

Playing *Endgame* or wearing the inside out. A work of art attempting to escape its ontological concept.

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Abstract The idea of this article is to deploy the artistically negative and revolutionary facets of Beckett's *Endgame* in a dialogical stance with Gadamer's ontological concept of the artwork as a *play* in order to indicate a possible means to reconsider the nature and meaning of the abstraction and negation it is allegedly proposing.

Key words play; Beckett; Gadamer; negation; abstraction.

“(…) civilization is, in its earliest phases, played. It does not come *from* play like a baby detaching itself from the womb: it arises *in* and *as* play, and never leaves it. (Huizinga 1955 : 173)

It appears as though at the margins of the above quotation from Huizinga's *Homo Ludens: A Study of Play-Element in Culture* Samuel Beckett wants to add a mocking commentary “Old endgame lost of old, play and lose and have done with losing.” (Beckett

2009 : 9) However, I believe that by addressing this very primal idea of culture, the author of *Endgame* does not mean negate but challenge. Therefore the aim of my paper is to add a new point to the general debate on the negative features of Beckett's plays, specifically *Endgame*, and determine whether the Irish playwright actually succeeds in escaping tradition in his revolutionary project. Although the matter appears to have been thoroughly discussed already, by Pascal Casanova and Erik Tønning for instance, I would like to present the problem from a different perspective, that is, by applying Gadamer's notion of *play*¹ as an ontological concept of the artwork to *Endgame* in particular, and then explore the resulting interaction. My intention is to determine not only *how* but *whether* attaining abstraction in the work of art such as *Endgame* is at all possible and whether it is indeed what Beckett sets out to accomplish. What will emerge following this approach is that in order to comprehend Beckett via his own negative method involves a new perspective on the nature of the supposed nihilism attributed to his works. It is not my purpose to discuss Beckett's 'nihilism' in this article since this topic has already been commented on by many scholars – Shane Weller for instance²; rather, I would like to introduce a new method with which to comprehend and conceptualize said nihilism and then apply the method to his work.

A possible reference

Would it be both possible and legitimate to imply a link between absurdist drama and the tradition of the absurd in face of the inherent motif of negation as stated in the Theatre of the Absurd's manifesto? I believe this link is not so obviously present or self-evident; it is essential to investigate the reflection of and on the past intrinsic to this kind of artistic movement: the movement by means of negation, which only gives the reflection of the past a deliberately antithetical, twisted appearance. Beckett wrote two plays that, according to Erik

Tonning in *Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama* are related to the tradition of the absurd precisely through contradicting its concepts. These plays are *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*. Examining them makes it possible to shed light on the multidimensional understanding of Beckett's plays.

Although it may appear paradoxical, such a hypothesis was established before Beckett by the Polish playwright, artist and philosopher Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz, also known under his artistic pseudonym – Witkacy – mainly acknowledged for his paintings that belong to the Polish avant-garde in the interwar period³. Not only had he written dramas that show a great resemblance to the theatre of the absurd and that appear as antecedents of Beckett and Ionesco, for instance; the author of *New Forms in Painting* also produced many philosophical essays about what he called “the new theatre” or “new forms in the theatre”.

When introducing his new form of the theatre Witkacy emphasizes the fact that in spite of its apparently revolutionary course it should carefully avoid the lure of attempting to become something utterly new, that is, negating old tendencies totally. On the contrary, it should originate directly in the past but oppose itself to the psychological, realistic drama that was most popular at the time.

One cannot deny an absolute affinity with life even though one does not consider a play from life's perspective only⁴. (Witkiewicz 1974 : 283)

Witkacy observes an *essential familiarity* and *shared quality* of the old theatrical form and his pure form. He continues that the theatre should purposely “plunge the viewer into this new dimension of experience, which was attainable in connection with the myths of the past”⁵ (285). In other words, the theatre should make possible what he calls a *metaphysical experience* – a feeling of anxiety that detaches the viewer from his or hers everyday life in

order to face *the mystery of existence*. In his *Poetics* Aristotle points to *catharsis* as the essence of tragedy⁶. I believe that the metaphysical experience related to the idea of pure form, and thereby to the experience of the theatre of the absurd, can be considered in analogy with *catharsis* – the purification experienced in ancient tragedy.⁷

What emerges as the common aspect of myths and tragedy is the influence they have on the viewer, which according to Aristotle is the vital foundation of tragedy as such. It arises from certain parallels between myth and theatre inherent in the form rather than the content of the artwork; Witkacy associates the essence of classical tragedy precisely with its formal unity (249).

