

Approaching the Postmodernist Threshold : Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht

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Of several central questions arising from the debate about postmodernism and representation, the meaning of 'character' and its relationship to subjectivity is especially pressing in the theatre. If the notion of a unified subject is bankrupt, peculiar questions arise for an art form like theatre whose fundamental elements are the physical presence of a live human being performing actions before other observers. The works of Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht occupy a liminal space, somewhere between modernist and postmodernist discourses, a contested space, where recuperation by either critical lamp is possible and sometimes disturbing. This paper describes postmodern theatre practices and then locates Beckett and Brecht in relation to the key issues of subject and character.

Within theatre circles as elsewhere, the adequacy of any definition of postmodern is typically contested. Nevertheless several readily recognizable aspects of postmodern performance can be identified :

1. An emphasis on the plurality of performance texts (written, the playwright's; visual, the director's, heurmenetic, the actor's; provisional, the rehearsal's).
2. The presence of multi-sometimes contradictory social codes invoked and carried in the signs of the various performance texts, resulting in the inevitable mapping of ideology.
3. A highly contingent and mercurial audience reception, which reads through the inter-texts various socially constructed meanings, some shared, some oppositional.
4. The rejection of textual closure as authoritarian and finally terrorist, whether of gender or race or class or narrative shape.
5. The recognition of the body of

the actor in space as a sign among other signs, not as the privileged representative of meaning, authority, logos, unified subjectivity.

This last issue is the most problematic precisely because it is difficult to separate the notion of a unified discrete subject from the image of a human being performing actions on a stage. As Charles Lyons has recently commented, "... the unity provided by the continuity of the presence of the actor / character tends to obscure the collision of readings that precedes the performance... No critical system can totally erase the presence of the human image that occupies the space of the stage—even though the presence of that aesthetic substitute may mark the absence of the illusive subject it replaces. "¹ This remark about the actor / character seems consonant with the post-modern insight that representation is all there is, cannot be avoided. To quote Derrida on Artaud, "Man...is that living being who constitutes representations by which he lives, and on the basis of which he possesses that strange capacity of being able to represent to himself precisely that life. "² So if there is an ontology here, it posits representation itself as the structure of being. Human beings play at / with representation, and they do so on the stage as elsewhere. The stage does not re-present some other-where, othertime present, it presents, in the present, what is itself a representation; thus the emphasis on the literality of much postmodern performance.

There is no clear consensus around a post-modern view of the subject, so let me state an underlying theoretical dilemma. Following Derrida's critique of presence, character in the theatre no longer carries the authority or logos of a center of meaning, essence or even integrity. Character is an element in the text, related to other units of language and gesture, imbricated with various, sometimes contradictory social codes and practices. Since the New Criticism, we have learned to look beyond the surface meaning for the latent meanings, creating a two-tier experience of phenomenological object (actor as character in space / time) and underlying structure of meaning (possibly linguistic, psychoanalytical, socio-economic, or more recently the endless play of signifiers.)

The dilemma is that the dramatic object, the character, is always accompanied by an actor who ghosts (Herb Blau's word) the

sign she presents. That is, through the effort of the actor, her intentionality, the heart beat pulses, the muscles strain, the mouth speaks this, not that, and the result is a reintroduction of unified consciousness into the discourse of representation. While if we listen to Baudrillard, we may be moving toward abandoning it, the human image is still powerfully linked to a private scene or sphere "where the dramatic interiority of the subject, engaged with its objects as with its image is played out."³ Perhaps Robert Wilson's highly prescribed movements succeed in representing the human image as conveyor of impulse, as nexus of countervailing tendencies, but even in *Knee Plays* or *Einstein on the Beach* we encounter speaking subjects in space/time expending effort toward some goal, however ineffable. It is difficult to embody a high degree of passivity on the stage because we see in the human effort and import of its meanings indications of intention and agency, perhaps shop-worn and out of date but none-the-less still powerful in this most laborintensive of art forms, theatre. My colleague Phil Auslander has written perceptively about the fallacy of importing univocal presence to the multiferous selves underlying the performance.⁴ Yet, attribute we will, and like Sartre's early flawed yet powerful notion of an inert in-itself twinned with a selfconscious for-itself, the actor in relation to the role still instills concepts of consciousness and agency in most audience members, most of the time.

