«Who is waiting for what in Endgame: the unresolved contradictions of theatricality?»

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Most critics would agree that Beckett bends, when he is not breaking, most of the rules designed to make the audience believe that they are actually witnessing a slice of life taking place before their very eyes on the stage, designed to make them identify with the characters and forget their own position as spectators in an auditorium. It is easy to find examples of such rule-bending even in the early plays. Opinion diverges however, when it comes to deciding on the consequences of this anti-illusionism. François Noudelmann argues that Beckett’s plays eliminate emotion:

Beckett élimine systématiquement tout pathos, contredisant par avance les commentateurs qui évoqueraient son pessimisme ou son optimisme. Ni les personnages, ni leur situation, ne sont sympathiques ou antipathiques, car le spectateur n’a pas à souffrir avec eux. Leur présence se donne au-delà du sentiment et même de l’émotion. (75)

This is not at all the opinion of Gerald Wesales on the subject of Endgame:

The play is intentionally artificial, of course, but that does not keep it from demanding audience allegiance—identification even—with its characters, attachments as sentimental as those we are likely to feel for Vladimir and Estragon in Godot. (107)

This same view is expressed by Matthew Davies in a more recent article:

Yet Beckett creates more than a spectacle, more than a chose vue, from which the spectator remains emotionally detached. (81)

How are we to account for such divergent opinions when both attitudes seem to be based on the massive presence of theatricality in the works? It is perhaps necessary to reconsider conventional wisdom as regards the subversion of theatrical codes and conventions.

Brecht, in his theoretical writings, claims that to display theatre’s inherent artifice is to enable the audience to stand back from the drama,
focusing less on what is happening to the characters and more on why it is happening, the external circumstances that have allowed it to happen. Hence, we find the emphasis on the role of scientific observer to be assumed by the spectator, the emphasis on the intellect rather than the emotions, a sense that the theatre is endowed with the power to reveal some kind of truth to the audience. Although it is not certain that Brecht’s plays themselves actually work in this way, the theory has received considerable attention.

We should not, of course, ignore other ways in which theatricality and the flouting of theatrical convention function. The theatre of Tom Stoppard, for example, suggests another approach. His plays, especially the early ones, show how very different results can be achieved by subverting illusionism. I would argue that a play like *The Real Inspector Hound* or *Travesties* elicits a response from the audience which is intellectual rather than emotional, based on aesthetic rather than political or ideological criteria. If any hidden truth is to be found here it is surely connected to the notion that the power of the theatre to create its own world is absolute. Hence, we experience that exhilarating feeling that the plays celebrate a world of infinite possibilities.

Beckett’s plays do not function either like the former or the latter illusion-breaking models. Neither the intellectual rationalism of Brecht nor the theatrical virtuosity of Stoppard seems to correspond to our response to a play like *Endgame*. Our aim in this paper is to concentrate on how the play positions the spectators, hence the question in the title. I shall try to show that Beckett’s refusal to play by the rules does not place the audience at a critical or aesthetic distance from the universe of the play. In fact, analysis of *Endgame* seems to suggest that it is the very breaking of the rules of illusionism which involves the spectator in the fiction.

The audience’s first contact with the fictional world of *Endgame* takes place when they view «the bare interior» announced in the first line of the opening stage directions (5). The description that follows confirms Davies’ contention that we are in the presence of: «traditional theatre architecture [...] in a relatively conventional pursuit of sustained theatrical illusion» (77). The walls, windows and door seem to belong to a naturalistic stage set. The fact that various objects on the stage are covered by sheets, which are gradually removed by Clov in the opening sequence,
far from perturbing us, actually holds out the possibility that all will be revealed to the audience. The slow process of removing and folding the sheets, first from the two ashbins then from the armchair where Hamm is seated, further reinforces spectator anticipation of rational explanation.

However, this anticipation proves to be ill-founded. The play very quickly sets up a series of contradictions, leading us to question these assumptions. First, it seems that the stage set is functioning as a living room in the most literal sense of the word, since beyond the limits of this space, there is no life, if the characters are to be believed. «Outside of here it's death» declares Hamm (42). Into this narrow space, the characters' existence is concentrated. Our sense of the compression of space is, of course, accentuated by our discovery of the presence of Nagg and Nell in the ashbins, contradicting, first, our assumptions concerning the opposition between the outside and the inside and then, more importantly, questioning the basic opposition between the human and the inanimate. By the end of the play, even the idea of a living room can be questioned since it is here that Nell dies.