Furthermore, Witkacy specifically indicates catharsis as the link between classical form and his own pure form explaining in what follows the priority of the formal feature of the work of art, upon which the metaphysical element is founded. What is more, the author of *The New Forms in Painting* observes the evanescence of metaphysical experiences beginning with the ancient world, with the exception of fleeting moments of ecstasy. Gadamer defines *ekstasis* as a modus of being outside of the self, figures of which are the constitutive elements of catharsis, *misery* and *horror*. The ecstatic nature of these feelings consists in:

(...) being overcome by misery and horror involves a painful division. There is a disjunction from what is happening, a refusal to accept that rebels against the agonizing events. (Gadamer 2004 : 127)

This painful division appears to apply only to the spectator who faces a conflict as he disagrees with (ergo does not understand) what is happening on stage. Here lies the essence of *catharsis*, provided of course that - in accordance with Aristotle's definition - we presuppose

that the basic experience of *catharsis* is purification - by releasing oneself from horror and misery. The author of *Truth and Method* defines purification as:

precisely to dissolve this disjunction from what is. It effects the total liberation of the constrained heart. We are freed not only from the spell in which the misery and horror of the tragic fate had bound us, but at the same time we are free from everything that divides us from what is. (127)

It may be asserted that tragic reflection – ‘pensiveness’ - appears in spite of the characteristically disproportionate resolution of guilt and fate, as the essence of tragic reflection is more profound:

(...) what does the spectator affirm here? (...) Tragic pensiveness does not affirm the tragic course of events as such, or the justice of the fate that overtakes the hero but rather a metaphysical order of being that is true for all. To see that "this is how it is" is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator, who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he, like everyone else, lives. The tragic affirmation is an insight that the spectator has by virtue of the continuity of meaning in which he places himself. (128)

Firstly, Gadamer implies that in regard to the artwork the simple idea of subjectively conceived meaning should be abandoned; otherwise the artwork would fail to be an “an ontological concept from which (...) the structure of artistic truth” (Zuidervaart 2004 : 57) might be derived. What is more though, he seems to add an important dimension to it – the mirror that shows the very avant-garde’s backward moving revolution in the subject-object

relation implied in art. By leaving the circle of the subjective abyss the viewer retreats back to himself and gains a specific kind of self-knowledge. The concept of *fate* in tragedy reflects the “metaphysical order of being that is true for all”, or rather a continuance of meaning in the light of which the viewer recognizes himself, as „this is how it is” occurs momentarily as something strange and divergent. This very situation seems to be displayed in *Endgame* by regularly recurring pieces of dialogue:

Hamm: What's happening?

Clov: Something is taking its course. (Beckett 2009 : 20)

However, at the same time Gadamer accentuates that the

spectator does not hold himself aloof at the distance characteristic of an aesthetic consciousness enjoying the art with which something is represented, but rather participates in the communion of being presented (Gadamer 2004 : 128).

For that reason, the *quidditas* of affirmation lies within the scope of tragic pensiveness, in which the viewer recognizes, in face of the irreducible strangeness of fate, that he does not stand alone but within a participating community of others.

Since in terms of ancient tragedy we speak of the three unities, Gadamer claims that upon these unities the meaning of the theatrical work is based:

Tragedy is the unity of a tragic course of events that is experienced as such. But what is experienced as a tragic course of events (...) is a closed circle of meaning that of itself

resists all penetration and interference. What is understood as tragic must simply be accepted. Hence it is, in fact, a phenomenon basic to the "aesthetic." (126)

In the above passage from *Truth and Method* we should cautiously reflect on Gadamer's last sentence where he considers tragedy to be a primal aesthetic phenomenon. Given that, we may arrive at the conclusion that tragedy determines the mode of being of the work of art as such and this mode is described by Gadamer as play:

When we speak of play in reference to the experience of art, this means neither the orientation nor even the state of mind of the creator or of those enjoying the work of art, nor the freedom of a subjectivity engaged in play, but the mode of being of the work of art itself. (102)

The key role of the ontological concept of play as conceived by Gadamer is to direct our attention to the fact that the work of art exists in the inter-subjective sphere; thus he emphasizes the autonomy of play and playing. In accordance, it appears worth recalling here that Heyman makes the unmitigated autonomy of the artwork the crucial element of the anti-theatrical manifesto of the theatre of the absurd⁸. Yet, Gadamer deepens his analysis of the mode of being of the artwork by claiming that this autonomy is only an element of the situation in which an aesthetic experience may occur as play. Thus he asserts:

The "subject" of the experience of art, that which remains and endures, is not the subjectivity of the person who experiences it but the work itself. This is the point at which the mode of being of play becomes significant. For play has its own essence, independent of the consciousness of those who play . (103)

Moreover, it is the nature of play to transform the players. Although the author of *Truth and Method* emphasizes that the ontological autonomy of the play forms the subject in its own mode of being, simultaneously he points to the subject's relation to itself and to the play. While participating in the play the subject becomes transformed. However, in order to occur the play itself requires a participant. Therefore the moment of presentation demarcates the interdependence of the play and its subject. In this manner the play may occur in its pendulous inner movement, expressed in the very word "playing".

