

To what extent and effect does Samuel Beckett use minimalism in his later plays to “work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect”?¹

A quotation from Beckett himself, the notion of attacking the audience’s “nerves” rather than their “intellect” expresses the nature of not only *Not I* to which it refers, but also the entire final period of his writing career from the 1960s onwards – that which is now commonly referred to by critics as his “late theatre”² or the “late plays”³. Beckett’s quest for discovering what language is capable of is clear from his movements between prose, drama and poetry, as well his writing in different languages throughout his career. However, it seems that Beckett’s last creative epoch saw a loss of faith in what the human language can accomplish, with a turn towards condensed, minimalist dialogues, terrifying dogmatic disembodied monologues, and in some cases a total discarding of language itself in mimes and his shortest work, *Breath*. Still playing on long-term themes such as entrapment and the tension between action and inaction, in the late plays Beckett takes these to a further level. Through such works as *Play*, *Eh Joe*, *Breath*, *Not I*, *Rockaby* and *What Where* Beckett exposes not only that sense of purgatorial boredom which is suggested in *Waiting for Godot*, but a new, static, “Hellish half-light”⁴ which the audience must face as well as the characters. Beckett’s withdrawal from conversational language in preference for either silence or expression of raw emotion is indicative of his sentiment that “Only at the extreme can you get to grips with the real problem”⁵. Through paring his plays down to guttural murmurs, disembodied omniscient characters, screams, laughs and silences Beckett wishes to truly attack the audience’s “nerves” and get them “in touch with their spirit”. He claimed that the lack of human “spirit” had “been the malaise of all time”⁶, the “real problem”, and thus through “expunging any element which he deemed extraneous”⁷, he forces us to face our own emotions, metaphysical unease and even psychopathy. His last plays depict a sort of Modernist desolate Waste Land⁸ of human existence, not through a 434-line poem, but through uncomfortable and unforgiving minimalist glimpses into not a Beckettian, rather than an Eliotean, Waste Land.

The evolution of Beckett’s career in turning to minimalism is crucial in analysing the language of the later plays. The absolute barren stasis that came with post-war human existence is a state which is surely one of silence rather than speaking; *feeling* rather than thinking. The limitations of language are explored, but not in a playful Shandyan way or in the kaleidoscopic way with which Beckett’s

¹ Gontarski, S.E., ‘Revising Himself: Performance as Text in Samuel Beckett’s Theatre’, *Journal of Modern Literature* Vol. 22, No. 1, Florida State University, <http://www.samuel-beckett.net/GontarskiRevising.html>

² Levy, Shimon, ‘Six She’s, One Not I: Proxies of Beckettian Selves’, *Samuel Beckett Today / Aujourd’hui*, Amsterdam: Editions Rodopi (2001), p.147

³ Garnder, Stanton B. Jr, ‘Visual Field in Beckett’s Late Plays’, *Comparative Drama* Vol. 21, No.4

⁴ Beckett, Samuel, ‘Play’, *The Complete Dramatic Works*, London: Faber and Faber (1990), p.312

⁵ Bowles, Patrick, ‘Patrick Bowles on Beckett in the Early 1950s’, *Beckett Remembering Remembering Beckett*, London: Bloomsbury Publishing (2006), p.110

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Gontarski, *op. cit.*

⁸ Eliot, T. S., ‘The Waste Land’, *Selected Poems*, London: Faber and Faber Limited (1961), p.39

