

Beckett as the Writer of Abstraction

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The “empty” Cartesian subject (\$) is not just the agent of abstraction (tearing apart what in reality belongs together), it is itself an abstraction, i.e., it emerges as the result of the process of abstraction, of self-withdrawal from its real-life context. This is why the “materialist” demand to localize a subject into the texture of its “concrete” historical situation misses the key point: what disappears if we do it? – is the subject itself. And, again, this does not mean that subject is a kind of user’s illusion which persists only insofar as it doesn’t know fully its concrete material conditions: the network of “concrete material conditions” is in itself incomplete, it contains cracks and inconsistencies which are the points of the rise of subjects.

In his detailed reading of Schubert’s *Winterreise*, Ian Bostridge¹ deploys the implications of the fact that, as we learn in the very first lines of the first song, the narrator both comes to and leaves the house as a stranger. We never learn the reason why he leaves: was he thrown out by the prohibitive father of the family, was he rejected by the girl, did he escape out of fear of marriage promulgated by the girl’s mother? This vagueness which creates anxiety is a positive feature in itself: it positively defines the narrator as a kind of empty place between parentheses, as a

barred subject in the Lacanian sense of $\$$. This emptiness is constitutive of the subject, it comes first, it is not the result of a process of abstraction or alienation: the barred/empty subject is not abstracted from the “concrete” individual or person fully embedded in its life-world, this abstraction/withdrawal from all substantial content constitutes it. The “fullness of a person,” its “inner wealth,” is what Lacan calls the fantasmatic “stuff of the I,” imaginary formations which fill in the void that “is” subject. Here also enters what Lacan calls *objet a*: *objet a* (as the stand-in for a lack) is the objectal correlate of the empty subject, that which causes anxiety. Back to *Winterreise*: *objet a* of the narrator is not the secret true reason why he had to leave the house, it is the very cause/agent of the narrator’s “emptying” into a stranger whose true motivations are obscure and impenetrable. As such, *objet a* is the object which would have been lost the moment we were to learn the “true” particular cause of why the narrator left the house.

The abstraction enacted by subject is not the end result, it is the point of passage to a new concretion. There is a passage in Proust’s *Recherche* in which Marcel uses the telephone for the first time, speaking to his grandmother; her voice, heard alone, apart from her body, surprised him – it is a voice of a frail old woman, not the voice of the grandmother he remembers. And the point is that this experience of the voice isolated from its context colors Marcel’s entire perception of the grandmother: when, later, he visits her in person, he perceives her in a new way, as a strange mad old woman drowsing over her book, overburdened with age, flushed and course, no longer the charming and caring grandmother he remembered. This is how voice as autonomous partial object can affect our entire perception of the body to which it belongs. The lesson of it is that, precisely, the direct experience of the unity of a body, where voice seems to fit its organic whole, involves a necessary mystification; in order to penetrate to the truth, one has to tear this unity apart, to focus onto one of its aspects in its isolation, and then to allow this element to color our entire perception. Such a “re-totalization”, based on violent abstraction, is what we should call “concrete abstraction”: abstraction which grounds its own concrete totality.

Another case of violent re-totalization is provided by movie actors who are as a rule identified with a certain screen persona: neither the

character(s) they play in a film nor what they really are as private “real” persons but a certain personality that transpires through multiple roles as the “type” an actor is playing again and again. Humphrey Bogart was playing the same cynical and wounded but honest character, Gary Cooper played the same terse and abrupt courageous type, Cary Grant played the same hectic hyper-active type, etc. There is, however, usually in their career at least one film in which they play a type running against their screen persona. Henry Fonda continuously played a strictly honest and highly moral character, but late in his career, he made an exception – he decided to play the main bad guy, a brutal sadistic killer working for the rail company in Sergio Leone’s *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The interesting thing is how this role (and Fonda plays it with obvious pleasure!) retroactively changed our perception of his standard screen persona and enabled us, spectators, to perceive cracks in it – say, to discern traces of brutality and arrogance in the way he played the great heroic figures from Abraham Lincoln to Colonel Thursday in John Ford’s *Fort Apache* who causes a massacre of his soldiers when he leads them to a hasty attack.

