Tracing Distortion, Disoriented Reality and Berkeley's Metaphysics in *Hamlet* and Beckett's Plays: Aesthetic Perspectives

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> Do I really look like a guy with a plan? You know what I am? I am a dog chasing cars. I wouldn't know what to do with one if I caught it! You know, I just...do things.
>
> The Joker – Heath Ledger – *Dark Knight* 2008

Abstract: The conundrum between *chaos* and *order*, *distortion* and *congruity* have a synchronicity of its own. Perceptual reality does not entertain binary opposites because there are none. It asks potent questions: Is the perception of our world around us a personal experience or is it impersonal? Is the *absurd* incongruous or another order that baffles the conservative mind? Is not every conformist structure a distortion of another, earlier structure? Art and literature, especially theatre and films are witness to life, a domino effect that has a mind of its own. The end is where the beginning is – a brilliantly used philosophy plays deeply within the microcosm of Beckett's paradoxical universe – *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* remain as the true testament of the distortion. To say that distortion is an order on its own, then, becomes the fulcrum, where absurd is but the *Other* that gives theatre, its own semiotic identity is in an equilibrium. Among many, one of the further evident indices of the transition from structuralism to post- structuralism, is the route whereby a unified practice has dispersed into a plurality of theoretical styles.

Keywords: Aesthetics, *Theatre of the Absurd*, *Hamlet*, *Berkeley's Metaphysics*, Samuel Beckett, Existentialism

Introduction

Theatrical Solution to Antinomies of Logicity – Transformation

All our apparatuses of knowledge and discourse – philosophy and science – are observations, personal or impersonal, of the domino effect of transformation. This paper will investigate solutions to such antinomies, the paradoxes, to which dramatic creation and absurdist traditions of theatre have tried doing justice, especially to the metamorphosis from the material to the immaterial – real to virtual and then to real in the suspended disbelief of cognitive functions. One as unpredictable as Joker, as quoted above, is most predictable in that trait that he is unpredictable. But no one wishes to face the brunt of it, except in the creative context, the imaginative *Physiologicity*[1] (a morphed word from *physiology*).

Art is an interesting but baffling experience, and it is no wonder that puzzling, often contradictory, statements are made about it. It is believed that theatre and the arts originate in personal emotions. In real life, these emotions are subject to inhibitions and express themselves in violent, sporadic outbursts. There is no lack of intensity, but the expression is confused and ill-organized. Art

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supplies man with its own vehicle of expression, which is different from the modes used in life. It is true that in real life we do not paint or sing our emotions. Although it is true that we express them in words, the medium used by the playwright or the playwright, it is quite different from the halting speech of everyday life to the special language of theatre.

Theatre and the arts, therefore, are expressions of recollected emotions, of emotions contemplated from a distance. The theatre of pain does not give us pain as it is felt but of pain as imaginatively surveyed. Can we then say that it is an expression of sympathy with pain? Such a description would be misleading, because sympathy with pain is an ordinary human emotion and its normal expression would be as undramatic as the expression of pain itself. The theatre of pain has the urgency of pain but also the aloofness of sympathy for sympathy with pain. The antinomy between the personal and the impersonal features of art may resolve if we relate it to the union of form and content. The content of art constitutes personal emotions and personal ideas, but once it is endowed with form, it acquires a life of its own and the artist is only a spectator of the emotions once felt in real life. When Eric Clapton lost his son, he felt deeply as a father, but when this emotion took shape in the poem *Tears in Heaven*,[2] although his emotion retained its old personal warmth, his playwright imagination also removed it from the sphere of personal agony and transformed it into an idealized experience. Within this assortment Marxism and psychoanalysis are, along with deconstructionism, the two most important threads. Both are anxious to challenge the idealist notion of the subject - i.e., the subject as centered, essentially conscious, and 'free' in the sense that it pre-exists as social or other purposes. Structuralism itself, of course, also discards such a conception of the subject, and in its firmness on the decisive role of language-like structures offers a basis for a materialist theory of subjectivity. But the Saussurean assessment of the "sign" in practice reinstates a diverse form of idealism, as Coward and Ellis argue in their Language and Materialism; a genuinely materialist account of the subject must break out of the confines of a 'pure' linguistics-based structuralism, and the Marxist and psychoanalytic viewpoints are above all ways of doing this. Equally, however, structuralism has undoubtedly forced Marxism and psychoanalysis to rethink some of their basic doctrines in a rigorous and productive way; as Robert Young puts it in his introduction to Untying the Text, post-structuralism would not have been possible without structuralism. Precisely, the theoretical developments that Lacan has introduced into psychoanalysis and Althusser into Marxism are both heavily predisposed by, and extremely critical of, structuralism.

1. The Aesthetic Solution to Antinomies of Logicity

1.1. *Universal Forms*

As art is both personal and impersonal, it is also both individual and universal. The individuality of a work of art is easy to understand; every work of art is distinctive because it has a form which is not like the form of any other work of art, however similar the basic ideas might be. Fables all over the world teach the same lessons, but every fable has its unique form, and that is why fables have a deathless appeal. Cézanne[3] drew portraits of himself; but each of these portraits is a unique product, because each has its own form, and each expresses a peculiar mood. We love characters in a drama or a novel only when we feel that they have an individual life, and one person does not talk or behave as any other person would do, and if Shakespeare is greater than other writers, it is primarily because of this individuality of portraiture.

