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BECKETT AND MODERNISM;

BY

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## 1. BECKETT AND MODERNISM

### INTRODUCTION

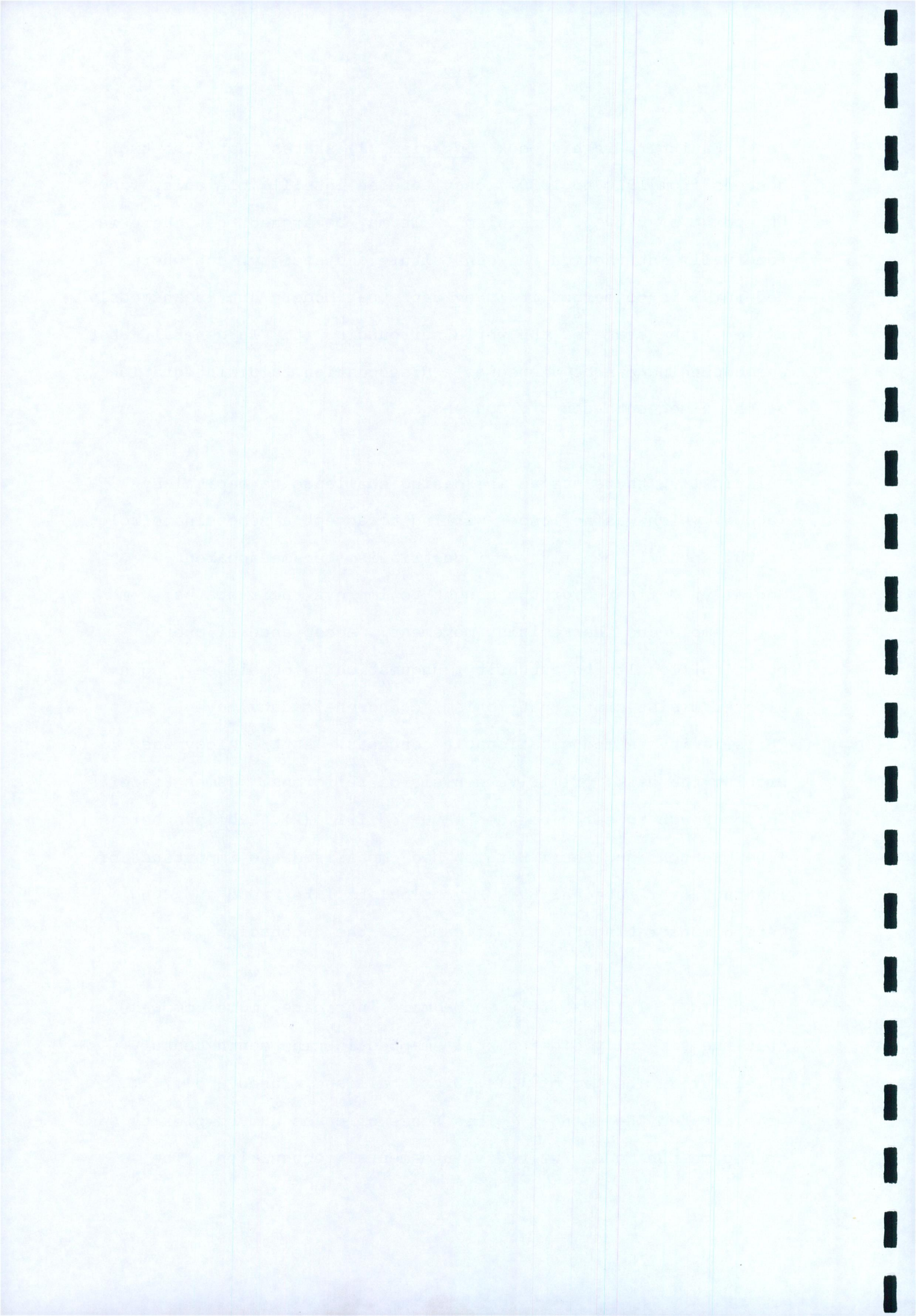
Modernism is part of the historical process by which the arts have dissociated themselves from nineteenth century assumptions, which had come, in the course of time to seem like dead conventions. The modern novel may be seen as the antithesis to the Nineteenth century novel. The nineteenth century novel is characterised by optimism, clarity of theme, confidence, carefully structured plot and the triumph of good over evil, all carefully orchestrated by the omniscient narrator. However, events in the late nineteenth century: the industrial revolution and urbanisation, the advent of the philosophy of Nihilism, and the theories of Freud and Darwin have shattered man's confidence in himself, his intellect and his surrounds. Modern man lives in a world without foundations where nothing seems certain and nothing seems sacred.

The assumptions about literary forms were related to a certain relationship between the writer and his/her readers. The writer assumed a foundation, a collection of attitudes, a shared reality. The most obvious example of this is in the 'realism' of the nineteenth century novel, in which the writers assumed that they and their readers shared a common reality. Conflicting ideas about art and culture are characteristic of the end of the nineteenth century and this suggests the collapse of prominent assumptions, artistic and social.

Peter Faulkner, in his book Modernism (1) states that 'the two decades from 1910 to 1930, constitute an intelligible unity from the point of view of Modernism'. It may be argued that there is some valid interaction between culture and society, but where Modernism is concerned it is evident that Modern art is anxiously aware of the state of the world surrounding it. In general, what was happening can be viewed as a dissociation, a disintegration of the nineteenth century consensus.

Politically, there was an increasing challenge to capital by labour, which was no longer willing to accept a subordinate role as the economic benefits of industrialism became apparent. Socially, dominated groups sought to improve their status; women, for example and the Feminist movement. Acceptance of one's position, loyalty to authority, unquestioning obedience, began also to disintegrate, patriotism, doing one's duty, even Christianity seemed questionable concepts. Anthropology was probing the dark, primitive genesis of religions. James Frazer's Golden Bough appeared between 1890 and 1915 (2). Philosophers like Nietzsche and Henri Bergson had emphasised the importance of instinct over rationality. Psychologists like Freud and Jung were demonstrating the significance of the unconscious.

The world of 1910 was felt to be more intricate, more complex than the carefully ordered world mapped in nineteenth century literature. The War of 1914-18 crystallised, fused and precipitated the changes. This sense of chaos and complexity was to become the Modern writer's fundamental recognition. The





challenge was to create new forms of art which could express the bewildering chaos of the mutating world. These new forms were created in all the arts of that period, by Picasso, Proust, Eliot, Pound, Woolf, Joyce, Yeats and Stravinsky. The common thread between all these innovators is in the fact that the old order was directly challenged and attacked. Traditional reliance on the author's personal feelings or experiences no longer seemed relevant as a base for fiction.

Terry Eagleton in The Significance of Theory (3) uncovers the paradox that Modern artists must tackle:

Modernism is art forced into mute self-contradiction and the source of this impasse lies in art's contradictory material status within Burgeois society.

(Eagleton, Significance of Theory P.48)

Eagleton reiterates the thinking of Theodor Adorno, the German Jew who felt that in the shadow of such atrocities as Auschwitz that no positive metaphysical meaning was any longer sufficiently substantial. With this disintegration of meaning upon which the structure of the aesthetic order was built, the coherence of art is destroyed and this, according to Adorno was evident in the general decay of all art forms of the time. Modern art seems to come from the opposite premise, it was no longer possible to accept the palatable lies of art forms still based on the continuation of standards and concepts that had lost all validity.



In the wake of events which even the survivors cannot survive, mankind vegetates, crawling forward on a pile of rubble, denied even the awareness of its own ruin.

(Adorno, Towards an Understanding of Endgame, Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame 1969 P. 85).

One might say that for Adorno history seemed vague and almost irrelevant after Auschwitz, merely a frozen zone in the aftermath in which time moves languorously, inexorably on, a grey miasma even though humanity is long dead. For Adorno there can only be the mystery that one is still, by some cruel oversight, alive. The image of humanity under this dolour is mutated and emaciated into the poor forked shades of Beckettian humanity. The structure of art depends not upon whether it manages to skirt this antinomy, but rather on the fashion in which it articulates it. (4) Art in Adorno's mind seemed inevitably forged from the bleak social surrounds. Eagleton equates Adorno with Beckett in their contract with failure. An artistic void for both which is the product of the bleak social condition, can, by some strange logic, figure as a creative solution.

REFERENCES

- (1) Peter Faulkner, Modernism, Methuen & Co. 1977.
- (2) Sir James Frazer (1954-1941) Published this great work of anthropology between 1890 and 1915, Eliot refers to it in his poem Wasteland.
- (3) Terry Eagleton, The Significance of Theory, P. 48.
- (4) Theodor Adorno, Towards an Understanding of Endgame, Twentieth Century Interpretations of Endgame P. 90.

CHAPTER 1

MODERNISM AND DRAMA

It is in poetry and the novel that Modernism can first be most clearly discerned; developments in drama seemed to follow a different course. The influence of G.B. Shaw certainly moved drama away from some nineteenth Century conventions, but his methods were consistent with a rationalist philosophy. The more experimental and practical innovations of the later Ibsen and of Strindberg and Pirandello, had little influence on English writers. Brecht's epic theatre where technology and other dramatic forms such as opera were fused with a strong political emphasis, was not accepted until the 1930s. Brecht's insistence on what he termed the "Alienation Effect" in order to force the audience into judgmental participation rather than identification paralleled the Modernist rejection of simple response but was more definite in intention. The post-1915 neo-realism of Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller in America and later in Osborne, Wesker and Shelagh Delaney in England tended towards the direct representation of social experience rather than the complexities of Modernism. Only with the plays of Luigi Pirandello, Samuel Beckett, and Eugene Ionesco followed by Harold Pinter in England did drama take on a form essentially Modernist. From the dates of these developments and their corresponding dates in the other arts it may be argued that drama has a less significant paleo - Modernist phase and a more significant neo-Modernist one.

Modernism achieved its major innovations by 1930, by which time, it had come to be accepted by those who took the arts seriously as having produced great works, even if the cost was to seriously

distance art from many people. One exception was the Marxist Georg Lukacs who was dissatisfied with Modernism, attacking it in The Ideology of Modernism in 1955 (1). It is mainly the subjectivism which Lukacs sees in Modernist art which appalls him in the works of Beckett, Joyce, Kafka and Eliot.

Kafkas' artistic ingenuity is really directed towards substituting his angst-ridden vision of the world for objective reality... A similar attenuation of reality underlies Joyce's stream of consciousness. Man is reduced to a sequence of unrelated fragments; he is inexplicable to others as to himself.

(Georg Lukacs, The Ideology of Modernism P. 26) (2)

Lukacs argues that Modernism shares with Naturalism a basically static approach to reality. The approach which Lukacs advocates shows the dialectical nature of human history, is Realism, the method brought into twentieth century literature by Thomas Mann, Gorky and O'Neill. This method, he argues fuses the particular and the general, whereas Modernism only offers the particular. For Lukacs this grimly meant: 'not the enrichment, but the negation of Art' (3).

Joyce in 'A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man offers a view of the Modern artist which may be a model for Modernists:

The artist like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent-paring his fingernails.

(James Joyce. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man). (4)

It may be argued that the function of art is not to make a statement but to generate an imaginative response and the spectator receives not an answer but an experience. Drama, like the other arts, gives expression to that subtle and elusive life of feeling that defies logical definition. By "feeling" is to be understood, physical sensations, emotions and even what it feels like to think. This flux of sensibility as a mode of reception and response cannot be tied down by logical discourse, but can find expression in what Clive Bell in discussing visual art called 'significant form'. (5)

Suzanne Langer in her book, Feeling and Form (6), has developed Bell's concepts arguing that all artistic form is an indirect expression of feeling. The artist creates an image, a form that gives shape to his/her feeling, and it is for the sensitive recipient to interpret its significance; 'Imagination always creates; it never records'. (7) The especial province of drama, as was pointed out by Aristotle, is to create an image, an illusion of action. Both Tragedy and Comedy depict such action and the conflict which it entails.

