

## MODERNIST DRAMA / POSTMODERNIST PERFORMANCE : THE CASE OF SAMUEL BECKETT

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The work of Samuel Beckett is seen by many critics to combine both the avant-garde tradition in theatrical practice and the more recent postmodern notions of performance. This study examines how the transition between the historical avant-garde (modernism) and postmodern schools of performance is enacted in the work of Beckett. The "waning of effect," the gradual processes of appropriation and commodification, and aspects of depoliticisation — all characteristics of the postmodern artefact — are studied in relation to Beckett's later plays and in contrast to his earlier ones. By applying Bakhtinian notions of cultural critique this study examines the conceptualisation and presentation of the human form. It draws parallels, more apparent in the earlier works, between the Beckettian body and the traditions of the grotesque. Through the examination of the human form and the relationship of the performance to its sometimes notional audience, this study tries to focus on the processes involved as the work of Beckett shifts from the avant-garde modernist tradition into an all encompassing postmodernism.



Since winning the Nobel Prize for literature in 1969 Beckett has grown increasingly silent. Now 83, the author of *Waiting For Godot* breaks that silence with this meditation on loneliness and old age which we publish for the first time. *Stirrings Still* is available in a signed limited edition of 200, published by John Calder at £ 1,000.

*(The Guardian 1989)*

With the above dithyrambic announcement Samuel Beckett made his final appearance on the publishing scene. This was preceded by rumours in the academic and journalistic world that urged everyone to keep buying *The Guardian* so that they too could purchase what turned out to be a "collector's item." At the same time, word had it that John Calder's publishing house was going through some difficulty and had, more or less, commissioned Beckett to write this piece in order to overcome its financial problems. Beckett himself is reported as claiming to have written

the piece in order to help yet another publisher from the United States who had lost his job. Regardless of the initial intentions, the market value of the piece acquires particular significance in the way we read it. The piece itself *Stirrings Still*, was a prose piece very similar to other late prose pieces by Beckett. Even though it was not theatrical, a type of performance was being enacted by the whole process of publication and dissemination of the work. This performance involved a variety of modes that can be recognised as postmodern. It was a commissioned work that was shamelessly determined by “market forces.” It simultaneously covered the high and low regions of the market and of aesthetic tastes. One could acquire it in its newspaper or in its signed limited edition form. Later, after Beckett’s death, it was published in paperback making it available to even more areas of the market. All these factors, combined with others more eccentric and mythological, like the fact that the piece itself was supposed to comprise 1,000 words, making it £1 per word, produced a type of drama that has been characterised as postmodern. The author himself, as the opening blurb states, is presented with a Pynchonesque obliqueness that makes him almost invisible, faithful to post-Barthesian notions of authorship. At the same time, there is a strong reference to the modernist project, both in the advertising rhetoric which mentions *Waiting for Godot*, and in *Stirrings Still* itself. As an exercise the event can be read as a paradigm of the whole postmodern project: it covers both the high and low aspects of the market in both financial and “artistic” terms, it refers to previous modernist experimentation in the form of pastiche or self-referentiality or in the form of quotational art, it departs from the modernist fixation on narrative, time and language, and dwells instead on spatial dimensions (hence its performative quality).

The transition from modernism or the *historical avant-garde* to postmodernism and in particular how it affects theatrical practice is an area that has been much discussed and written about. It is interesting to note that in the work of theoreticians as diverse as Jurgen Habermas, Fredrick Jameson and Patrice Pavis, the work of Beckett occupies a privileged position. More often than not it is referred to as the turning point; the conjuncture at which modernist experimentation consolidates into postmodernist performance. The process itself is seen as a gradual diminishing of certain aspects integral to modernism. For Pavis postmodern theatre is characterised by its depoliticisation and its lack of coherence and totality. This, however, does not necessarily imply criticism. Pavis writes:

The apparent incoherence of the postmodern theatre object can be contrasted with the coherence of its mode of function and reception. This coherence has to do with its mode of construction and enunciation. ... For Brecht — who stops at the threshold of postmodernism — the making and the process are still predicated on what is made, on the meaning to be produced; after Brecht, in the work of Beckett, for example, making and enunciating form a signifier which cannot be reduced to a signified.