However, this is not the entire truth. If art consisted only of individual forms, it would not have been possible for any reader or spectator to pass into and personify with it. It may be profitable here to examine, once again, the nature of this aesthetic identification. How does the playwright merge in the experience or the reader with the playwright's theatre? This identification which is at the same time nearer and more distant than sympathy is primarily *empathy* or feeling into the form of a thing. Herbert Reed illustrates empathy by saying that a spectator with an open mind looking into

the Japanese print the great wave by Katsushika Hokusai will be absorbed by the sweep of the enormous wave, its upswelling movement rather than think of the poor men in the boats and their danger. "When," says he, "we feel sympathy for the afflicted, we reenact in ourselves the feelings of others; when we contemplate a work of art, we project ourselves into the form of a work of art, and our feelings are determined by what we find there, by the dimensions we occupy".[4] It is to be seen that even if we accept the theory of empathy, we must recognize an element of universality in art, for it would not be possible for us to project ourselves into the form of a work of art unless there were a universal element in it. We should be able to appreciate the enormous sweep of the great wave, if only we have an idea of enormousness, and the suggestion is apparent that Hokusai's print will have a larger appeal for those who have seen the upswelling movement of a great wave than for those who have no experience of the sea.

These are the great commonplaces or the archetypal patterns or the primary and basic emotions. Because we are all stirred by these emotions, we shall be interested in all the devious ways of expressing them. We are interested in the expressions of these emotions in real life, too. But in real life an Othello is just a jealous man, a Macbeth is just a criminally ambitious general. Why is it that all such characters of art and theatre are more gripping than such characters in real life? Even if we do not admit that art is more restful than life, we must concede that it appeals in an unusual, *absurd* way.

The answer to this *absurdity* is found in the symbolical character of art. Art expresses an idea on a plane of reality different from that to which it belonged, and that is why art can eschew or transform all that is accidental and of merely local and temporary importance; it can also add much that will help to reveal the idea in all its distinctness and purity. As far as Shakespeare composed Hamlet for a particular company and a particular audience, Hamlet had to be fat because Burbage was fat. But Burbage's corpulence has nothing to do with Hamlet as ideally conceived by Shakespeare, and for us the line "he is fat and scant of breath"[5] is significant only as showing Gertrude's excitement and anxiety which are striking contrast to the criminality of her second husband. It is in this way that an individual peculiarity of a particular actor has been promoted to the region of universal forms.

1.2. Distortion and Assimilation

Succeeding from the above argument and its conclusion, the following arguments present one final antinomy left to discuss: is art and theatre self-expression or do they also imply communication for others? When the playwright publishes a work or the painter invites other people to see paintings or the musician puts down the notes for performers, each think of an audience and expects reward and appreciation. But when these artists see their visions, do they think of the public or is self-expression and end in itself? Art is the most intimate expression of the artist's personality, and is a process of dislocation, distortion, assimilation, and assimilation through distortion of the natural order to create a new assimilation into the imaginative realm. The artist retires into an inner sanctum and is seldom anxious to prove the truth of the visions with reference to facts or laws. If this intimacy or privacy is gone, art would lose both its intensity and its directness. Artistic activity has its origin in the spiritual necessity for intimate self-expression, followed by the artist drawing pictures, painting, or singing songs or carvings or builds with appropriate materials. This later activity stands apart from the primary artistic activity by its volitional character, and it can be called artistic only metaphorically. But in this view the true work of art is over as soon as the artist's intuitions mushroom in the brain.

The above theory seems at first sight to be unobjectionable, or it is the expression of the deepest impulses in the artist's soul and the fact that others are pleased with the work or that the artist wins wealth is a mere accident. Although the artist's emotions and ideas are personal and although the artist may feel the creative urge as primarily and impulse to self-expression, the artist can achieve aesthetic excellence only when the artist not merely feels emotions or things out thoughts but contemplates them as a vision. In other words, all artistic activity involves the process of distancing (a

form of alienation), and its chief characteristic is a combination of intensive apprehension and placid detachment. It is only when the painter or the sculptor is also a beholder or the playwright the reader of his own creation that creative activity can begin. The content of art consists of emotions and ideas that the artist feels or thinks uniquely, and they are derived from the artist's contact with the world, and thus the audience enters the work of an artist and becomes potentially communicable.

2. Hamlet's Insanity Defense through the premise of Disoriented Reality

2.1. *Sigmund Freud and the Oedipal Witness Box*

It is improbable and quite oblique to assume that we are copiously in the jurisdiction of what we say or that readers are copiously in control of their reactions. We cannot deduce that our intended significances will be conveyed, or that our conscious purposes represent our exact intentions. Neither can we deduce that language is an apparent medium of communication, of either thought or emotion. Freud was aware of the problematic nature of language itself, its imperviousness and materiality, its resistance to clarity and its refusal to be reduced to any mono-dimensional "literal" significance. His own works comprise many literary references, and some of his major concepts, such as the Oedipus complex, were initiated on literary works such as *Oedipus Rex* and *Hamlet*. Freud's own literary analyses incline to relate his *prototypes* of dream interpretation to literary texts, viewing the latter as manifestations of wish fulfillment and flattering projections of the ego of an author. Ensuing psychologists and literary critics, developing Freud's ideas, have protracted the field of psychoanalytic criticism to encompass: analysis of the motives of an author, of readers and fictional characters, involving a text to features of the author's biography such as childhood memories, relationship to parents; the nature of the creative process; the psychology of reader's reactions to literary texts; interpretation of symbols in a text, to unearth covert significances; exploration of the connections between various authors in a literary tradition; investigation of gender roles and stereotypes; and the functioning of language in the structure of the conscious and unconscious. What motivates nearly all these accomplishments is the perception of a broad analogy, promoted by Freud himself, between the psychoanalytic route and the production of a narrative. In a sense, the psychoanalyst himself creates a fiction: prompted by a patient's neurosis and recollection of traumatic events, the psychoanalyst creates a rational narrative about the patient within which the traumatic event can take its place and be understood.