In each case what is intended is to-and-fro movement that is not tied to any goal that would bring it to an end. (104)

According to Gadamer the mode of being of the work of art is that of *play*, and that involves self-presentation. The metaphor of play depicts as it were the occurrence of the third reality in the momentary encounter of two other realities: the subject and the work of art. In this third dimension the latter, the work of art, undergoes a substantial transformation. Gadamer further claims that the result of this process is a *transformation into structure*.

But transformation means that something is suddenly and as a whole something else, that this other transformed thing that it has become is its true being, in comparison with which its earlier being is nil. When we find someone transformed we mean precisely this, that he has become another person, as it were. (111)

The entire space where play occurs along with the subject undergoes a transformation, which results in revealing some kind of truth. What truth? Gadamer claims: "In being presented in

play, what is emerges".(112) Is it something substantially different from what was there before? Here the author makes a reference to the classical idea of substance, according to which case transformation is only possible as an accidental occurrence at the level of phenomena, whereas the very subject of transformation remains unchanged. Therefore, what it means is that the truth is indeed uncovered, recognized. What is more, it appears that from this assertion we may conclude the following about reality as such:

"Reality" always stands in a horizon of desired or feared or, at any rate, still undecided future possibilities. Hence it is always the case that mutually exclusive expectations are aroused, not all of which can be fulfilled. The undecidedness of the future permits such a superfluity of expectations that reality necessarily lags behind them. (112)

The fact that we perceive reality through a future-directed perspective, which due to its ambiguity is a constant source of both desire and anxiety, results in its concealment in the multitude of expectations. Thus we may say that a future-oriented attitude obscures the horizon of what is now. Is it possible to break through this concealment? In order to release oneself from the suggestiveness of desired goals it is necessary, according to Gadamer, to be detached from what *is*; this would enable one to perceive wholeness as a closed sphere of meaning.

Moreover, someone who can see the whole of reality as a closed circle of meaning in which everything is fulfilled will speak of the comedy and tragedy of life. In these cases, where reality is understood as a play or game, emerges the reality of play, which we call the play of art. The being of all play is always self-realization, sheer fulfillment, *energeia* which has its *telos* within itself. The world of the work of art, in which play

expresses itself fully in the unity of its course, is in fact a wholly transformed world. In and through it everyone recognizes that this is how things are. (112)

This kind of detachment is indispensable if one is to speak of a comedy and tragedy of life, and this in turn is not attainable unless one is able to perceive the wholeness of meaning. Yet, wholeness is concealed while we are immersed in the everyday world surrounding us, that is in our waiting attitude. Only art as understood through the metaphor of play, which encompasses in its *energeia* the contemporary significance, and through its *telos* the essential enclosure of meaning, may facilitate detachment.

Playing Endgame - exhibiting abstraction

How does the above thesis apply to the anti-artistic practice of the theatre of the absurd, specifically Beckett? The very characteristic of our blurred perception of the future seems to be exposed in a mocking way in *Endgame*: “Do you believe in the life to come? Mine was always that.” Following the trace of mockery I believe Beckett is in fact staging the very situation of the play, in the form of particular elements, which normally remain concealed before the viewers throughout the actual performance or reading of the play and are only revealed after reflection upon the aesthetic phenomena in question; in Beckett’s drama these phenomena are exhibited on the stage itself. As Heyman notices:

(...) Beckett was taking an important step making the play an object in its own right, pointing insistently and amusingly inward at the fact of its being a play. (...) The self – consciously literary cadences and the recurrent dissolution of character into comedian not

only undermine our willingness to suspend disbelief but mock us for having started out with it. (Heyman 1979 : 8).

Beckett's play points to itself, exhibiting its own tools. The proof of this is that in *Endgame* tragedy is mingled with comedy, although in a specific manner, as every cautious comic gestures of the characters are marked with failure⁹ and the characters turn into comedians. Or to be more precise: they are subjected to mockery.

Clov: Why this farce, day after day?

Hamm: Routine. One never knows. [Pause.] (...)

Hamm: Clov!