(Pavis 71)

According to Jameson this coherence in the mode of function and reception within a postmodern framework is dictated by market forces. More in the tradition of Walter Benjamin, Jameson sees the mode of construction as something which does carry ideological weight. The inability of the postmodern artefact to "be reduced to a signified" is not seen merely as a window to the much celebrated notions of ambivalence and ambiguity, but as a potentially dehistoricising and commodifying process. It is not so much the fact that postmodern theatre is rid of the Brechtian burden to voice critique on modes of production as the disturbing, according to Jameson, fact that it ends up celebrating those modes:

So, in postmodern culture, "culture" has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself: modernism was still minimally and tendentially the critique of the commodity and the effort to make it transcend itself. Postmodernism is the consumption of sheer commodification as a process.

(Jameson 1991: X)

In both these approaches modernism or the historical avant-garde (according to Pavis) still remains within a tradition of ideological critique. The lack of this political and historical dimension in one instance is seen as a case of emancipation and in the other as the ultimate form of appropriation and commodification. I wish to trace this transition comparing the early work of Beckett with the later pieces. In general I propose to study the work of Beckett as a test-case for the notion of postmodern theatre.

The early plays of Samuel Beckett owe more to the defiant and radical strand of the European avant-garde than to the strictly Anglophone modernism (notably apart from the works of James Joyce). His early plays, at the tail-end of the European modernist experiment, can be seen as a continuation and in many ways as a ramification of the cultural critique initiated by modernism. The fact that this experimentation is continued in dramatic form is again characteristic. After the trilogy (*Malloy*, *Malone Dies*, *The Unnamable*) Beckett is done with the Joycean style experimentation in language and linearity, and it is almost as if the work breaks out into space, into dramatic form. In this theatrical form the early plays (*Waiting For Godot*, *Endgame*, *Happy Days*) can be seen as subversive and dark, articulating a form of cultural critique. As the work moves into a postmodern framework its critical power seems to diminish, giving way to a mode of consolidation and containment. This lack of critical power is also followed by what Jameson calls "waning of effect." The need to be involved with the theatrical event, albeit in a non-Aristotelian manner, was still a crucial point for the historical avant-garde. Whether we refer to the Dadaist interventions, the Bauhaus architectural performances on buildings or the first performance of *Waiting for Godot* in the USA, the need to involve the audience, to bring about effect, was an integral part of the theatrical avant-garde. Jameson connects this with

the gradual spatialisation of the postmodern artefact:

The waning of effect, however, might also have been characterized, in the narrower context of literary criticism, as the waning of the great high modernist thematics of time and temporality, the elegiac mysteries of *duree* and memory... We have often been told, however, and I think it is at least empirically arguable that our daily life, our psychic experience, our cultural languages, are today dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time, as in the preceding period of high modernism.

(Jameson 16)

The spatialisation of the postmodern artefact stresses its performative quality. The idea of enactment becomes crucial. Instead of the modernist concern with time, memory and history, postmodernism propagates what Jameson calls “nostalgia-deco” and synchronicity. The past is referred to only for the sake of pastiche, a stylistic reference rather than a historical one. The notion of space, however, is an integral part of theatre as a distinct mode of artistic production. The idea of space is not only metaphorical, but physical. Theatre itself can be seen as a “locus;” a space where the written and the oral, the collective and the individual, the corporeal and the linguistic form a dialectic essential to theatrical practice. Bakhtin’s notion of carnival and Barthes’s so called “polyphony” of the theatre are realised mainly through spatial categories, namely the human form, and not through linguistic or idealistic ones.

