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'At me too someone is looking...': Coercive Systems in Beckett's Theatre.

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Abstract:

Beckett's writing- in prose and theatre- is commonly imagined as a series of exercises in decay and diminution. His protagonists exist in a world in which all systems decay, and where, because of this endemic system failure, they are progressively unable to express the reality of their situation through systems of discourse. This article argues that, although, this may be true for Beckett's prose pieces, it is not true of his theatrical works. Beckett's plays rely for their effects on the fact that theatre itself can be thought of as a coercive system- one that does not decay, but which persists, even as the protagonists trapped within it are worn down to nothing.

1.

At the end of *Waiting for Godot*, Vladimir has a speech that is as close, arguably, as either he or Beckett comes to a summary of the play, or at least of the tramps' experience of the play:

> **Vladimir:** Was I sleeping, while the others suffered? Am I sleeping now? Tomorrow, when I wake, or I think I do, what shall I say of today? That with my friend, Estragon, at the place until the fall of night, I waited for Godot? That Pozzo came with his carrier, and that he spoke to me? But in all that, what truth will there be?... He'll know nothing. He'll tell me of the blows he received and I'll give him a carrot. … At me too someone is looking. At me too someone is saying, he's sleeping, he knows nothing, let him sleep on.
> (Beckett 1986, 84-85)

In this speech, Vladimir imagines himself as exercising benign control over his friend Estragon; his relation to his fellow tramp, just for this moment, is nurturing and caring. Then, however, he goes on to imagine himself on the other end of the relation. Now, someone looks at him the way that he looks at Estragon; this person, unnamed and amorphous, treats him with the same dismissive fondness with which he treats his friend. We know the relation between Vladimir and Estragon. We have seen it play out over the course of the performance; we know that the two seem indissolubly bound together. The relation between Vladimir and the offstage figure he imagines is rather less definite. The figure's tone of voice seems as gentle as the tone Vladimir adopts when talking about Estragon; if anything it sounds paternal, or maternal (either is possible: the gender of the imagined figure is never established). We know, though, that the tramps experience the world they inhabit as one which is coercive. The best that can be said is that they have the illusion of choice; rather like the prisoners in Bentham's panopticon, as imagined by Foucault, they might assume that their actions are willed, but those actions are determined by an outside force over which they have no control. Vladimir's momentary evocation of a figure outside of the performance text, monitoring the

tramps, can be read as a momentary realisation of the power structures that bind them both to the absent figure of Godot. Seen in this light, the imagined voice seems rather less kindly. The tramps are forced to occupy the same space, day after day; the fact that they are bound to this location by the promise of some form of redemption does not lessen the pain of this confinement. That pain breaks through at certain key moments—when the tramps beat Lucky to the ground; when they can no longer find words to describe the sound of the 'dead voices' that surround them; and when Vladimir, immediately after the sentence quoted above, says despairingly 'I can't go on.' However, that is exactly what he does; and in the system the play establishes, it is hard to see that he has any other option.

The offstage figure in Vladimir's speech is, it seems, a momentary construction—a fiction within the wider fiction of the play. His or her relation to the onstage characters seems to mirror that of the unseen Godot; the tramps are simultaneously kept in place and kept in ignorance by Godot's promise. It is possible, also, to imagine that the thought processes Vladimir imputes to his fictional watcher are thought processes that might have occurred to the figure whose offstage existence serves mainly to prolong the interregnum in which the tramps are suspended. Certainly, the play bears testament to Godot's neglect. However, it is also perfectly possible to read this fictional figure as a representation, not of Godot, but of something wider—something placed by Vladimir beyond the text, and beyond the playing area. After all, it is not simply the tramps that are trapped by the events of the play. Pozzo and Lucky cycle through the same pattern in each act, even though they are increasingly unable to fulfil their pre-set role. The boy arrives at the same time in each act; Godot himself seems bound up in activities that keep him from meeting the tramps—so, perhaps, Godot is also confined. Vladimir's watcher might be a momentary invocation of his own sense of helplessness; but it might also be something else—an indication of a system of control that stretches from the country road and the tramps, out into the furthest extent of the fictional space of the play.