Drama is an especially complicated art, in that part of its material being words, it may also involve discussion of ideas. This discussion, however, should not be mistaken for a statement of the author's convictions. In a good play it is an expression of character's feeling about ideas, a very different thing. Another enquiry concerns the appropriateness of the form in which feeling is conveyed. Many consider Beckett's Waiting for Godot



to convey the same mood implicit in King Lear, and that each play is an image of man, disillusioned, adrift, assailed by despair in an alien abode. Having said that, the plays could hardly be more different: King Lear is a Renaissance verse tragedy of the fall of kings, with subtle presentation of character development and contrast, and with a coherent plot skilfully developed through arresting action up to the tragic climax. Godot is a prose play about an abortive encounter, almost devoid of individual characterisation and story, with a static circular structure and an ending as ambiguous and inconclusive as its beginning. Perhaps it is the critic's task to be a flexible interpreter of the artist's purposes. Most difficult to estimate are plays like Lear or Godot which express a mood of despair. Perhaps endurance is affirmed, Lear begs forgiveness and the tramps still go on. A facile optimism may be a betrayal. It is never easy to identify causes of artistic renewal but one reason was that young artists like Wesker and Delaney introduced a new vigour into the jaded realistic mode by using it to express the vital stresses of the working people they knew. Hence the settings in squalid flats and dingy basements and attics. More far reaching was the general awareness among avant-garde playwrights that verbalism was not adequate, and also their readiness to experiment with the form of theatre. Here the way had been shown by scholarly research into the history of drama, which gave dramatists the confidence to revive valid theatrical techniques such as song, music and clowning that the early twentieth century saw banished to the music halls.

The most vital stimulus was the challenge of genius. Brecht's Epic theatre offered a more free and fluid form than that of the solid 'Well-made' play and his novel use of traditional theatrical devices: song, masks, extravagant settings, direct address to the audience. These approaches were quickly adapted by Arden, Bolt and Osborne (8). Meanwhile Eugene Ionesco (9) introduced monsters like the rhinoceros and used devices of absence like unfilled chairs to satirize man's frightened and empty existence. Another pervasive and growing influence was that of Antonin Artaud's demand for a 'theatre of Cruelty' (10). This is the most rudimentary and atavistic theatre form, for it attempts to recreate in modern terms essentially primitive, even barbaric rituals from which drama evolved.

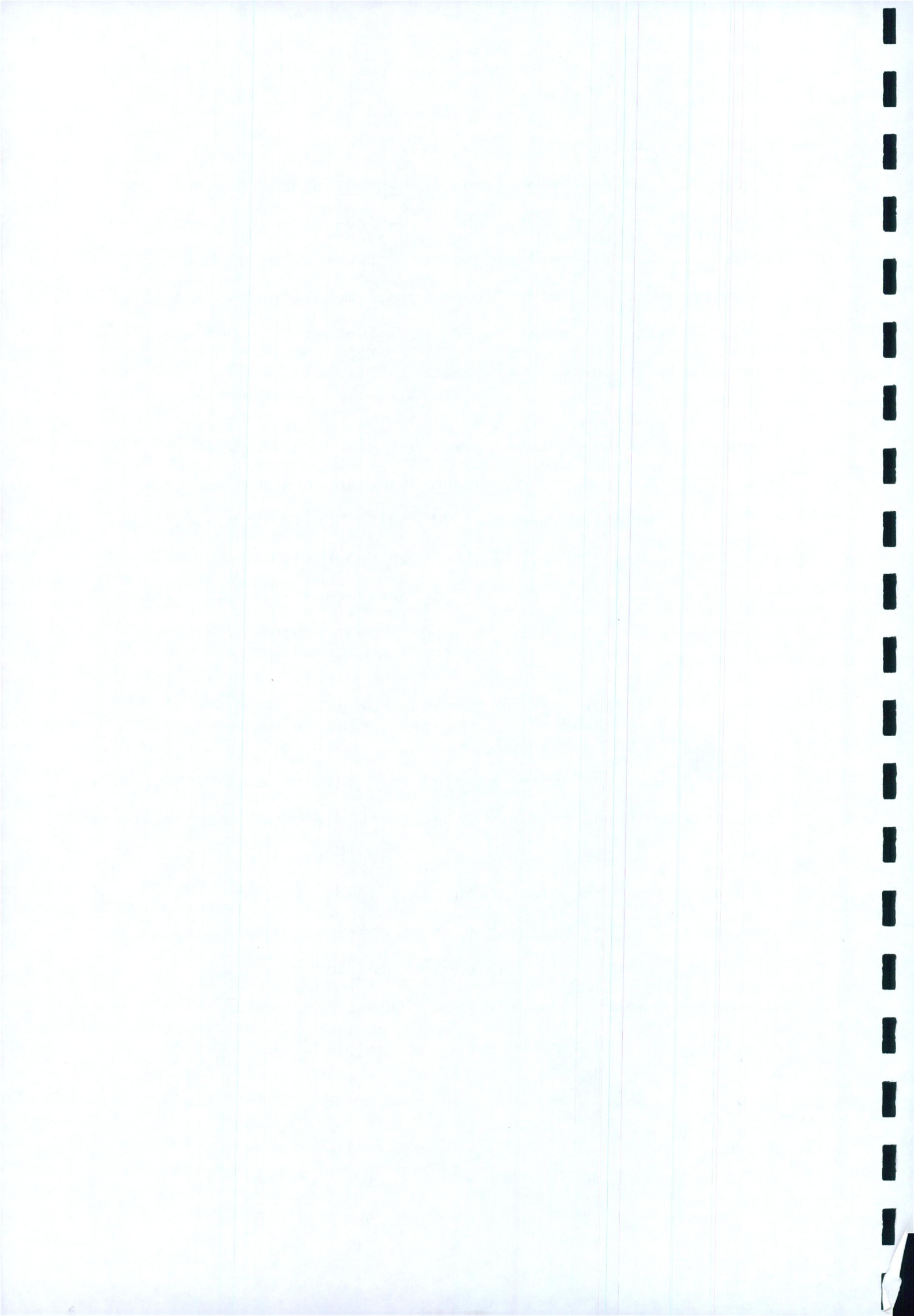
Another recent Modernist dramatic trend has been the fresh and topical approach to Shakespeare. Some producers have traced in his plays the bleak disenchantment of Post-War Europe. In 1963 Peter Brook (11) had said that his production of King Lear with Paul Scofield (12) as protagonist owed much to the Polish critic Jan Kott (13), whose book Shakespeare, our Contemporary was published the following year. Kott, who lived through the Nazi tyranny and the Stalinist occupation of Poland argues that the power-politics chicanery and violence of twentieth century Europe have their counterparts in the Wars of the Roses and the Tudor disturbances. He finds in Shakespeare's Histories and Tragedies especially Macbeth, what he terms the 'Grand Mechanism' of History, the bloodstained struggle for power with its horrible consequences and he claims that Shakespeare 'condemns war by

showing up the feudal butchery' (14). At Stratford and the Aldwych in 1965, the production of Henry V neglected the traditional royal splendour and showed the King, battle-scarred, leading a tattered army, plagued by corrupt camp-followers. Played on a bare and gaunt stage, grey, metallic and cavernous, it was strikingly similar to Brecht's "Mother Courage" which ran concurrently at the Old Vic theatre.

Submerged in Shakespeare's plays, not given full representation because the noisy Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres were not designed for exposing such inward, quiet battles; but revealed when taught, by Beckett and other contemporaries, a more searching analysis can be made of Shakespeare's texts. 'The Rest is Silence', says Hamlet. Richard II had recognised -

Nor I, nor any man that but man is,  
With nothing will be pleased, till he be eased  
With being nothing.

The Peter Brook production of King Lear was inspired by Beckett (15). While it may be argued that Brook distorted Shakespeare by relentlessly bludgeoning him into a Beckettian shape, the instinct behind that distortion was probably correct. Shakespeare can be interpreted, in a somewhat narrow reading, as occupying a similar space as Beckett in that they posit vulnerable people amid a world of chaos, cries and stones, questioning and puzzled people on a bare landscape.



THE THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

The concept of the 'Absurd' was first formulated by Albert Camus (16) to indicate the discrepancy between human reason and aspiration and an indifferent or even hostile universe. However like Jean Paul Sartre he expressed his convictions through the formal, conventional dramatic tradition:

that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical and transcendent roots, man is lost, all his actions become useless, senseless. (17)

It is readily observed that not every playwright of the Absurd is an Existentialist thinker like Camus or Sartre and many are seen to be more concerned with an irrational human society than with the universe. What they seem to have in common is a shared attitude towards technique. All have discarded traditional realism and express absurdity through images that are themselves absurd, including bizarre situations and objects both sad and comic, such as aged parents consigned to live in ashbins (18). Martin Esslin in Theatre of the Absurd (19) states that the Absurd can be seen as the reflection of what seems to be the attitude most genuinely representative of our time. Their work is seen to sensitively mirror the preoccupations and anxieties of the contemporary world.

There is also observed in the Absurd a certain element of Surrealism, and Muriel Bradbrook has suggested another term for the Absurd, a 'Theatre of Dream'. She states, it is the

unconscious dream mind that juxtaposes objects and incidents that in the waking state have no connection like, for instance a rhino in a provincial street. Harold Pinter (20) seems to have an intuitive awareness of the hinterland of dream. Frisch (21) has ably demonstrated that the Absurd can be an effective vehicle for satire and many Absurdist writers such as Ionesco and Simpson have satirized the modern prostitution of language corrupted by salesmen and politicians, and have used conversation of vapid emptiness to reveal its breakdown as a means of communication. It is partly because of their distrust of language that they have had recourse to ludicrous objects and images and have extended the parameters which had until then defined the acceptable limits of theatre.

'Brecht is the key figure of our time, and all theatre work today at some point starts or returns to his statements and achievement'. (22)

Peter Brook acknowledges the importance and significance of the drama of Bertold Brecht, the first major dissociation from traditional forms in drama. The most permanent features of Brecht's mature drama are Epic form and the 'Verfremdung' or 'Alienation effect' both developed in reaction to the traditional dramatic form, which was dubbed 'Aristotelian'. He considered that the closely constructed Aristotelian play which encourages the audience's emotional participation in the action siphons off the spectator's emotion, leaving one a passive and acquiescent member of society.

According to Brecht the drama should not be ritual but debate. The spectator would be, in theory, a detached observer, calmly investigating the views of the world that confront her/him, rationally considering arguments and stimulated to decisive social action. For Brecht, a necessary theatre could never, for one moment, take its sights off the society it was serving. Brecht therefore developed his 'Epic Theatre', loosely constructed with a sequence of individual scenes which function as independent dramatic illustrations or quotations to the narrative. 'Epic Theatre' advances by fits and starts like the images on a film strip. He used a variety of techniques to establish the narrative tone, such as an actual story-teller on stage, explanatory verses relayed before the scenes and banner headlines which foretell the events to be portrayed. By throwing the action thus into the past tense, he discards the lure of suspense, his dramatic intelligence, vigour and inventions excite lively interest and a sense of curiosity. (23)

To dissociate the traditional identity of the spectator with the action Brecht developed his 'Alienation Effect', devising techniques to keep the spectator at a critical distance. This implies using an image that suddenly makes the familiar seem strange and novel to the onlooker, so that he is shocked into recognising its significance. Distances were created which were detrimental to illusion among the audience. These distances were meant to make the audience adopt a critical attitude, to make it think. His productions were non-realistic and theatrical, using direct address to the audience, formalised settings, masks and

stylised make-up, which were sometimes grotesque. His texts were freely adapted during rehearsal, so that an acquaintance with the pattern of Brecht's mime and gesticulation is often necessary to the full experience of his plays.

Useless information absorbs our attention at the expense of something more important. Brecht takes this rigour and applies it not only to scenery but to the work of the actor and attitude of the audience. If he cut out superfluous emotion and the development of characteristics and feelings that related only to the characters it was because the clarity of his theme was threatened. Epic Theatre cast doubts upon the concept that theatre for entertainment stole its basic function within the capitalist system and also threatened the privileges of the critics by adopting various divergent theatrical techniques and breaking away from theatrical rigour. The selection process Brecht employed anticipates Beckett's own severe selection and paring away of substance that he used in his drama. (24)

'Shakespeare is a model of the theatre', explains Peter Brook, 'that contains Brecht and Beckett, but goes beyond both. Our need in the post-Brecht Theatre is to find a way forward back to Shakespeare. In Shakespeare the introspection and metaphysics soften nothing,... It is because the contradictions are so strong that they burn us so deeply.' (25)

Brook also argues that the minimal scenery and absence of realism in the mise-en-scene of Elizabethan theatre was one of its greatest freedoms.



