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Samuel Beckett : Drama as philosophical endgame ?

Foreword

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Foreword

Philippe Birgy

- 1 Beckett studies have been enriched by a variety of criticism that relies on theoretical constructs or introduces abstract concepts to clarify its objects, explain their construction or validate interpretative hypotheses concerning their significance.
- 2 The purpose of this collection of articles is not to offer an exhaustive panorama or a radical assessment of such philosophical approaches, which, broadly speaking, also include all forms of *universals* that might be recognized in Beckett's plays, be they archetypal or psychoanalytical (psychoanalysis being understood as a form of applied philosophy of the mind or of the subject). Nonetheless, the reader will remark that most of the contributors to this collection either resort to a particular branch of philosophy to push forward their enquiry into Beckett's oeuvre, or react to them in an attempt to define a singularity of the stage and valorize the physicality of the dramatic experience. That is why the examinations of Beckett's work contained in this particular issue of *Miranda* range between the two poles of theatricality and conceptualization. The material and scenographic presence of the actors' bodies and the staged objects, as well as the tangible character of the voices, belong to the former, while the ideas that might possibly reveal or obscure the originality or otherness of Beckett's theater stand at the other extremity of the critical spectrum.
- 3 As one gets involved in a discursive practice on the theatre, one is necessarily caught between the elusiveness of symbolical language and the material dispositions of staging, which, according to some, overcome discursive and textual evidence. This friction certainly signals a certain limit of interpretation, but there is no way this border can be neatly drawn. There will unavoidably be some extra-linguistic event that must be recognized by the critic yet can hardly be so without the critic's relying on logical inferences and notional words. In short, it seems that he cannot do otherwise but touch upon philosophy, if ever so lightly.
- 4 If we are to believe Douglas McMillan and Marta Fehsenfeld,¹ Beckett's statements about the absence of a philosophical system *behind* his plays seem to preclude any recourse to a theoretical apparatus that would eventually explain them away.² But such a statement does only describe one of the inroads that the investigation of Beckett's

plays may take. Indeed, many commentators have made the case for some form of conscious influences bearing on Beckett. Consequently they have endeavored to trace back his works to their sources, using a form of genetic criticism, as the one chosen by Steven Bond and Lydie Parisse.

- 5 Some have argued the existence of universal logical laws that regulated the artistic production. Others still deemed that Beckett's plays were necessarily related to a context, either because certain ideas were historically relevant and contributed to the formation of Beckett's style, or because they were a response to a cultural "state of affairs" that affected them. Thus, the playwright's productions were inscribed in a history of ideas and mentalities. That is certainly why Beckett has been commonly associated with existentialism (as Victoria Swanson reminds us), or re-read within the historicist perspective of Adorno, on the grounds that his writings were contemporary with Beckett's.
- 6 Eventually Beckett's *oeuvre* has been related to a post-historical or post-modern paradigm which arguably decreed the impossible achievement of both historical relevance and philosophical universals.
- 7 Whether the theater is interpreted as a matter of affects and percepts situated beyond the limits of the thinkable (Deleuze, Adorno), as the experience of the failure of intended meaning, as a mode of approach of the subject, or as a metadramatic reflection on the categories of time, plot, characters, and the figuration of reality, all these critical voices, which insist that Beckett's plays resist coherent exposition, end up paradoxically grounding their own theories on such notions as the "unsayable" and the "irrepresentable".

1. Performance and subjective perception

- 8 Victoria Swanson considers the presentation and dramatization of bodies on stage in *Endgame*, *Happy Days*, and *Play*. She first lays the stress on the common historical situation in which thinkers and artists alike found themselves after the Second World War in France. Acknowledging the relationship between Beckett's theatre and the dilemmas of Sartre's existentialism, she posits a dialogue between their respective conceptions of subjectivity. Yet she also emphasizes other aspects of the plays which "anticipate" poststructuralism, the latter being understood as a reaction to the post-war intellectual climate in France. Swanson documents the hypothesis of an influence of Beckett upon Foucault. Indeed Beckett's work, insofar as it revolves around the issues of constriction and confinement of the body, shares some ground with the philosopher's. Conversely, Foucault proposes a model which applies particularly well to Beckett's exhibition on stage of "fragments of beings" whose subjectivity has no liberating function. Emphasizing both men's common preoccupations with corporeality, Swanson studies *Endgame* as a panoptic mechanism. Indeed the centrality of Hamm's position, Clov's constant scrutiny of the off-stage, his regulated actions under his master's supervision, as well as his self-inflicted punishments all become very significant when related in this manner to dramatic techniques. Yet Beckett parts way with Foucault when he exposes on stage a "bodily potential" that reaches beyond the passive corporeal confinement implemented by the panoptic structure of power.
- 9 "Why is there something instead of nothing on Beckett's stage?" Starting, half in jest, from the ontological question which provides the grounding of a first philosophy, Arka