It is even remotely unfathomable to extent Freud's *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1900) must have snubbed the empiricist and positivist scholarships of its time. Although in part based on physiological mockups of streams and blockages (images that later find a literary equal in the modernist 'stream-of-consciousness' practice), it also aligned the incipient discipline with contemporaneous vogues, such as spiritualism and mysticism, and openly affirmed its debt to storytelling and literary analysis. For motives that have no palpable therapeutic purpose, he designates the temporality of dreams and the origins of their 'timeless' quality as *condensation* and *displacement*. The linguist Roman Jakobson picks up on these footings in his essay '*Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances'* (1956) and associates them with metaphor and metonymy.[6] The reckoning has since become undisputed in structural literary analysis. Lionel Trilling identified this connection as early as 1947, when he appealed that "[t]he Freudian psychology makes poetry indigenous to the very constitution of the mind' and called psychoanalysis 'a science of tropes, of metaphor and its variants, synecdoche, and metonymy".[7]

The aesthetic outcome of 'timelessness' in turn became another literary idyllic and shaped the innovation of W. B. Yeats, Virginia Woolf and James Joyce.

More than postulating a structural link between the psyche and poetics, Freud's experiment also outlined a complex model of interpretation. On the one hand, dream interpretation as well as case studies followed the customary hermeneutic surface–depth model. It assumes that under the layer of

images or narrative a "true meaning" can be decrypted. More awkwardly, reductive readings of Freud introduced, via the soon disseminated 'Freudian symbols', an almost exclusive absorption of interpretation on the personal conflicts of the author and a set an outline of libidinal frustrations. Its general shape is outlined in Freud's essay 'Repression' (1915). While the number of Freudian- inspired analyses of literature is now impossible to assess, some texts have become particularly prominent objects, and some readings especially influential. Joseph Conrad's Heart of Darkness can accordingly be read as an incestuous oedipal return to the mother.

The most fecund place for a Freudian construing, however, has undoubtedly been Shakespeare's Hamlet – a celebrated early specimen is Ernest Jones' study *Hamlet and Oedipus* (1949).[8] In their extreme forms, simplistic submissions of Freudian notions have led to tactics that regard all creative activity as the result of psychological disturbance, a compensation for deficient or anomalous fulfilment of libidinal urges. Freud's libidinal idyllic is genital heterosexual sexuality, while deviations lead to narcissism, fetishism, homosexuality, etc. He pursues this squabble in some of his essays on art and literature, for example his studies of Leonardo da Vinci and Dostoevsky. While Freud is vigilant not to make assertions about an 'essence' of art, he designates the artist as someone who has finalized what is daydreaming for ordinary people. This prolific engagement of repression is called sublimation. It is regarded as the source of most ethnic productions.[9] What the psychoanalyst can ensure is quantifying together the various components of an artist's life and his works, and to compose from these the artists' mental establishment and his visceral impulses. Freud directed such an analysis of Leonardo da Vinci's depiction of *The Madonna and Child with St. Anne* (1910). His lengthy scrutiny of Leonardo da Vinci's personality generated a prototype for psychoanalytic biography. He wrote a psychoanalytic justification of the novella Gradiva by the German author Wilhelm Jensen, as well as psychological readings of other works. In 1914 he published (anonymously) an acute interpretation of the "meaning" of Michelangelo's statue of Moses in Rome. Anyhow his own readings of literary and artistic texts, Freud never demanded that psychoanalysis could adequately elucidate the process of artistic creation. In his manuscript "Dostoevsky and Parricide" (1928), he stated: "Before the problem of the creative artist exploration must, alas, lay down its arms."[10]

2.2. Jacques Lacan and the Narcissistic Mirror

In 1953, at a psychoanalytic symposium in Rome, Lacan gave a paper (usually known as the "Rome speech") delineating his rebellious position vis-a-vis conventional psychoanalysis and putting forward for the first time his theses on the centrality of language. Language is to be assumed here both in the ordinary sense of verbal communiqué – particularly, for him, as this befalls between analyst and patient - and in the broader Structuralist sense of Levi-Strauss' "symbolic function". In the Rome speech, Lacan uses a very Levi-Straussian view of the unconscious; well ahead, as we shall see, this advances rather inversely. He also follows Levi- Strauss in assuming the concepts of structural linguistics for use in another turf - in his case, that of psychoanalysis. Here too, however, the unique ideas undergo substantial re-figuring. Lacan sees both the subject and the unconscious as more vibrant human constructs and is far more concerned than Levi-Strauss with the process of their production. This stress also adds a quasi-literary facet to his theory; his justification of the construction of the subject in language has itself, in its archetypal version, a certain 'narrative' form: it is the story of the causation of the subject, and Lacan does not oversight an occasion to point out its fictional and dramatic dimensions. The story has two instants of climax and/or crisis (although it must be stressed that in the life of any individual, these are not once-and-for-all events, but constantly recur in one form or another): the 'mirror stage' and the 'entry into the Symbolic order'.

The model of the mirror stage, put forward in an important early paper in 1949, is rooted in Freud's observation that the ego matures out of narcissism. Prior to this, the infant proficiencies himself as a fluid fusion of drives, of good and bad feelings, missing both unity and separateness, indistinguishable from the world around him and from the mother's body. The moment at which he

comprehends that his doppelgänger in the mirror is in fact "himself" literally transforms him: for the first time, he sees himself as it were from the outside, as a totality, a distinct, unwavering entity - and he reacts, Lacan says, with 'jubilation'. This narcissistic empathy with the image is what constitutes the ego, and it underlines the importance of vision in the child's development. But in classifying with the mirror image, which is not only gratifyingly separate from the world around it but inexorably also separate from him as subject, he is constructing his identity on a fantasy - or, as Lacan also says, situating it "in a. fictional direction"; and the ego is thus constitutionally estranged from the subject. Also, the perfect couple formed by subject and image provides an ambiguous model for other dual associations and especially the child's relation to his mother. The mirror stage inducts the Imaginary Order — that continuing dimension of the subject's actuality which is bound up with the ego, the mother, estranging identifications of all kinds, and a largely visual mode of experience.

