Shimon Levy

**Notes Towards Beckett’s Plays as an Intensive Theatre Course**

“Among those we call great artists, I can think of none whose concern was not predominantly with his expressive possibilities, those of his vehicle, those of humanity.”[[1]](#endnote-1) Beckett’s comment regarding the painter Bram Van Velde is also an implicit recommendation to interpret his own works from the point of view of the creator, the medium and the recipient. His comment on Joyce, “his writing is not about something, it is that something itself”[[2]](#endnote-2), is equally characteristic of Beckett’s own works; while his note on Proust, “Man is the creature that cannot come forth from himself, who knows others only in himself, and who, if he asserts the contrary, lies,”[[3]](#endnote-3) invites a Socratic mode of both studying and teaching Beckett’s works, especially those meant to be performed: namely mediated through actors, directors, designers etc., who must place their selves in order to know others, any others – theatrical, radiophonic or cinematographic personae included. Moreover, in Beckett’s works the medium-oriented “how” is inseparable from the “what” of the message; therefore, the very performance of the piece does not describe but, rather, creates a new – fictitious as it may be – situation, a performative act, which is not “about” anything but first and foremost that very thing itself.

 Beckett, a creative artist, aspiring to reach beyond the discursive rationality of philosophic methodologies, was nonetheless well versed in both classical and contemporary philosophy, from the early pre-Socratic thinkers to Wittgenstein’s Logical Positivism and Sartre’s Existentialism. He also engaged with the Cartesian Body-Soul dilemma. Following Jaako Hintikka’s (and Rudolph Steiner’s in his *Philosophy of Freedom, 1894*) argument that the *cogito ergo sum* is a speech act rather than a syllogism,[[4]](#endnote-4) I contend that in Beckett’s performative works the *cogito* is replaced by “I am present… hence I am” in his stage works, since presence is the minimum any stage requires; “I emit a noise hence I am” in his radio-plays; and “I am photographed hence I am” in his film and TV plays. Beckett’s works are replete with exquisite examples of media-oriented self-referential expressions, and he seldom permitted the original medium of a particular work to be transposed, like turning a radio-play into a film, a film into play, etc. His consequent medium-oriented approach as Stanley Gontarski rightly noted, indeed invites a fresh analytical perspective; and a renewed approach to the methodology of teaching Beckett’s works – especially his plays. Rather than McLuhan’s famous “the medium is message”, Beckett posits the message as inseparable from the medium.

 In the following presentation I focus on several of Beckett’s dramatic and theatrical expressive means, as represented in some of his plays. With a few exceptions, he went from a relative wealth of expressive theatrical, radiophonic and cinematographic means to fewer and more self-reflexive (“meta-mediumal” or ars-poetic) means in his later performative works. The theatrical non-verbal languages such as movement, lighting, costume, usage of space etc. in *Waiting for Godot* (1952) for example, are certainly “richer” than in later plays like *Not I* (1972), *Footfalls* (1975-6) or *Rockaby* (1980). Paralelly, *All That Fall* (1956) is richer in radiophonic expressive means than *Radio II* (1960). From *Film* (1963) Beckett moved to writing and directing the more “spiritual” – some say “ghostly” - and poetic TV scripts like *…but the clouds…* (1976), *Nacht und Traeume* (1982) and others. Moreover, in many of Beckett’s performative works we detect a clear dominance of a one or two particular medium-oriented expressive means.

If *Waiting for Godot* is “about” anything other than itself, it is surely about Time, because “waiting” obviously hypostatizes the passage of time, both on and offstage, as a still growing number of scholars and the legions of their disciples justly and boringly continue to argue. *Waiting for Godot* is replete with notions of time, with notes and remarks on how it passes or not, on time as torture, as in “have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time”; and occasionally, time as entertainment: “It’ll pass the time”, as the most typical theatrical time, the continuous present. In this context it is interesting to compare *Krapp’s Last Tape*’s (1958) treatment of time with that of *Waiting for Godot*. Beckett locates the play in a late evening in the future, thus dragging both dramatic past and future into the present: “time past and time future, what might have been and what has been going to one end, which is always present” to quote TS Eliot, rather than his better known “time present and time past are both perhaps present in time future”. Understandably, waiting is a safe theatrical mode of hypostasizing time, as suggested by the play’s name. Perhaps Beckett treats time in *Waiting for Godot* as the very plot of the piece, and sometimes also as a stage prop. This may also led us to consider whether Godot is not only offstage, but also off-time…