Clov: [impatiently] What is it?

Hamm: We're not beginning to ... to ... mean something?

Clov: Mean something! You and I, mean something! [Brief laugh.] Ah that's a good one!

Hamm: I wonder. [Pause.] (Beckett 2009 : 40)

Yet, this comic quality does not fail in conveying Gadamer's claims; on the contrary, it seems to even more purposively imply the distance of the play towards itself.

Let us consider the situation of the play exhibited by Beckett, beginning with the presented concept of time and space. Time in Beckett's plays is not conceived in a linear mode but a circular one, and this characteristic turns into a gradually more radical imperative in his later plays. In *Waiting for Godot* there are still two parts – the first part shows a single day of waiting, the second is the perhaps twisted but in essence identical reflection of the first; in *Endgame* this silent rule of drama is violated. Thus Beckett brings the very inner mechanism of the play as an ontological idea to the surface of the drama. This mechanism Gadamer describes in the following:

Play clearly represents an order in which the to-and-fro motion of play follows of itself. It is part of play that the movement is not only without goal or purpose but also without effort. It happens, as it were, by itself. (105)

Hence, as we may still determine that the three classical unities remain present in *Endgame*, we also notice that it is overemphasized. Time is deliberately locked within a circle. Likewise, the space presented in the drama constitutes a closed-in sphere – an orphic circle to which the characters are assigned as if under some kind of spell, and therefore their actions and acting appear to be entirely blank and unstable. The characters are devoid of the power attributed to “doing and daring”¹⁰, and they are also devoid of the magical power derived from knowledge. Although there is some kind of order which appears to be related to some unreachable cosmic order, Hamm and Clov are denied access to it. They are infinitely powerless. This spell or charm reaches the spectator and the player as well, as Gadamer states:

The structure of play absorbs the player into itself, and thus frees him from the burden of taking the initiative, which constitutes the actual strain of existence. This is also seen in the spontaneous tendency to repetition that emerges in the player and in the constant self-renewal of play, which affects its form (e.g., the refrain). (105)

Another crucial point emerges from the above passage of *Truth and Method*: the self – renewal of the play resides in its formal aspect. This phenomenon is also exhibited by Beckett in *Waiting for Godot*, where the second part is a simple repetition of the first one with a small disparity in content, which nevertheless fails to affect the inner sense of the drama – it does not break the charm of suspended waiting. For Beckett, however, the renewal of the play is only an

illusory progression toward the actual confinement of the dramatic space within the magic circle of impassivity.

Although the enchantment that the characters of *Endgame* are entangled in purposely resembles and imitates ancient fate it explicitly fails to deliver a resolution through tragic tension. Instead of the expected affirmation we face an absurd outcome – the spiralling, ceaseless reoccurrence of the identical which grows into a pervasive abstraction, an increasing and all-embracing grayness attributed to the offstage area in *Endgame*.

Hamm: And the horizon? Nothing on the horizon?

Clov: (Lowering the telescope, turning towards Hamm, exasperated): What in God's name would there be on the horizon? (Pause.)

Hamm: The waves, how are the waves?

Clov: The waves? (He turns the telescope on the waves.) Lead.

Hamm: And the sun?

Clove: (Looking) Zero.

Hamm: But it should be sinking. Look again.

Clov: (Looking) Damn the sun.

Hamm: Is it night already then?

Clov: (Looking) No.

Hamm: Then what is it?

Clov: (Looking) Gray. (Lowering the telescope, turning towards Hamm, louder.) Gray! (Pause, still louder.) GRRAY! (Beckett 2009 : 39)

The abstraction appears to be flooding the artwork from an underground or submerged level: language and narrative, although this progression from the mimetic to the abstract is

perhaps more evident in Beckett's novels, as Angela Moorjani accentuates in her book *Abysmal Games in the Novels of Samuel Beckett* (Moorjani 1982 : 15). Possibly Beckett wishes to convey to us the fact that theatre and art need (if possible) to escape "neatness of identification" – the danger that appears to be represented in Clov's attitude: "I love order. It's my dream. A world where all would be silent and still, and each thing in its last place, under the last dust." (Beckett 2009 : 66), but I would argue otherwise. By deliberately exhibiting the mechanism of play as primal, underlying even the ontological structure of language, and magnifying this mechanism even into an abstract, negative absurdity, Beckett appears to imply that one cannot simply escape the deathly "danger" implicit in "neatness of identifications" (Beckett 1983: 19); in spite of the emphasized self-awareness of the play, *Endgame* still remains under its own charm – the enchantment of aesthetics:

in the game (...) the constitution of the function of exhibition of presentation (Darstellung) can be seen, a function that doubtlessly summons the linguistic medium, but that in principle precedes and supports it. (Ricoeur 1991 : 41)