If we identify with the main character in a play we automatically accept their point of view, seeing the world with their eyes. From the standpoint of a didactic Socialist theatre, Brecht argued that this traditional psychological link between actor and audience must be broken. An audience, one may conclude, is unable to see the actions of the characters in a play critically if they are made to adopt their points of view. Correspondingly the 'Theatre of the Absurd' is seen to transcend the categories of Tragedy and Comedy and combines a confusion of laughter and horror. The theatre of the Absurd by its very nature cannot provoke the thoughtful attitude of detached social criticism which was Brecht's objective. The Absurdists present the audience with scenes from a distasteful abode and a world that seems to have lost its unifying principle, its meaning and its purpose; in other words, they present an absurdity.

REFERENCES CHAPTER 1

- (1) G. Lukacs, The Ideology of Modernism in The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (1963) p. 26.
- (2) ibid
- (3) ibid
- (4) James Joyce. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, quoted in A Modernist Reader (1986) p. 57.
- (5) Quoted in Suzanne Langer's book Feeling and Form (1953) p. 300.
- (6) ibid p. 299-301
- (7) ibid p. 296
- (8) John Osborne b. 1929, English playwright, neo-Realist, In Look Back in Anger 1956 he shows considerable theatrical talent, torrential eloquence and the journalist's flair for seeing the mood of his generation.
- (9) Eugene Ionesco b. 1912, One of the Leading Parisian Playwrights of the Absurd, differs from Camus and Sartre in that he expresses his convictions of life's absurdity, not rationally, but through images that are in themselves absurd. Plays: The Chairs 1951, The Bald Prima Donna, 1948, Rhinoceros, 1958.
- (10) Antonin Artaud: In 1938 Artaud published The Theatre and its Double, a collection of essays detailing an experimental form of theatre, which forms the theoretical basis of the Theatre of Cruelty, his central purpose being a ritual of 'cruelty' to exorcise fantasies. Artaud envisioned a total theatre appealing to the essential human, primarily visual, anti-textural, using music, dance, plastic art, mimicry, gesticulations, scenery and lighting to induce a state of trance.
- (11) Peter Brook: b. 1925, English director who, using the theories of Artaud and practices of Brecht and Beckett, directed many interesting reinterpretations of Shakespeare's Plays. His A Midsummer Nights' Dream saw the use of acrobatic techniques like trapezes and characters who had more than one role. He worked closely with the Royal Shakespeare Company and U.S., a collaboration between director, actors, designers, musicians and writers in an attempt to confront the Vietnam War.
- (12) Paul Schofield: Director who worked closely with the Royal Shakespeare Company in the 1960s, directing many experimental plays by Beckett, Irvings, Pinter, Saunders and Whiting between 1960 and 1965 at the Aldwych.
- (13) Jan Kott, Shakespeare, Our Contemporary, Quoted in Pear's Encyclopaedia, section on Contemporary Theatre.
- (14) ibid
- (15) Production of King Lear by Peter Brook referred to in Beckett at 80, p. 61.

- (16) Albert Camus (1913- 60). It was this French Existentialist who first formulated the concept of the Absurd, describing it as whatever in human experience is incompatible with man's desire for Reason, Justice, Happiness and Purpose.
- (17) Eugene Ionesco; Quoted in The Politics of Magic, The Work and Times of Tom Murphy, Fintan O'Toole, Raven Arts Press, Dublin, 1987 p. 145.
- (18) Reference to Endgame by Samuel Beckett in which the parents of Hamm are consigned to reside inside industrial ash-bins.
- (19) Martin Esslin, The Theatre of the Absurd, 1961, pp. 22-23.
- (20) Harold Pinter: b. 1930, formerly an actor, is now considered one of the leading playwrights of the Absurd. He exerts an almost hypnotic power over his audience, for he has an assured theatrical expertise, an uncanny sense of the novel situation and the telling pause; and as his plays find resolution in some final surprise, they are aesthetically satisfying. Plays: The Dumb Waiter 1957, The Birthday Party 1958, The Caretaker 1960.
- (21) Max Frisch b. 1911 - German - Swiss who has been influenced by Shaw and Brecht, dramatises current issues in ingenious, apt and witty parables that have a lucid economy of outline. Plays: The Fire Raisers 1961, Andorra 1964.
- (22) Peter Brook The Empty Space Penguin. 1968 - pp. 80-90. Quote p. 80.
- (23) Walter Benjamin, Understanding Brecht, 1966 p. 21.
- (24) *ibid* p. 9.
- (25) Peter Brook, The Empty Space, p. 80.

CHAPTER 2

BECKETT AND MODERNISM

I'm working with impotence, ignorance. My little exploration is that zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable-as something by definition incompatible with art.

(Samuel Beckett, interview with Israel Shenker N.Y. Times 1956).

This is Samuel Beckett's own description of his entire canon of work; poetry, novels, plays for stage, television and film, in a move beyond literary nationalism, with two countries and two languages claiming him. Most of his work has been written in French and then translated into English by himself and those early works and late works for stage written originally in English were translated back into French. He expresses an enormous knowledge of languages, literature and philosophy by means of quotation, allusion and puns, originally sophomoric but residual in the later works. Joyce's concern with language is perhaps more central to his work, where in all his work there is a constant paring down, a minimalizing of syntax and content, until the later stories emerge as austere crafted articulations of despair reflecting his struggles with the central paradox: the inadequacy of language to express what must be said. He also displays a Kafkaesque precision as he details an incomprehensible world impinging on his protagonists who move in ever vaguer locations as their inner chaos increases. A grimly humorous voice speaks in either the first or third person and focuses on memories, isolated acts and objects, sensations, cogitations and language itself.

Opinions are a rarity in the works of Beckett and when made are immediately negated, erased, laughed at. His physical and psychologically grotesque characters, vague even about their own flickering existence gaze out among the ruins in a mixture of bafflement and disgust, grinning darkly to themselves.

There's going to be a departure. I'll be there, I won't miss it, it won't be me, I'll be here, I'll say I'm far from here, it won't be me, I won't say anything, there's going to be a story someone's going to try and tell a story.

(Beckett, Texts for Nothing Collected Shorter Prose, p. 78). (1)

Where now? Who now? When now? Unquestioning  
I, Say I. Unbelieving. Questions,  
Hypotheses....

(Beckett, The Unnamable The Beckett Trilogy  
1959 p. 265). (2)

One might say there is a constant search in all Beckett's work for some credible, rational form of reality that may conceivably be found when all the veneers or layers of illusion have been shed. This reality was sought by Murphy in that strange inner, private refuge that he sought to plumb in his willing acquiescence to the darkness with its chaos of forms, he may become 'a mote in the dark of absolute freedom' (3). Standing still, thinking aloud or moving with difficulty in one of those funambulistic' staggers of Watt (4), Beckett's characters are, above all, talkers, everywhere in the fiction we hear their voices:

What tedium, and I thought I had it all thought out. If I had the use of my body I would throw it out of the window. But perhaps it is the knowledge of my impotence that emboldens me to that thought.

(Beckett, Malone Dies The Beckett Trilogy 1959 p. 201).

In the Unnamable there are no things except things voiced:

Silence once broken will never again be whole.

(The Unnamable, The Beckett Trilogy, 1959, p. 351)

The movement to the actual stage discourse of Vladimir and Estragon, may be 'a relief' but it is so natural and predictable that it hardly seems like a shift at all. John Banville (5) thinks that

it is a remarkable and significant fact that the two greatest Irish prose artists of the century (Joyce and Beckett) both resolutely refused to deal directly with the times in which they lived. Nowhere in Beckett's writing is there a single mention of the European catastrophe he witnessed first hand.

(A Tinker's Curse, Irish Times September 28 1991).

He further expostulates or rather, uncovers a misconception; the notion of the 'everyday' language of literature as being a capable voice which can address one's everyday concerns. Thus, he points out, the poem is taken as a scan of the poet's emotions, the play is looked on as a 'slice of life' and the novel is regarded or judged according to how accurately it measures reality.

Beckett's fiction and drama firmly disappoint any such expectations. His is an hermetically closed art, it holds its peace. His puzzlement in the face of the world is irremediable. It presents one with the evidence, but no explanation. Is art as Heidegger once said, an uncovering of truth? Beckett is sceptical: 'What is more true than anything else? To swim is true, to sink is true. One is not more true than the other. One cannot speak any more of being, one must speak only of the mess.'

(6)

Beckett broke with the traditional modes of representation with the writing of the novel Watt (7) during the War. Watt can be viewed as Beckett's first Modernist novel. In an essay entitled Beckett, Valery and Watt (8), Poss Posnock uses the critical writing of Paul Valery as a paradigm which can directly illuminate Beckett's strategies as an artist. Watt is Beckett's critique of the traditional novel, providing as well, a tentative answer to that tradition. Posnock draws comparisons between the two writers. Both, he points out, are interested in Cartesian rationalism, both have a fondness for perceiving mathematics as a trivial exercise of purely formal relationships akin to literature; and methodical rigourousness.

Watt has little interest in any traditional, mimetic obligations:

For since when were Watt's concerns with what things were in reality? (p. 227).

Yet the realism of Watt exists, albeit in a paradoxical state; although this is clearly not a realistic novel in the traditional



sense, in another aspect it is, in Posnock's terms, 'Hyper realistic'. Consider, for instance the description of every conceivable move that Mr. Knott could make about his room, this is conceived using language. This is Realism, 'in extremis' and reduced to absurdity because it obliterates the novelist's 'selection of detail' and substitutes for this arbitrary selection, a transcription of every possibility that is available to a given character in a given situation.

Arbitrary is the key word in describing the traditional novelist's procedure of mirroring reality; Beckett ridicules this. When one rejects the basic principles of Realism - that the task of language is to reflect with fidelity familiar reality through a selection of detail - the result is to vanquish selections and include everything.

Rather than create a story about the 'real' world, Beckett provides the linguistic manifestations that occur when a novelist refuses to select detail; language is given to proceed according to its own inner and obsessively systematic logic.

substitute for the illusion of a unique scheme  
which imitates reality that of the possible at  
each moment which I think more truthful (9)

(Paul Valery, *The Art of Poetry*, 1958 p. 103)

Beckett helps to kill off the Realistic novel by the very profundity of his commitment to realism, (albeit sarcastic and darkly humorous). For the Rationalist, anything arbitrary is repellent; a Rationalist seeks to master experience by

comprehending everything through the power of the mind. The concept of a form of art dedicated to producing, through arbitrary selection, 'an illusion of life' is something ridiculous and idiotic for the Rationalist. The recording, therefore, of Knott's movements is not an absurdity, but a safeguard against absurdity.

Yet there is a paradox inherent in this argument, for all literary art, however religiously it seeks to purify itself by purging the arbitrary is inherently arbitrary. For language, the stuff and fabric of literature is never anything except selection, choice, discrimination.

In the words of Terry Eagleton

Perhaps it is a pity that we lack a word to capture the unique aroma of coffee, that our speech is wizened and anaemic, remote from the taste and feel of reality, is it a matter of failure that a word does not describe anything. (10)

(Terry Eagleton, *The Significance of Theory*, 1990 p. 41).

What Watt seeks is detachment through articulation, a theme which Beckett uses almost exclusively after Watt. Language which comes into being out of self-defence is a private language that can exist only by the vague rules of its internal clarity.

Rationalism and Absurdity are hybridised; in one sense the reader is told a great deal concerning the character's movements and in another equally logical sense, the reader learns nothing of the characters.