The representation of such agency is not in itself the limit case of modernism and is, in fact, a requirement for political efficacy in post-modern art. Rather, the demarcation of modernist from post-modernist seems to me to turn on the degree to which a Romantic moment of nostalgia or regret accompanies representations of the self as a site of struggle among competing social and psychological practices garnered from historical positioning. An aspect of this nostalgia is the maintenance of desire for a utopian horizon, a fixed and incontrovertible sociopolitical teleology against which the present is always experienced as lack. The separate issue is the degree to which the self is interested in its own transmission and transformation, capable of intervention in the social practices which constitute it, if not in an autonomous way from outside the ideological grid, at least synthesizing the resources of the competing narratives and discourses crisscrossing its boundaries. This representation of agency makes the difference between what Hal Foster has called a postmodernism of resistance and a postmodernism of reaction.⁵ To the extent that agency

can be incorporated, post-modernism can be politically progressive; however, if it is truly a completely disinterested play of signification through a passive subject as conveyor, it is rife with possibilities for the reactionary politics with which it is so often charged.

The search for a threshold, for a way to mark the difference between modernism and postmodernism has led me to Samuel Beckett and Bertolt Brecht, arguably the two most important dramatists of our century, and the precursors of postmodern performance. Beckett constructs a radically decentered subject but only with attendant regret, something which seems to mark him as modernist, since regret as a symptom of Romantic nostalgia severely qualifies his postmodernist posture. As for Brecht, if he deconstructs unified subjectivity gleefully, or at least playfully, he simultaneously reasserts the imperative of overcoming fractured decentered subjectivity, often establishing a utopian Marxist horizon for his theatrical discourse.

In the case of Samuel Beckett, a modernist reading sees his characters as decimated ruins of selves still maintaining their "I" even while saying "Not I." From *Waiting for Godot* through *Endgame*, *Not I*, *Ohio Impromptu*, and *Rockaby*, Beckett depicts human consciousness at the end of its tether, reduced to series of processes controlling the self, which struggles in anguish to give up its projects of intentionality and personal meaning. In *Rockaby*, the voice and body of the woman on the stage are separated, as are the body and mouth in *Not I*. In the other three plays, characters exist in dyads, seemingly playing their texts for / to each other. In *Not I*, Mouth, referring to herself in the third person, struggles through a subjective process: "...as she suddenly realized ...gradually realized ... she was not suffering ...imagine ! ... not suffering ! ... indeed could not remember ... off-hand...when she had suffered less...unless of course she was...*meant* to be suffering... ha ! ... thought to be suffering... just as the odd time...in her life...when clearly intended to be having pleasure...she was in fact...having none...not the slightest .."⁶ This passage is typical of the seeming struggle in the text for the Mouth to clarify consciousness of her past, even if she won't own it (what?... who?... no ! ... she ! ...). However, when considering Beckett's insistence on the actor's rapid delivery in performance, it is also an impossible text for the audience to "sort through", attribute, decode. Peter Gidal has pointed out that the spectator is there by involved in the frustrating

effort to constitute self-as-subject "The viewer's attempt to see, the first process which forces her or him to be in process, and the viewer's attempt to hear, the first process also which forces her or him to be in process, and the viewer's attempt to know (understand), a first process which forces him or her to be in process, and the viewer's attempt to produce some signification, constantly, which could link, but the movement's rapidity and non-localisability all 'maintain, the stage 'object' as a subject-not-i. Not you the viewer either, as the normative identification-process, even that of self-identity (imagined or desired) is made impossible. The linkage between every signifier (the mark, or the word, or the image), every signifier being a signified for another signifier, is broken down here, or not upheld. It is kept in process, so as to disallow a process of linkage from taking place." Thus the performance of this text produces for the audience an experience of being a subject-in-process while it deconstructs any particular I-ness. To this extent, it is clearly postmodern in its affects and reception. However, the anguish of the severed body which flaps its arms when the effort of the Mouth to deny the I in the narrative is expressed reactivates the Romantic nostalgia of modernism, for all of Beckett's acerbic and non-romantic terseness. There is a kind of celebration in the stubborn persistence and sometimes perversity of the I, present in the ambiguous suggestion that human consciousness attenuates but persists, hangs on at the vanishing point but does not quite vanish. The stasis of the ending of *Endgame*, Hamm and Clov frozen in a not-quite-finished relation to their personal narratives, or of *Rockaby* with its gradual approach of the moment of death or dissolution of self which is, nevertheless, suspended in the final image—contribute to an elegiac pessimism I can only consider modernist.