Space, another Aristotelian basic dramatic unity, dominates the claustrophobic stage-space of Endgame, Beckett’s second published play. The characters are closed in a room, Clov’s “private” space is the kitchen, Hamm’s is his wheel chair, while Nag and Nell are stuck in ashbins. Endgame, retrospectively, illuminates the open road of *Waiting for Godot*. Whereas *Waiting for Godot*’s movement – linking time and space – “feels” centrifugal since Didi and Gogo cannot go away, must come back and wait; the claustrophobic *Endgame*’s feels like centripetal movement – “I’ll leave you” – “You can’t|” and indeed Clov freezes on the threshold of offstage and does not leave Hamm.

In *Endgame* Beckettuses meta-theatricality as a leading device, a play within a play, beginning with “me to play” and ending with mutual thanks exchanged between the main roles. The opening constitutes a slow, tragi-comic and ritual series of opening mini-theatre curtains, a master-piece in gradually revealing the relevant acting areas on stage: Clov draws the window curtains, removes the sheets from the ashbins, the lids too, and then puts them back, and takes Hamm’s sheet. Soon Hamm continues to unfold like the stage – removing the handkerchief, then taking off his glasses, then rubbing his eyes…

*Happy Days* lays a heavy weight on two theatrical elements, dialogue and stage-properties. The props in *Happy Days* gradually become highly significant when Winnie is unable to reach them anymore in the second act. Therefor words become “things” and *vice versa*. Equally brilliant is Beckett’s stratagem in reflecting actor-audience relationships through Winnie talking forwards (to the audience) to Willie who is actually behind her. Beckett succeeds in creating the illusion that it is Willie who witnesses Winnie’s dialogue with the audience rather than the audience witnessing her talking to Willie. [See Levy, *Beckett* 1990:93] If this subtle and highly poetic consideration of audience-actor relationships – the most important component in the theatre – is not clear enough, Beckett puts in Winnie’s mouth the little monologue, indeed a quoted real or imaginary dialogue of Shower and Cooker, German for watching and looking, who gape at her and talk about her like the real audience in the auditorium.

This man Shower or Cooker -- no matter -- and the woman -- hand in hand -- in the other handbags -- standing there gaping at me -- “ ... What’s she doing?” he says -- “What’s the idea!” he says, “stuck up to her diddies in the bleeding ground” -- coarse fellow -- “what does it mean?” He says -- “what’s it meant to mean?” (*CDW*, 164)

The real protagonist of *Play* (1962-63) is certainly light, a technical device, a theatre tool, usually silent but here active, talked-to and emphatically dominant as an open metaphor for the eye of the Other, of God? Of Theatricality itself. As a good metaphor, light in *Play* is both an image and a real thing at the same time. Is it “mere eye? No mind. Opening and shutting on me. Am I as much as […] being seen?” says M and gets no answer*.* (CDW 317)

Light, perhaps the most delicate and sensitive theatrical means of expression, is treated by Beckett with particular creative originality, all the way from *Eleutheria* to *What Where*. With a few exceptions Beckett’s stages till *Not I* turn gradually darker and the lighting more focused. *Endgame* gets a grey light, *Happy Days* – a very bright and scorching desert-like light, related to as “Hail Holy light” on the one hand but also as “Hellish light”, by Winnie; in *Krapp’s Last Tape* there is little light, and only on Krapp’s table; light only on the table in *Ohio Impromptu*; two lamp-lights only on A and B’s desks in TII “soft light from above only and concentrated on playing area” – rest of stage as dark as possible in *Come and Go*. “One sees little in this light”, Flo says. The light on the strip in *Footfalls* must be dim, strongest at foot level, less on body, least on head – thus creating a sense of floating for the pacing M. And a single strong spot on Mouth in *Not I*.