The play continues in a similar vein, setting up expectations on the one hand through the use of stage conventions, only to subvert the convention almost immediately afterwards. The presence of the door and the two windows functions in this way. They suggest that this prison-like interior has openings to an outside world. Our access to this outside world is, however, severely restricted. The opening sequence indicates how difficult or even impossible it will be to see out of these windows. Clov needs a ladder to reach them. The first time he looks out in the silent sequence at the beginning, we learn nothing. In fact, we are never to discover what lies beyond these windows.

As far as the door is concerned, the problem is slightly different. Clov's kitchen, mentioned several times in the dialogue by both him and Hamm (5, 9 and 11) at first seems to be in keeping with traditional stage space. After all, a living room might well lead to a kitchen. However, we are never really given the impression that this kitchen exists. Firstly, Clov's description of it suggests an empty cube (5). Secondly, when asked to specify what keeps him so busy there, he responds evasively: «I look at the wall» (11). It is therefore hard for the spectator to imagine what this kitchen might look like since we are given no clues. In fact, Beckett seems
to be playing with the traditional convention of extending stage space by evoking the off-stage area since this kitchen has no specific identity. It seems rather to have more in common with the wings of a theatre where the actors wait for their cue to come on stage: «I'll lean on the table, and look at the wall, and wait for him to whistle me» is Clov's announcement (6). As we will see later, this idea is reinforced by the way that Clov acts as a kind of stage hand bringing on the props. Beckett, we conclude, has decided not to make use of the immediate off-stage area to extend the fictional space through sound or visual indications.

It is, of course, possible to open up fictional space through the dialogue. However, here again, the audience’s expectations are confounded. The references to specific places, real places incidentally, are few and far between (Ardennes and Sedan on page 13, Lake Como on page 15), buried in the vague and contradictory reminiscences of Nagg and Nell.

When, in the second inspection scene, Clov looks out of the window again using the telescope, we hope to be given more details. Instead, his responses to the insistent questions of Hamm, who voices the growing impatience and curiosity of the spectators at this point, insist more on what is «the same» (20) or no longer there. It is words expressing negation that dominate: «no», «nothing», «zero» (20-21). The only description of what he claims to see is imprecise: the sea or ocean through one window, the earth through the other and even this difference is open to question since the waves are said to resemble “lead” and the light outside said to be grey, like the on-stage interior. Hamm’s story of the mad painter/engraver should dispel any remaining hopes of further clarification. Dragged to the window to witness both the earth and the ocean in full splendour, he only sees ashes (28), leading the audience back to the grey stage space with its ascheans. In short, we are never to discover what, if anything, lies just beyond the stage walls. These walls remain frustratingly impermeable.

The so-called “fourth wall” however, which functions according to the strictest of rules in conventional plays, proves less impermeable. The spectators, of course, are supposed to be able to see and hear the characters while the reverse is not true. On two occasions, Beckett breaks through the fourth wall in an unexpected and anti-illusionistic fashion. First, Clov turns his telescope on the audience and comments ironically: «I see ... a multitude ... in transports ... of joy» (20). By putting his
inspection of the world beyond the windows on the same level as his
inspection of the audience, the play spills over into the auditorium.
Likewise, when Hamm throws his whistle into the auditorium, his gesture
constitutes a physical invasion of audience space:

The last lines of the play have Hamm withdrawing into solitude, after he
has pierced the barrier between audience and spectacle with the whistle
he throws into the auditorium. (Connor, 140)

The audience, like the characters, is trapped in the narrow world of the
stage set, which appears increasingly sealed off from any hypothetical
outside world. The fact that Beckett does not try to make the theatrical
space function according to the norms of illusionistic theatre in no way
lets the audience off the hook as far as our sense of sharing the characters’
imprisonment is concerned.

When we look at temporal organisation of the play, our impression
of enforced enclosure continues. Here again Beckett discards most of the
conventional devices used to create represented time. Our expectations of
finding out something about what went before are immediately thwarted
since the playwright does everything he can to make the duration of the
fictional action coincide with the duration of the performance,
abandoning any semblance of starting in medias res, multiplying, through
gesture, the signs that indicate that both action and performance are about
to begin (drawing back the curtains, removing the sheets) and then
suggesting, through words, that the action is actually on the point of
ending, thereby shortening dramatic time even more.