This spatial dimension of theatre that “opens up” possibilities for critique is more prevalent in oral traditions or in ritualistic, ancient theatres of the past. The theatrical avant-garde turned to the “grand” theatres of the past or to popular theatrical traditions, in order to recover this sacred and holy dimension of the theatre, a tradition that encompassed the irreverent and the blasphemous together with the divine and the sacred. Again, this bridging of high and low culture that determines theatrical history (written/oral, sacred/blasphemous) makes it particularly pertinent to the postmodern debate. As early as 1915 the Futurists, together with the most of the theatrical avant-garde in Europe, were turning to the low and blasphemous theatrical traditions for inspiration. F. T. Marinetti writes:

In praise of the variety theatre. We have profound disgust for the contemporary theatre (verse, prose and music) because it wavers stupidity between historic reconstructions (a pastiche or a plagiarism) and the photographic reproduction of our daily life ... On the other hand we assiduously frequent the theatre of Varieties (Music Halls, cafe-chantants or equestrian circuses) which today offers the only spectacle worthy of a truly Futuristic spirit.

(Kirby 89)

In its more elevated expression this inspiration was sought in the ritualistic theatres of the East. The work of Artaud with all its Orientalist modes of

*othering* and appropriation was characteristic of this trend. Whether high or low, these modes of theatre were re-written in a modernist context in an attempt to rejuvenate and reactivate a European theatrical art that was considered to be "conservative and sterile." This avant-garde project is evident in the early works of Samuel Beckett that carry traces of *Commedia dell'Arte* influences and appropriations. This space that the avant-garde theatres retrieve from other theatrical traditions is a space that leads to possibilities of critique and subversion, but also in many instances, has been totally appropriated within a discourse of containment. The lament at the loss of what Artaud termed the "communal sacred" — that collective notion from which theatre derives and against which it defines itself — has led to radical experimentation in the theatres of the avant-garde and modernism. Much of this experimentation when shifting into a postmodern context, I will argue, has been defused and acts merely as narcissistic reference. The lack of a need to define itself against any world view — collective or not — heightens postmodernism's "narcissistic self-contemplation" (Hutcheon 1980).

In an article entitled "Modern Theatre Does Not Take (A) Place," Julia Kristeva comments on the disappearance of the "communal sacred":

In short, Mallarme asserts first, the disappearance of the sacred — of the communal sacred —, the absence of a sacred locus that is always the locus, the place, of theatre; and second, he asserts the eventual retreat of this sacredness into language. Proof: the post-Mallarmean survivors of the modern theatre are fantasies deprived of a public, while the most advanced experiments in writing address themselves uniquely to the individual unconscious, without speculating on the fantasies of the larger group.

(Kristeva 1977)

In short the two evils that were seen to have brought theatre to a dead end — language and individuation — were brought back triumphantly. The collective aspect of the oral tradition was re-written into an ever increasing solipsistic individuation and the corporeal, somatic dimension was being inscribed and replaced through language. We can trace this movement from the early Beckett of *Waiting for Godot* to the late Beckett of *Stirrings Still*. The former is a piece with strong grotesque elements, with circus and vaudeville techniques while the latter is self-referential and solipsistic, each relating in equivalent ways to its audience (or non-audience). "Characters" like Vladimir and Estragon no matter how alienated and deconstructed they appear, still define themselves, albeit in a negative dialectic, against a world view, against the notion or memory of a communal space. The later works like *Ohio Impromptu* are populated by beings that are like "a machine for discarding text without being involved in a plausible situation" (Pavis 67).

This gradual retreat into language and individuation at the expense of the more somatic and collective practices of theatre in the work of Beckett, is not

necessarily a linear or monologic process. His work is informed by the tension between the two, and in his early plays this tension is what articulates their critique. The techniques and discourses that Beckett re-writes from the theatre of the *Commedia dell'Arte*, from the circus, or from the vaudeville tradition are not merely "heightened" into a more elevated avant-garde, but enter into a relationship of polyphony and dialogism with each other. The concept of polyphony as analysed by Bakhtin, underlines the coexistence in a textual or extra-textual situation of a plurality of voices which do not extinguish each other, but exist to generate dialogical dynamism and critique. These voices do not express or fuse into a single subjectivity, but enact the notion of heterogeneity. Moreover, dialogism produces constant conflict and subversion in a movement that is self-generating and defying of the idea of containment. Dialogism and polyphony are two of the discourses that enter a text into intertextual relationships with other texts. Intertextuality is what essentially places a text into discursive relationships with culture at large. Bakhtin writes of the "semantic treasures" in the work of Shakespeare:

(they) ... were created and collected through the centuries and even millennia: they lay hidden in the language, and not only in the literary language, but also in those strata of the popular language that before Shakespeare's time had not entered literature, in the diverse genres and forms of speech communication, in the forms of a mighty national culture (primarily carnival forms) that were shaped through millennia, in theatre-spectacle (mystery plays, farces, and so forth) in plots whose roots go back to prehistoric antiquity, and, finally, in forms of thinking.

(Bakhtin 1986: 5)

Similarly intertextuality is what places a text within history and articulates its critical viewpoint. Beckett's early works are highly intertextual, drawing on other traditions and creating a polyphony that adds to their subversiveness.

The concept of intertextuality seems particularly pertinent in the analysis of theatrical practice as it applies itself beyond mere textual elements. It helps understand, and historically place, the spatial relationships of theatrical art. The human body, gesture, pace etc. all enter into intertextual relationships as well. The human form in the work of Beckett partakes in varying intertextual relationships with both other modes of theatre and other works by the same playwright.

As mentioned earlier, the corporeal dimension of the theatre is chiefly what connects it with, or enters it into a dialogue with the more blasphemous and irreverent "low" theatrical traditions. Like most of the avant-garde of his time, Beckett sees in the somatic elements of theatre a mode that is critical of language and its representational mechanisms. Oscar Schlemmer of the Bauhaus movement triumphantly exclaimed that "the history of the theatre is the history of the human form (Schlemmer 1961). Beckett seeks his renditions of the human form in the defiant Italian theatre of the 15th and 16th centuries. To these essentially *Commedia dell'Arte* type characters he

adds influences from other popular forms like the circus and vaudeville, and creates the physicality of roles like Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp.

Beckett's early plays are almost all inhabited by characters that can be termed grotesque in the Bakhtinian sense of the word. The *Commedia dell'Arte* influences are important here. For Bakhtin the grotesque is one of the main expressions of the carnivalesque. Against the notion of individuation, the grotesque body especially in the oral traditions of theatrical modes like the *Commedia dell'Arte*, is there not to differentiate the subject but to establish its lost unity with the world that surrounds it. This sacred, almost ritualistic role assigned to the human form makes it particularly relevant to a theatrical project that wants to restore the sacredness of theatre in general. The very physicality of the grotesque body is what gives it substance. It is the ultimate anti-humanist and anti-anthropomorphic rendition of the human form. In this sense it sounds essentially modernist as well. What is stressed is the ever changing, transsexual, heterogeneous nature of this body. Bakhtin writes:

The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created and builds and creates another body. Moreover, the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world.

(Bakhtin 1984: 317)

This body, which is in constant dialogue with the world, and both forms and is formed by it, is the ultimate locus of heterogeneity. Rather than expressing the homogeneous and consolidating view of the anthropomorphic subject, the grotesque body presents us with a three-dimensionalised critique of the renaissance subject. It is not heightened ideas that form the drama of this subject. The drama of such a body could only be a physical one. Eating, drinking, defecation, sweating, dismemberment are all aspects of the grotesque drama. Such bodily dramas are dominant in *Waiting for Godot*. Dropped trousers, manifest odours, beating, unexpected blows and suicide threats, connect Vladimir and Estragon with the grotesque characters of earlier theatrical traditions. Estragon exclaims:

ESTRAGON: (*Recoiling*) Who farted?

VLADIMIR: Pozzo

POZZO: Here! Here! Pity.

ESTRAGON: It's revolting.

(Beckett 1956, rpt 1985: 81)

In *Endgame* all Nagg is interested in is his pap:

NAGG: Me pap.