W1, W2 and M In *Play* are lit by light, talk to it, talk only when lit; light is their motivating force. When it’s dark they seem not to exist. Light here is a puppeteer, a mysterious force, divine, perhaps, or merely an eye? An inquisitor, a torturer, “the Other”? Nevertheless, more than merely focusing on stage lighting – and whoever has directed *Play* according to the playwright’s directions knows that the person in charge of the light is more than a merely a technician –Beckett’s treatment of light is no less than a Copernican revolution. Light not only illuminates the stage characters and objects, but is itself lit, explored and questioned. By correcting our understandable mistake regarding who turns around whom, the Polish genius situated the observing consciousness in the center, rather than Earth or the Sun, and turned it into self-consciousness.

*Come and Go* (1965) focuses on the exits and entrances of three women, faces shaded, resembling each other, sounding alike except for the three “oh”s and two lines that follow. Their movement must be silent, their posture on their bench – erect, establishing a sense of floating. In this fascinating dramaticule Vi, Flo and Ru constantly cross the line between here and there, on stage and offstage, light and darkness, life and death. Rather than puppets, however, the three women seem more like mock angels, sweet ghosts. The secret, and Beckett’s plays often contain one or more secrets – is that none of the women knows about herself that she is dead, and is stunned to learn this also about her two friends. If this is the case, this ghost-play is both funnier and more serious than it might appear.

In *A Piece of Monologue* (1979) Beckett again revolutionizes traditional theatricality, and turns his stage instructions – the so-called auctorial text - into the actually spoken text of the motionless speaker. The audience is hence invited to complete the “action” and imagine it “happening”’ - not “just spoken” - on a minimal but highly suggestive stage design, including a skull-like lamp and a pallet bed. The play’s text opens with “Birth was the death of him” and ends, not much more cheerfully, with “The dying and the going […] the unaccountable. From nowhere. On all sides nowhere. Unutterably faint. The globe alone. Alone gone.” One truly wonders how stage instructions turn into a monologue which activates an otherwise motionless stage.

Technically, emotionally and conceptually *Not I* (1972) is considered a highly demanding play. Having directed it with nine actresses in Hebrew, German and English between 1975 and 2016, I still wonder how much “I” there is in the so many “Not I’s”, of Beckett himself, of his translators, of the actresses of course, and of the character who vehemently rejects the first person singular. One tentative conclusion I have arrived at is that without an authentic investment of one’s real biography – especially the biography of the actress, in the dramatic life-story of Mouth, the play cannot and would not “work”. *Not I* – to repeat – is not about (theatrical) self-reference, but indeed that thing itself. It is the performative act of self-creation in Beckett’s texts that invites the audience to do the same.

Presented with a self-negating, self-avoiding or self-rejecting and almost fully disembodied dramatic character, actors of *Not I* must indeed “drag up the past” and make it present in and for the here and now of the unique, never-the-same tonight’s performance. They are practically conditioned to learn about their roles primarily from the physically immediate, often painful and confining whereabouts on stage.[[5]](#endnote-5) In such spaces they are virtually forced to harness their whereabouts *vis-à-vis* their selves. The actress must refer to a She when she vehemently avoids the first person singular. Is the circumscribed and denied “I” the “self” of the actress? Logically it is not, because the actress is not She (as in “What?.. Who?.. No!.. She!…”) and therefore she, the actress, can say so without lying. However, the “I” cannot be determined as the “I” of any given member of the audience either. Yet tentatively, illusorily, or artistically it is indeed the “I” of whoever posits his or her I for the fictitious characters, be it author, director, actor, or audience. In order to initiate such a hermeneutic search for real or fictitious selves in the theatre, it must therefore be the “I” of the actress who starts the cycle in a live performance.