fellow Modernists Joyce and Eliot had experimented with words. Instead Beckett strips the stage of language, sometimes completely. Such is the case in *Breath*⁹, famously his shortest work, consisting aurally of only two cries and a single sharp inhale and exhale. The suggestion of suffocation which is inherent in the need to fill a play with nothing but inhalation and exhalation already injects the play with the desperation of someone who is neither fully alive nor fully dead. In Damien Hirst's production of *Breath* Hirst presents the "miscellaneous rubbish" as hospital and medical waste, creating an environment further suggestive of being in-between states of life.¹⁰ Even without considering the two cries, the amplified slow inhale and exhale in most productions almost sound like a scream in themselves.¹¹ In Beckett's note about the "cry" which precedes and follows the breath, he specifies that it be an "instant of recorded vagitus" – referring to the cry of a newborn baby, which can in some instances be heard even from the uterus. This specification is interesting, taking the audience back to the biological acts which accompany human birth – a newborn's cry and the implication of its very first inhale and exhale. The suggestion that we could even be listening to a case of 'vagitus uterinus', in which a baby can cry from within the womb when a membrane rupture allows air to enter the cavity¹², suggests again a state of being not quite alive, presenting the audience with an "inner scream" which actually precedes human birth, unlike the "inner scream" of *Not I* which has broken free from a woman after a life of being silenced. Beckett's concern for "inner screams" bursting forth before and after life is indicative of his obsession for discovering the essence of feeling and expression at the stages of birth and death, at which we are most human and not constrained by thought or "intellect".¹³ As he said himself, "My work is a matter of fundamental sounds"¹⁴, and what are vagitus and breathing but "fundamental sounds"?

Beckett has whittled down the entire experience of living into one biological action. There is a suggestion that despite the desperation to continue living, the "miscellaneous rubbish" which is littered on stage is the only experience available to the breather and to us. Such a stark and microcosmic presentation of futility- the human tendency to struggle on through life despite the lack of 'life' available to be lived- is in cruel contrast with Beckett's longer *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* from which the same theme resonates. "Faint brief cry" and the second "immediate cry" at the beginning and end are in themselves suggestions of human suffering, interrupted paradoxically only by the breath which keeps the sufferer alive. The cry being both "faint" and "brief" is not exposing any kind of Aristotelian, cathartic suffering but merely hinting towards what seems to be an ever-present, insidious "contemporary malaise".¹⁵ In *Breath* the sheer compactness of the play is in itself unsettling, and this combined with its aurally and visually abstract nature is

⁹ Beckett, 'Breath', *op. cit.*, p.371

¹⁰ Hirst, Damien, 'Breath', <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K25ZpAQ4-4M>

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² <http://wordsmith.org/words/vagitus.html>

¹³ Gontarski, *op. cit.*

¹⁴ Davies, Paul, *The Ideal Real: Beckett's Fiction and Imagination*, Fairleigh Dickinson University Press: 1994, p.72

¹⁵ Bowles, Patrick, *Beckett Remembering Remembering Beckett*, *op. cit.*, p.110

perhaps the purest example of Beckett attacking the “nerves” rather than the intellect. His claim, “My work is a matter of fundamental sounds” echoes the phrase “I emit sounds” from his novel *The Unnamable*.¹⁶ The passive nature of the verb “emit” is a suggestion that just as Beckett made his audience subject to his “sounds”, his existential concerns “*worked on [his] nerves*” too, as guttural and “fundamental” as the breath itself. Considering this we can read the breath as a metaphorical representation also of Beckett’s creative struggle with playwriting – the struggle for “inspiration”, the word used by Beckett in the play script, suggests an inspiration both figurative and literal, the breath and light acting like his own creative energy intensifying to a peak of suggested mental clarity, which then bathetically reveals only more clearly the rubbish on the stage, before immediately dimming again. There is a sense that creativity, or anything fulfilling that can come from living and breathing, is not only unsustainable but reveals only ever “miscellaneous rubbish”- domestic decay and minutiae become the only available subject for art. Through this minute-long play free from the confines of language, Beckett wishes to provoke not “[intellectual]” thought especially, but a disruption of the audience’s sensibility, something which is felt in the gut; reverting to a deep atavistic sense of self that has been lost in the structures of both modern society and traditional play writing.

