

Words and Theatre: What Brings Absurdity Home in Beckett's Plays

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Abstract

Maurice Blanchot, a novelist, philosopher and critic from France gives the concept of the fall of art. He says that whenever an old form of art dies, a new form is born. An escape from the past or tradition, therefore, should be quite acceptable. In fact his comment on Beckett's works is as vague as the works themselves. He claims that Beckett's plays are an epitome of his idea of the existence of human kind as well as literature. The radicalism of his works is to show the gradual decay and later disappearance of the format itself, perhaps, in order to give way to a new one.

Key Words: Beckett, Tradition, Art, Play, Audience, Criticism

The reaction on watching Beckett's plays for the first time would have, no doubt, puzzled the audience's minds as the plays were first produced on the stage and published in book forms thereafter. A record bunch of criticism was heaped upon the author, the actors, directors and producers alike. An outright rejection in the name of tradition and format and the blame of writing nonsense for narrative was the reason given. But, as claims Martin Esslin, those critics and viewers were perhaps obsessed with the then criteria and measures of a proper stage play only and didn't think of analysing in a broader arena. They failed to take the tradition in a broader concern. Otherwise they could surely find relativity of Beckett's absurdity with some past practices. "It is only because", says Esslin, "habit and fossilized convention have so narrowed the public's expectation as to what constitutes theatre proper that attempts to widen its range meet with angry protests from those who have come to see a certain closely defined kind of entertainment and who lack the

spontaneity of mind to let a slightly different approach make its impact on them."¹

The widening of range is an essential for the development of any form of art. That is what adds to its glorious history day by day, moment by moment. But the habit of sorting things under the pre-existing categories hampers this development. Maurice Blanchot, a novelist, philosopher and critic from France gives the concept of the *fall of art*. He says that whenever an old form of art dies, a new form is born. An escape from the past or *tradition*, therefore, should be quite acceptable. In fact his comment on Beckett's works is as vague as the works themselves. He claims that Beckett's plays are an epitome of his idea of the existence of human kind as well as literature. The radicalism of his works is to show the gradual decay and later disappearance of the format itself, perhaps, in order to give way to a new one.

But if a new creed happens to be a deviation from the old one, at the same times it is surely inspired by its predecessor to some extent. Somehow the

traces trail back to some point back in the old tradition and history. For a wide reader like Beckett, it is not impossible to connect with the tradition as he comes up with so many allusions from whatever he studied. Considering it, Martin Esslin, the author of *The Theatre of the Absurd*, correlates even the seemingly novelty of the absurdist element with the past, the past of the theatre.

If we talk about theme, Martin Heidegger's theories of *Dasein* (to be there) and *Geworfenheit* (thrownness) in *Being and Time* (1927) discuss that man is thrown into a particular time, place and action he cannot choose. But yes, what he does and how he reacts at that situation projects his future. This theme has been dominant in great epics and ancient Greek tragedies like that of Sophocles, Euripides, of English playwrights like Marlowe and Shakespeare to some modern age novelist like Thomas Hardy, Charles Dickens and many more. It was Beckett's technique that presented this theme in a whole new avatar, almost unprecedented for theatre. The reason of using the word 'almost' is given below.

The music hall cross-talk technique used earlier in comic plays with two or more characters where they converse in the manner of rapid fire has been the key of two major plays of Beckett, namely, *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Short sentences, quick query and response occur there to arouse laughter and spontaneity.

VLADIMIR: Oh, it's not the worst, I know

ESTRAGON: What?

VLADIMIR: To have thought.

ESTRAGON: Obviously.

VLADIMIR: But we could have done without it.

*ESTRAGON: Que voulez-vous?*²

The only difference is that in music hall this cross-talk was meant for comic purpose and here in Beckett, it has been engineered for keeping the narrative intact. Hermann Reich, the historian calls the use of *hallucinari* as the comic as well as sarcastic element in theatre. Here, by *hallucinari* he means 'talking at random, talking nonsense' and also 'dreaming, to talk and think strange things'.³ Estragon always sleeps and dreams that he is beaten by *them* (whom?). In Beckett's plays (and novels too) this turns out as talking and doing nonsense or sometimes only doing trifles and not speaking a word. The mouth in *Not I* and Winnie in *Happy Days* babble continuously while *Breath* has not a single dialogue. The tradition of mime plays was not new at all. Krapp (*Krapp's Last Tape*) appears to be silent on stage but his recorded voice is to be heard by all. This type of conversation and act contains a deep and vague meaning within.