Whether Beckett's representation of subjects-in-process is sufficiently strong in performance to counteract the tendencies in the work toward modernist regret is a function of particular performance conditions and audience reception. In *Rockaby*, the crucial moment is the one in which the audience decides whether or not to unify the separated formal elements, the voice and body of the woman on the stage. The formal separation is the text's strongest warning of the deliberate incompleteness of the characterization and also, at the same time, of the possible inadequacy of the notion of completion or unification for human subjectivity. If this rupture has sufficient weight in performance to put both

character and viewer into question, then the equation of person-body-consciousness-intent is problematized. Without both questions, a realist conception of character remains intact and only our ability to know or fully grasp it is at issue—this is only half the project.

The text of *Rockaby*, as Barbara Becker has pointed out, has a variety of elisions, deletions, and gaps which can be heightened or at least played by attention to meaning units, rhythms, schematic images. Actors, then, depending on their preparation and performance strategies, have some ability to use their instruments to bracket characters and throw their coherence into question. We are not far from Brecht's search for alienation effects or from the role of collage and montage in modern art, causing a confrontation between the material properties of a medium and the representation attempted within the medium. In the case of Beckett, Becker describes a kind of inverted Stanislavsky approach designed to help the actor destruct, in performance, a consciousness which must be conspicuous by its absence and/or deformity in order to reach the foreground of the audience's perception.⁹ We leave Beckett, then, struggling to portray the process of I-ness, the contradictory and non-unified attempts at discourse and narrative which mark human subjects. Insofar as he succeeds, postmodernists may claim Beckett for producing that affect. Insofar as he declines to let go of a regret for failed authority or logos, he remains in the company of T. S. Eliot in the modernist Waste Land of frustrated desire.

In the case of Bertolt Brecht, the tendency toward Romantic nostalgia seems absent and the case for an active subject-in-process more promising. Brecht anticipated and developed practical demonstrations of several of the key operations of deconstruction and postmodernism. The early plays, especially, are unfinished texts, ambiguously subversive of any fixed meanings, unraveling notions of identity and permanence. *A Man's A Man* is an exemplary text here and Galy may be seen as post-Derridean man. He is a "man who does not wish to be named;" that is, specified through signification, identified, "subject / ified." Brecht represents an instance of the transformation and reconstruction of a subject, of Galy Gay into Jeraiah Jip, the human fighting machine. Brecht revised *A Man's A Man* over ten times, changing the way Galy's story is valued (is social engineering a good or bad thing?), indeed

Brecht's penchant for constant revision is itself a postmodern refusal of closure. *Galileo* is another text where concrete history caused Brecht to reconstitute his vision of the protagonist and reverse his judgment. After the Atom bomb, the question of scientists' responsibility pressed Brecht to change the ending of the play and place more responsibility on Galileo.

In addition to portraying the transformation and reconstruction of subjects and insisting on the qualifying dialectic of history, Brecht also developed a dramatic technique for revealing the semiotizing of identity and its social construction—the Alienation Effect. As an acting technique, the A-effect makes possible the separation of action from act/or, or rather the perception of an action as socially constructed behavior which replaces, displaces, a series of other possible behaviors.² These other meanings are present in their absence; they do not take (a) place except when implicated as not-enacted. Brecht wrote of fixing the “not-but”, which is precisely the foregrounding of suppressed, not-represented alternatives by showing the represented action as social gest. “He (the actor) will say for instance, ‘You’ll pay for that’, and not say ‘I forgive you’. He detests his children; it is not the case that he loves them. He moves down stage left and not up stage right, Whatever he doesn’t do must be contained and conserved in what he does.”¹⁰

Brecht developed this technique for representing the inscription of ideology on the subject, but the notion of “ideology” is not itself unproblematic. Brecht requires a theory which provides an association between subjects-in-process and the production of ideology. Louis Althusser's re-formulation is not compatible with Brecht's dramaturgy because it emphasizes an a historical ideological grid which determines individual positioning within a specific organization of reality. Trapped “inside”; a constructed subjectivity, individuals have no means of responding to the contradictions of the particular historical moment (although this may be *tres* post-modern).