HAMM: The old folks at home! No decency left! Guzzle, guzzle that's all they

think of. (*He whistles. Enter Clov. He halts beside the chair*). Well! I thought you were leaving me.

CLOV: Oh, not just yet.

NAGG: Me pap!

HAMM: Give him his pap.

CLOV: There's no more pap.

HAMM: (*To Nagg*) Do you hear that? There's no more pap. You'll never get any more pap.

NAGG: I want me pap.

(Beckett 1958, rpt 1982: 15)

Winnie in *Happy Days* says:

I used to perspire freely. (*Pause*) Now hardly at all. (*Pause*) The heat is much greater. (*Pause*) The perspiration much less. (*Pause*) That is what I find wonderful. (*Pause*) The way man adapts himself (*Pause*). To changing conditions.

(Beckett 1961, rpt 1981: 27)

In enacting these physical relationships with the world (in Winnie's case half buried in it) Beckett's dramatic subjects are grotesque bodies in the act of becoming. Bakhtin says that "the most important of all human features for the grotesque is the mouth. It dominates all else. The grotesque face is actually reduced to the gaping mouth; the other features are only a frame encasing this wide-open bodily abyss" (Bakhtin 1984). We need only to picture Beckett's play *Not I* to see the connection between the grotesque tradition and to draw the parallels between the critique of the subject presented in *Not I* and that of the grotesque mode in general.

As a mode of presentation, the grotesque objectifies the human form, it changes people into things. Rather than dwell on the idealistic and symbolic differences that manifest the human subject, it chooses to stress its sameness to the world that surrounds it. The grotesque "subject" is made of flesh, bones, blood, in other words it is a materialistic body, one that defies the categorizations imposed by language and ideology. It is a subversive body, one that celebrates a lost collective oneness. Probably one of the most ancient functions of theatre, this function of the grotesque is parallel to the Dionysian idea of "ecstasy" where the aim, as with the grotesque, is to transgress the categories of gender, class, language, in a process that deconstructs the notion of the unified and unifying subject.

In an interview Billie Whitelaw, one of Beckett's favourite actresses, touches upon this issue of objectification. She writes:

And I look as if I'm carved out of stone, like sculpture... I think if people thought they were going to see a walking painting it would be closer to Beckett than imagining they were going to see a play.

(*The Guardian* 1986: 11)



This turning of people into things usually generates laughter. This laughter is not there to console and comfort but to disrupt, to criticise. Bakhtin sees laughter as one of the main structuring units of the carnivalesque. Henri Bergson writes “we laugh every time a person gives the impression of being a thing” (Bergson 97).

This carnivalesque laughter echoes throughout all the early Beckett plays. If we see the comic (since comedy appeared before tragedy) and the grotesque as expressing the darker, more defiant elements of theatre, then plays like *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* partake of this tradition. Their emphasis on the body refers back to what was probably the first theatrical drama, a bodily drama, sacred and blasphemous, there to re-enact the lost links with the world through the rituals of birth-death-resurrection. These ancient mysteries in their oral form still remained dominant in the *Commedia dell Arte*. The ritualistic sacrifice of the grotesque body, in its comic version, is a prevalent theme of the *Commedia*. As this theatrical death always entails resurrection, the life-death theme provides much of the comic effect in the *Commedia*. A contrast between a suicide scene in a typical *Commedia* scenario and a similar one in *Waiting for Godot* highlights their intertextuality:

ARLECCHINO: ... Alas, alas poor miserable Arlecchino. I want to drop dead here and now. And then history books would tell how Arlecchino died for love of Columbine. I'll go to my room, fasten a rope to the ceiling, climb on a chair, put my head in the noose, kick away the chair — and then — (*He imitates a hanged man*). I've made up my mind, nothing can stop me ... Hang myself? What an uninteresting way to die. That won't make me famous.

(Gherardi 69)

From *Waiting for Godot*:

ESTRAGON: Why don't we hang ourselves?

VLADIMIR: With what?

ESTRAGON: You haven't got a rope?