This structure has a parallel in Beckett's prose fiction. The narrator of *How It Is*, after enacting his own moment of torture and control, imagines that he is crawling in the mud toward his own torturer, and that after his torturer is done with him they will in turn crawl away from each other, to torture and be tortured in their turn. To ensure that the violence enacted by each on each has some meaning, the narrator posits recorders who watch and note down each encounter. The fictional cycle soon breaks down; the logistics of all of these co-ordinated encounters simply can't be organised in a way that pleases the narrator's rigorously symmetrical mind. The fictional construct collapses; but this does not free the narrator. He is still where he was; trapped in the mud with his sack, his tins and his can opener. In the same way, Vladimir might dismiss the fictional figure overseeing him, but doing so does not materially change his situation. He is still caught, where he was, and how he was. There is, however, one difference between the two examples; in *How It Is,* the system collapses and disappears, whereas in *Godot,* Vladimir might dismiss the thought that someone is watching him, but, because he is a character in a performance, he is still being watched.

2.

As both *Godot* and *How It Is* demonstrate, in both theatre and prose Beckett creates fictional universes in which characters imagine themselves at the mercy of systems over which they have no control. In relation to these systems, they imagine themselves as powerless; Vladimir imagines himself asleep, and the narrator of *How It Is* imagines that the cycle of torturer, tortured and recorder will never end. They cannot intervene in the working out of those systems. The best that they can do is to bear witness to the system's effects. As Joseph Anderton perceptively notes in his recent monograph *Beckett's Creatures: Art of Failure after the Holocaust* (2016), the world of Beckett's prose and theatre places great emphasis on the idea of testimony, albeit filtered through Beckett's habitual concerns over the flawed nature of any linguistic system. Beckett's trilogy, Anderton argues,

… resonates with rather unorthodox concepts of testimony that focus on the spaces between seeing and saying, event and account. The fallibility of the witness and the dissociation inherent to retrospect are most intense in Holocaust testimony, but the same issues apply to Beckett's author-narrators to render them both ignorant and impotent, and yet oddly cognizant of their deficiencies.

(86)

In Beckett's prose works, testimony is almost an involuntary act; the speaker speaks primarily in response to internal pressures—in particular, the pressure to describe and analyse the situation in which it finds itself. This leads the voice in Beckett's prose into a complex labyrinth of discourses; the desire to speak, and to speak truthfully, is at least partly negated by the impossibility of assigning truth to the events and images described, and the need to capture images which describe experience is always foiled by the mutability of those images. At the end of the short prose piece 'Imagination Dead Imagine,' for example, the narrator, after identifying and describing the figures on the rotunda in detail, turns its back on the image for a second, to seek "better elsewhere" (Beckett 1995, 185). When it turns back, the rotunda and the figures have disappeared, and they will never be found again.

In the prose works, this compulsion has an identifiable source. The narrators speak of an internal voice, "in me not mine" (Beckett 2006, 411), as the narrator of *How it is* puts it; this voice either prompts them directly, or, as in *Molloy*, speaks to them of a world which mirrors the world in which they find themselves. The voice tells stories, and tells stories through the narrator, with or without the narrator's conscious consent. In the *nouvelles* and the trilogy, the voice is closely identified with the speaker; it is both a compulsion and a refuge (at the beginning of 'The Calmative', the narrator says that he will tell a story because "I am too frightened this evening to listen to myself rot" (Beckett 1995, 61). Once the story begins, it subsumes the narrator, who becomes the protagonist and an unwilling, ironic chorus. One might say that the story wills itself into existence, to the narrator's bafflement ("I don't know why I told this story," says the protagonist of 'the Expelled' (60). When the story is done, the narrator remains unsure of its status; as the speaker of 'The End' is at the conclusion of his story: "The memory came faint and cold of the story I might have told, a story in the likeness of my life, I mean without the courage to end or the strength to go on" (99) Note the characteristic phrase, "the memory came." The speaker does not remember; he does not call the memory into existence. The memory comes; it wills itself into the speaker's mind, and asserts its presence even as the protagonist's consciousness dissipates. This, of course, is a version of Malone's death in *Malone Dies*; as he approaches his end (which will not be the end of the story he tells), he writes "a few lines to remind me that I too subsist." Having momentarily called himself back from the narrative, he reflects on his coming death; "my story ended I'll be living yet" (Beckett 2006, 276). In this, as in much else, he is mistaken; he dies with his story unfinished. The narrative subsumes the narrator; the internal voice drowns out the speaker; the storyteller dissolves into the story.

In the drama, the nature of the compulsion is different. As Anna McMullan puts it, Beckett's theatre 'performs embodiment'; one of the conditions of that embodiment is that the theatrical protagonist operates within systems of external coercion:

Beckett… often foregrounds the theatre itself… as a model of embodied relations of authority. As playwright and director, Beckett's authority is inscribed on the bodies of others, a material factor which recurs self-consciously in works such as *Catastrophe,* which places an actor's body on a plinth, while a Director and Assistant manipulate it as an object to be exhibited on stage.
(12)

This remains an entirely valid observation; I am interested, though, in the buried metaphor contained within McMullan's argument. The idea of an authority inscribing itself into the body of a protagonist derives from Kafka's short story, *In the Penal Colony*. In Kafka, the

moment is simultaneously torture and redemption; the prisoner has the name of his crime written into his flesh, so that there is a record of it to serve as a reminder, not only of the crime itself, but of the pain of the punishment. The colony's commander discusses this as an almost religious act of abeyance, pain, and cleansing; it is not cruelty, or at least not only cruelty, but in itself a ceremony that purifies the criminal. When a visitor to the colony brings news that the punishments are going to cease, the commander submits himself to the machine that traces the punishment on the inmates' skin. As it carves into him, the machine breaks; and man and machine die together.

This seems on the surface to be a clear description of the operation of power in Beckett's theatre. The nature of the punishment his characters undergo is embodied, in McMullan's sense of the word; but the fate of those who inflict punishment, whether they are human or mechanical, is apparently no better. Hamm and Pozzo decay, but still try to control and coerce those around them. The light in *Play*, according to Beckett's own stage directions, fades and withers on the repeat, as does the light illuminating the strip of floor in *Footfalls*. In *What Where*, the cycle of torturer and victim exhausts itself; in *That Time* the provoking voices cease; in *Rockaby*, the apparently more benign coercion of the rocking chair eventually comes to rest. In each of these examples, whether they are as vicious as the machine in Kafka's story or rather gentler (if no less insistent), the coercer and the coerced are subject to the apparent entropy of the Beckettian universe. However, in the theatre, this does not mean that the coercive system itself has disappeared. in the theatre, the coercive system exists outside of the text—in the mechanisms of the theatre itself. In the prose, compulsion is internal, and expressed through the creation of voices within the monologue of the text's central character; in the theatre, compulsion is external, and is created by the action of extra-textual forces on the characters in the performance. In what follows I will argue that the systems of the theatre themselves, which are extra-textual (that is, which exist behind the creation of any performance text, even though they are only referred to glancingly or not at all) serve as systems of coercion and compulsion. I will also argue that these systems serve to weaken and destroy the figures trapped within them.

3.