I am interested in the shape of ideas, even if I don't believe them. There is a wonderful sentence in St. Augustine, "Do not despair, one of the thieves was saved. Do not presume, one of the thieves was damned". That sentence has a wonderful shape. It is the shape that matters. (11) (Samuel Beckett)

When the shape of sentences matter, every word in the sentence becomes crucial, precision of diction and syntax is demanded.

When I was working on Watt, I felt the need to create for a smaller space, one in which I had some control of where people stood or moved above all of a certain light. I wrote Waiting For Godot. (Samuel Beckett, 1983)

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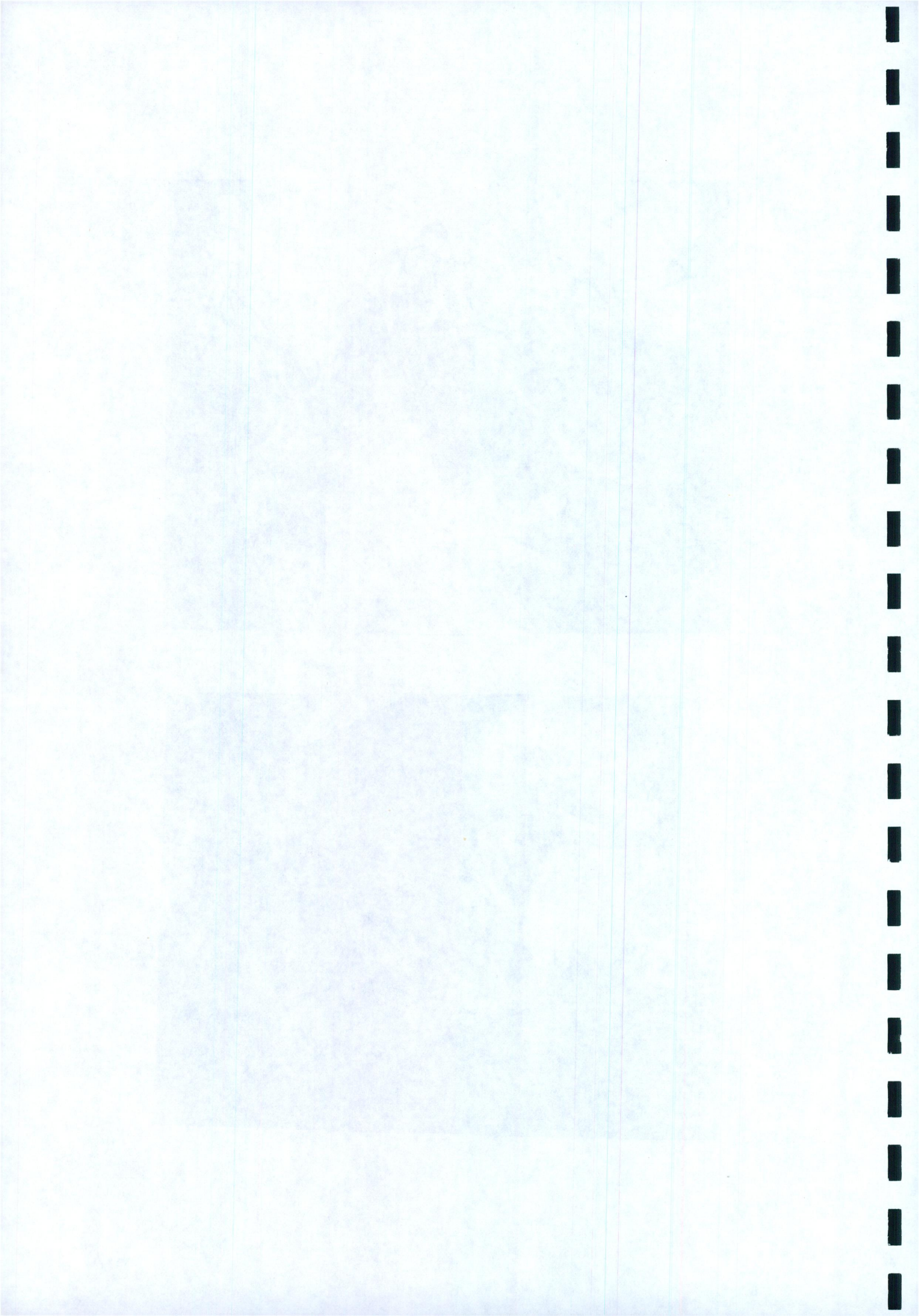
CHAPTER 3

BECKETT AND DRAMA

When Beckett made the transition from writing the first person novels to the composition of a dramatic text, he confronted a different collection of conventions, a new set of aesthetic parameters which he was now required to work within (1) The text of the novels represents the voice of the protagonist, and when the reader proceeds through these works, she/he voices the I that the speaker employs, seeing the surrounds and landscapes as the protagonists words describe. On seeing and hearing a dramatic performance, the spectator does not voice the words of the characters silently to themselves as in the novel, the audience does not see the scenery only through the perception of the characters, also, there are many more characters given the I of the monologue. The spectator sees the scene as an actual space that the characters occupy, that surrounds them, witnessing simultaneously the character's perception of that scene and its (lack of) significance.

In dramatic Expressionism in the early 20th century dramatic artists attempted to link the subjective perception of the character and the scene in which she/he is moving by making the spatial environment reflect the distortions and idiosyncrasies of the character's perception. This desire to create scenic images that reflect the character's consciousness or state of mind derives from the desire of several modern playwrights to deny the significance of objective reality and to emphasise the subjective reality of the individual mind. In the plays and films of the German Expressionists, Toller, (2) Kaiser (3), Wiene (4) and later used by O'Neill (5), the stage space represents images







within the consciousness of the protagonist. The characters with whom the protagonist interacts become images within his psyche also, figurative images distorted by the fear and anxiety of the central figure. (6)

In the plays of Beckett, characters and scenes are inextricably linked. One cannot picture Vladimir and Estragon divorced from the stolid landscape of the Cackon country - not because the scene projects their consciousness, but because they make use of the particular scene to sustain their states of mind. The contrast in perception between Vladimir and Estragon illustrates the way Beckett maintains the scene, neutral as it may be, discrete from the psyche of his characters. Estragon sees his environment as unchanging, irresolute in barren enmity but changing in details, while Vladimir identifies the scene with reference to earlier environments. One might presume that Beckett articulates the enigmatic quality of objective reality by giving antithetical versions of it, and by refusing to resolve the differences.

Early in his writing career, Beckett declared:

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.

(Samuel Beckett, Proust and 3 dialogues, New York, Grove Press, 1964, p. 16). (7)

It is clear from this quotation that such art could never hope to do more than merely express an absence to an absence. Memorable sentences in Beckett's plays tend to incline one toward that same

desperate conclusion, 'Nothing to be done; says Estragon at the beginning of Wailing for Godot, where any non-absurd, non-trivial question concerning human activity seems impossibly elusive. Although Vladimir and Estragon finally come to leave, they remain.

'Finished, its' finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished', says Clov in Endgame (8). Endgame reduces the world to a bare room in a tower cut off from all extraneous surrounds, where 'something is taking its course'. 'Absent always', says Hamm, 'It all happened without me'. Later plays have yet more extreme and severe images of uncertainty, immobility, impotence and isolation. In Happy Days (9), Winnie is being inhumed gradually into the earth by some strange force of reduction that has squeezed her life to a bustle of memories on the verge of extinction. In Play (10) the heads of two women and one man recite, from funerary urns snatches of an incident common to their lives, at the summoning of a spotlight. In Not I (11), the speaker has become reduced to a mouth, spilling words, strewn into the blackness that surrounds it, physically and syntactically amputated from any personal identity. Not I achieves an extreme condition of human absence by giving minimal details about an 'uneventful life', avoiding any image of consciousness, and offering only the text that repeats itself within it. A severe, blighted, bitter, yearning life articulated through the hysterically detached medium of her mouth.

Beckett's reduction of his characters to comic types partial persons, and disembodied voices can be acted and understood only be people who are not so severely reduced. Indeed every such reduction derives its theatrical force from the fact that it both requires and resists the medium of live actors and witnesses. Endgame could not take place in the world suggested by the play. The roles of the pair who wait for Godot require the precision of skilled comedians. The deteriorating and trapped Winnie is a part for an artist of the oblique form of dialogue with the audience called Dramatic Monologue (12).

Beckett is an ironic master of the theory of Minimalism. His negations heighten many positive theatrical qualities. This is another aspect of Modernism; for art to refer even protestingly, is for it to become instantly collusive with what it refers to, one might say that negation negates itself because it literally, can't help positing the very objects it desires to destroy. One might thus conclude, tentatively, that all art is essentially affirmative, an 'optimism' which is merely the other necessary face of Adorno's scarred coin of political pessimism (13).

Beckett invites us to relish the precise articulation of uncertainty and the arduous miming of incapacibilities. Every apparent sundering of mind and body offers a challenge to the actors discipline. Every apparent loss occurs in a world of literature and theatrical plenitude without which this performance would be impossible. Every image of solipsism reaches us through a collaboratively shaped event. Through a

shared imagination of absence such plays as Endgame, Happy Days and Not I open themselves to the fullness of human presence.

A note written by Beckett when working on That Time exemplifies, this concept of Minimalist theatre: 'to the objection visual component, too small, out of all proportion with aural, answer: make it smaller on the principle that less is more'. (14) And earlier to Keith Johnstone, that 'a stage in an area of maximum, verbal presence and maximum corporal presence'. Such craftsman's remarks are worth more than all Beckett's talk of the expression that there is nothing to express. If one recognises him as a Minimalist, an ironic artist of maximum presence, can one, perhaps, begin to cope with the otherwise incomprehensible fact that this artist of stasis, sterility, ignorance and impotence has become such an expolively fertile presence in a theatre space that refuses to come to an end.

'Every word is like an unnecessary stain of  
silence and nothingness'.

(Samuel Beckett). (15)

In the Trilogy (16), the speaker frequently geminates to conduct an internal argument with itself. The final moments in The Unnamable include such a division, a difference of opinion, a negation and erasion. One area of the Unnamable wants to stop, to end, to lose itself in welcoming darkness and silence, the other one urges it on, to continue;

I can't go on, you must go on, I'll go on, you must say words, as long as there are any.

(Samuel Beckett, The Unnamable 1959 p. )

This bifurcation of voices within the same speaker manifests the antithesis that marks each of Beckett's protagonists: the need to continue speech and thus life, and the desire for silence, alluring and comfortable darkness, a kind of desire for a kind of death (17).

Beckett has used silence in the theatre as an integral and most important element in his plays. It creates pauses where the audience absorbs and assimilates the words. Silence seems contrary to the grain of the theatre, which demands action and diction, where silence is something uncomfortable and impassive. The increased use of silence in theatre is due to the influence of film and television, in which the camera can direct attention without the aid of words. Such moments could not have been transferred to the theatre so readily had not Beckett worked so precisely and slowly to control silence by the simplest economical means. Beckett used silence like a painter who reduces her palette in order to dwell on the quality of a single colour. In Waiting for Godot, the advent of night is looked forward to by Vladimir and Estragon as marking temporary respite from the regulated vigil that they must keep, 'will night ever come?' Night is an interminably long time in coming. That time must now be filled with words, anything so as not to surrender to the encroaching silence. Silence is ominously present in the play, reminding them repeatedly of the possibility of failure,

extinction, darkness. Pozzo's blindness and Lucky's dumbness in Act 2 are two closely related elements of that lapse into final silence and permanent darkness (18).

Darkness and silence are used in Endgame (19) as part of a complex patterning of stark, fundamental and economical images that tend toward an extinguished world and an apocalyptic vision. In ways, the entire play is a bitter indictment of God's creation, where life is seen as an inconvenience and where those responsible for its glimmering are to be squarely cursed. Darkness is reminiscent of dying; that of the individual and of the world.

When old Mother Pegg asked you for oil for her lamp and you told her to get out to hell, you knew what was happening then, no? You know what she died of, Mother Pegg? Of darkness.