**Directing as a metaphor for oppression**

The manipulated, perhaps tortured or made up to look tortured, puppet-like protagonist at the beginning of *Catastrophe* (1982) is transformed into an almost redeemed actor at the end, in one of Beckett’s relatively optimistic plays. This intensely meta-theatrical piece presents a snide metaphor on directing theatre as an act of oppression, while also – in the end – offering the actor a lot of light – a metaphor and not a metaphor at the same time. And, I must confess – I dragged the last fade-out on the actor’s slightly smiling face for long 20 seconds. I also wonder whether Beckett was remembering Brecht’s words “moegen Andere von Ihrer Schande reden, ich rede von der meine” (“let others talk of their shame, I talk of mine”) when he used theatre as an honest means and an image to protest against the political oppression of Vaclav Havel, to whom he dedicated *Catastrophe*.

The space is an empty stage, but the active element here – again - is undoubtedly the light. Due to a series of instructions passed from a tyrannical director to an (almost?) obedient assistant, who undresses P (protagonist) and changes his posture on a plinth, the audience is gradually provoked into deciding which of the characters is morally worse: the director, the assistant, the morally indifferent light technician – here indeed only a technician, uninterested in “what” he is lighting… or the asinine protagonist-actor who allows “them” to pester him. Or perhaps it is us, in allowing human degradation, albeit fictitious and theatrical as it is, to happen right before our eyes, in our presence and, therefore, with our tacit consent? *Catastrophe* is “about” the ethics of standing-by, of watching evil without intervening. But finally the bad guys – director and assistant - disappear into offstage, leaving the actor alone to face his real as well as fictitious audience.

Though Beckett himself found *Eleutheria* (1947) “seriously flawed”, [JK, 363] this first long play offers a sophisticated theatre workshop, in which many motifs and typical Beckettian dramatic techniques used in his later plays can be clearly detected. *Eleutheria* may at times be overly explicit or even somewhat laborious, as Beckett himself probably thought, but its dramatic text nevertheless offers a surprising, indeed revolutionary, number of highly coherent (meta-)theatrical devices harnessed to the main theme: personal freedom, as does *Catastrophe*, one of Beckett’s last plays.

*Eleutheria* is full of revealing stage instructions that relate to space. Already here Beckett employs offstage which later in his works becomes a major theatrical break-through, and combines it with what can conveniently be presented as a hermeneutical circle of Author, Actors, Audience in their self-referential aspect, as the very foundation of the theatrical situation. Of the three Aristotelian dramatic unities Space is the main non-verbal theatrical element of *Eleutheria*. Beckett, in more than three pages, describes

…a split set, with two very different decors juxtaposed. Hence there are two simultaneous actions: the main action and the marginal action. The latter is silent, apart from a few short phrases, the stage business there being confined to the vague attitudes and movement of a single character. In fact it is not so much a place of action as a site, which is often empty. (Eleutheria, trans. Barbara Wright, Faber & Faber, London , Boston 1995; p.5) […]

The text in *Eleutheria* is almost exclusively concerned with the main action. The marginal action is for the actor to determine, within the limits of the indications in the following note. “[…] The two rooms share the whole width of the rear wall as well as the same floor, but when they pass from Victor to his family they become domesticated and respectable. Like the water from the open sea becoming the water in the harbour. The theatrical effect of this dualistic space, then, should be produced less by the transition than by the fact that Victor’s room takes up three quarters of the stage, and by the flagrant discrepancy between the furniture on either side.” [p 5]

In this first full-length play, Beckett prepares his unique usage of offstage for his plays to come. Offstage in many, especially modern, plays is both a technique and a “content”, a medium as well as a message, a concept and an image, a theatrically active element that manages to escape the paradox of “expressing the inexpressible”, and present void, nothingness and emptiness, as well as more emotionally charged notions such as “seclusion”, “loneliness”, “being there” etc.), without refuting them. As a shadowy *doppelgänger*, offstage in *Eleutheria* is clearly designed to function as a major, rather than “a marginal”, partner.