Althusser admired Brecht but did not really see their incompatibility. In his discussion of the relationship between spectator and play, Althusser insists that Brecht's plays produce a new consciousness: “The play is really the production of a new spectator, an actor who starts where the performance ends, who only starts so as to complete it, but in life.” There is however, no justified theoretical ground for this conclusion as elsewhere he notes, “He (the spectator) also sees and lives the play in the mode of a questioned false consciousness. For what else is he

if not the brother of the characters, caught in the spontaneous myths of ideology, in its illusions and privileged forms, as much as they are?"¹¹

Raymond Williams emphasizes human practice and experience as the source of values and meanings which are constituted by/through human sociality. While this is a more promising theoretical ground for Brecht's theatrical representations, it strays dangerously close to naive empiricism and old-style humanism in its appeal to a "structure of feeling" which relies on an epistemology of authentication through personal experience.¹²

Brecht's work implies some middle ground between Althusser and Williams as it maps out a network of social positions involving contradiction and struggle which represent and implicate the spectator. If *Mother Courage* can damn the war at one stage-moment and embrace it in the next, it is so that we can recognize the relations between impulse and ideology in order to develop strategies of resistance or even deconstruction. The Brechtian actor, describing and commenting on the character, is engaged in his/her own ideological struggle, even as the performance unfolds—the representation of agency is endemic to the A-effect. Without the possibility of historical intervention, Brecht would become a reactionary post-modern, denying any avenue for actively engaging in the dialectics of social change.

In some of Brecht's major work, the utopian desire for a fixed political program undermines this post modern critique of the unified self by its prescriptive and totalizing closure. Brecht's certainty about truth, respect for the efficacy of science, and old-fashioned Marxist solutions, reinstate him within the precincts of modernism. But in his insistence on subjects' dialectical relationship between acting on history and being acted upon, Brecht's subject is always in process, crisscrossed by the the contradictions of competing practices, engaged in ideological struggles which are implicated in historical and material processes.

In the work of Mabou Mines, *Le Theatre du Soleil*, or Heiner Muller, the positive legacies of Brecht and Beckett to postmodernism seem apparent. Here, Romantic regret and utopian projects drop away leaving urgent explorations of the possibility of resistance to the dominant hegemony. Actors construct character as sign, yet implicate themselves in the resulting critique of unified presence. Beckett and Brecht helped create the theatrical tools to achieve this postmodernist experiment.

Notes and References

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3. Jean Baudrillard, "The Ecstasy of Communication," in *Postmodern Culture*, Ed. by Hal Foster, (London: Pluto Press), 1983, p. 126.
4. Philip Auslander, "Toward a Concept of the Political in Postmodern Theatre," *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 39, No. 1, March 1987, pp. 20-34.
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6. Samuel Beckett, "Not I," *First Love And Other Shorts*, (New York : Grove Press, Inc.) 1974, p. 1-3.
7. Peter Gidal, *Understanding Beckett*, (New York : St. Martin's Press) 1986, p. 91.
8. Barbara Becker, "A Phenomenology of Character," Western Communication Association, Denver, fall, 1985.
9. See Terry Eagleton's discussion of the Derridean character of alienated acting : "The dramatic gesture, by miming routine behaviour in contrivedly hollow ways, represents it in all its lack, in its suppression of material conditions and historical possibilities, and thus represents an absence which it at the same time produces. Terry Eagleton, "Brecht and Rhetoric," *Against the Grain*, (London : Verso) 1986, P. 167.
10. Bertolt Brecht, Short Description of a New Technique of Acting," *Brecht On Theatre*, trans. by Jhon Willett, (New York : Hill and Wang), 1964, p. 137.
11. Louis Althusser, "The 'Piccolo Teatro' : Bertolazzi and Brecht," *For Marx*, trans. by Ben Brewster, (New York : Pantheon Books), 1969, pp. 129-151.
12. For an excellent discussion of the issues involved in the debate on ideology see Jhon Higgins, "Raymond Williams and the Problem of Ideology," *Postmodernism and Politics*, Ed. by Jonathan Arac, (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press), 1986, pp. 112-122.

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