2.3. Deconstructing the Insanity Defense in Hamlet

A thorough understanding of psychoanalysis interpretation of literature and all the corresponding theories by analysts can be best made explicit by taking a literal example – Hamlet, a work on which both Freud and Lacan formulated their case. Freud's own explanation of Hamlet centered on the "discovery"[11] of Hamlet's Oedipal longing for his mother and the resultant guilt averting him from slaying the man who has done what he reflexively wanted to do. Lacan's reading is not disparate to this but recasts it in terms of the position of the phallus in the portentous economy of the unconscious. This allows him to tie the central issue of Hamlet's tardy action with other elements in the play: lamentation, fantasy, narcissism, and psychosis. The phallus figures in all of these, in a disconcerting variety of roles ("And the phallus is everywhere present in the disorder in which we find Hamlet each time he approaches one of the decisive moments of his action", p. 49) which do not always seem attuned with each other; but this perhaps illustrates the nature of meanings as they multiply in the unconscious. The phallus, according to Lacan, is the signifier of unconscious desire - the longing of the Other.[12] It comes to undertake that role through the workings of the Oedipus complex. The child's first desire is to be the object of the mother's desire — i.e., to be the phallus that the mother lacks. The intervention of the Name-of-the-Father forces the child to give up this craving: to accept Symbolic castration, to repress the phallus, which thus becomes the unconscious signifier of this unique desire. As such, it comes to stand for all subsequent desires as well, and to replicate itself in chains of signifiers which metaphorically supernumerary for it.

The most potent question Shakespeare has been able to make enigmatic in the play – why is Hamlet unable to kill Claudius until he is dying himself? Lacan's solution is in the first illustration that "man's desire is the desire of the other", and that Hamlet's desire is deferred from, subject to, his mother's desire for Claudius. He is forced in a sense to plea her desire, which is Claudius. But Lacan expands this further through two major facets of the Imaginary order: fantasy and narcissism. Fantasy denotes to the subject's relation to an object of desire which is an Imaginary auxiliary for the Symbolic phallus - it is thus in some sense a "lure" or a deflection; and in Hamlet's case it is also what deflects him, decoys him away from, his mission to avenge his father. The main make-believe entity, or "bait" (p. 11), is Ophelia, and Lacan analyses this at length, indicating to her phallic overtones in the text (p. 23); but the duel with Laertes - which Claudius organizes to "deflect", in fact to get rid of, Hamlet – institutes another trap set on the level of the Imaginary. Hamlet's unusually docile recognition of the gamble can only be explained, Lacan argues, by the logic of the mirror stage in which narcissism is inextricably guaranteed up with rivalry. That is, Hamlet identifies with Laertes as an ideal image of himself, and therefore (as already evident in their fight over Ophelia's grave) sees him as a rival: "The ego ideal is . . . the one you have to kill" (p. 31).

The inmost and most concealed motive for Hamlet's inaction is, however, a different kind of narcissism, and one that again concerns the phallus. As Lacan has said, the decline of the Oedipus complex entails in mourning the phallus; and, as in all mourning, its loss is compensated for in the

Imaginary register: by the formation of an image of the phallus which is narcissistically capitalized by the subject (pp. 48—9). And this is Lacan's final revelation — Claudius represents the phallus. So, to kill Claudius would be to commit suicide. But why is Claudius the phallus? Because he is the recipient of the mother's desire - but also because he has escaped scot-free from killing the father. The approbation triggers the phallus insecurity, the emotional unconscious suddenly sends latent signals of this insecurity to the academic mind of Hamlet. Hamlet looks for a flaw in the new nuptial, something that he assumes is contrived. Shakespeare may reflect, in Hamlet's philosophical mood, something beyond the resistance of the scholar to action, to assassinate, to involve in the words, under the well-portrayed supernatural enterprise. It is a psychic inhibition, fallibility, despair, and suffering that he cannot comprehend. He is torn asunder between his knowledge of perceptual judgement and that of a ghost and its narrative. But all knowledge derives by hypothetical reasoning from knowledge of external facts and previous knowledge.

Such is with Hamlet. His mind broods over such knowledge as to philosophize action. This incessant struggle between reason and action is reflective of Kant's *Theory of Practical Reason*. Within the pathologically affected will of the rational Hamlet we find a conflict of maxims with the practical laws created by himself. His rational reasoning is overshadowed by the ambition of a duty, which creates its own laws, and the process of adjustment is hindered thus. The influence of the supernatural on Hamlet's maxims and hitherto indecisive mind create imperatives of action, unsupported by his emotions, sobered by rational learning. Hamlet vows to suppress all his academic learning and take on the role of the primal avenger, but for that he knows he needs to put up an act, a mask of pseudo psychopathic schizophrenia – but with a personality of his own:

> […] How strange or odd so e'er I bear myself (As I perchance hereafter shall think meet
> To put an antic disposition on),
> That you, at such times seeing me, never shall— With arms encumbered thus, or this headshake, Or by pronouncing of some doubtful phrase, […]

The phrase "antic disposition" can be recast as manic depression or schizophrenic lunacy, something that Hamlet needs because his reasoning mind counters his primal instincts. The challenge to the phallus is met – Hamlet has found the necessary psychological anchors to take the fight to the initial defeat from his uncle, and even from Gertrude.

