Alex Pentek

MA/MFA Art in the Contemporary World

National College of Art and Design, Dublin.

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Beckett's Bookshelf

A brief comparison between the work of Samuel Beckett and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

"*Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattman of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights di-vine apathia divine athabia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some ex-ceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell…*" [1]

These lines open a three and a half page monologue by the slave, Lucky, in Beckett's *Waiting For Godot,* which seems both exhaustedly profound and pompously absurd. Afterwards, Lucky heavily collapses face down on the ground as if spent from carrying the weight of these thoughts, rope still tethered around his neck. What is happening here? In fact, what is happening in most of Beckett's work?

Perhaps it is comforting to know that since January 5, 1953, when *Waiting for Godot* premiered at the Theatre de Babylone, Paris, the intended absurdity of much of Beckett's work continues to create aesthetic feelings of confusion, angst, monotony and exhaustion mixed with fleeting moments of joy and tragic humour with audiences around the world. The more familiar I become with the richness and complexity of Beckett's work the more I realise how completely unqualified I am to analyse and compare this mysterious legacy with other artworks without delving deeper into underlying ideas that motivated Beckett.

For example, looking at Gerard Byrne's contemporary video work *Points of View in Waiting For Godot,* Beckett's stage directions for the play are simply described by being read aloud. This can be seen as a continuation by Byrne of Beckett's interest in portraying the messy surface of things as they are, as Beckett said; - the "straw, flotsam, etc., names, dates, births, deaths, because that is all I can know."[2] While Beckett's influence on Byrne's work is interesting in itself, the question of why Beckett was interested in knowing only the surface of things still remains.

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[1] Beckett, Samuel (1976), 'Waiting for Godot', 'Not I' in *I can't go on, I'll go on. A Samuel Beckett Reader* Richard W. Seaver (ed.) New York: Grove Press

[2] Beckett S. German Diaries. 15th Jan. 1937.

By beginning with this question and with feelings of doubt, I take my lead from Beckett to "then doubt certain."[3] I also take consolation that "Only he who has learned something can begin to doubt."[4]

Of all the mediums available, (sound, moving image, etc.), the medium of language allows us to delve deeper into Beckett, who said "words are all we have." [5] If philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein is right in saying that "philosophy and literary style are not separate as the form mirrors the content," [6] then from this perspective, understanding Beckett's enigmatic use of language as being the surface of things could help us to understand his Absurdist style.

Before focusing on Beckett's use of language I will first briefly look at perhaps a more obvious connection between Beckett's writing and French Philosopher Albert Camus. Like Beckett, Camus was in Paris when it was invaded by Nazi Germany and became a member of the French Resistance. During this time, the French-Algerian born philosopher wrote one of his major works, *The Myth of Sisyphus* in 1942. [7] Both Beckett and Camus frequented the literary bar called the Pont Royal Hotel, and Camus is affiliated with Absurdism that influenced Beckett's theatre.

According to Camus, ultimately there is no meaning to the universe. Faced by this cosmic banality, Camus says that in order to find meaning people have one of seven reactions that he examines over four chapters in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Interestingly, these seven reactions can be found in *Waiting For Godot*:

1. Suicide. *(Estragon: "What about hanging ourselves.")*

2. Distraction. *(Such as the changing of boots, talking of sex, food and drink).*

3. Denial. (*Religious beliefs referenced by Vladimirl*).

4. Be an actor. *(All characters fulfil this roll and also dramatically perform 'roles' to one another).*

5. Be another kind of artist. *(Vladimir sings a song about a dog).*

6. Be political. *(Pozzo enjoys a form of brutal political power over his slave, Lucky).*

7. Acceptance. *(Lucky, who when offered comfort or rest from his tasks resigns himself to his slavery, accepting his fate like Sisyphus who accepts his pointless task of endlessly rolling the stone up the mountain).*

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[3], FURLANIANDRE. "Beckett after Wittgenstein: The Literature of Exhausted Justification." *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 38-57. Accessed June 21, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41616793.

[4] Gustafson, Donald. "Wittgenstein's "Zettel"." *Philosophy* 43, no. 164 (1968): 161-64. Accessed June 25, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/3748843.

[5] Beckett S. Cavell S. Must we mean what we say? Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 1976.

[6] Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics

[7] Camus, Albert (1955). *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf. ISBN 0-679-73373-6.

