedy, you’re always aware of the mortal chasm over which this artifice is built. Speech, elegant and striving for precision merely papers over the silence beneath, not so unlike the magpie monologues of Beckett’s Winnie.

Within this shadowy context, so profound as to be immeasurable, Mr. Albee and Mr. Stoppard use bright, impeccably assembled dialogue to illuminate the provisional structures of daily life. They see the cosmic joke within the limitations of language and revel in it in ways that remind us of how much the Absurdists have in common with music-hall comedians.

Mr. Stoppard has created unabashedly silly farces centered on characters hamstrung by speech impediments and spoon-erisms (“Rough Crossing,” “On the Razzle”), as well as dizzying homages to artistic ancestors like James Joyce, Tristan Tzara and Oscar Wilde, in “Travesties,” and A. E. Housman in “The Invention of Love.”

Mr. Albee regularly comes up with light-handed but heavy-hearted verbal vaudevilles that explore love and death with the rhythms of the Borscht Belt (“The Play About the Baby,” “Counting the Ways,” “Me, Myself & I”). But puns abound in his most serious works as well. Who else would include a running joke about cardinals (as in churchmen) versus cardinals (as in birds) in a play as ontologically dense as “Tiny Alice”?

Don’t think that these writers abandon their verbal self-consciousness when they turn to relatively naturalistic portraits of, say, marriage. The couples of Mr. Albee’s “Virginia Woolf” and “Delicate Balance”
and of Mr. Stoppard’s “Real Thing” and “Jumpers” are always squabbling about the meanings and uses of words. Whoever controls language has the upper hand, however conditional.

Not that these couples ever have much hope of completely connecting through language. In “Jumpers,” a dithery philosopher and his terminally neurotic wife reach their happiest peak of communication in a game of charades. And Mr. Albee’s “Homelife” — which received its New York premiere this season and is a companion piece to his first play, “Zoo Story” — begins with this exchange between a husband and wife:

ANN: We should talk. (Waits; no reply; turns, exits whence)

PETER: (After she goes — recognizing he had heard her) What? We should — what? (Louder) We should what?

ANN: (Offstage): What? (Reentering) We should what?

PETER: We should what?

The dialogue that follows is elegant, witty and highly literate. But those first four sentences are the X-ray of all that is subsequently spoken in “Homelife” and, for that matter, much of Mr. Albee’s work — and, I might venture, Mr. Stoppard’s.

The last scene of “Rock ’n’ Roll” finds a non-Czech-speaking Englishwoman (the superb Sinead Cusack) in Prague, unsure of whether the people around her understand her or not but ecstatic all the same. The play’s final lines address what is a basic human condition of Mr. Stoppard’s world with defiance and triumph: “I don’t care! I don’t care! I don’t care!”

And the working title for Mr. Albee’s next play? “Silence.”