Though his mimes, *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II*, and *Breath* are Beckett’s only plays with absolutely no speech in them, the frenzied monologue of *Not I* defies the conventional use of language by not only being minimalist in the diction itself, written in only fragmented sentences and half-clauses, but is also a never-ending pouring out of what Billie Whitelaw called an “inner scream”¹⁷. In one of its most recent productions the entire play was performed in only nine minutes by Lisa Dwan,¹⁸ at which speed it does indeed become almost “unintelligible”.¹⁹ It is an ultimate example of late Beckettian condensation. Jessica Tandy, who first performed the piece, suggests the woman, “after a lifetime of virtual speechlessness”²⁰, “[spews] out” a tirade which has been suppressed for so long that it is uncontrollable and barely coherent. She said about the monologue: “it just has to come out.”²¹ In the passage “whole body like gone... just the mouth ... like maddened ... and can’t stop... no stopping it ... something she - ... something she had to- ... what? .. who?.. no!.. she!”²², it is suggested that her voice has been so suppressed that it could have, perhaps even after death, broken free from the body which is now “gone”, for one final explosive chance at expression- “just the mouth”. The “vehement refusal to relinquish third person”²³, as Beckett puts it in his note to the play, distances the voice even further from a real identity. The voice wishes to

¹⁶ Davies, *op. cit.*, p.72

¹⁷ Branigan, Kevin, *Radio Beckett: Musicality in the Radio Plays of Samuel Beckett*, Peter Lang (2008), p.187

¹⁸ *Not I*, Beckett, Samuel, dir. Roger Michell, *Royal Court Theatre*, London, 21st May 2013: performance

¹⁹ Gontarski, *op. cit.*

²⁰ Tim Masters, ‘Not I: Lisa Dwan’s record speed Beckett’, BBC News, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-22397436>

²¹ Zarrili, Phillip B. and Peter Hulton, *The Psychophysical Actor at Work*, Routledge: 2009, p.136

²² Beckett, ‘Not I’, *op. cit.*, p.376

²³ *Ibid.*

break out of the “convoluted, high repetitious” text, which becomes a prison of the self, with the “[tight structure]” of the monologue conveying the effect of having been entrapped in a body for so long- the idea of the self becomes solipsistic and claustrophobic. The voice is already physically disembodied from individual identity through the floating-mouth effect of the focused lighting. With the audience in pitch black conditions the mouth even gives the illusion to the audience of floating through the air.²⁴ The abstract placement of a hysterical human voice in such a context and the play’s minimalism in both length and lighting forces the audience again to engage with the play on an instinctive, physical level rather than a mental one.

The “unintelligible” nature of the monologue itself comes from the fact that it is supposedly intended to be performed at the speed of thought, or as Billie Whitelaw described her own experience, “like an athlete crashing through barriers, but also like a musical instrument playing notes”.²⁵ Tandy described the experience similarly, saying that “it all makes perfectly good sense, musically”.²⁶ The concentration on the musicality of the text is interesting, as although the monologue is not particularly melodious in the traditional sense, the significance of the play lies in experiencing sound in the same way you experience music. The notion of literature being musical is usually attributed to lyricism in poetry, and yet here we have a terrifying and breathless staccato stream of isolated phrases. The tonal and rhythmic patterns in the text are indeed punctuated almost musically – and in alignment with Beckett’s wishes to acknowledge the “extremes”²⁷ of language, the general monologue is interrupted only by either repeated elliptical silences, screams and laughs, or the desperate refrain of “what? .. who? .. no! .. she!”. The repetitions of all these extremes echo through both the theatre and audience’s memories afterwards, and each scream, laugh or isolated refrain becomes even more meaningless out of context. Repetition being usually emphatic of a particular implication here ironically just seems to further hollow out the already senseless exclamations of expression. The repetitions become simply a delineation of the fragmented and confused nature of a voice and its repressed scream. The voice’s desperation has reached such an extent that the audience is no longer capable of empathising with it and it seems eventually to just become uncontrollable “verbal diarrhoea”, as so put by Professor James Knowlson.²⁸ The echoed refrains literally resonate the implied sense of claustrophobia which the voice itself has experienced for so long, and the plosive alliteration seen throughout such as in “brain begging ... something begging in the brain ... begging” suggests a further stumbling and stuttering which fortifies the character’s desperation and the out-bursting nature of the speech. The subtle sibilance that runs throughout the monologue “steady stream”, “sweet silence”, “steps then stop... stare into space... stop and stare” add to the onomatopoeic “buzzing”, the musical drone which pervades the woman’s stream of consciousness. As well as the insidious threat of insanity connoted