Or let us take Ben Kingsley; the role that defined his screen persona was that of Gandhi in Attenborough’s rather boring “masterpiece” – a dull and preaching agent of justice, equality and Indian independence. However, 18 years later, Kingsley excelled in *Sexy Beast* where he plays a brutal mob enforcer bursting with evil wit and irony. So, perhaps, the fact that the two big movie roles of Ben Kingsley are Gandhi and the ridiculously-aggressive English gangster do bear witness to a deeper affinity: what if the second character is the full actualization of the hidden potentials of the first one? If we look back at Gandhi from this standpoint, we are forced to bring out the weird and very problematic features of his character ignored by the media hagiography... (There is another role played by Kingsley which breaks out of this duality and moves to a totally different dimension: in the 1988 TV drama *Lenin: The Train*, Kingsley gives a very sympathetic portrayal of Lenin on his legendary train voyage from Zurich to Petersburg in the Spring of 1917, with Dominique Sanda as Inessa Aemand and the old Leslie Caron as Nadhezda Krupskaya.)

Our last example in these series is Tom Cruise. His exception – the exception to his standard screen persona – is what I consider by far his

best role, that of Frank Mackey, a motivational speaker peddling a pick-up artist course to men, in P.T. Anderson's *Magnolia*. What is so striking is the obvious pleasure with which he plays this extremely repulsive character; an extrovert, hard-talking guy who teaches his pupils how it is all about fucking women and how to dominate them. (Later in the film his character gains some complexity, but what we get is just the twisted inner life of a vulgar corrupted person.) Again, if we look back at his other roles from this vantage point, we can easily discern the immanent vulgarity of his screen persona which transpires even in his "socially-critical" roles like that of playing the anti-war activist Ron Kovic in Oliver Stone's movie adaptation of Kovic's memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July*. We can perceive the vacuity of his arrogant sarcasms in *The Color of Money* or in *A Few Good Men*, the vain pretentiousness of *Vanilla Sky*, up to the flat and unconvincing heroism of his Stauffenberg in *Valkyrie*. The point is not that this is his "real person" but that it is the reality beneath his screen persona. In short, the old Marxist and Freudian rule holds here also: the exception is the only way to universal truth.

But the great writer of abstraction is Samuel Beckett, and to a partisan of the standard Marxist concrete historical analysis of the works of art in the style of Lukacs, the way he practices abstraction in his work cannot but appear as resolutely "anti-Marxist." When he depicts the subjective experience of terror, loss, suffering and persecution, he does not endeavour to locate it into a concrete historical context (say, making it clear that it is a moment of Fascist terror in an occupied country, or of the Stalinist terror against dissident intellectuals). Beckett does (almost – not quite, of course) the exact contrary: he puts particular forms of terror and persecution which belong to different contexts and levels (Fascist terror, the "terror" of anti-Fascist revenge, administrative "terror" of regulating the repatriation of refugees and prisoners) into a series and blurs their distinctions, constructing an abstract form of de-contextualized terror, one can even say: a Platonic Idea of terror. Why this? Shouldn't we locate every terror into its concrete historical situation and distinguish between Fascist terror, authentic revolutionary terror, Stalinist terror, consumerist terror, etc.? Why is Beckett's abstraction from concrete social context not only psychologically (a victim experiences his situation as abstract), but

also ontologically, with regard to social totality itself, more truthful than a “concrete” realist image of social totality?

Let’s take a closer look at how Beckett proceeds. He does not simply erase echoes of historical reality – abstraction is in his writing a process, not a state. As Emilie Morin perspicuously noticed,

on the surface, there is little about his destitute characters that might suggest an aspiration to political theorising or political action. And yet they partially function as political metonymies: the political order to which they belong, sketched in the shadows and recesses of the texts, materialises precisely as they struggle through ruins, mud, deserted landscapes, empty rooms and other residues of a historical horror escaping categorisation.²

Beckett often is the exemplary apolitical writer, dealing with basic existential deadlocks and dilemmas. However, a close reading of his works makes it clear that Beckett’s entire opus is impregnated by (traces of and echoes to) political events: the political turmoil in Ireland around 1930, the struggle between Fascism and anti-Fascism through the 1930s, Resistance against Fascist occupation, the struggle for Black emancipation against apartheid (his only financial donation to a political party was to ANC), the Algerian war of independence (apropos the French colonial war in Algeria, he coined the term “Murderous Humanitarianism” in order to designate the truth of the French “civilizing” colonialism), the Vietnam war, Palestinian resistance, the defence of persecuted writers... all is there, but not directly (“realistically”) represented.