Whereas we might expect events reported in the dialogue to help us
reconstruct some kind of past chronologically, Endgame makes this
difficult. Past events remain imprecise and contradictory, part of that
uncertain territory in which memory and story overlap.

The stories which Hamm, Nagg, Nell, and eventually Clov, tell are not
revelations about the past but actions in the present. [...] Hamm
remembers and creates simultaneously. Remembering is not repetition it
is calling forth, making past activity present. (Keyssar 232)

It is well nigh impossible to separate anecdote from recollection.
Clov’s account (9) of how he begged on his knees to have a bicycle is
strangely echoed in Hamm’s story of the beggar (33), blurring the barrier
between what is supposed to have happened and what is announced as being part of Hamm’s chronicle.

Even the most explicit time markers are remarkably unreliable. The word «yesterday» is challenged in a number of ways, by Nell (13 and 15) and more violently by Hamm and Clov (28) who both seem to question the possibility of using language to order time. This challenges the assumption that language is precisely how the theatre creates the illusion of time other than the present. Hamm, for instance, protests at Clov’s use of the word: «Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!»

As for the future, towards which the events of the play are ostensibly leading, the signs are ambiguous. The most obvious example of reference to the future is Clov’s repeated promise/threat/announcement of his intention to leave (repeated at least ten times). The hypothetical future is evoked when Hamm tells Clov to eliminate the flea since «humanity might start from there all over again» (22). Yet, other signs suggest that the future is already part of the present. The characters prophesy the future, by embodying it physically. Hamm announces that one day Clov will be a blind invalid like him (23). We even experience a kind of double anticipation. Nagg expresses the hope that one day Hamm will call out for him in vain: «I hope the day will come when you’ll really need to have me listen to you, and need to hear my voice» (35). Hamm himself anticipates this moment in his penultimate soliloquy, featuring the future perfect form: «I’ll have called my father and I’ll have called ... [he hesitates] ... my son» (41). Finally, we actually witness him calling out for his father in the final soliloquy (49). Are we then to conclude that we should abandon speculation about the fictional future or past and concentrate on the present?

Even the present proves complicated since the events we witness unfold in both a continuous and discontinuous manner. On the one hand, the action runs continuously from beginning to end with no breaks (no acts, scenes or intervals) to allow the action to move forward. As we saw above, both the action and the dialogue suggest that the action of the play starts one morning (5-6). On the other hand, the time of day once established is quickly contested when Hamm asks to be put to bed (7). Further doubts are expressed when Hamm comments: «In the morning
they brace you up and in the evening they calm you down. Unless it’s the other way round» (17).

In fact, it is the present moment of the performance which counts, more than the chronology of the fiction. The present of the performance refuses to choose between moving forward relentlessly towards an inescapable end and going round in circles. On the one hand, the highly repetitive structure of the dialogue in terms of both verbal forms and vocabulary and the equally repetitive organisation of movement and gesture (fetching objects, looking out of the windows, taking a tour round the room) create the impression that nothing new can happen. On the other hand, the compression and concentration of theatrical time confronts the spectators with a visual and verbal display of their own future decline. We witness simultaneously on stage the progression of life through several stages up to and including death. In Endgame, Beckett carries off a feat which is difficult to achieve on stage: he makes time visible. By making no attempt to construct a chronological story for his characters, Beckett confronts the spectators with their own mortality and places it under their noses, so to speak, without offering them a clear fictional chronology as protection. Here again, there is no respite for the spectators, little to make the experience of waiting more bearable.

We have so far suggested that Beckett’s use of theatrical space and time prevents the spectators from developing those rationalising strategies which might help them account for the bleak picture of isolation, futility and suffering. There are no convenient explanations on offer. The characters, too, constantly evade our attempts either to identify with them completely or to dissociate ourselves from them. Critics have all noted the way in which the characters function primarily as performers. Davies, for example, notes that: «Beckett’s characters are all actors by necessity» (Davies 80).