²⁴ *Not I: performance, op. cit.*

²⁵ Zarrili, Phillip B. and Peter Hulton, *op. cit.*, p.136

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Bowles, Patrick, *Beckett Remembering Remembering Beckett, op. cit.*, p.110

²⁸ Tim Masters, *op. cit.*

to by the notion of an imaginary “buzzing” and the generally obsessive tone of the speaker, it appears that the voice, despite finally breaking free from the body, is somehow still battling for expression with this other, foreign sound. Without the ability to interact or sympathise with the voice we find ourselves thrown amidst its ramblings, forced to experience the hysteria ourselves. The external voice which we cannot escape from becomes as threatening to us as those which taunts Beckett’s characters in his other late plays, such as in *Eh Joe*, *Krapp’s Last Tape*, and *Rockaby*.

As S.E.Gontarski said, Beckett often “combed his text for visual and aural parallels”²⁹. His minimalism meant that there was a focused visual aspect to his later plays working in conjunction with the aural. The singular words in the exclamatory “what? .. who? .. no! .. she!” refrain in *Not I* are not only memorable for its repetitions but are inextricably linked to the image of the mouth by the distinctive and exaggerated shapes which the lips contort into to produce the vowel sounds. The effect of this is that the audience’s memory of the performance references not a plot, but an aural imprint of the monologue in their mind consisting of the repetitions and screams, and the ghost-like image of the tooth-baring mouth eight feet above stage level. The harshness of the language, which you must listen to in terms of rhythm and timbre instead of the words themselves, as well as the focus on the visual demonstrate how Beckett uses a new kind of play-writing to attack the “nerves” – both figuratively in terms of putting the audience on edge, as well as literally playing with the audience’s optic nerves and ear drums to produce an almost tangible discomforting tension in the air of the theatre. Modern day hysteria and the terrifying nature of human emotion are experienced in this soliloquy by its minimalist presentation on stage and by thus pulling the audience, plunged into darkness, into the hysteria themselves. Equally, Graley Herren comments upon Beckett’s literal attack on “optical nerves” in the swivelling spotlight in *Play*, which also creates optical illusions such as that of the “spectator [seeing] traces of a face etched on the blackness, even after its illumination has ceased”.³⁰ The spectral nature this effect in this play about guilt, regret and reflection is suggestive of the mark that the characters have left on each other but also literally projects visual impressions of the same sense of guilt onto the audience’s retina. We are propelled into *Play*’s “Hellish half-light”.³¹ As Herren continues, in *Play* Beckett “radically [delimits] what we can see” by denying us what is “traditionally ...the relative freedom of the theatrical gaze” and gives us instead a gaze that is exclusively “dictated by the spotlight”.³² Beckett uses light just as he uses sound to force the audience into the hysteria and distress of his plays, as in the “musically”³³ structured *Not I* and in some ways the equally musical counterpoints and choruses of the three characters in *Play*. The use of the spotlight in both plays selectively disables the audience’s senses, forcing them to experience the same entrapment and sensory submission to Beckett’s stage directions that the characters must

²⁹ Gontarski, *op. cit.*,

³⁰ Herren, Graley, *Different Music: Karmitz and Beckett’s Film Adaptation of Comédie*, Edinburgh University Press, p.18

³¹ Beckett, Samuel, ‘Play’, *op. cit.*, p.312

³² Herren, *op. cit.*, p.19

³³ Zarrili, Phillip B. and Peter Hulton, *op. cit.*, p.136

experience. As stated by Joel Beers in the OC Weekly article 'He Gets on Your Nerves', Beckett wanted "to take the mind out of the process and facilitate a total emotional connection between performer and viewer/listener".³⁴