(Beckett, Endgame p. 75)

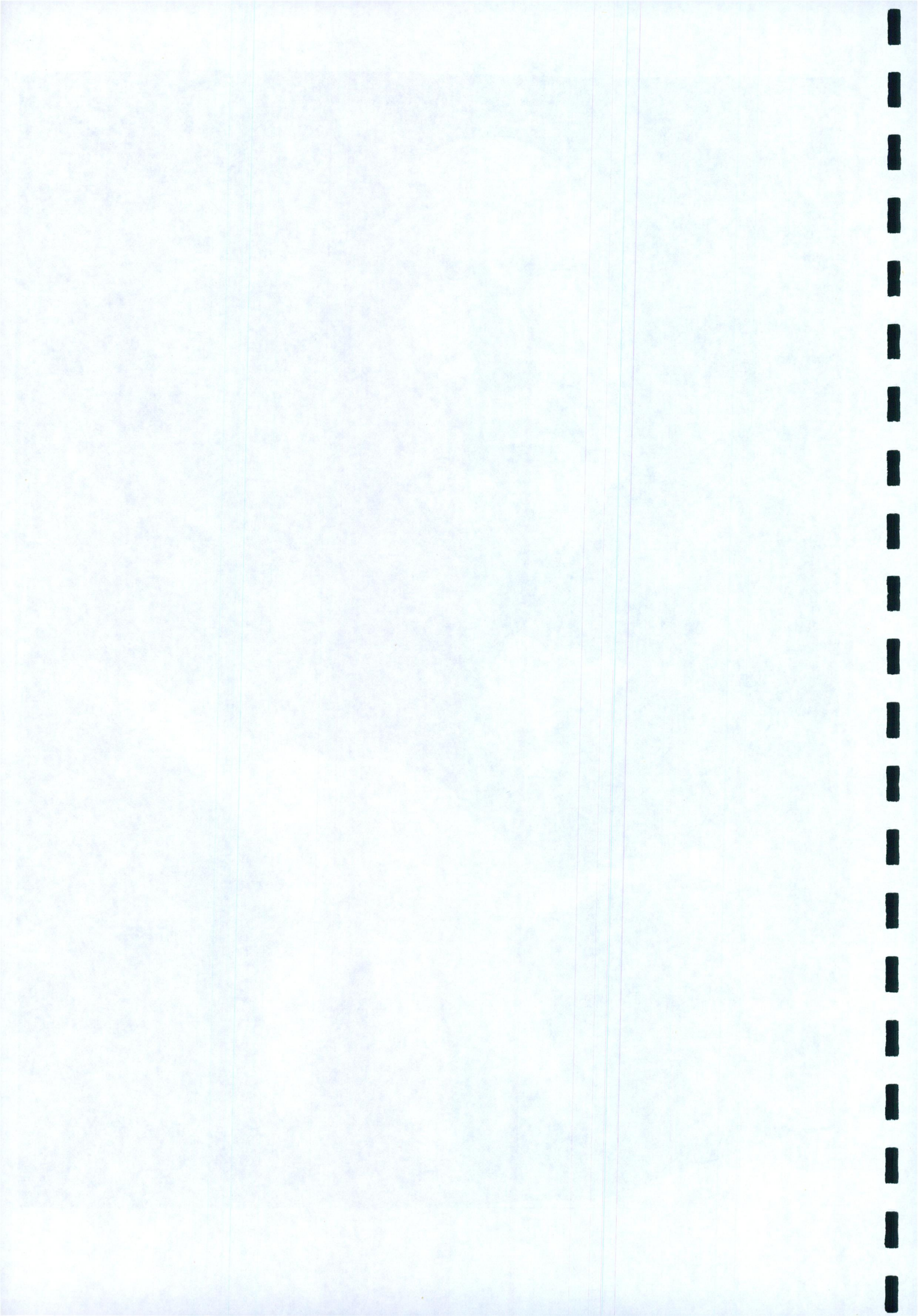
The earth is 'extinguished', though Clov, 'never say it lit'. 'The light is sunk', 'the sun was sinking down among the dead'. Blind Hamm sits at a dark and sunless window facing the water and basks in imaginary light enthusing: 'That's what I call light'. The yearnings for light or 'whiteness' are annulled or contrasted,

It was deep, deep you could see down to the bottom, so white, so clear.

(Endgame, 1958 p. 21)

is counterbalanced by Hamm's call, 'My kingdom for a nightman'. Hamm also asks Clov about his toy black dog;







He's white, isn't he?  
Nearly,  
What do you mean nearly? Is he white or isn't he?  
He isn't.

(Endgame, 1958, p. 30)

Any aspirations towards the light and white, seem constantly to return to darkness, 'let it end!.... with a bang!... of darkness!' is Hamm's culmination of a whole series of images of failing, fading and extinction. 'I see my light dying,' says Clov, behind him is divided into water and earth by two high windows seen by Clov as 'Zero, mortibus', 'Corpsed'. An inexorable end, a winding down

in the chess game lost from the start, Hamm makes a few useless moves as only a bad player would. A good one would have given up long ago. He is only trying to delay the inevitable end. Each of his gestures is one of the last useless moves which put off the end.

(Beckett, To Ernst Schroder) (20)

There seems to be an ambivalent response of Beckett characters toward the darkness that increases in the later plays. Woman I in Play (21) expresses her wishes: 'Silence and darkness were all I craved. Well I got a certain amount of both. They being one.' Yet the darkness which is silence seems both craved and feared. It is craved by the three figures in Play who are summoned up out of darkness by the interrogative spotlight, darkness seems to hold out to them a promise of silence and peace:

Down, all going down, with the dark, peace is coming.

(Beckett, Play p. 15)

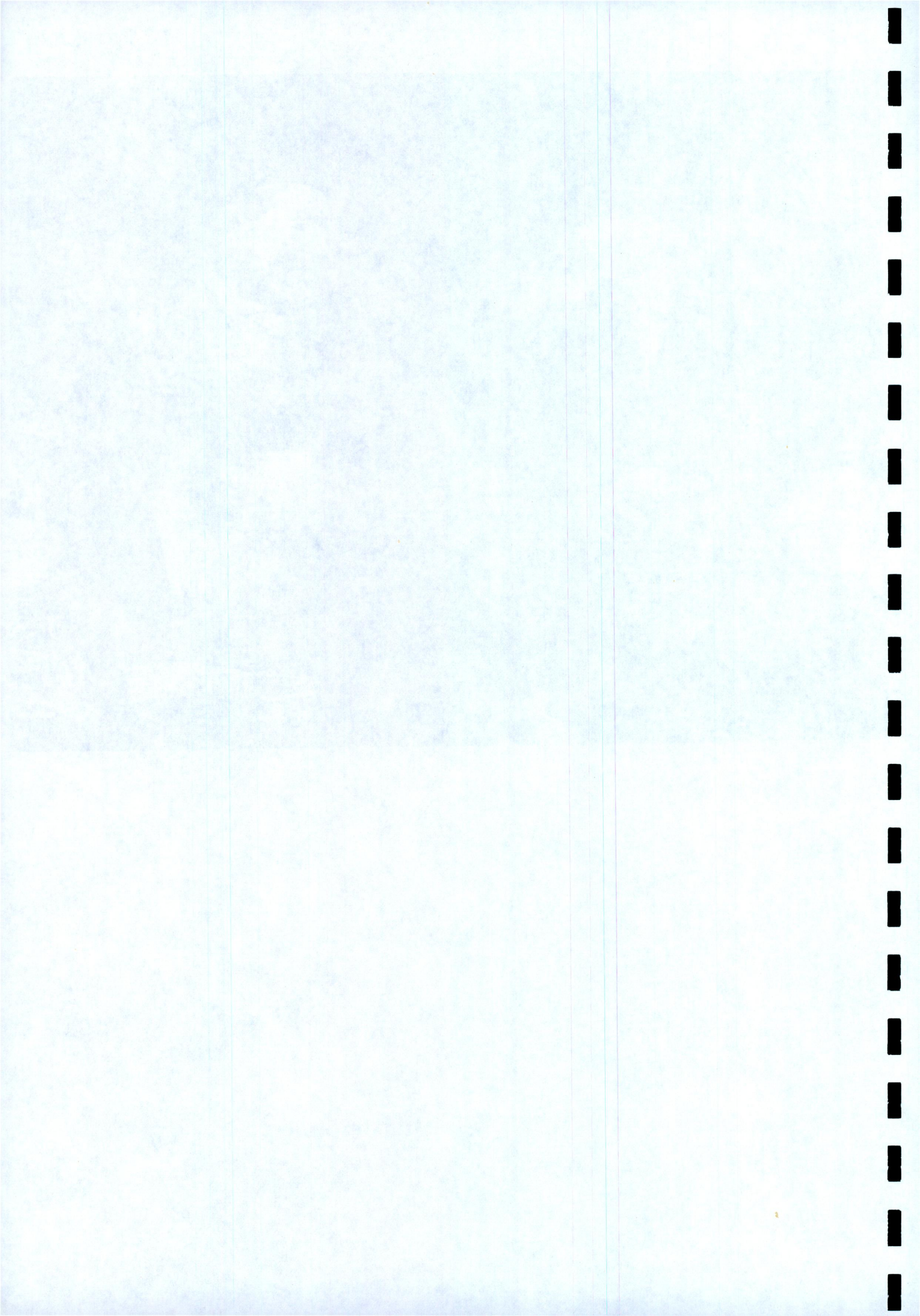
Silence was in the heart of the dark, the  
silence of dust and the things that would  
never stir, if left alone.

(Beckett, Malone Dies p. 27)

This is movement toward darkness and silence, which is also, as From an Abandoned Work makes clear, a movement toward total stasis, where encounters are made in the inner darkness with its 'myriad of voices', voices that refuse silence, insistent on telling their stories, where to be alive is not enough, they must talk about their lives. This impulse to go on creating fiction or simply saying words, as long as there are any, which provides the substance for much of the Trilogy also figures predominantly in a number of the plays. Hamm speaks of a time when he could go on with his story, 'end it and begin another', the Voice in Cascando (20) strives to find the right story so that he, too, may end, 'rest, sleep, no more stories; no more words'. Darkness and stillness seem to be the enviable qualities of an imagined ending, unattainable and unimaginable. Darkness is then feared, 'And Then?' For unless something can be found in the depths of the void of darkness the dark will mean an end to all, to the fiction, the stories, the word.

It is largely by means of the imagery of light and dark as well as movement within and without that Beckett puts into effect his 'little exploration of that whole zone of being that has always been set aside by artists as something unusable, as something by definition incompatible with art'. (23)





Waiting for Godot set the scene for the total dissociation of theatre from Naturalism and the merely mimetic. After Godot, plots could be minimal, expositions expendable, characters contradictory, settings unlocalized and dialogue unpredictable. Blatant farce could jostle tragedy, obscenity could pun on the sacred:

V: Christ! What's Christ got to do with it?  
You're not going to compare yourself to Christ!  
E: All my life I've compared myself to him.  
V: But where he lived it was warm, it was dry!  
E: Yes. And they crucified quick (Waiting for Godot p. 52).

One actor could recite a ten minute monologue and another be mute; or the same actor could be both monologist and mute. In Godot, Beckett sharpened one's perceptions by allowing his character's minds to be free to roam the lofty and eerie heights as well as to scabble upon the miserable 'muckheap'.

In Beckett's plays action is constantly arrested in silence, and is brought to a close with unusual simplicity:

(Long silence)  
Say something!  
I'm trying.  
(Long silence).  
(in anguish) Say anything at all!  
What do we do now?  
Wait for Godot.  
Ah!  
(Silence).  
This is awful. (Mockingly, to the audience)  
  
(Waiting for Godot p. 63)

The audience is left in possession of little more than what has happened at each moment in the play; no concluding summaries are provided to pull the experience into a clarifying context. At the end there seems nothing more to do or say, 'You are looking for the words, you correct yourself constantly... at the end you can't go any farther. It is just an end.' (Samuel Beckett)

(24)

Another feature of Beckett's style is his uncompromising exactness, no detail is left unconsidered. Each word is used so precisely that phrases made of conventional elements are rendered uncommonly memorable. The positioning of each silence appears to provide a moment of relative rest in which the shape of the preceding sentences become isolated like a completed unit in a musical composition. By means of sequential silences, the shape of the whole play slowly seems to become apparent and the musical quality and form of the words is perceived. In an economy of phrasing, like cello music as Hugh Kenner has said (25), the voices of Estragon and Vladimir are arranged to ask and answer in lucid symmetry which is spaced and assembled with measured pauses of silence. An equation of balance is resolved as the voices come to the end of their lyric:

Our movements.  
Our relaxations.  
Our elongations.  
Our relaxations.  
To warm us up.  
To calm us down.  
Off we go.