A gap persists between the two levels perfectly rendered by Beckett who wrote: “The material of experience is not the material of expression.” The “material of experience” are the historical data, social events; the “material of expression” is the universe depicted in Beckett’s world; and the passage from one to the other is abstraction. It is in this precise sense that Beckett called for “an art of *empêchement* (impediment or hindrance), a state of deprivation that is material and ontological in equal measure”³: an invisible obstacle renders impossible the continuous transition from abstract experience to concrete social totality. This obstacle acts like the Lacanian Real/Impossible which makes reality (the reality of social totality, in this case) incomplete,

cracked. The persisting unfreedom, uneasiness, and dislocation in a modern formally “free” society can be properly articulated, brought to light, only in an art which is no longer constrained to the “realist” representative model. The modern uneasiness, unfreedom in the very form of formal freedom, servitude in the very form of autonomy, and, more fundamentally, anxiety and perplexity caused by that very autonomy, reaches so deep into the very ontological foundations of our being that it can be expressed only in an art form which destabilizes and denaturalizes the most elementary coordinates of our sense of reality.

Perhaps the exemplary case of Beckett's procedure of abstraction is his *Malone Dies* whose entire topic and details clearly relate to the French peripeties during the German occupation and its aftermath: the Nazi and collaborationist control, terror and oppression, the revenge against collaborationists and the way refugees were treated when returning home and recuperating. What gives such a power to the novel is precisely that these three domains are condensed into a single suffocating experience of an individual lost in the web of police, psychiatric and administrative measures. However, Beckett's procedure of abstraction reaches its peak in his two late short theatre masterpieces, *Not I* and *Catastrophe*. In *Not I*, a twenty-minute dramatic monologue from 1972, there are no “persons” here, intersubjectivity is reduced to its most elementary skeleton, that of the speaker (who is not a person, but a partial object, a faceless MOUTH speaking — an “organ without a body,” as it were) and AUDITOR, a witness of the monologue who says nothing throughout the play; all the Auditor does is that, in “a gesture of helpless compassion” (Beckett), he four times repeats the gesture of simple sideways raising of arms from sides and their falling back. The basic constellation of the play is thus the dialogue between the subject and the big Other, where this couple is reduced to its barest minimum: the Other is a silent impotent witness which fails in its effort to serve as the medium of the Truth of what is said, and the speaking subject itself is deprived of its dignified status of “person” and reduced to a partial object.

Catastrophe (1982), a late short play which may appear to violate his rules, is a “realist” play staging the rehearsal of a theatre play of the brutal interrogation of a nameless prisoner, and it shamelessly relies on a parallel between oppressive interrogation and the ruthless domination of

a theatre director over his actors in rehearsing a play. *Catastrophe* can thus be read “as a solipsistic reflection upon the dispossessed body; as a rumination on the mechanics of theatrical spectacle; as an exposition of the tyranny practised by Soviet Communism; as an examination of the enduring power of dissent in the face of oppression.”⁴ All these disparate levels are condensed into one, the Idea of the mechanics of oppression, and the ambiguity affects even the conclusion:

The play can be viewed as an allegory on the power of totalitarianism and the struggle to oppose it, the protagonist representing people ruled by dictators (the director and his aide). By ‘tweak[ing] him until his clothing and posture project the required image of pitiful dejectedness,’ they exert their control over the silenced figure. ‘The Director’s reifying of the Protagonist can be seen as an attempt to reduce a living human being to the status of an icon of impotent suffering. But, at the end of the play, he reasserts his humanity and his individuality in a single, vestigial, yet compelling movement’⁵ – in an act of defiance, the man looks up into the audience (after having been looking down the entire time). In answer to a reviewer who claimed that the ending was ambiguous Beckett replied angrily: ‘There’s no ambiguity there at all. He’s saying, you bastards, you haven’t finished me yet.’⁶