As Trish McTighe points out, in Beckett's stage work touch establishes the idea of presence as something which can either be affirmed or negated: "There are two pulls producing this paradox: on the one hand, the desire to affirm presence (to touch); on the other, the need to fall back from presence because in being verified, it disappears" (221). However, McTighe's discussion deals, as she herself makes clear, with touch that is not a violence or an imposition; furthermore, it argues that, in the plays she discusses (*Eh Joe* and *Nacht und Träume*), the moment of achieved or deferred touch is a moment in which the subject is formed, and where his or her existence is confirmed, albeit in a complex, contradictory fashion. However, as soon as the idea of coercion—of the binding of a character to a power structure, and to the control either of another character or a mechanism which provokes some kind of action—is introduced, the relation between characters changes. In these moments, characters find themselves caught in a relation of mutual weakness, in which the exercise of power weakens both the powerful and the powerless. These moments of coercion, in both Beckett's drama and prose, could be described, to co-opt a term from Deleuze, as moments of negative immanence.

Deleuze's description of immanence derives from his analysis of the work of Spinoza (whose philosophy Deleuze describes as a "voyage in immanence" (1988, 29). For Deleuze, Spinoza's philosophy works to establish the idea that there is "one nature for all bodies, one Nature for all individuals, a Nature which is in itself an individual varying in an infinite number of ways" (122). In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze goes on to argue that "Pure immanence requires as a principle the equality of being, or the positing of equal Being: not only is being equal in itself, but it is seen to be equally present in all things" (1990, 173). In Beckett's work, there are moments of what could be called immanence; moments where those involved seem bound together—part of the same nature. However, these are balanced against

moments in which the exercise of coercion weakens both the coercer and the one coerced—moments of negative immanence. Negative immanence, on this reading, is a moment in which unequal being is present; a moment when, rather than the creation of one nature, processes which create and deepen inequalities, or which serve to sap power and agency from those involved in them.

In Beckett's pieces for the theatre, systems of coercion, I would argue, covertly operate in a space beyond the ostensible working of the text. In doing so, they draw our attention to one of the defining characteristics of performance as a medium. Performance, simply put, relies on extratextual structures, both fictive and real, to create its meanings. Beyond the fictive world evoked on stage is an external, unstaged world whose unseen operations bear upon the actions we see; and the theatre itself is an extratextual system—a series of mechanisms (sound, lighting, stage settings, and so on) which are brought to bear on the performer in the realisation of performance. Beckett's theatre employs both of these systems to create moments of negative immanence in his texts. Firstly, the characters are placed at the mercy of systems of power which originate from an unseen, unknown world operating outside of the performance text; secondly, characters find themselves placed within systems and environments that wear away at the protagonists without themselves being changed—and these systems are created through the extratextual mechanisms of the theatre itself. In both cases, the systems serve to trap the characters in negative immanence; the power relations explored on stage remain unequal, but the relation between the characters and the theatrical systems that surround them is also unequal—and they are weakened in the struggle against systems they cannot escape.

Examples of the first type of extra-textual coercion in Beckett's theatre include the creation of an extratextual offstage space, as for example in *Endgame*. It is described as an absence ("grey... light black, from pole to pole" 1986, 107), but this doesn't mean that its physical reality can be dismissed by the characters on stage. Hamm, in his story, enquires of the situation in Kov; Mother Pegg dies "of darkness" (129) somewhere in the unmapped space beyond Hamm's shelter; at the play's end, Clov is poised to leave the shelter, but he is still on stage as the play ends—in performance, there seems to be an impenetrable barrier between the inside and the outside. In *Happy Days,* Winnie is slowly absorbed into the earth; the space she inhabits forces her body down, into itself (and it also burns the parts of her left exposed—something made painfully clear in the play's second half, when she can no longer reach her parasol).This arrangement occurs in other Beckett texts: in *Godot*, as noted above; in *What Where*; in *Not I* (where the presence of an unheard voice pushes Mouth into speech); in both *Acts without Words*, where the offstage space is clearly identified as coercive; in *Catastrophe,* where the figures manipulating the protagonist move out into extratextual space (not the space of the audience, but a space from which they can attempt to exercise power over the central figure). The paradigmatic example of this in Beckett's work is *Rough for Radio II*. The animator, stenographer and torturer beat the text out of Fox, at the behest of an authority we never meet:

> S: 1: Kindly to refrain from recording mere animal cries, they serve only to indispose us.
>   2: Kindly to provide a strictly literal transcript, the meanest syllable has, or may have, its importance.
>   3: Kindly to ensure full neutralisation of the subject when not in session, especially with regard to the gag, its permanence and good repair...
> (276)

After the Animator has amended Fox's script, his response to the Secretary clearly exposes their place in a coercive framework whose nature and extent is never made clear:

> A: Don't cry, miss, dry your pretty eyes and smile at me. And tomorrow, who knows, we may be free.
> (284)

The second system does not suggest the existence of a conscious, reasoning extratextual authority. Rather, it is a system created by the elements of the performance itself. *Play,* for example, operates within a mechanism that traps both the figures in the urns and the light. The light goes "poking and pecking" (312) at the figures, but the process in turn wears the light away; Beckett asked that the light be dimmed during the repeat, as though the constant interrogation was itself sapping its power. This diminution is noted by the figures themselves:

M: And now that you are... mere eye. Just looking. At my face. On and off.
[Spot from M to W1]
W1: Weary of playing with me. Get off me. Yes.
(317)

Even before the repeat, the light is a "mere eye" (with the strong impression that the light was stronger and more capable in the past) and is "weary of playing" (which implies a time when the light was not tired). The gradual decay of the image onstage, however, does not itself mean that the system of interrogation that links the light and the figures is itself decaying. On the contrary, it can suggest that this system (which is extra-textual, never addressed directly in the play itself) persists, acting as a coercive force on both the light and the figures. Something must fix both light and figures in place, and something must hold them there, beyond the point at which any meaning can be extracted from the interrogation. In both *Footfalls* and *Rockaby*, the coercive space is created by a combination of offstage speech, light, and constrained movement within a limited space (the lighted strip in *Footfalls,* the rocking chair in *Rockaby*). At the end of *Footfalls*, when May has disappeared, the strip and the bell that introduces it are still there; at the end of *Rockaby*, M's story might have been told, but the mechanisms that enabled that story are still in place.

The workings of these hidden mechanisms do not, however, simply imply the existence of hidden coercive forces outside of the performance space. They also rely on the complicity of the onstage characters. Vladimir and Estragon willingly submit to the need to wait; Hamm confines his parents in enclosed spaces from which they can't escape (and in doing so, he makes their situation a precise mirror of his own). Winnie does not entirely accept the processes that consume her, but she displaces any criticism of them on to others ("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?" (156)); this displacement helps her to accommodate herself to the encroaching earth. Other people might wonder about the workings of the mechanism; for Winnie, the mechanism and its effects are the unavoidable constrains that shape her life. The ending of *Krapp's Last Tape* provides a resonant image of the accommodation characters in the early plays forge with the systems that shape them. Krapp might strike against the repetitive cycle of recording and reflection that threatens to consume him; he might sweep the tapes from the table, and he might interrupt the recording of a new tape to revisit a memory, not just of the end of a love affair, but of a moment when he was so isolated that "the Earth itself might be uninhabited" (223). The words we hear suggest that, perhaps, the older Krapp might confront the coercive system he has created; but the last stage direction notes that "the tape runs on in silence" (223). In one production, Beckett ensured that the audience remained aware that the mechanism outlasted the man. The tape recorder chosen for the performance had a red light, which shone when the machine was in operation; as the lights faded, the red glow of the machine was the last thing the audience saw.

In the later plays, the mechanisms are more apparent, and more pervasive; and the relation between them and the performer/character changes. In the texts up to *Play*, one can say that the characters are complicit in their confinement, even if that complicity is expressed as the grim determination to make the most of the situation. From *Play* onward, two things happen in tandem; the characters acquire the characteristics of mechanisms, and the mechanisms are humanised. The light in *Play* has already been mentioned; but the characters' responses to the light, which at first seem spontaneous ("W2: Are you listening to me? Is anyone listening to me? Is anyone looking at me? Is anyone bothering about me at all?"