VLADIMIR: No.

ESTRAGON: Then we can't.

(*Silence*)

VLADIMIR: Let's go.

ESTRAGON: Wait, there's my belt.

VLADIMIR: It's too short.

ESTRAGON: You could hang onto my legs.

VLADIMIR: And who'd hang onto mine?

(Beckett 1956, rpt 1985: 93)

As grotesque figures, Vladimir and Estragon are enacting one of the main

functions of this type of theatre, that is to break down the life/death opposition. In doing so they generate laughter.

If we read the early Beckett plays as characteristic of a carnivalesque mode of theatre, they are immediately placed in relationships with other similar traditions. These relationships inform the intertextual quality of the plays and also add to their critical power. Dark and subversive, they are never solipsistic or self-contained, they presuppose an audience and consciously rely on their relationship to that audience. In these plays the emphasis on carnival occurs almost despite the modernist experimentation in theatre and not because of it. The later plays return to the concerns of high modernism and lose much of these initial qualities. At this stage, however, the work of Beckett still resists the fetishisation imposed by modernism. It is not self-composed and self-contained. It still determines, and is determined by, relationships which are intertextual and dialogical. These elements place it within a carnivalesque tradition and distance it from other modernist projects. Julia Kristeva writes on this tradition:

Carnavalesque structure is like the residue of a cosmogony that ignored substance, causality or identity outside its link to the whole, *which exists only in or through relationship*. This carnivalesque cosmogony has persisted in the form of an antitheological (but not anti-mystical) and deeply popular movement. It remains present as an often misunderstood and persecuted substratum of official Western culture throughout its entire history; ... As composed of distance, relationships, analogies and non-exclusive oppositions, it is essentially dialogical.

(Kristeva 1980: 78)

This web of relationships is what makes these texts historical. The critique they voice is at once political and empowering. It is worth mentioning once again the initial response to the first production of *Waiting for Godot* in the United States. As Martin Esslin records in *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961), a group of young actors decided to stage the play at the Saint Quentin penitentiary. This was in November of 1957 and the jail hadn't seen live theatre since 1913 when Sarah Bernhardt had appeared. Everyone was nervous as this was definitely not a show with dancing girls in it. After the initial disappointment the audience followed every word of the play. The record has it that they left shaken by the experience. Later, expressions from the play became part of their everyday language. Here was a performance that did not require a complete knowledge of the history of European thought in order to be understood, it engaged its audience in a critical dialogue without being didactic. I believe that this was possible with the early Beckett plays because they rely on theatrical structures and discourses which are carnivalesque.

The critical power and the historical dimension of these plays gradually vanishes as the work of Beckett becomes more enclosed, more self-

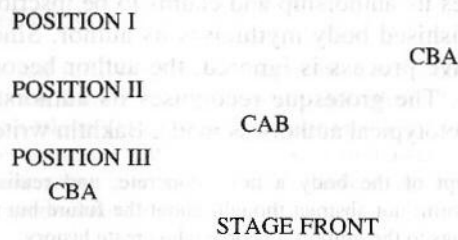
referential and starts to systematically ignore the audience. This is not only achieved through the notion of the “waning of effect” mentioned earlier, but is an almost “built-in” quality of the later plays. Plays like *Quad* or *What, Where* present themselves as finished objects that have to be perceived as a whole unit or not at all. Even *Catastrophe* uses the general themes of self-referentiality only to dissolve into further narcissistic self-contemplation. There is not much a performance can alter in these texts. “Their sort of text addresses itself as a whole to the audience, like a global poem tossed in the hearers’ laps to be taken or left as they please” (Pavis 1992: 57).

As early as *Acts Without Words I and II* (1956) the grotesque body starts to give way to the fetishised body. These plays contain the critique of the subject voiced in the earlier ones but their modes of presentation become more abstract and obscure, mystifying and self-contained. In these plays Beckett appears as the absolute master of ceremonies. He is the playwright, the director, as all directions are explicitly stated, and he is virtually the actors as well, as all their movements are predetermined. The scenic action for *Act Without Words I*, with a few slight alterations, is given in the stage directions:

Desert, Dazzling light. The man is flung backwards on stage from the right wing. He falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects. Whistle from right wing. He reflects, goes out right. Immediately flung back on stage he falls, gets up, immediately dusts himself, turns aside, reflects.