In other words, the difference between Oedipus Rex and Hamlet is that whereas Oedipus' crime of slaughtering his father and marrying his mother was punished by castration, Claudius' acting out of the Oedipal drama has left him uncastrated: the phallus is "still there…and it is precisely Claudius who is called upon to embody it" (p. 50, my italics). Lacan corroborates this connection further through the phallic implications of kingship, and claims that Hamlet's enigmatic statement: "The body is with the king, but the king is not with the body" makes profound sense if 'phallus' is substituted for 'king': "the body is bound up in this matter of the phallus - and how - but the phallus, on the contrary, is bound to nothing: it always slips through your fingers" (p. 52).

The fact that Hamlet says he is the foil ("I'll be your foil, Laertes") which, as it turns out, kills both himself and Claudius aids to accentuate the final verity: it is only now of his own death, when the knowledge that he is dying releases him from all narcissistic attachments, that Hamlet is free to kill the king/phallus.

While we establish relations and literary links between literary scholarship and psychoanalytic theories, the argument was reopened, after what seems in retrospect as a retreat into either Structuralist or biographical positions, by the *Psychology and Literature* issue of *New Literary History* in 1980 and eventually the special 1990 edition of *The Oxford Literary Review*.[13] Several compendiums that appeared during this period and since are listed in the bibliography below.

These enduring critical reassessments exhibit that psychoanalysis has persisted as a stumbling block and point of argument for literary and cultural theory in the late twentieth century. Yet they

also hint at the probable of psychoanalysis to offer a decisive and necessary link between disparate poststructuralist theories. It is aide-mémoire of the continual translations and transformations that happen in literary and cultural theories, their implicit and explicit desires, tensions, and frustrations. At the same time, by partly creating the object of critical investigation itself, psychoanalysis has avoided an unwarranted synchronization and homogenization that might have turned it into the super-theory that it never set out to be.

3. The Beckett Paradox

Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* are traditionally associated with Sartre's *existentialism* in that they deny any inherent purpose to life. However, a careful reading of the two plays shows that they need not be read as despair-ridden and pessimistic. Aware of the potentially devastating implications of Sartre's philosophy, Beckett offers a way for humans to find essence by highlighting George Berkeley's *idealism*, in which nothing exists without being perceived. Through the repeated motif of perception, Beckett's plays include Berkeley's ideology, which holds that as recognized is at the heart of meaningful existence. The result is a 'Beckettian' synthesis between existentialism and idealism wherein humans, thrust into a world with no essence, construct significance through perceiving and being perceived. *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* suggest that though meaning may not be inherent in the world, our sense of self and happiness is irreducibly tied to the way we are acknowledged, and that we are empowered only when we are accepted by ourselves and others. In the postmodern world where ambition, technology, and chaos often leave one to retreat into self-imposed loneliness, Beckett's dramas convey that introspection and interdependence are at the crux of purposeful life:

> I began to discover stage scenes in the most common-place everyday events. [One day I saw] a blind man begging; two girls went by without seeing him, singing: "I closed my eyes; it was marvelous!" This gave me the idea of showing on stage, as crudely and as visibly as possible, the loneliness of man, the absence of communication among human beings.[14]

In *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape*, both written in the 1950s, Samuel Beckett examines the emptiness of human existence, especially acute during the post-war era. His plays, which express the banality of life through meaningless repetitions, have been associated with existentialism in that they deny any inherent purpose to life. However, a careful reading of *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* reveals that Beckett's plays need not be interpreted as despair-ridden and pessimistic. A dialectical reading of the plays illustrates that Beckett offers a way for humans to find essence in life by showing his audience what *not* to do; in other words, by repeatedly exposing why his characters Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp are unhappy, Beckett highlights their weakness and in turn suggests what one *should* do to overcome life's barrenness. Beckett's solution to existential despair derives from Berkeley's idealism in which nothing exists without being perceived. Beckett applies this ideology to the human psyche and dramatically conveys that although meaning may not be inherent in the world, humans can find essence in our relationships and interdependence:

> The *Theatre of the Absurd* shows the world as an incomprehensible place. The spectators see the happenings on the stage entirely from the outside, without ever understanding the full meaning of these strange patterns of events, as newly arrived visitors might watch life in a country of which they have not yet mastered the language.' The confrontation of the audience with characters and happenings which they are not quite able to comprehend makes it impossible for them to share the aspirations and emotions depicted in the play…Emotional identification with the characters is replaced by a puzzled, critical attention. For while the happenings on the stage are absurd, they yet remain recognizable as somehow related to real life with its absurdity, so that eventually the spectators are brought face to face with the irrational side of their existence. Thus, the absurd and fantastic goings-on of the *Theatre of the Absurd* will, in the end, be found to reveal the irrationality of the human condition and the illusion of what we thought was its apparent logical structure.[15]

After the Second World War, Samuel Beckett played a significant role in shaping the literary movement that would later become known as postmodernism. Emerging from the horrors of genocide and destruction, writers struggled to make sense of the atrocities they had witnessed and were further disappointed by the new Cold War. The apparent lack of progress in history inspired postmodernists to express the bleak human prospect in their works. Molière reflected the transitory and incoherent nature of human existence in the Theatre of the Absurd, in which "men and women, as Shakespeare says, were viewed as mere actors in an absurd play, making their entrances and exits upon the stage of life and mouthing their tales 'full of sound and fury,' signifying nothing."[16]

Among the most influential postmodern plays are Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape,* both closely associated with absurdism and existentialism. Noting the barren yet symbolic details of his works, the philosopher Alain Badiou describes Beckett as "a writer of the absurd, of despair, of empty skies, of incommunicability and of eternal solitude " in sum, an existentialist."[17] Sartre's philosophy " which argues there is no intrinsic meaning in human existence " permeates Waiting *for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape.* Considered the father of existentialism and a contemporary of Beckett, Sartre held that existence is prior to essence and that humans come into being without inherent significance. Existentialism thus "places the entire responsibility for [one's] existence squarely upon [one's] own shoulders."[18] Though Sartre himself did not necessarily intend his philosophy to be pessimistic, Beckett showed that the seeming meaninglessness of life could lead individuals into despair. The purposeless lives of Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp epitomize the Sartrean individual who struggles to make sense of life's seeming insignificance.