Further, Esslin impresses that only language and dialogues cannot comprise a theatre. Sometimes the visuals work more than speech. The *pure* dramatic element happens to be the performance. He is absolutely correct here. If we go to the era of mystery and miracle plays, we find that the visualization of miracles, supernatural things (dragons, gods, angels, and monsters) on stage was what amused the viewers. These plays used to provide the true drama, presentation of something that is unbelievable, amusing is what is called *absurd*. This absurdity, therefore, was there in the theatre since the ancient times. This absurdist element in Beckett adds disgust and horror along with amusement. The dried out earth, paralysed people, light and dark play with the audience's minds more than the written words. In old times,

this technique was used to target the simple, common masses that were not so witty and needed the aid of the visuals. While Beckett's turns it as a weapon to try the wit of his audience and leaves them to make sense out of what they see. The look-alikes in *Ohio Impromptu*, the ghost like May in *Footfalls*, the sand-bound Winnie in *Happy Days* keep the onlookers stuck to their seats and baffled within.

Ian Mackean in his essay *The Function of Comedy in the Plays of Samuel Beckett* strives to establish a partial similarity between the buffoonery in the Comedy of manners and the foolish appearance of the characters in Beckett plays. He says that in both the genres the characters are making fools of themselves, doing senseless things. But while the comedy of manners was meant for criticising the social mannerism in a lighter mood, Beckett disguises the bleakness of life behind them. Also, Comedy of Manners deals with things and people that look real to the minutest observer. Beckett, on the other hand, shows individuals who are hard to believe to have existed ever. He just amalgamates his theme and style in such a manner that a third level is born where the two become inseparable.

Leslie Hill in his essay *Poststructuralist Readings of Beckett*, takes Badiou's pinion into consideration. Alain Badiou (January 17, 1937) is a French philosopher, formerly chair of Philosophy at the École normale supérieure (the same University where Beckett had been a faculty member for a long time) and founder of the faculty of Philosophy of the Université de Paris VIII with Gilles Deleuze, Michel Foucault and Jean-François Lyotard. According to Badiou, Beckett is not in the support of any Flexible aid to describe life in terms of, such as emotions, relationships,

society, race or anything. These things further add ambiguity to the concept of human life. He (Beckett) gives the core material to the bare eyes, the basic that is the universal essence of life, i.e. *death*. He feels like ripping words off the theme and show what he exactly wants to as words are just not enough for him. Badiou says, "If Plato the philosopher, in *The Sophist*, determines the general conditions of all thought, Beckett the writer, by the ascetic movement of his prose, aims to present in fiction the intemporal determinants of humanity."⁴

We can find a connection somewhere deep down between Badiou's post-structuralistic explanation and Esslin's concept of 'pure' drama. He too, like, Esslin, is of the thought that Beckett doesn't need words to create the dramatic effect. "Theatre is always more than mere language."⁵ The only difference between these two critics is that one of them finds the traces of Beckett's modernism in age-old tradition and the other (Badiou) sees him in the light of a post-modern creed.

Leslie Hill analyses the post-structuralist effects on the critics of Beckett. The post-structuralist school evolved against the structuralist one. Structuralism established that to have an understanding of the world, something like language (that could play the mediator or medium) is needed to connect the ideas of reality with reality itself. But the objection is aroused because of the obsession with language that structuralism shows. It claims that language is self-sufficient for that purpose while post-structuralism disputes over the variety of meaning and usage of language and literature that can create confusion. Hence, a certain mediumistic construct defining a certain reality becomes nearly impossible.

Basically, the scepticism that the post-structuralists show over the so-called supremacy of language is displayed by Beckett. Language has the most flexible properties. And, at the same time it fails to give the desired results more often. Beckett already establishes the influence of music overpowering that of words in *Words and Music*, a short play. In this play, the *master* (Croak) provides his *slaves* Bob (music) and Joe (words) with terms like Love, Age and asks them to explain them. We find Joe babbling and stammering and irritating his master. While Bob plays tunes of the given themes and the master feels it to the core.

CROAK: Love. [Pause. Thump of club on ground.] Love!

WORDS: [Orotund.] Love is of all the passions the most powerful passion and indeed no passion is more powerful than the passion of love...⁶

Again,

CROAK: Age! [Pause.]

WORDS: [Faltering.] age is...age is when...old age I mean...if that is what my lord means...is when...⁷

Also, when the master asks them to join each-other the result is a mess that disappoints him.

That could be the reason, perhaps, behind Beckett using less and less dialogues and more and more emphasis on performance and visuals in the long run. It is the visuals that make the audience think and rethink of what to extract out of the plays. Otherwise, the narrative is more often repeated, distorted, ambiguous and entangled. The famous quote from his *Three Dialogues* has been repeatedly referred to in this context, "The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express." He never explained his ways nor provided any hints so that his words would not mar the intensity of the expression his viewers would experience by themselves.

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