(Beckett 1958, rpt 1984: 43)

The playfulness, the openendedness, of the grotesque body gives way to these strictly determined and enclosed bodies of the one-act plays and later plays like *Come and Go*, *Quad*, and *What Where*. What is characteristic about these plays is that they are almost always accompanied by detailed diagrams outlining the movements of these scenic bodies. *Act Without Words II* is preceded by the following diagram:



(Beckett 1959, rpt 1984: 51)

This rendition of the body is not one that stresses its sameness with the world, its collective dimension, but one that in the tradition of high modernism seeks to separate and fetishise. This is a narcissistic presentation of the subject, one that manages to mythicise its creator and the whole

process of individuation. It portrays the illusion that it exists beyond relationships and is totally independent of any notion of an audience. It owes more to the *Mechanised Eccentric* of the Bauhaus and to Edward Gordon Craig's idealistic *Ubermarionette* than to the grotesque body of the carnival. In itself this fetishised body can be seen to continue the critique of the subject initiated by the grotesque. This critique, however, becomes less and less historical and more "metaphysical" and "universal." It mystifies its uniqueness and condemns its audience to inactivity or boredom. Having lost its collective and intertextual quality it becomes, as Theodor Adorno writes, solipsistic:

The individual himself is revealed to be a historical category, both the outcome of the capitalist process of alienation and a defiant protest against it, something transient himself... But although the prison of individuation is seen to be both prison and illusion — the stage set is the image of this kind of insight — art cannot break the spell of a detached subjectivity; it can only give concrete form to solipsism.

(Adorno 1991: 249)

The shift from the grotesque body of carnival to the fetishised body of modernism is enacted on many levels. Although it may be seen as continuing the critique of the subject, it no longer does so from the position of the collective, which is the traditional locus of theatre. The point of view has shifted. The position presented now is that of the individual. This form of the body in all its desperation and existential angst celebrates its uniqueness and its absolute self-containment. In the place of the collective it posits the transcendental notion of the "universal subject." In the context of this universalisation the solipsistic uniqueness of this subject is heralded as the *human condition*. It is defined by itself and by its author and resists dialogical relationships that would stress its historicity. In general, the only intertextual relationship it takes part in is with itself and with its author. Where the grotesque denounces its authorship and claims to be inscribed by voices of a collective, the fetishised body mythicises its author. Since the dialogical nature of the creative process is ignored, the author becomes a type of God of individuation. The grotesque recognises its authorship in everyone or no one, it is the prototypical authorless mode. Bakhtin writes:

Thus, in the grotesque concept of the body a new, concrete, and realistic awareness was born and took form: not abstract thought about the future but the living sense that each man belongs to the immortal people who create history.

(Bakhtin 1984: 367)

It is not only concepts of authorship that change drastically, but the relationship with the audience as well. For the grotesque it is essentially a place against which the theatrical act constantly defines itself. It is almost inconceivable for a grotesque spectacle to exist without an audience. The

fetishised body on the other hand and the type of theatre it enacts can exist almost independently of an audience. Totally enclosed and self-generating, its relationship to the audience is redundant. The only relationship it enacts is with its creator. Everything else is considered superfluous. This does not mean that the grotesque is necessarily a pleasant, uplifting, humanist spectacle. Quite the opposite, it is very cruel and anti-humanist. This however always involves an audience. The cruelty expressed through abstraction and stylisation is contained in the fetishised body and is never actually enacted. This quality is what makes it anti-theatrical in the end. The subversive laughter of the grotesque disappears, leaving its audience literally voiceless. Adorno writes of the type of laughter generated by Beckett's plays:

The laughter it arouses ought to suffocate the ones who laugh. This is what has become of humour now that it has become obsolete as an aesthetic medium and repulsive, without a canon for what should be laughed about, without a place of reconciliation from which one could laugh, and without anything harmless on the face of the earth that would allow itself to be laughed at.