(314)) are, by the time they are repeated, more easily understood as mechanised responses to a humanised mechanical prompt. The precursors of this development in Beckett's stage work come in the two mimes *Act without Words 1 & 2*, and in his work for other media in the early 1960s. In the mimes, we move from the apparently autonomous subject compelled to action by offstage forces we never see, to the interaction of biomechanical entities. The figures in the sacks have their own, preset, mechanical activities; and so does the goad.

In the radio plays *Words and Music* and *Cascando*, we can see the same progression. In *Words and Music*, Croak beats, cajoles, and exhorts Words and Music into a joint composition; in other words, the characters jointly create a mechanism that can respond to an outside stimulus—a stimulus from a character or characters we never encounter. Croak is late, because of "the face... on the stairs" (288); and "the face" (291) is the last instruction he gives. In *Cascando*, the mechanism is already in place. Opener no longer requires a stimulus; mechanically, he tells us, he opens and closes first words, then music, and then both. Voice's monologue is low and breathless; but it can be switched on and off as though it were the recording of a piece of music—as though the human traces of effort in the delivery no longer signify an individual's struggle against external, constraining forces. The intermingling of the human and the mechanical, and the creation of a performance text that is entirely biomechanical, leads us directly to the world of the later plays. Mouth in *Not I* is a suffering woman, and a tape recorder spooling out of control; the head in *That Time* is an old man and an animatronic dummy, and the taped voices are both mechanisms whose operation impedes his rest, and the sources of what information we seem to have about his life before the play. In *Rockaby*, M is an old woman waiting for death; but she is also the ballast the chair needs to regulate its rock—and she is the mechanism's on switch. For it to work, she has to say "More" (435).

4.

The progress of Beckett's theatre tends to be thought of as an exercise in diminution, and in reduction. The scope of the theatre narrows down to the body, or to a part of the body; the stage space shrinks, into a space clearly demarcated between zones of light and dark. This is a trope that echoes through a lot of writing on Beckett's theatre; Laura Salisbury calls them "reifications of the attenuation of time and a life that resists its own end" (57). McMullan, in *Performing Embodiment,* argues that the late plays: "…exploit intersecting layers of the actor's body as fictional persona, sentient flesh and, as Pierre Chabert has argued, 'raw material which may be modified, sculpted, shaped and distorted for the stage'" (102). However, if one treats Beckett's theatre as a series of exercises in coercion, most of which are activated and maintained by processes beyond the world of the text, it is possible to move away from the idea of the late drama as attenuation, and as concerned with layers of the actor's body; and to move toward a reading which connects the later drama with the early, in which the body is enmeshed in a potentially infinite series of coercive relations. If one takes into account the creation of these mechanisms (which are sustained by mechanisms either that the characters acknowledge, but do not understand, or which is created by the interaction of the mechanisms the audience see and the environment those mechanisms suggest), one moves toward the idea of Beckett's theatre as an immutable coercive system. The figures enmeshed in it might be subject to the weakening effects of a state of negative immanence; they might wear themselves down to silence, and the particular structures involved in the coercion we see might decay (rather in the way that Molloy decays more quickly when he attacks the charcoal burner). There is, however, no moment in the theatre that parallels either the destruction of the machine in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*, or the sudden collapse of the cycle of torturer and tortured in Beckett's own *How It Is*. At the end of the performance, the extra-textual world implied by the actions of the characters on stage persists. The mechanisms in the theatre are physically present to the audience; we know that they do not decay; and around the operation of even the smallest mechanism (like the chair in *Rockaby*) we are aware of a wider network of control—the light that comes from a source we do not see, a voice that comes from the darkness, or, as in *Not I*, a voice we do not hear. In Beckett's prose, coercive

mechanisms decay; in Beckett's theatre, coercive mechanisms persist, in a space beyond the performance text, beyond the confines of the stage, in a space whose scope and limits we can barely guess.

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