(Waiting for Godot p. 76).

Beckett has succeeded through playwrighting and directing in inventing a new kind of theatre, one involving a type of audience and stage transaction similar to Brecht's alienation effect where psychological links are broken down between audience and action. Some would perhaps argue that the Beckett stage transaction does not quite fit into the traditional dichotomy between the director Stanislavsky and Brecht. 'Beckett', writes Johnathan Kalb (26) 'is not a great director in the sense of Mejerhold or Stanislavsky, since he has only directed his own plays. But nevertheless, his productions do bring into full actuality ideas about staging that he had, while writing left unsaid in the published plays. They are the best examples of how his work was intended to appear'.

Beckett's triumph as a Twentieth Century artist is that he has found means within fiction and drama, 'those intractable and muddy' of forms, (27) of accommodating the chaos and contingency of contemporary feeling and form. Most writers seem to be content in writing descriptively and their efforts end in precisely that, a writing about things. Beckett's work is not about things, it is the thing itself.

Beckett uses the raw material of life as an artist and recognises it is worthless until passed through the distillation process of the imagination.

'His work', John Banville explains, 'is neither black nor white, neither pessimistic nor optimistic (such terms mean nothing when it comes to art) but merely is. At its darkest it is luminous, radiant with the fact of its own hard won existence'. (28)

(Banville).



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- (3) *ibid.*
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- (5) Eugene O'Neill (1883-1953) Perhaps the most influential American playwright, his plays dealt with the serious issues of human life, his characters, often the flotsam or detritus of humanity, he conceived with a disillusioned compassion. Lacking the advantage of an American dramatic tradition, O'Neill experimented with many European techniques including Expressionism before finding his own style. Plays: The Iceman Cometh, Long Day's Journey Into Night, Strange Interlude, A Moon for the Misbegotten.
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CHAPTER 4

WAITING FOR GODOT

Much of Beckett's work can be seen as the struggle with the paradox, the central artistic paradox: the inadequacy of words to express what must be said. In 1929 in his essay on Joyce's Work in Progress, Beckett wrote:

His writing is not about something, it is that something itself. (1)

Twenty years later he wrote En Attendant Godot, which, in fact, seems to reflect this critical maxim. Terry Eagleton argues that writing strives to phenomenalize language, which, Adorno sees as entirely 'self-defeating', since the more it strives to be like the thing it seeks to describe, the more it becomes a thing in its own inimitable way. Eagleton describes the actual practise of writing as a

crabbed, rebarbative practise, pitched into a constant state of crisis, twisting and looping back on itself, struggling in the structure of every sentence to avoid at once a bad immediacy of the object and the false self identify of the concept.

(Terry Eagleton ) (2)

This seems to have been the sort of conflict Beckett constantly struggled with in his writing, the description of things, the essence of things, the anaemic nature of language and the thing itself, which is what the original intent is mutated into.

In the process of translating En Attendant Godot into Waiting for Godot, Beckett generalised the setting, rendering it more

hospitable to non-French audiences. Godot is not a French play, it is set wherever one happens to be. Yet as Gerry Dukes (3) points out, where you happen to be is in a theatre auditorium, where one will be told the location of the actor's toilet: end of the corridor on the left.

The night will fall and the moon shall rise, twice, voices will rustle like leaves and like ashes, a charnel house and 'That Bog', will be occupied. Vladimir, Estragon, Pozzo, Lucky and the Boy are not characters in the sense of what that meant for earlier playwrights, nor are they symbols or mouthpieces for the writer. Gone are their solid identities defined by a remembered past; gone, too are certainties concerning the present. The future is simply another deferred catastrophe.

Pozzo orates, whinges and grieves. He, too suffers on 'this bitch of an earth' in his arrogance. Desire is frustrated by the 'poisonous ingenuity of time in the science of affliction'. His servant is lucky insofar as he has shrugged off his initiatives and shed his rights. Yet this Lucky articulates the obvious and unpalatable truth. We live in an abode of stones where, despite our efforts, we waste and shrink, decay and dwindle. Godot? What of Godot?; Godot resounds through the play to which he gives his name like an interminable and perplexing enigma, a name that has no referent. Waiting for Godot implies duration, and posits a goal for waiting. However the title hints at more than the performance fulfils. Beckett stretches the time of duration to

cast a doubt on the arrival of Godot, and even on the existence of Godot.

Drama critic, Kenneth Tynan in a review of the play in 1955 said:

It forced me to re examine the rules which have hitherto governed drama; and having done so, to pronounce them not elastic enough. (4)

In Waiting for Godot stage dialogue becomes the language of poetry. The lofty and eerie poetry of Pozzo's 'They give birth astride of a grave' speech is equated with the meaningless trivial whispers for the sake of security. What we are tempted to call the poetic in Godot, however is placed within the broader context of a play which borrows so many of its elements from Burlesque, Commedia del'arte, silent film and music hall. One's enduring image may not be of the lofty, eerie incantations but of trousers falling and aborted comic suicide attempts from a mutant tree. Many critics have noticed that the poetic alternates with the comic (5), creating a pattern whose hilarious actions are as memorable as Pozzo's and later Vladimir's lyricism. Godot offers one a poetic moment which competes for our attention with the comic vitality that makes it so accessible in performance.

Finally it will be Pozzo's lines that contain the dramatic tension of the play, resolving it by making us see the poetic in the comic and the comic in the poetic. Beckett's later style in the theatre is ultimately a concentration and reduction of the staying power of such moments, stretching those out to encompass the entire range of the drama itself.

In 1930 Beckett's poem Whoroscope won the Hours press prize for the best poem on the subject of time. His 1931 monograph on Proust analyses: 'Time, Creative and destructive', 'Le Kid', written in 1931 mocks time with two stage alarm clocks, and clocks are a recurrent prop in later plays. Pozzo's grandfather gave him a watch, Clov and Hamm listens to the alarm clock, B Schedules activities by his watch in Act Without Words II (6). Krapp has a silver watch. Sound effects are also linked with time - the bells of Happy Days and the chimes of Footfalls. No-one in his plays mentions the exact fictional hour, day or year of action, but time is nevertheless the shadow protagonist (or antagonist) of his plays. (7)

In Waiting for Godot the characters do not use images of the past to create a sense of their identity in time. They either cannot or will not maintain a concept of the continuity of their experiences by assimilating images of the past. Consequently they find they must invent and improvise with the raw material they find in their present situation: the barren landscape, their own decaying physical processes and the painful failure of those processes, the presence of Pozzo and Lucky, and the potential help promised by Godot. Rather than an Aristotelian beginning, middle and end, Beckett's plays are endless continua, his characters seem cursed to endure through time.

The light doesn't change for most of each act, the landscape doesn't change for each act, pauses and silences are numerous, wayfarers are minimal. The two have to explore their own

resources to while away the wait for Godot. Vladimir phrases their situation accurately:

All I know is that the hours are long, under these conditions and constrain us to beguile them with proceedings which, how shall I say, which may at first seem reasonable until they become a habit.

(Waiting for Godot, 1956 p. 80)

During the course of the play it is Vladimir who reminds Estragon of their appointment. In Act II it is Vladimir who notices the leaves on the tree. It is Vladimir who, while Estragon sleeps, watches the swift rise of the rudimentary moon after the departure of the Boy. Vladimir experiences the infuriating variability in the flow of time. 'Time has stopped', of Act I becomes 'time flows already', in Act II.

Ignorant of Godot, Pozzo and Lucky live in time. Pozzo's watch told him of the time, he lives by it in Act I, by Act II he has undergone an education in time, the watch is lost, so is his sight and his notion of time. However he is lyrical about his situation echoing his speech about 'the veil of gentleness and peace' and 'that's how it is on this bitch of an earth', in Act I is his Act II speech 'astride of a grave'. Lucky's recitation is like Pozzo's: both speeches are a form of entertainment, and as Cohn says (8) stretch fictional time for the audience. Both speeches, in three movements, tell of a darkening: Pozzo's pale twilight moves to day's light and anticipates the sudden fall of night. Lucky begins with the image of a white bearded god, moves to a fading figure and moves to the 'abode of stones' in the



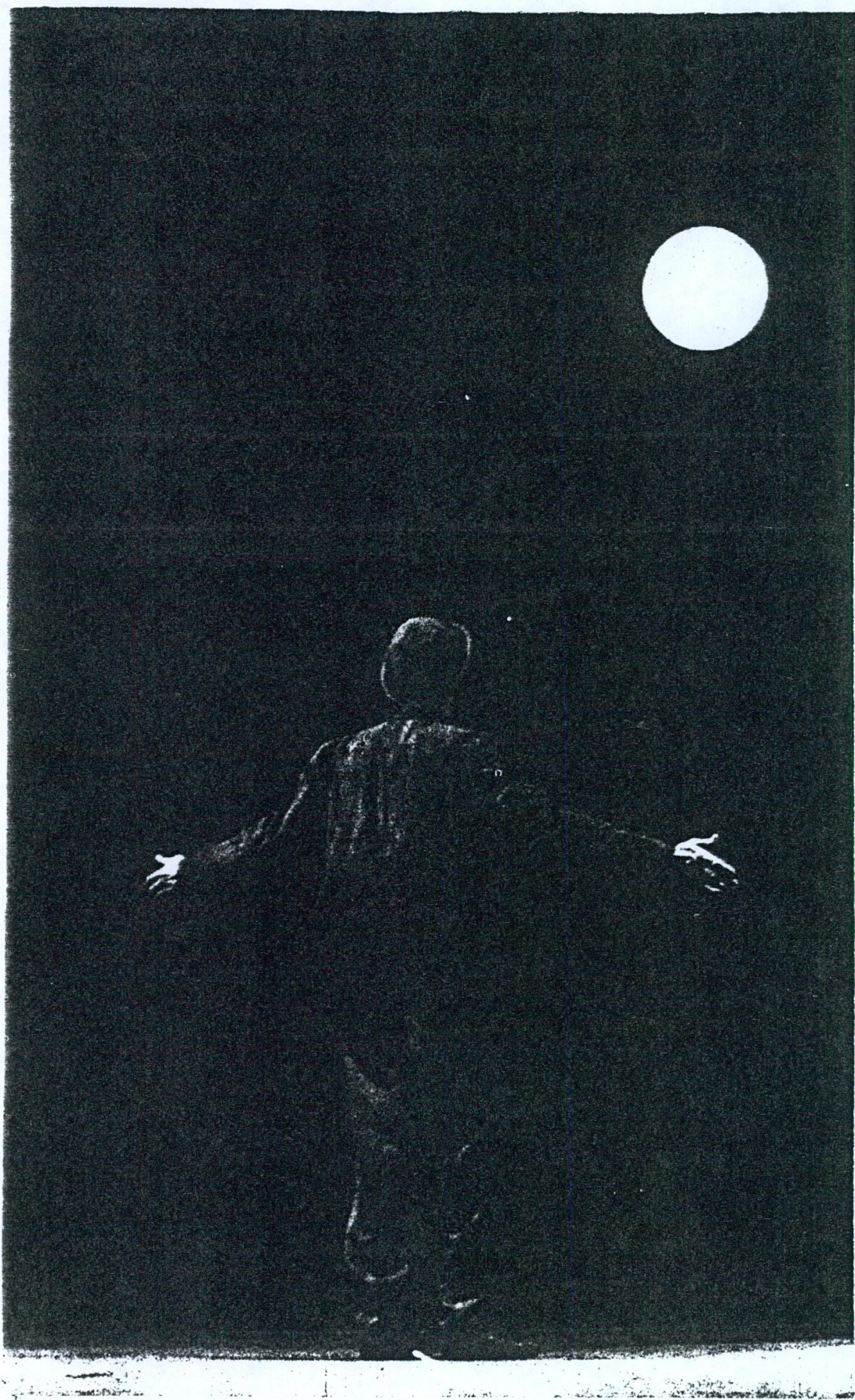
darkened cold. Lucky functions for Pozzo as a teacher and quasi-entertainer, but over the years his esoteric knowledge has faded into this single linguistic performance:

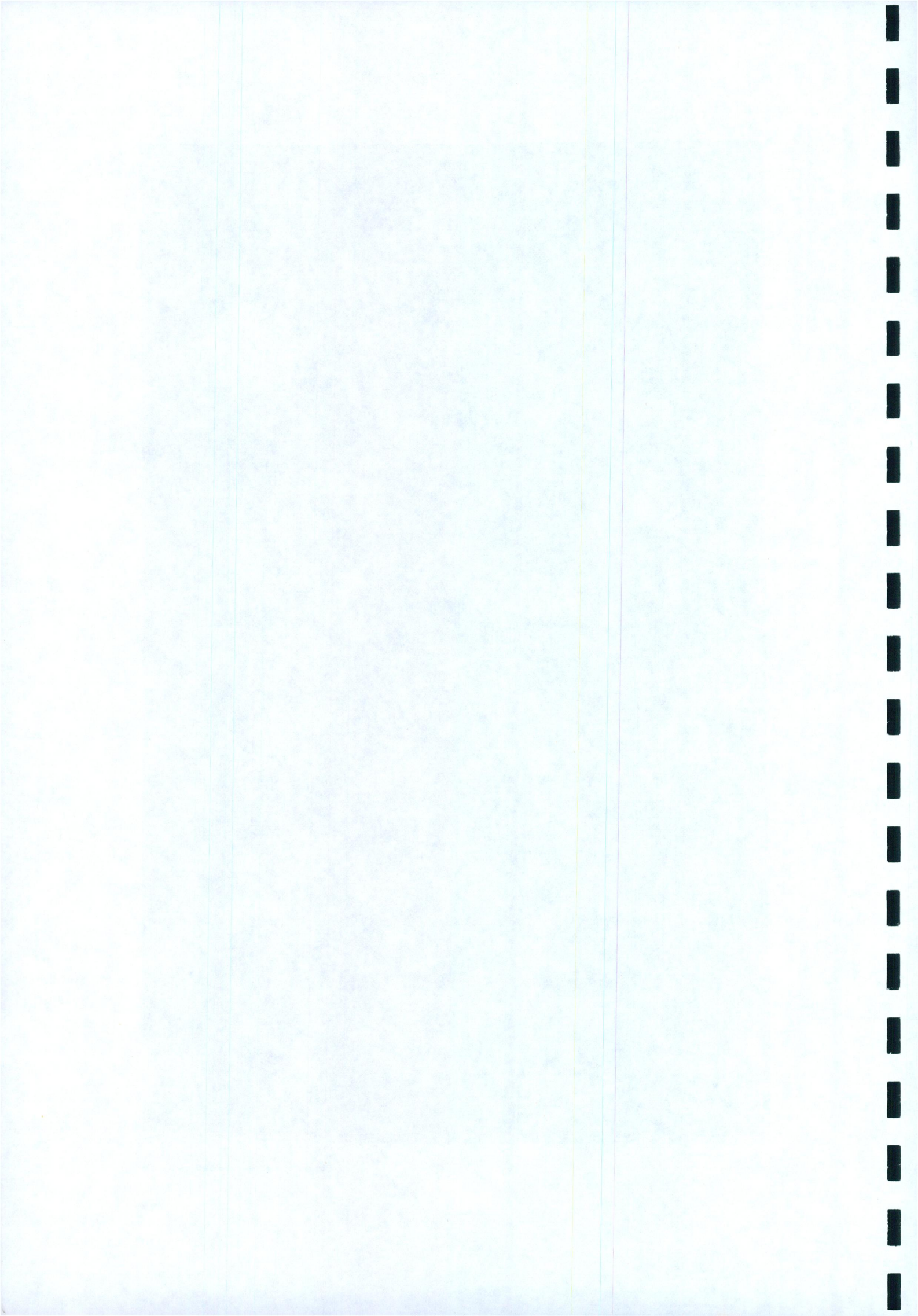
Given the existence as uttered forth  
in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann  
of a personal God quaquaquaquaqu with while beard  
quaquaquaquaqu outside time without extension  
who from the heights of divine apathia divine  
athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with  
some exceptions for reasons unknown but time  
will tell... that man in short that man in  
brief in spite of the strides of dimentation  
and defecation is seen to waste and pine waste  
and pine and concurrently simultaneously what  
is more for reasons unknown in spite of the  
strides... the skull the skull the skull the  
skull in Connemara in spite of the tennis the  
labours abandons left unfinished graver still  
abode of stones in a word I resume...

(Waiting for Godot 1956 pp. 43-45)

This speech constitutes the remaining residual elements of a learned man with an educated mind, but now the years of disappointment and deterioration have drained it of its coherence relevance and significance. All that remains is the detritus of philosophies, culture and geography: suggestions of significance are smudged, rendered unverified and vague, residue at the base of a repetitious amorphous chant. As with Vladimir and Estragon, we are given the remains, ruins of their lives together. The interactions between the couples, their conventions of interaction reveal that their relationships exist only as habit.

In his blindness, Pozzo has lost his sense of time and his story. In his opinion to separate or distinguish one moment from another is a pointless and arbitrary exercise. The structural sequence





of the two acts, the second similar to the first, seems to imply that time is a sequence of scattered, random units that, by chance, add up to the larger scale of the whole. The two acts imply a continuous number of acts all self-similar; a continuum. The scenes are repeated in each act: Vladimir and Estragon, alone; with Pozzo and Lucky; alone; with the boy; alone. One would presume that this suggests that each day or month continues this long, lonely tedium. Phrases and activity endorse this suggestion: guesses about time and space, questions about the tree, pleas, the desire to hang themselves. The dead dog song at the beginning of Act II is a good simile for the play. The song is structured as a closed causal loop in time, an infinite regression, through time and language, it mourns the death of a hungry dog, beaten to death by a cook with a ladle, buried and another dog to write the story upon the tombstone telling of a dog beaten and so on ad infinitum.

Much of the play dramatises habitual routines that stretches bludgeons and dulls time to an eventless, barren continuum. All events are absorbed by this smothering continuum. Day succeeds day but the connection between the two is smudged and blurred. Vladimir actually tries to glean a connection but Estragon laughs at his attempts as sophistic. Vladimir questions his validity of perception and his ability to sustain the memory of events.

Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am  
I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or  
think I do, what shall I say of today? That  
with Estragon my friend, at this place, until  
the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That  
Pozzo passed, with his carrier, and that he

spoke to us? Probably. But in all that what truth will there be?

(Waiting for Godot p. 90)

Vladimir considers the sleeping form of Estragon and realises that nothing will change, their paradigm is crystalline and set. He repeats Pozzo's eerie sermon:

They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it's night once more.

(Waiting for Godot p. 89)

Pozzo had condensed, honed and shaped the cycle of life into a single verifiable second. Vladimir repeats the view of the funeral associated with childbirth, locating both down in the dark hole at gravesite. Vladimir extends the singularity into a more global sense of time.

We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. But habit is a great deadener.

(Waiting for Godot p. 91)

However he cuts himself off with a question of paranoid perception a feeling of being watched, which could be Beckett punning on the audience;

At me, too someone is looking, of me too someone is saying, he is sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on.

(Waiting for Godot p. 91)

Time in Godot seems both halted and perpetual, causing nothing to change, and yet deteriorating the figures progressively. (9)

The particular is fused with the general:

Time is usually said to consist of past, present and future, but in *Godot*, tense becomes tension. The present is thick and ubiquitous. Infirmary threatens with its darkness and silence. Brave little incidents glisten briefly, but they are soon absorbed into the long grey wait.

Ruby Cohn, *Just Play* 1980 p. 42.

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- (5) cf. Martin Esslin in The Theatre of the Absurd pp. 44-47., Hugh Kenner in A Reader's Guide pp.
- (6) Act Without Words II, Eh Joe and Other Writings, London: F & F. 1967 contains Eh Joe, Act without words II, Film.
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CHAPTER 5

BECKETT'S LATE DRAMA



Beckett's usual procedure as a dramatist was to eliminate, reduce and compress as if he were suspicious of stage business and was attempting to reduce it to a minimum. The gradual increase of ambiguity gained through such reduction creates stage imagery susceptible of many readings which the plays suggest, but do not endorse. The reduction and compression in *Godot* seem to pinpoint or focus attention on various human failings: the failure of critical bodily functions, painful urination. This perception of the body as an unreliable and fatigued machine where-in the mind is immured, the experience of being able to identify the surrounding environment with a sense of connection or memory, being an alien object in an hostile space, being unable to locate oneself in a coherent sense of time, coming to realise that the sense of past may be a fiction, and finally, the recognition of one's dependency on another human being, realising that this represents a kind of trap that hems in the self in habitual patterns from which it is impossible to become free.

E: In the meantime let us try and converse calmly since we are incapable of keeping silent.

V: You're right, we're inexhaustible.

E: It's so we won't think.

V: We have that excuse.

E: It's so we won't hear.

V: We have our reasons.

E: All the dead voices.

V: They make a noise like wings.

E: Like leaves.

V: Like sand.

E: Like leaves.

(Silence).

V: They all speak together

E: Each one to itself.

V: Rather they whisper.

E: They rustle.

V: They murmur.

E: They rustle.

(Silence)

V: What do they say?

E: They talk about their lives.

V: To have lived is not enough for them.

E: They have to talk about it.

V: To be dead is not enough for them.

E: It is not sufficient.

V: They make a noise like feathers.

E: Like leaves.  
V: Like ashes.  
E: Like leaves.  
(Long Silence)

(Waiting for Godot pp. 62 - 63)

Esslin suggests that this passage contains 'The Key' (1) to much of Beckett's work. It seems, rather, to almost represent a paradigm or scaffold upon which Beckett's later work on the stage is assembled. It contains the essential imagery that characterises his late style.

To discuss Beckett's late style in the theatre is to attempt to invent a new kind of critical language. Narrative, Poetry and Drama, the conventional, traditional literary categories imposed on writing seem, in this instance inadequate. His theatre is reduced to a piece of monologue (2) and the play has become something else, a performance. Consistently, a story is being unfolded, a fiction approximating the dramatic situation experienced by the audience.

Beckett's concern seems to have been the practical elements of making a stage image concrete. His texts contain precise and schematic stage directions for lighting, movement and sound. 'Can you stage a mouth', Beckett asked one critic, (3) 'Just a moving mouth, with the rest of the face in darkness'. Showing the playwright's concern with the physical rather than the metaphysical problems of stage plays. Beckett in his theatre space seems to have utilised the physical apparatus to achieve his stage imagery and the resonance of such images.