The Sartrean existential struggle is apparent even from the first line of *Waiting for Godot.* The bare setting of "A country road. A tree. Evening" immediately conveys emptiness; roads and trees, which are conventional symbols of life, are barren, suggesting a lack of abundance. The use of participle " the continuous and unfinished form of the verb " in the title of the play is also significant because it suggests that nothing worthwhile happens in life as Vladimir and Estragon idly wait for Godot to appear.

Furthermore, the play opens with Estragon exclaiming that there is "nothing to be done," in response to which Vladimir confesses, "I'm beginning to come round to that opinion."[19] There really is nothing to be done in a play in which two plain characters wait, passing the time with verbal and physical repertoire. There is no coherent story, point, or design in the play, and Vladimir and Estragon's lives are reduced to meaningless repetition and banters. In fact, the two characters even dismiss existence as a sort of a problem to be solved:

> Vladimir: Suppose we repented. Estragon: Repented what?
> Vladimir: Oh… We would not have to go to into the details.
> Estragon: Our being born?[20]

Being born becomes an occasion to repent for, as if existing is a sin, a fault, a regrettable fact. Vladimir also directly represents Sartre's notion of the universal individual, the idea that one man represents all of mankind because "in choosing for himself he chooses for all men."[21] For example, Vladimir convinces Estragon that they should help Lucky by claiming: "at this place, at this moment of time, all mankind is us, whether we like it or not. Let us make the most of it, before it is too late!"[22] Because one always chooses what one believes to be the best, each decision a person makes serves to define the ideal for all of humanity. In this way, not only does *Waiting for Godot* capture the boredom and insignificance of an existential life, but it also relays Sartre's sentiment that the choices individuals make necessarily affect everyone else.

Similarly, *Krapp's Last Tape* harkens to Sartrean existentialism with its mindless repetitions and lack of a traditional plot. It is interesting to note that the play is set in the future; though the play takes place in the late evening in the future (suggesting the end of time), Krapp possesses no intelligible sense of his past and thus fails to attribute meaning to his life. For instance, Krapp does not remember

his journal's contents when he rummages through them, even when they involve something as grave as his mother's death: "mother at rest at last…. Hm…. The black ball…. [*He raises his head, stares blankly front. Puzzled.*] Black ball?"[23] Krapp repeatedly raises his head and stares blankly into space in hopes of remembering, but his life, too, has been reduced to fragments of random and redundant moments that have lost significance. Krapp's life lacks any sense of progress since what he thought was most important in his past years " discoveries, thoughts, and philosophy " are no longer valuable to him. In fact, they torment him to the point where he cannot even stand to listen to them again. When the younger Krapp in the tape shares what sounds like an epiphany and reads, "what I suddenly saw then was this, that the belief I had been going on all my life, namely—," Krapp angrily switches off the tape and curses as he fast-forwards through the next few minutes of the tape. He comments, "[I've] just been listening to that stupid bastard I took myself for 30 years ago, hard to believe I was ever as bad as that."[24] Instead of leading a fulfilling life, Krapp has spent his time on earth in a meaningless acquisition of years, exemplifying Sartre's philosophy that life is inherently meaningless.

Despite Sartre's belief that existentialism is empowering because it allows one to freely determine one's own essence, Beckett recognized how dangerous an inherently meaningless life could be for the individual: Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp are all unhappy. As such, Beckett employs strong currents of Berkeley's idealism in *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* to suggest a solution to the hopeless existential life. Building upon Sartre's notion of the universal individual, Beckett's plays endorse Berkeley's idea that one cannot exist happily on one's own because being recognized is at the heart of meaningful existence. Berkeley, an eighteenth-century idealist, famously argued that "*esse* is *precipi*": that to be is to be perceived.[25] He posited that everything in the realm of awareness " form, colors, texture, taste, etc. " are ideas perceived by the senses and concluded that everything in the world, including individuals, exists only when acknowledged by a perceiving mind. When Berkeley wrote that "all the choir of heaven and furniture of the earth have not any subsistence without a mind" and that "their being is to be perceived or known," he contended that nothing truly exists until perceived by a conscious mind.[26]

When analyzed from a Berkeleian point-of-view, *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* show how life becomes reduced to a series of boring, meaningless, and fragmented moments when no one is really "looking." The plays reveal "a universe of insignificance, its tension created by the conflict between the insignificance and man's effort to give himself meaning despite everything."[27] However, difficulty arises when a man tries to give *himself* meaning; though Beckett may believe in the individual ability to determine essence, he suggests that we cannot conceive meaning on our own because we are relational beings.

One commentator agrees when he shares that "Beckett may be wishing to apply to mind Berkeley's notion of the relativity and dependency of the sensible object."[28] Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp are all occupied with perception: they crave recognition and become depressed when they are deprived of it " this explains why Vladimir and Estragon endlessly wait for Godot and why Krapp only seems to recall people's eyes. Through the repeated motif of perception, Beckett provides a Berkeleian answer to the potentially devastating bleakness of existentialism. The result is a Beckettian redemptive existentialism in which our sense of self and happiness are constructed only when we are perceived, both by ourselves and others.