The Myth of Sisyphus may be helpful in this particular case of interpreting possible hidden meaning and symbolism in *Waiting for Godot*. However, while the connection between the work of Camus and Beckett is widely published, this possible interpretation and reductive search for meaning and "explanation simply substitutes one symbol for another." [8] Also, what if the work is intended to be absurd? Where do we go from here? This still leads us no further in understanding Beckett's confounding use of language.

'Absurd' in Greek is *paralogo,* - meaning what is next to thought, *logos* - logic or linguistic expression. *Paralogo* and *logos* are connected, meaning the absurd or nonsensical is not outside logic entirely, but in close proximity to it.[9] Beckett uses the theatre of the absurd to demonstrate the limitations of language and its associated meaning, such as 'waiting' in *Waiting for Godot*. By exploring parallels between Beckett and the work of Wittgenstein through their mutual obsession with language and other themes such as expectation, rule following and isolation these connections could shed light on Beckett's use of language and these important themes.

According to Andre Furlani, "Beckett's library was most populated by the writing of Ludwig Wittgenstein,"[10] whose first major publication *Tractatus Logicos Philosophicus*, was published in 1921. This series of seven dense statements comprises a sub-series of empirical assertive statements as demonstrations, not arguments, that can perhaps be considered as performative philosophy. This culminates with the final statement "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." [11] As an observational philosopher, Wittgenstein's defactoism historically describes that "In philosophy there are no deductions: it is purely descriptive.," [12] which undermines most of western philosophy. Echoing this view, in a radio interview with Tom Driver in 1961 Beckett says "One can only speak of what is in-front of one's eyes, and that now is simply the mess." Here we are approaching the descriptive surface of language, but why is this important?

In *Tractatus*, Wittgenstein attempts to connect language with the world through a series of propositions and facts, introducing the idea of 'language games' as forms of use to explore the ambiguity of language's meaning in relation to context and rules. Believing that we "cannot get beyond language by means of language," [13] Wittgenstein and Beckett share a "mistrust of grammar as the first condition of

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[8] Wittgenstein L. Lectures & Conversations on aesthetics, psychology, & religious belief. Compiled notes taken by Smythies Y. Rhees R. & Taylor J. Edited by Barrett C. University of California Press, Berkeley, LA. 1967.

[9] Marialena Avgerinou Wittgenstein's language and Beckett: the limits of language and the absurd scientific article Received: P.70. 19. 4. 2017. — Accepted: 2. 5. 2017.

[10] FURLANIANDRE. "Beckett after Wittgenstein: The Literature of Exhausted Justification." *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 38-57. Accessed June 21, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41616793.

[11] Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics

[12] McGUINNESS, BRIAN. "BERTRAND RUSSELL AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN'S 'NOTES ON LOGIC'." *Revue Internationale De Philosophie* 26, no. 102 (4) (1972): 444-60. Accessed June 25, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23943255.

[13] Wittgenstein, Ludwig (2007) *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, trans. C.K. Ogden. New York: Cosimo Classics

philosophy." [14] Wittgenstein believed that we communicate to one another through imagery, and that we use language to transfer this imagery. This presents the problem of having to use language and metaphor to explore itself. Seeing this paradox, Wittgenstein likened the language of *Tractatus* to a ladder that must be thrown away once we have climbed it. Analogies to this may be found in Beckett's 1956 novel *Watt* - "Do not come down the ladder, Ifor, I haf taken it away," and also with the ladder featuring often in *Endgame*. It seems that Beckett and Wittgenstein share this paradoxical view of language, the limitations of which which Beckett explores as the basis for much of his dramaturgy.

Although Wittgenstein considered that his *Tractatus* had finished philosophy, retiring from the subject for a number of years, he returned to re-write his ideas with his second major work *Philosophical Investigations*. Sadly, this was published posthumously in 1953, the same year as *Waiting For Godot* made its first appearance. *Investigations* was based on several years of writing and lecturing at Cambridge University. Here, Wittgenstein rejects his earlier work as dogmatic, to develop the idea of language games with rules for the way we habitually use language which he called 'forms of life'. This allowed him freedom to explore the idea of 'family resemblances' where things only need to share overlapping *surface* properties without any underlying essence.