The four characters are given some distinctive features such as a name and some kind of a relationship to the others. Hamm’s position as master is reinforced through the constant orders he addresses to Clov, for example. The characters are also distinguished through their different physical infirmities. Yet, our attempts to pin down these characters as if they were conventional theatrical figures soon run into difficulties just when we think we have worked them out. We may note how the dialogue is
frequently presented as following a pre-established pattern with the same questions and answers being proposed (7, 25). In this respect, the dialogue reinforces the circularity of the play’s spatial movement and temporal organisation. Secondly, any sense that the dialogue helps define the character is undermined by having them echo each other’s lines. («Why this farce, day after day?» Clav and Nell, 12 and 21). Sometimes, several voices seem to echo each other although there may only be one speaker, as for example in Hamm’s last soliloquy, blocking our attempts to link character and speech. Intertextuality further heightens this phenomenon of overlapping voices. The instability of the use of language in the play is made apparent by the characters’ ability to shift to diametrically opposed positions almost instantaneously as if the necessity of bringing a sequence of dialogue to an end counted more than any semblance of coherent characterization (see examples on pages 8, 10 and 24).

All critics have noticed how the dialogue is full of metatheatrical references («farce» on page 12 and 21; «dialogue» on page 36; «aside», «soliloquy» and «underplot» on page 46; «exit» on page 48) yet, how does this affect the audience’s response to these characters and what they say? How are we to respond to Hamm’s repeated statement: «Me to play» (6, 41, and 48)? Where we might expect these reminders of the fictional status of what we are witnessing to defuse dramatic tension, it is perhaps not really the case, since drawing our attention to the theatrical nature of the dialogue does not stop the audience from being involved.

On the contrary, in many ways it does not so much distance the characters from the spectators as invite the spectators to question their own action as spectators. If it is obvious that Beckett’s characters embody failure of one sort or another, it can also be argued that the spectators do not fare much better. They are appealed to in different ways. Most of the time we are placed in the same position as the onstage characters, without ever knowing more than they do. We are forced to listen to the stories, jokes and anecdotes of the characters, then invited to listen to an assessment of the story-teller’s performance. Finally, we are given comments on the reaction produced by the story or joke. Each time we seem to get it wrong. If we laugh at Nagg’s joke about the tailor, we are poor judges since Nagg claims he «tell[s] the story worse and worse» (16).
The play is written so that our responses are inappropriate or ill-timed. Matthew Davies suggests that:

The audience feels as neglected, or rejected, as the onstage characters. Beckett creates of his fourth wall a two-way mirror through which his performers [...] enact their solitude. (Davies 80-81)

At the same time as the play seems to call out for the audience to look beyond what they can see and hear, to interpret the gestures and words of the characters, it also makes it extremely difficult to do so and even pokes fun at any such attempt. Hamm, for example, puts himself in the position of the «rational being» trying to decipher the characters’ behaviour: «Ah, good, now I can see what it is, yes, now I understand what it’s at» (22). Rational explanation then is not of much help. Nor can we dismiss what we witness as a demonstration of theatrical virtuosity for its own sake. Our experience of watching the play involves mixed feelings. If we laugh at the comic routines (especially on pages 19-20), we may well also remember Nell’s words: «Nothing is funnier than unhappiness» (14).

Despite the fact that *Endgame* does not manipulate the spectators in the usual ways to involve them in the fictional world, this involvement takes place. Instead of luring the spectators into a coherent, fictional universe, which is ultimately reassuring because it is both coherent and fictional, Beckett systematically dismantles the conventions which allow this universe to function. By closing off the stage space the audience is made to experience the same feeling of confinement as the characters. Likewise in our struggle with the dramatic time of the play we share the characters’ frustration and confusion. Finally, if the characters repeatedly insist on their fictional status, in both the form and content of the dialogue, this in no way provides the spectator with a convenient escape route. We can never affirm with any degree of certainty that it is only the characters that are playing the waiting game. For indeed in many respects, as we have seen, the characters’ unstable status serves to heighten the equally uncertain position of the audience. We can neither immerse ourselves in the fiction, nor sit back comfortably in our seats and observe it with detachment. The world of *Endgame* is simply inescapable. We may then conclude that «theatricality» as practised by Beckett in no way constitutes a barrier to an audience involvement which goes beyond the
aesthetic and intellectual to include both an emotional and physical response. As Alfred Simon so eloquently puts it:

Nous ne sommes ni voyeurs, ni spectateurs, ni simples témoins. Beckett nous dit nos mots, nous restitue nos mots dérobés. Ces mots-là sortent de nous. Nous entrions en eux comme la larve dans son tunnel. Nous rampons comme elle, dans la nuit illimitée de la pensée où vacille la lueur de l'âtre. Nous rampons dans le temps, en nous et hors de nous, là où mystérieusement, à tout instant, la fin et le commencement de font qu’un. (151)

BIBLIOGRAPHY:


