

A Failed Play

The foreword of the English translation of Samuel Beckett's first, long unpublished play *Eleuthéria* (Ἐλευθερία, ancient Greek for "Freedom"), relates a dramatic plot around the dispute between his French and his American publishers over the rights for the publication of a work deemed faulty by the late author (he had considered it "une pièce ratée" - a failed play). Moreover, it reveals Beckett's own ambiguity towards the play; after initially agreeing to its publication, he attempted to translate the French script to English, as he'd done with many of his pieces, however, the translation was stalled and eventually abandoned, delaying the final publication date until after his death in 1994. An interesting aspect of the dispute is the moral discrepancy between the two publishers and the respective legal systems of the two different countries in regards to copyright. While France privileges the author's intentions even posthumously, America affirms the precedence of the public's right to access to an oeuvre based upon their First Amendment for free speech.

Eleuthéria can be seen to foreclose *Waiting for Godot*. While the main character of the former, Victor, refuses and cannot explain the motives of his actions, he desires to be nothing: "It is perhaps time that somebody was quite simply nothing". Risking absence, Beckett first abandoned motive from the stage and eventually abandoned an entire character in *Godot*. Referring to the play's title (freedom), Beckett uses space as a non-verbal theatrical device. From his stage directions:

"This play, in the first two acts, calls for a staging juxtaposing two distinct locations and therefore two simultaneous actions, a main action and a marginal action, the latter silent apart from a few short sentences and, as regards non-verbal expression, reduced to the vague attitudes and movements of a single character. Strictly speaking, less an action than a site, often empty." [...] The scene on stage, in the first two acts, depicts, juxtaposed, two locales separated from each other in real space, namely, Victor's room and an area of the morning room at the Krapp home, the latter as if wedged into the former. There is no partition. Victor's room moves imperceptibly on into the Krapps' morning room, as the sullied into the clean, the sordid into the decent, breadth into clutter. Over the entire width of the stage there is the same back wall, the same flooring, which, however, in moving on from Victor to his family, become housebroken and presentable. The two rooms share the whole width of the rear wall as well as the same floor, but when they pass from Victor to his family they become domesticated and respectable. Like the water from the open sea becoming the water in the harbor."¹

In many ways the aspiration for nothingness, a scenography of "lieu vague" (vague place) is what interests me in Beckett's work. His stages and scenes bring out the protagonists and props stripped down to the core, as if all other content is evacuated. Infamous for his stage instructions being both lapidary and near tyrannical, Beckett transfers the intensity of the existential drama and the futility experienced by his characters onto the few objects or elements that construct his scenes.

His objects are therefore both highly charged and allegorical as well base and occasionally mean. Even though these elements on first glance seem subservient to the function they perform within the minimal actions between dialogues and monologues (a ladder to check the weather, a tree to hang oneself), as symbols they reveal their intimate connection to desire and despair. Since they depend on theatricality, on being performed, his scenes are dynamic as

¹ Beckett, Samuel. *Eleuthéria: A Play* (Kindle Locations 375-380). OR Books. Kindle Edition.

sites. The French meaning of the original label “une pièce ratée” allows for a translation either as a failed play or as a failed room. This poetic connection is paramount to my fascination with Beckett’s spatio-temporal organization of scenes. *A Country Road. A Tree. Evening.*² Far from disregarding the world as material condition, I understand his “nothingness” as a radicalization of meaning calcified in appearances. His is an existentialism that is universal not because it shuns particularity but because it excavates the painful communality of being.

*“As for me I break it in vain and as for you you repair it in vain.”*³

² Beckett, Samuel. *Waiting for Godot: A tragicomedy in two acts.* 1955.

³ Beckett, Samuel. *Eleuthéria: A Play* (Kindle Locations 375-380). OR Books. Kindle Edition.