For example, in Wittgenstein's Blue and Brown books he sketches a scenario of 'waiting' as a drama of family likenesses. "When someone promises from one day to the next 'I'll visit you tomorrow,' is he saying the same thing every day or every day something different?"[15] With Godot sending daily word to expect him tomorrow, Beckett shows there is no single feature in common to all states of waiting, though there are many common features overlapping. The subject matter of *Waiting for Godot* can only describe *what is done while waiting for Godot*.

Vladimir. *What do we do now?*

Estragon. *Wait.*

Vladimir. *Yes, but while waiting.*

Estragon. *What about Hanging ourselves?* [16]

The nominalism of Wittgenstein says that there are no *universals*, nothing except general names. According to Fogelin, Beckett shares what he calls Wittgenstein's defactoism that was "a fundamental challenge to the legitimacy of the philosophical

[14] McGUINNESS, BRIAN. "BERTRAND RUSSELL AND LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN'S 'NOTES ON LOGIC'." *Revue Internationale De Philosophie* 26, no. 102 (4) (1972): 444-60. Accessed June 26, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/23943255.

[15] FURLANIANDRE. "Beckett after Wittgenstein: The Literature of Exhausted Justification." *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 38-57. Accessed June 21, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/41616793.

[16] Beckett, Samuel (1976), 'Waiting for Godot', 'Not I' in *I can't go on, I'll go on. A Samuel Beckett Reader* Richard W. Seaver (ed.) New York: Grove Press

enterprise as it is commonly pursued."[17] While this challenge perhaps offers another interesting interpretation of Lucky's speech as a parody of religion and philosophy, -Beckett's challenge to our accepted daily habitual use and the descriptive surface of language, or 'forms of life' that Wittgenstein describes, helps to understand his fascination in focusing on language, and in using absurdity to push these rules to their limits.

With themes of waiting and expectation explored in *Waiting for Godot,* rule following is another important theme in the exploration of language by Beckett and Wittgenstein, and can even be seen as a synecdoche for Beckett's theatre, such as in *Engame* for example. Living under Ham's dictatorship, Clov deals with oppressive rules on many levels. When Ham repeats the phrase "We're getting on" at various times to himself, it becomes ambiguous, breaking the rules of the language game of 'healing relationships' to mean the opposite, or possibly even the passing of time.

The rules of language, (and breaking them), is important to Beckett, and has parity with Wittgenstein's examination that no truly private realm of meaning should exist; In *Philophische Untersuchunga*, Wittgenstein explains that rule following is a practice or habit, not an interpretation. He also says that interpretation is not ubiquitous but remedial, and is sometimes not always welcome! To understand a sentence means to understand a language, and to understand a language means to command a technique or common practice. In other words, speech is public. Language does not simply make company possible, *it makes company,* and means a truly private language cannot exist.

Exploring this idea and also the theme of isolation, Beckett's *Not I* unmasks the notion that 'I' as a concept is not an isolated essence, abstracted from life. In describing 'I' without using the word 'I' in this iconic and absurd monologue, Beckett demonstrates Wittgenstein's ideas of language as a 'form of life', where an individual is always part of society. Even as a disembodied mouth and a pair of lips.

Beckett preferred to describe his plays by using stage directions instead of explaining his "enigmatically obvious plays."[18] In his note book for *Endspiel,* he wrote; "Ohne Metaphysic" - without metaphysics, "It's just a play."[19] His theatre notebooks reflect embodiment not metaphysical descriptions, reflected by Gerard Byrne's *Points of View in Waiting For Godot.* Parallel to this and also likely sitting on Beckett's bookshelf, Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations* provides a philosophical antithesis to the hermeneutical excesses of the times. By using language *both as a medium and a subject*, Beckett explores not a lack of meaning, but the inability to express things meaningfully. The crisis between subject and language identified by Wittgenstein is almost symbiotically presented through a parallel perspective in Beckett's Absurdist theatre. For theorist Ihab Hassan, this 'indeterminance' defined postmodernism in his books and essays as early as 1967.

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[17] FURLANIANDRE. "Beckett after Wittgenstein: The Literature of Exhausted Justification." *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 38-57. Accessed June 21, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4161679

[18] FURLANIANDRE. "Beckett after Wittgenstein: The Literature of Exhausted Justification." *PMLA* 127, no. 1 (2012): 38-57. (p.53). Accessed June 21, 2021. http://www.jstor.org/stable/4161679

[19] Beckett S. German Diaries. 15th Jan. 1937.

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