Yet, this very function of presentation adheres to the principle of dialogical consciousness, pulling the play out of chaos towards the audience, as Simon Levy claims in "Samuel Beckett. Self-referential Drama: The Sensitive Chaos", referring to Gadamer's concept of aesthetics (Levy 2002 : 9). No matter how reduced the characters of Beckett's dramas are while suspended at the edge of the void of no meaning, they possess an indispensable urge to communicate. As it is again represented by Clov:

Finished, it's finished, nearly finished, it must be nearly finished. Grain upon grain, one by one, and one day, suddenly, there's a heap, a little heap, the impossible heap. I can't be

punished any more. I'll go now to my kitchen, ten feet by ten feet by ten feet, and wait for him to whistle me. Nice dimensions, nice proportions, I'll lean on the table, and look at the wall, and wait for him to whistle me. (Beckett 2009 : 9)

However, this urge to communicate is not limited to the characters only but reaches the viewer as well; it does not constitute a simple reference to the idea of dialogue as such, but also seems to be generated by the need to have a *witness*:

(...) moving from “you” to “we” to “I”; then split the I so as to never leave it in solitude. In theatre at least a witness is a precondition. The relation (...) creates “The dialogue” as the dramatic answer to the question “What is there to keep me here?” (EG, 120). Without it no speech and no being in space on stage make any sense. (Levy 2002 : 10)

The claim for *making sense on stage* is not a mere necessity in order to exist on the stage. In fact, Beckett seems dramatically close to falling into silence or absolute incomprehensibility as his last dramas balance at the edge of abstraction. This point is discussed by Erik Tønning in his *Samuel Beckett's Abstract Drama. Works for Stage and Screen 1962-1985*. Tønning draws a sharp distinction between these works and *Waiting for Godot* or *Endgame*, where he still observes a reference to tradition. Yet, although Beckett's path may appear to be extremely close to the abyss of abstraction, I do believe it is the only possible path. As Pascal Casanova admits “One cannot advance the hypothesis of an absolute independence of the text with respect to the world, grammar and literary convention.” (Casanova 2006 : 23). I believe Beckett's struggle is directed toward the reversal of the aesthetic enchantment, a reversal which does not signify negation of the tradition, but signifies retracing meanings in order to precipitate and then aggrandize their abstract content. As this abstract content is attributed

firmly to the formal aspect of the drama Beckett rearranges it as if to “wear the inside out” as regards the ontological concept; that is the only way to make it possible for a witness to perceive the abstract structure he is entangled in. Thereby we are enabled to almost feel the touch of the veiled nihilist force standing behind the curtain and reaching for our throats. I believe this is Beckett’s testimony as an artist. Paradoxically, the urge to communicate that surfaces in Beckett’s drama wrests it from dehumanization, as Shiller claims: "Man only plays when in the full meaning of the word he is a man, and he is only completely a man when he plays." This small piece of land is left for us to inhabit in order not to speak but to counterpoint, to negate, to scream at the sight of language being torn apart “until that which lurks behind, be it something or nothing, starts seeping through” (Beckett 2009: 518).

Notes:

¹ Although standard translations use the notion of *play* German *Spiel* may also be translated as *game*.

² On this subject see Shane Weller’s book *A Taste for the Negative: Beckett and Nihilism*. Great Britain: MHRA, 2005

³ For further information see also: *Twentieth-Century Polish Avant-Garde Drama: Plays, Scenarios, Critical Documents*. Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz ... [et al.]. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by Daniel Gerould, in collaboration with Eleanor Gerould. (1977); *Witkacy: Stanisław Ignacy Witkiewicz As an Imaginative Writer*. Daniel Gerould. (1981); *Witkiewicz Reader*. Edited, translated, and with an introduction by Daniel Gerould. (1992)

⁴ Translation made by the author of this article. For the original Polish source see Witkacy p. 283.

⁵ Translation made by the author of this article. For the original Polish source see Witkacy p. 285.

⁶ See Aristotle p. 97-99.

⁷ See also Lamont p. 57.

⁸ R. Heyman, *Theatre and anti-theatre: new movements since Beckett*, Secker & Warburg, London 1979.

⁹ See Oppo p. 99.

¹⁰ „For archaic man, doing and daring are power, but knowing is magical power. For him all particular knowledge is sacred knowledge—esoteric and wonder-working wisdom, because any knowing is directly related to the cosmic order itself.” (Huizinga 1955:105)

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