(Adorno 257)

It may be argued that the drama of Samuel Beckett is concerned with the breaking down of this common "place of reconciliation" — the lack of a common discourse that would ideally reconstruct the lost collective. In a sense, theatre takes place in that space between the individual and the collective. The tension between the two, and their dialogical relationship, manifests one of the oldest functions of theatre. The works of Beckett inhabit that space only up to a point. His work gradually becomes all the more enclosed and confined. Their dialogism gives way to a highly stylised monologism, taking the angle of individuation through a universalising discourse. His manipulation of the body is one example of this process towards individuation and exclusion. From flexible and open-ended systems in the early plays they become tightly sealed entities. Bakhtin writes of this enclosed body:

It is self-sufficient and speaks in its name alone. All that happens within it concerns it alone, that is, only the individual, closed sphere. Therefore, all the events taking place within it acquire one single meaning: death is only death, it never coincides with birth: old age is torn away from youth; blows merely hurt, without assisting an act of birth. All actions and events are interpreted on the level of a single, individual life.

(Bakhtin 1984: 321)

The above quotation is in a way an analysis of the state of the subject once Adorno's "place of reconciliation" has disappeared. It also reads like a description of many a Beckett play. A reading could proceed claiming that the presentation of such a state alone constitutes a critique. Deprived of its intertextual relationships however, the fetishised body is essentially

monologic and partakes of the discourse it is trying to voice a critique against. Closing off his chapter on postmodern theatre, Pavis writes: "Postmodern theatre raises theory to the rank of a playful activity; it suggests as the only inheritance the faculty of replaying the past, rather than pretending to recreate and absorb it" (Pavis 72).

This study makes the hypothesis that the way the past was replayed in works like *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Ohio Impromptu* does not only signify a difference of time, but may also entail processes of appropriation and commodification. The denial of history and the potential open-endedness and ambivalence of postmodern theatre may be introducing totalities of its own. The presentation of the work of Samuel Beckett in this context acts as an example of avant-garde experimentation turned into postmodern theatre. The discourse of critique and subversion which is apparent in the early plays seems to give way to one of confinement and consolidation. The anarchic grotesqueness of *Waiting for Godot* turns into the solipsism of the one act plays and short pieces. I have attempted to trace this process applying Bakhtinian notions on cultural critique. Through this approach the Beckett body, his theatrical material, becomes confined and monological. From a discursive body it turns into a performative body. As such it is more interested in the postmodern notion of enactment rather than in the modernist idea of critique. It "replays the past" in ways that no longer rely on relationships, and in "performances" that are, at best, nostalgic of its lost intertextuality. The late Beckett pieces like *Stirrings Still* can be seen as only bearing traces of modernist notions of theatricality. At the same time, however, they can take part in "performances" or postmodern processes of enactment that treat them as finished, no longer merely fetishised, but commodified entities.

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Το έργο του Samuel Beckett φαίνεται να βρίσκεται ανάμεσα στις παραδόσεις του μοντερνισμού και του μεταμοντερνισμού. Η εργασία αυτή παρακολουθεί τη μετάβαση από την παράδοση του μοντερνισμού — τόσο θεματικά όσο και μορφολογικά — στην γλώσσα παράστασης του μεταμοντερνισμού. Η μετατόπιση αυτή προσεγγίζεται μέσα από την ανάλυση της ανθρώπινης μορφής, της σχέσης του θεάματος με το κοινό και τη νοητή σχέση συγγραφέα-κειμένου- παράστασης. Εξετάζεται και η ιδεολογική διάσταση αυτής της μετατόπισης ακολουθώντας την κριτική του μεταμοντέρνου, όπως αυτή εκφράζεται από τους Habermas και Jameson.



*The Portrait of Ira Aldridge by Taras Shevchenko*