Using both language and the visual minimally, Beckett seeks to present existential truths about the modern human existence in a different way to his fellow modernists. In comparison to the relatively enormous *Ulysses* and Eliot whose diction in *The Waste Land* is endlessly layered and labyrinthine, Beckett is equally insistent about the desolation of the modern world but through the vastly contrasting use of minimalism. Whereas Joyce wrote in excess Beckett's late work is deliberately reductive. As Beckett himself said, "James Joyce was a synthesiser, trying to bring in as much as he could. I am an analyser, trying to leave out as much as I can".³⁵ Beckett's focus was on stripping a literary work down to its bare essentials, focusing on a *lack* of substance to explore human impotence, infertility and incompetence. In Roland Barthes' statement "text is a tissue of quotations"³⁶, he famously suggested that all language was repetition and that all that can be said has been said- so Beckett begins to *not* say things. Beckett withdraws from language – "[leaves] out as much as [he] can", saying that "when words fail you, you can fall back on silence!"³⁷ An examination of Beckett's use of silence is his minimalism in the mimes *Act Without Words I* and *Act Without Words II*. In these mimes a clear comparison between Beckett and the 20th century French philosophy he was influenced by can be drawn. As the main character gives up at the end of *Act Without Words I* ("He does not move. / Whistle from above. / He does not move.") the man reaches a kind of acceptance of his fate that can be compared with that of Sisyphus from Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Much like Sisyphus, in *Act Without Words I* the man's "whole being is exerted toward accomplishing nothing."³⁸ Some stoic solace is found by Camus in Sisyphus' determination to carry on at his task despite his "consciousness" of its futility- he becomes "superior to his fate"- the "absurd hero". However, the man in Beckett's first mime, unlike Sisyphus, carries "at every step the hope of succeeding"³⁹ and "tries in vain to reach [the] carafe" time and time again, until at the end he too realises he will never succeed, causing him to give up entirely, "lying on his side, his face toward [the] auditorium, staring before him."⁴⁰ He is "absurd" too, but an absurd tragic victim, not a hero. In this way there is a disconnect between Beckett's and Camus' understandings of existentialism. Whereas Camus declares that the "absurd" and "Happiness... are inseparable", Beckett suggests in *Act Without Words I* that there is no redemption or catharsis- simply a numb, silent stasis. The man remains alone, incapacitated by the expiration of his own spirit, on the stage.

³⁴ Beers, Joel, 'He Gets on Your Nerves', *The Orange County Weekly*: 2000, <http://www.ocweekly.com/2000-04-13/culture/he-gets-on-your-nerves/>

³⁵ Vallee, Paul, 'Samuel Beckett: His life story', *The Independent*: 2006, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/europe/samuel-beckett-his-life-story-472171.html>

³⁶ Barthes, Roland, *Death of the Author*, 1977, <http://www.deathoftheauthor.com/>

³⁷ Bowles, Patrick, *Beckett Remembering Remembering Beckett*, *op. cit.*, p.110

³⁸ Camus, Albert, *The Myth of Sisyphus: And Other Essays*, New York: Vintage Books (1991)

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Beckett, 'Act Without Words I', *op. cit.*, p.202

Whereas the superfluous objects in *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame* seemed to gesture to meaning where none exists, the props in Beckett's later plays appear often to have a life of their own, as also in *Krapp's Last Tape* and *Rockaby*, always with seemingly threatening, even menacing, intentions. They actively torment the characters in a way that the props did not in Beckett's earlier plays, and this can be understood as an aspect of his later minimalism – whereas he utilised superfluity in his early career, everything on stage has a purpose in his late plays. The importance of the return to the minimal is evident in that by the end of the play only the man remains, and having been abandoned by the paraphernalia which taunted him and gave him neither life nor death, the suggestion of his insignificance in a vast desert amplifies even further as without his torment he has nothing left. The silence of the entire play, its visual sparseness, and the lack of catharsis at the end is suggestive of the eternal, never ending Beckettian 'waste land'. A statement applicable to all of Beckett's late works, Ronan McDonald says of Beckett that the temporal and geographical uncertainty to his work universalises their experience, and his "stripped stages or nameless narrators seemed shorthand for everywhere and everyone".⁴¹ Yet, McDonald also realises that despite this "timelessness", he is "celebrated as the truest voice of a ravaged post-war world... a world bereft of transcendent hope, without God, morality, value, or even the solace of a stable selfhood."⁴² Beckett's minimalism, stripping down not only the sensory aspects of his plays but also the identity of his characters, projects how the post-war condition is not only a contextualised time frame that transpired after the Second World War, but a permanent silent, suffocating state of being for humans.