Chattopadhyay proceeds to demonstrate that, although many commentators have dwelt on the notion of absence, the exhaustion or impoverishment of all the objects and subject matters of drama does not leave a void on the stage. The question of this material remainder is tackled with reference to Freud and Lacan. The notion of an unnamable and irrepresentable core of the Real from which the endless play of substitution originates is, according to the author, fundamentally related to Beckett's use of the stage and to his creation of objects which appear to be both inside and outside. Such conception resonates with Shimon Levy's discussion of the off-stage in the second part of this collection.

- 10 Tram Nguyen's article concentrates on the "visceral gusto" of the voice, even when it is disembodied and does not issue from any interiority but rather comes from the exteriority of the Other. She observes the restriction of the body's gestures in Beckett's plays and the dramatic strategies used to capture the audience's attention in spite of these self-imposed limits. Language "sustains the body", its "aural staging" contributes to a theatre that goes against "visual satisfaction". Taking into account Levinas' ethical reflections on the figure of otherness, she envisages Beckett's theater in terms of interaction with an audience, arguing that "the voice that speaks reveals to us the necessity of engaging with the Other".
- 11 Lea Sinoimeri equally engages with the question of the voice with reference to Beckett's use of technical media in the series of plays from *Krapp's Last Tape* to *Rockaby*. She interprets this move partly as a reaction to the development of the radio and recording industries: a technological and cultural situation which effectively disembodies human voices, alienating them from the physical site of subjectivity. Yet, according to Sinoimeri, this dissociation of the voice from the corporeal presence of the body is also the result of a purposeful "return to the psychoanalytical concept which had informed his works in the early thirties", accompanied by a shift of focus from the "schizophrenic" to the "schizophonic". From then on, Beckett increasingly explores the potential of recorded sounds and assigns new functions to auditory perceptions. Enhancing the grain of externalised sound thus becomes the object of his dramatic art. In the later plays, the recorded voice eventually materializes the texture of life on stage while the characters become listeners affected by its resonance. Furthermore, this shift affecting Beckett's conception of the stage has direct consequences on his choice of language and furthers a linguistic inquiry on the spectral and divided nature of the voice.

2. Ideas & Forms: philosophical palimpsests

- 12 Where do recurrent motifs come from? Can we still believe, as Yeats more than occasionally did, that they emanate from some reservoir of collective memory? Are they not rather fanciful patterns forced upon a text or a play at the risk of dismantling its integrity? Or do they just serve as a peg to organize our perceptions of the play? These questions seem as much addressed to the authors under study as they are to the critical readers that we intend to be. Steven Bond's hypothesis is firstly that of an influence: Beckett inherited through Joyce a concern with the possible significance of occult disciplines. Yet both authors were also keen to put a distance between themselves and esoteric practices of interpretation. For Beckett also picked up from Joyce a marked ambivalence towards abstract worldviews and ready-made theoretical

constructs. Bond proposes a close reading of the two authors that traces the possible sources of the initials “R. C.” used a simple motif in their texts. The article thus casts a light on the “covert Rosicrucianism at play in Joyce and in Beckett”. But that is far from being the end of this genetic line of argument. For both authors appears to be similarly indebted to Descartes, who figures in the text in the form of “covert references”, that is, of the same coded signature, “R. C.”. The father of rationalism consequently becomes associated to the practice of deciphering of a code to get access to some secret knowledge. As Bond shrewdly concludes: “Joyce and Beckett were likely invoking the blurred distinction between theosophical and philosophical matters which characterized the period of the late Renaissance”. This critical dilemma, or *coincidentia oppositorum*, is also at the heart of the following paper.