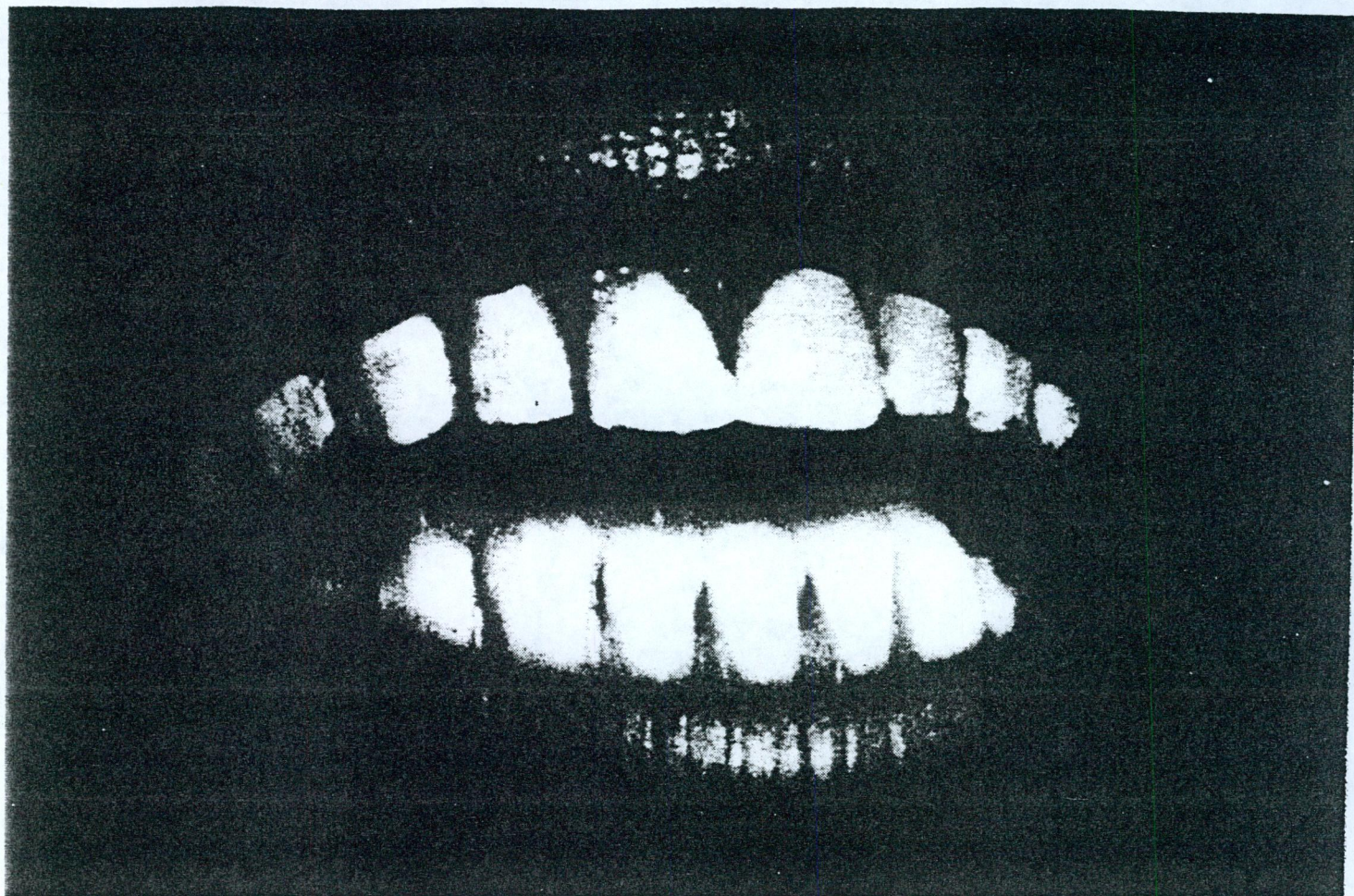
Beckett's dramatic text is a specific skeleton for a specific staging, dispensing with all non-essentials. The directors task is, as Alan Schnieder said: 'To make sure the inessentials don't creep back in'. (4)

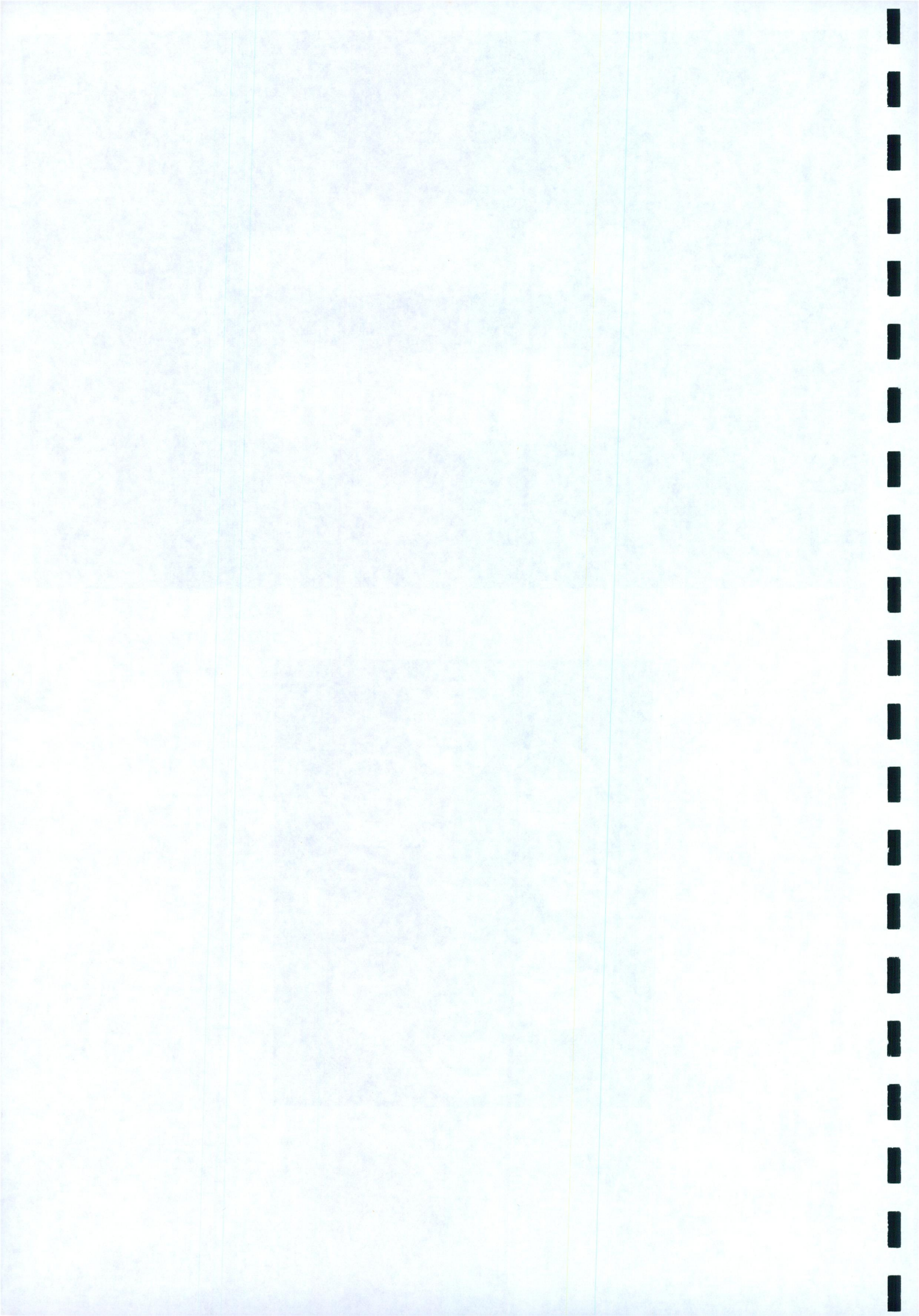
Eagleton in 'Towards a Science of the Text (5)' makes the point that the text is not a set of vague notations or a framework which initiates or inspires the production, but the text is a map of the real terrain of the production. In later Beckett, the text and performance are synthesised into one, and this is how he communicates his private image toward the public. There is in late Beckett a breaking down of barriers between the territories of fiction and poetry and dramatic scores.

Beckett's dramas gradually embrace soliloquy which Ruby Cohn calls 'The traditional device to explore the speakers inner life', whose deepest feelings emerge even as they take shape in his own consciousness. The effect on the audience is that of greater knowledge of the speaker and at the same time of a more intense emotional relationship with him. (5)

Krapp's Last Tape (6), Embers (7) and Happy Days (8) are subtle deviations of interior monologue into the appearance of dialogue. On the stage however, monologue is necessarily external. In Krapp's Last Tape, the arrangement of live voice and tape recorder mimic a lonely dialogue. Krapp, in his annual birthday ritual, listens to an old diary tape and records a new one, two monologues. On the tape there is not a soliloquy recorded but a quasi-performance designed for the purpose of future listening.

Not I (9) is a form of soliloquy, severely mutated, there is the presence of an on-stage auditor and the deliberate attempt to absent the first-person pronoun. The 'I' in Not I is the most minimal dramatic character in Beckett's canon, the protagonist, who like Godot, fails to appear before the curtain fall, but while waiting for the first person singular to arrive, one is showered by the words that are strewn, tumbling from Mouth at a height of eight feet, illuminated by a spotlight, like Play, where the spotlight commands the actions, and not the traditional opposite, and yet unlike Play, Not I offers no second chance to arrange those disjointed and breathless phrases into logic. The story that tells of birth and a life so appalling that Mouth cannot concede that it is her story. By denial of the first-person, autobiography is forced into biography. There are vague flickering scenes, conception, birth, a life emerging from silence, a constant insistence on 'She', the final insistence is followed by the description of a day in April and then the curtain falls. Her thoughts that her distress cannot continue, and a termination of speech is what she aches for, she aches to be rewarded with silence and the darkness that is beginning to enfold her. She prays for an end to words and the comforting solace of silence to follow. The babble and ray of light, have gradually coalesced. They continue until the soliloquy ends in a final image of the Spring scene, in the field that gave them birth.





Balancing the spectacular with the literary Not I opens up Beckett's theatre and the creation of a new kind of dramatic image.

she who but a moment before... but a moment!...  
could not make a sound.... no sound of any kind...  
now can't stop.

(Not I, 1973 The Complete Dramatic Works, p.378)

Mouth persists in telling what appears to be a stubborn lie: that she is not speaking of herself, but of someone else. Curiously, the fictionalizing impulse survives the ontological instability that threatens to blow the remains of the protagonist's self into pieces. Whatever delusions and confusions Mouth may be suffering from, she persists in her refusal to relinquish the third person, perhaps because she must refuse, being habitually tied to the words and story, or perhaps because she chooses to refuse, recognising in the play of words the means of gaining a distance from the chaos of memory and experience that her brain generates.

(10)

Whole body like gone... just the mouth... stream of words... no idea what she's saying.

(Not I, 1973 The Complete Dramatic Works, p. 382)

In the Unnamable, the protagonist tries to escape the first person, but fails. He finally comes to the awareness that, what he means by 'I' is inscrutable. He puts off speaking of 'I' because he knows nothing of the self. The Unnamable appears to be eager, but is finally unable to say 'I' with any confidence. Mouth, feeling her situation more keenly, insists on remaining

separate from 'I', hoping that should it continue long enough her narrative will eventually gain her release from suffering.

hit on it in the end... then back... God is love...  
Tender mercies... new every morning... back in the  
field... April Morning... face in the grass...  
nothing but the larks... pick it up. (and a voice  
continues behind curtain, unintelligible).

(Not I, 1973 The Complete Dramatic Works, p. 383)

The soliloquy terminates in a blend of divine love and Spring rebirth through the voice has thrice reiterated 'spared that' about love, has twice laughed at the idea of a merciful god, has associated speech with Winter and a lack of mercy. The first two April descriptions trace a childlike search for cowslips but the last three repeat 'nothing but the larks'.

Beckett has conceived a whole play as soliloquy, in which he withholds knowledge of its protagonist but seems to direct the audience towards a severe emotional relationship with her. Paired with this pulsing mouth, the shrouded figure completes the image by providing it with an internal audience, rendering its hermetic isolation complete. (11)

This mouth wishes to exhaust the substance of her being through language, but her language is the product of her unhinged mind, out of touch with herself. Even within the grove, Mouth continues the search for silence through language, for nothingness and darkness through memory and feeling.



CONCLUSION

By way of conclusion, it appears that modernist drama has its beginnings with the plays of Brecht. In so far as Brecht refused to accept Aristotelian Catharsis; the purging of the emotions through identification with the main protagonist in a play. In Brecht's theatre, no appeal is made to the spectator's capacity for empathy with the protagonists. The art of Brecht's theatre called Epic theatre, consists in arousing astonishment rather than empathy. The psychological link which existed between audience and action up to Epic theatre, was now broken down. The link that exists between audience and action is the link of pleasure Epic theatre's use of pantomime and music hall and direct address to the audience entertains, Brecht sought primarily to entertain his audience and secondly to inform.

Beckett probably did not seek to emulate or carry on from the way paved by Brecht, but whether aware of Brecht's achievements or not, there is a similarity between the two playwrights. Both independently forged their own personal version of theatre, out of a dissatisfaction with tradition.

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