McDonald says of Beckett, "His stage images have a visual and concrete dimension that the modernist poets and novelists arguably lack. One can visualise the spare Beckettian stage more easily than the poetic urban wasteland".⁴³ It is this use of the minimal to elevate the pre-existing Modernist message to new heights which sets Beckett's late works apart from even the rest of his oeuvre. Beckett touches on the Prufrockian sense of incapacity and inaction, and the Tyresian all encompassing helpless observation of desolation around us, but not through such personified, lyricised and tragically romanticised characters. In Beckett's work the characters are anything but romanticised- not even named- they are simply, "tragic". He said himself that "nothing is more grotesque than the tragic"⁴⁴ and it is this ugly, pathetic bathos which emblemises the Beckettian waste land. The suggestion of an eternal cycle in *Act Without Words II*, the repetition of entire plays as in *Play* and the echoes and refrains throughout works such as *What Where* and *Not I* all are suggestive of a kind of numb, never-ending state of being in which meaning has simply faded. It is suggested that we will forever, and in some ways always have done, live in the exhausted post-war debris (*Breath*) left behind by those who have come before us. This purgatorial state of being

⁴¹ McDonald, Ronan, *The Cambridge Introduction to Samuel Beckett*, Cambridge University Press (2006), p.2

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ McDonald, *op. cit.*, p.1

⁴⁴ Gontarski, *op. cit.*

somewhat alive, somewhat dead- the “Hellish half-light”⁴⁵ - is evidence that the Beckettian waste land is a desolate, dried up, anti-Edenic Hell. Instead of describing all that might be in this state Beckett focuses on *lack*- a lack of dialogue, a lack of meaning, a lack of setting and often even a lack of movement, as in *Play* where the characters cannot even turn their heads. The audience are thus propelled into a state of physical and mental stasis – they are fixed to their seats as the women and the man are to their urns in *Play*, as Joe is to his bed in *Eh Joe*, or the silent actor to his “black block”⁴⁶ in *Catastrophe*. Beckett torments not only the victims in his plays through imposing sensory limitations and meaninglessness onto his characters, but also onto the audience themselves. As Beckett restrains our view and understanding of his late plays, and we witness only “ghostly shapes, only half seen, struggling to retain a feeble hold on their sense of themselves”⁴⁷, we too can only try to retain a feeble hold on to our sense of self. Beckett attacks our “nerves”, almost as if testing to see if when provoked our own “inner scream[s]” will finally erupt out from us in a moment of hysteria. Patricia Boyette, Beckett actress, said that “as a human being, Beckett takes me to places I’ve never been before. They’re not always places I want to go, but that’s what makes me need to go there”⁴⁸; we too “need to” abandon our comfort zones and our “intellect”. As with Lucky’s thinking in *Waiting for Godot*, appealing to the “intellect” produces only further meaninglessness. It is only in the acceptance of Beckett’s muttering, his screams, and his fading lights that we can truly appeal to our “nerves”, to realise and overcome the “real problem”⁴⁹ of universal spiritual purgatory and become finally “in touch with [our] spirits”.⁵⁰

⁴⁵ Beckett, ‘Play’, p.312

⁴⁶ Beckett, ‘Catastrophe’, p.457

⁴⁷ Bradby, David, *Modern French Drama 1940-1990*, Cambridge University Press (1991), p.74

⁴⁸ Beers, *op. cit.*

⁴⁹ Bowles, Patrick, *Beckett Remembering Remembering Beckett*, *op. cit.*, p.110

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

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