In short, he is making Beckett’s standard point of persisting in resistance: “Try again. Fail again. Fail better.” However, what we should bear in mind here is that, in this case, the “bastards” are also members of the public that enjoys the show, and “you haven’t finished me yet” also means: I will not resign myself to play the suffering victim in order to satisfy your humanitarian needs. Although Beckett dutifully signed petitions in solidarity with the artists persecuted in “totalitarian” (mostly Communist) countries, he was also aware of “what becomes of solidarity under the imperative to transform suffering into spectacle. The play offers a rebuke to the expectations of an imagined audience attending a charity event, awaiting a predicted performance of hardship in exchange for its donation.” *Catastrophe* was first performed precisely as part of such a public spectacle of solidarity with Vaclav Havel (imprisoned in Czechoslovakia), so that when, in the play’s very last moment, the victimized Protagonist raises his head and takes a direct look at the

audience, this gesture should definitely be read also as addressing the public with a message like “don’t think you are much better than what is portrayed in my short play, the anonymous prosecutor terrorizing the Protagonist, and the theatre director terrorizing the actor – you are part of the same hypocritical game, enjoying the spectacle of suffering which makes you feel good in your solidarity with the victim.” This is the art of abstraction, of reduction to form, at its most radical, brought to the self-referential extreme: with regard to content, it slides metonymically from the terror of totalitarian interrogation to the terror exerted by theatre directors on performers, and from there to the terror exerted by the benevolent humanitarian public on the theatre ensemble itself. Nobody is simply innocent, nobody is totally exempted.

The circle is thus (almost) closed: humanitarian charity participates in the universe which creates victims; eco-sustainability reproduces the very ecological problems it claims to resolve; reforms of capitalism make it more efficient... The circle is ALMOST closed: it is impossible to break out of it, which means one can do it by means of a real-impossible act. Such an act can assume many forms, up to the renunciation to act. A friend of mine was in analysis with a big Lacanian figure, and his analysis was over when he decided that he didn’t want to change but would prefer to remain the same as he is. This rejection of change was, of course, the most radical existential change, since prior to this decision, his entire existence was under the shadow of a need to change.

So, what is to be done in the Beckettian situation that is ours today, in a situation in which the future is obscure and impenetrable and we can rely on no prospect of progress in the way classic Marxism still did? Although things are changing today in a breath-taking rhythm (in ecology, economy, sciences...), nobody really knows where will all this lead us. Maybe, Lenin can unexpectedly serve as our guide here. Two years before his death, when it became clear that there will be no all-European revolution, and that the idea of building socialism in one country was nonsense, he wrote:

What if the complete hopelessness of the situation, by stimulating the efforts of the workers and peasants tenfold, offered us the opportunity to create the fundamental requisites of civilization in a different way from that of the West European countries?"⁷

The basic ideological operation of Stalin was precisely to turn around Lenin's reading of the situation: he presented the fact that Soviet Union remained alone as a unique chance to build socialism in one country. In that historical situation, Stalin's formula was one of hope; however, the next decade made evident the price paid for the attempt to live up to this hope: purges, mass starvation, etc. Today's Left finds itself in a situation described by Lenin: no predetermined "historical task" is waiting for us, or, more precisely, the realization of this Big Task has miserably failed, but this very situation gives us a weird kind of freedom – we can improvise, although under the shadow of the impossibility to achieve the Big Goal. And we should make a step further here: what if this is not an exception (as it may have appeared in the case of Russia where revolution occurred at a wrong place and time) but the rule: what if the true revolutionary change can take place only in the aftermath of the failed Big Revolution? This is how we can and should act in the Hegelian historical moment when the End already took place and we live in its confused aftermath.

¹ See Ian Bostridge, *Schubert's Winter Journey*, London: Faber and Faber 2015.

² Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017, p. 3.

³ Morin, op.cit., p. 239.

⁴ Op.cit., p. 243.

⁵ James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London: Bloomsbury 1996, p 679.

⁶ Quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catastrophe_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catastrophe_(play)).

⁷ V.I.Lenin, *Collected Works*, Vol. 33, Moscow: Progress Publishers 1966, p. 479.