Evidence of Vladimir and Estragon's tireless desire for recognition pervades *Waiting for Godot*. Vladimir repeatedly wakes up his sleeping friend until Estragon exclaims, "Why will you never let me sleep?" Vladimir simply answers, "I felt lonely,"[29] as if he cannot stand not being looked at even for a minute because he is afraid, he will cease to exist when no one is aware of him. Even Pozzo, an expert and therefore arguably the most powerful character in the play, repeatedly asks for attention when he utters, "is everybody ready? Is everybody looking at me? Will you look at me, pig!"[30] However, the correlation between being seen and existing becomes most clear when Vladimir converses with the Boy upon learning that Godot will not be coming that evening:

> Boy: What am I to say to Mr. Godot, sir?
> Vladimir: Tell him… [*he hesitates*] … tell him you saw us. [*Pause*] You did see us, didn't you?[31]

Here, Vladimir and Estragon seek recognition from Godot before Godot arrives, and this exemplifies Beckett's synthesis of existentialism – the philosophy that existence precedes essence – and idealism – that to be is to be is to be perceived. A similar dialogue takes place when Vladimir learns once again that Godot will not be coming in Act II:

> Boy: What am I to tell Mr. Godot, sir?
> Vladimir: Tell him… [*he hesitates*] ... tell him you saw me and that… [*he hesitates*] … that you saw me. […] [*With sudden violence*] You're sure you saw me; you won't come and tell me tomorrow that you never saw me![32]

There is a strong need for Vladimir to know that he had been seen; Berman explains that "[in Beckett's plays] minds become dependent, vulnerable beings; they need the support and comfort of being perceived."[33] Beckett's characters express their basic desire for acceptance through their obsession with being seen.

The Berkeleian "to be is to be perceived" axiom is also present in *Krapp's Last Tape* as Krapp ends his reclusive life in deep unhappiness. During the play, we learn that Krapp had been distancing himself from others because of his artistic ambitions. "As the tapes make clear," Gordon analyzes, "he has pursued the life of the mind, separating the 'grain' from the 'husks' following his 'vision' that would, so he thought, survive his infirmity."[34] The extent to which Krapp preferred solitude is clear when he records that he "celebrated the awful occasion [of his birthday], as in recent years, quietly at the Wine-house" with "not a soul" around him.[35] Instead of choosing to take a break once a year to celebrate his birthday, Krapp took even that time to pursue the life of a writer. However, this commitment to achievement only leaves him restless, and he repeatedly confesses his loneliness: "[I] never knew such silence. The earth might be uninhabited."[36] We learn that even his career has been unfulfilling, as only "seventeen copies [of his book] sold, of which eleven [were sold] at trade price to free circulating libraries beyond the seas."[37] Though he invested himself in the life of a detached artist, he returns again and again on the tape to the moments he wants to relive, and to his disappointment, Krapp learns that beauty lies in moments shared and not in the achievement of brilliance. In accordance with Berkeley's philosophy, Krapp's greatest moments were those concerned with recognition.[38]

Krapp, like Vladimir and Estragon, strongly desires to be seen, as evidenced through his obsession with eyes. His insatiable appetite for recognition, coupled with his misery due to his failure to connect with others, suggests that a meaningful existence cannot exist without others' perception. Krapp is particularly obsessed with the female gaze. For instance, though he calls his relationship with Bianca a "hopeless business," he fondly recalls her eyes as "very warm" and "incomparable"; he remembers "not much about her, apart from a tribute to her eyes."[39] Similarly, Krapp is drawn to a particular nurse because she happened to be looking at him: "whenever I looked in her direction she had her eyes on me… […] The face she had! The eyes!"[40] Krapp seems incapable of remembering people unless he feels acknowledged by them. The crucial boat scene to which Krapp returns repeatedly confirms how important the female gaze is for Krapp's sense of self:

> "I said again I thought it was hopeless and no good going on and she agreed, without opening her eyes. [Pause.] I asked her to look at me and after a few moments " [Pause.] after a few moments she did, but the eyes just slits, because of the glare. I bent over her to get them in the shadow, and they opened. [Pause. Low.] Let me in"[41]

Here, the last sentence "Let me in" though unmistakably sexual in suggestion, also functions as Krapp's metaphysical plea: the girl needs to help him belong to this world. In his analysis, Knowlson acknowledges that the girl's eyes not only serve as windows to the soul, but also as mirrors, reflecting and confirming that which is before them.[42] This is why Krapp cannot stand having the girl's eyes in

the sunlight and creates a shadow so that she can look at him properly: he needs to know that he is being perceived thoroughly to feel grounded. The present-day Krapp repeatedly returns to this part of the tape because this instance of companionship, gaze, and intimacy was when he felt most alive.

Lastly, Beckett shows the importance of self-perception for meaningful existence through Krapp's inability to address his present self. In Beckett's adaptation of idealism, self- recognition is just as indispensable as others' recognition in shaping one's existence. Krapp is always recording his future self or listening to his past self; he does not, or cannot, ever face his present self. To complicate matters further, the play is set in the future: Krapp "lives entirely outside time in a no-man's land," a place of "a repeated past and anticipated future."[43] The tape recorder limits Krapp to his past or future self, and his present self is preoccupied with everything but the now. "The words that Krapp had recorded so many years ago," Knowlson observes, "now represent the only form of contact that he can achieve in a depleted, solitary, almost totally barren existence."[44] If time is a relative term and reality is constructed of perceiving minds and ideas, Krapp never truly exists because he is never in the present.

Beckett uses the Berkeleian notion of perception in *Waiting for Godot* and *Krapp's Last Tape* to offer a solution to the problems that existentialism creates. The two plays echo Sartre's philosophy in their suggestion that there is no necessary or inherent purpose to life. However, Beckett provides a way out from existential despair in Berkeley's idealism, the philosophy that nothing in the world is made significant until chanced upon a by perceiving mind. Beckett's philosophy precludes passive and reclusive lives from being meaningful, and in this framework, Vladimir, Estragon, and Krapp's lives serve as the antithesis of the ideal lifestyle we should be pursuing. In short, Beckett's characters show what we should *not* do if we desire a purposeful life.