Some of Beckett’s works reveal a unique brinkmanship between an intellectually skeptical, often sardonic rejection of religiosity, and an equally prevalent yearning for the “beyond”, whatever “it” may be, spirituality, one dares to assume. Notions of the “beyond” hover in and above Beckett’s drama like a restlessly re-appearing Godot, or rather the child in the play, about whom Beckett told his friend Gottfried Büttner in Berlin in 1975, when he directed *Waiting for Godot* at the Schiller Theater: “He is not from here”. This asymptotic tendency towards the “beyond” is already manifest in *Eleutheria,* presented – or represented – through the black aura of offstage.

 Beckett the playwright is strongly implied through Victor and even explicitly so in the text: “Samuel Beke, Beke… he must be a cross between a Jew from Greenland and a peasant from the Auvergne”. [136] Victor/Beckett’s refusal to disclose his reasons for his recluse behavior, or actually to maintain his quest for spiritual freedom, recurs often as a main motif in Beckett’s later plays, beginning with the waiting for Godot, according to some interpretations, and on to the “mole” (same term used in *Eleutheria*, p.161!) in *Radio II*. Is it Beckett himself represented as C in *Theatre II?* In *Cascando* the “story” motif is connected with the “extrication” process and with life itself: “he opens nothing, he has nothing to open, it’s in his head.” [CDW 300] More explicitly the Victor theme appears in *Cascando* in

“They say, that is not his life, he does not live on that. They don’t see me, they don’t see what my life is, they don’t see what I live on, and they say, that is not his life, he does not live on that. [Pause.] I have lived on it… till I’m old. Old enough”. (CDW 300)

The audience, the third important theatrical element, is represented in *Eleutheria* and actually invited onstage as “spectator”, in a role often more serious than it might seem to the audience in light of his critical entertaining remarks. The “audience” becomes an implied character too in Beckett’s later plays. Didi and Gogo are also Lucky and Pozzo’s audience, and vice versa. A similar on-stage audience-actors device is used for Hamm and Clov in *Endgame*, as well as for Winnie and Willie in *Happy Days*, as noted above. Some Beckett plays end with an almost explicit gesture to the audience: the handkerchief in *Theatre II*, Willie’s hand stretched toward Winnie, the auditor in *Not I* whose “four brief movements” show a helpless compassion, thus inviting the audience to experience as outsiders what goes on inside “Not I”. Finally, Victor, a distant relative of Melville’s Bartleby, of Dostoyevsky’s Prince Mishkin, of certain Kafka characters, will turn his “emaciated back on humanity”. [170] In a brilliant stage instruction, following those relating to Victor moving in the marginal action, Beckett foreshadows Victor’s turning his back on humanity and describes a passage as coming to an abrupt end, “as if overcome by a feeling of fatigue and fatuity”, [140] perfectly in line with the opening note of act III: “Krap family side swallowed up by orchestra pit” [118], in which both space and acting-style/action fall into offstage, inertia, passivity and nothingness.

In *Eleutheria* Beckett seems to deal in his creative life with this most important theme, freedom, through self-referential meta-theatricality and offstage, leaving people – his audience - free to respond as they wish, freely. Perhaps *Eleutheria* is not Beckett’s best play, but it is certainly one of his most interesting ones. Its “flaws”, even more than some of its revolutionary achievements, are highly revealing, at least insofar as Beckett was coping with his creative if not personal freedom.

1. Samuel Beckett, *Proust and Three Dialogues with George Duthuit* (London: John Calder, 1965), 120. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Samuel Beckett, *Dante... Bruno. Vico .. Joyce* (In *Our Exagmination* etc*.*) (London: Faber & Faber, 1972), 14. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Beckett, *Proust, p. 66* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. Jaaco Hintikka, “Cogito, Ergo Sum, Inference or Performance”, in *Meta-Meditations*, ed. Alexander Sesonke and Noel Fleming (Belmont, CA.: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1965), 58. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Similar to Nag and Nell in their ashbins, or W1, M and W2 in their burial urns in Play. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)