- 13 Lydie Parisse considers Beckett's theater deep motivation to be the unsettling of dualistic principles. The playwright thus works from and on abstractions, trying to stage an impossible conflation of opposites that would overcome the logical dichotomies structuring our thoughts. If, on the one hand, Beckett tries to reason out the nature of language, on the other hand, he also confronts its instability, and uses it against itself, forcing it to reveal its flaws and insufficiencies. Parisse summons Heraclitus and Berkeley to argue the case of a writerly and dramatic craft based on paradoxes, a method of madness used as a means to attain a visionary experience. “The site of speech resides on the stage”, that is, “in a space of practical experimentation where one can concretely experience the dimensions of the visible and the invisible”, where a “negative theology” is brought into play. This paradox also determines Parisse's approach: the unnamable is the limit of principled philosophy, yet it can itself be formulated as a principle, that of the “coincidence of opposites”, a philosophical theme [or motif] that irrupts in Beckett's play as a tangible presence.
- 14 Starting from the simple observation that language misses its point, Katy Masuga chooses to use Wittgenstein's philosophy of language to discuss Beckett's attempts at presenting the incompleteness of the verbal utterance through dramatic expression. She notes that, in spite of his negative assessment of the insufficiencies of language, Beckett persists in writing, playing linguistic games, testing and probing the limits of language, dismantling it and toying with “the possibility of a peculiar and even *entertaining* gap” in it. Masuga registers the consequences of this linguistic predicament on the practical aspects of the performance and its impact on the audience. Thus, she posits a “scène de l'écriture”, a “literal presence of the text”, of the arrangement of words and of its underlying logic—or lack of thereof. Something happens in Beckett's plays, as one would naturally expect in drama, but it happens to language. Consequently, the stage is of crucial importance to present the ambiguity of words in their relationship to the objects they can or cannot refer to. This, according to the author, explains how the performance of Beckett's plays can become “a matter of sound instead of sight” revealing the “paradoxical nature of existence within language, which can only be made evident by means of the very deliberate and visual absence of ordinary action and in the empty space of vigorous, active silence”.

3. Philosophical *endgame*?

- 15 Philippe Birgy proposes a close reading of Adorno's “Understanding *Endgame*”, an essay where Adorno precisely contests the possibility of such an understanding. Adorno is

commonly perceived as a very unprincipled philosopher yet the very coherent theses developed in his more theoretical books (*The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for instance) are implicit in his assessment of Beckett's play. This has led commentators to dismiss his argumentation as insufficiently based on the text of the play. Yet, contrary to that opinion, Birgy would rather call Adorno's essay a fair description that closely follows the variations of whatever is "following its course" on stage, down to the smallest utterances and gestures. It thus offers an account which is at one with Beckett's prescription that the actors should be, as Shimon Levy reminds us, a function in the representation of space bringing the attention of the audience to bear on it. The characters are run through by a series of contradictory affects and Adorno carefully attends to the variations of these states of existence. He shows Hamm and Clov to be hampered in their attempts at speaking or acting on principles by the recognition that they have no ground to base themselves on, no unquestionable reason or logical deductions to suggest any proper course to follow.

- 16 Shimon Levy, who is not only a scholar but also a stage director and a playwright, insists that Beckett's theater is less receptive to philosophy than his prose and proposes to start from the experience of the stage if one wants to elaborate critical concepts that may, if not explain away Beckett's play, at least capture the dramatic situation they consist in, thereby ruling out any pre-conceptions that most philosophical systems impose upon the object of their investigation. To do so, he concentrates on Beckett's first play, *Eleutheria*, and the situation of theatrical communication that it defines, involving the author, the medium and the public. He stresses the determining function of the off-stage as a means to signal the irrepresentable and "grasp essences that are neither physical nor [...] mental". Shimon Levy also posits the presence of Beckett in his characters, and the difficulty in "putting one's soul" into the part. He argues the case for metatheatricality, the presentation of the author's creative life and freedom in the very fabric of the performance.

NOTES

1. McMillan, Douglas and Marta Fehsenfeld. *Beckett in the Theatre: the Author as Practical Playwright and Director*. London: John Calder, 1988. 12.
2. As we shall see, the possibility of saying anything rational or even reasonable about the play (or for that matter about any work of art) is precisely what preoccupies Adorno.

INDEX

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