Conclusion

In the postmodern world where technology and ambition promote self-reliant individualism more than ever, Beckett warns that a meaningful existence can seldom be achieved alone. Despite life's inconsequential repetitions and routines, there is essence to be found, and, according to Beckett's drama, self-conscious trueness to the present self and the willingness to be perceived by others are at the crux of purposeful life:

> Hence, it is the theatre, which is multidimensional and more than merely language or literature, which is the only instrument to express the bewildering complexity of the human condition. The human condition being what it is, with man small, help- less, insecure, and unable ever to fathom the world in all its hopelessness, death, and absurdity, the theatre has to confront him with the bitter truth that most human endeavor is irrational and senseless, that communication between human beings is well-nigh impossible, and that the world will forever remain an impenetrable mystery. At the same time, the recognition of all these bitter truths will have a liberating effect: if we realize the basic absurdity of most of our objectives, we are freed from being obsessed with them and this release expresses itself in laughter.[45]

One must perceive oneself and one another to find meaning in this world. We cannot thrive on our own. Reconciling with the past, taking advantage of the present, and forming relationships with others point us to Beckettian redemptive existentialism " the philosophy that existence can be empowered when we are perceived, and that only when we are accepted do, we find meaning and significance.

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Notes

[1] A word of own morphing: The apparent turgidity of an image the mind conjures and withholds until morphed into some other image. The power of the inventive mind is in holding true to the singular perception of the image as concrete and real is the *physiologicity* of imagination.
[2] Eric Clapton, *Clapton: The Autobiography* (United States: Broadway Books, 2007).
[3] John Rewald and Paul Cézanne, *Cezanne Biography* (New Caledonia: Harry N. Abrams, 1986).
[4] Herbert Read, *The Meaning of Art* (United Kingdom: Faber & Faber, 1951) 22-23.
[5] This initial citation of the line in question refers to *The Riverside Shakespeare*. For the line in the First Folio, see Thompson and Taylor's Arden edition, 5.2.239. For the line in the Q2, see also their Arden edition, 5.2.269. The inclusion of the comma varies. *The First Quarto* does not include the line.
[6] Roman Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbance', *Studies on Child Language and Aphasia* (The Hague: Mouton, 1971), pp. 49-73.
[7] Lionel Trilling, 'Freud and Literature', *The Liberal Imagination* (London: Heinemann, 1964), pp. 34-57 (pp. 52–53).
[8] Ernest Jones, *Hamlet and Oedipus* (New York: Norton, 1976). See also Jacques Lacan, 'Desire and the Interpretation of Desire in *Hamlet*', in Felman (ed.), *Literature and Psychoanalysis*, pp. 11-52.
[9] Sigmund Freud, 'Leonardo da Vinci and a Memory of his Childhood' (1910), and 'Dostoevsky and Parricide' (1927), in *Art and Literature*, trans. James Strachey, ed. Albert Dickson, Pelican Freud Library, vol XIV, pp. 143-231, esp. p. 167 and pp. 435-460. See also Sigmund Freud, 'Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming' (1907), in *Art and Literature*, pp. 129-141.
[10] Quoted by Peter Gay in Freud, p. 444.
[11] As he triumphantly put it, 'After all, the conflict in Hamlet is so effectively concealed **that** it was left to me to unearth it' (VII, pp. 309-10, quoted in Wright, *Psychoanalytic Criticism,* p. 34).
[12] See 'The signification of the Phallus', in Ecrits: A Selection, pp. 281-91.
[13] See the special edition of *New Literary History* 12.1 (1980), *Psychology and Literature: Some Contemporary Directions*; and Nicholas Royle and Ann Wordsworth (eds.), *Psychoanalysis and Literature: New Work*, special edition of *The Oxford Literary Review* 12.1-2 (1990).
[14] Ionesco, "Dans les Armes de la Ville," *Cahiers de la Compagnie Madeleine Renaud-Jean-Louis Barrault,* No. 20 (October 1957).
[15] Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd" *The Tulane Drama Review* (United States: Cambridge MIT Press, Vol. 4 No. 4, May 1960), 5.
[16] John Fletcher, *About Beckett*: *The Playwright and the Work* (London: Faber and Faber, 2003), 20.
[17] Alain Badiou. *On Beckett*. Ed. Nina Power and Alberto Toscano (Manchester: Clinaman, 2003), xvii-38.
[18] John Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (UK: Yale University, 2007).
[19] Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot." *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works*. (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 11.
[20] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 74.
[21] John Paul Sartre, *Existentialism Is a Humanism* (UK: Yale University, 2007).
[22] Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot." *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 74.
[23] Samuel Beckett, "Krapp's Last Tape." *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 217.
[24] Becekett, *Dramatic Works*, 222.
[25] George Berkeley, *A Treatise Concerning the Principles of Human Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University, 1998), 3.
[26] Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, 6.
[27] Harold Bloom, "Guicharnaud J. Existence on Stage", *Modern Critical Views: Samuel Beckett* (United States: Facts on File, 2008), 116.
[28] David Berman, *Beckett and Berkeley* (Irish University Review Spring 14.1 1984), 5.
[29] Samuel Beckett, "Waiting for Godot" *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 17.
[30] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 30.
[31] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 50.
[32] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 47.

[33] David Berman, *Beckett and Berkeley* (Irish University Review Spring 14.1 1984), 5.
[34] Lois Gordon, *Krapp's Last Tape: A New Reading* (Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, Spring 1990), 100.
[35] Samuel Beckett, "Krapp's Last Tape." *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 1955), 217.
[36] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 223.
[37] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 222.
[38] Intriguing debates of the play also include Katharine Worth's "Past into Future: Krapp's Last Tape to Breath? in *Beckett's Later Fiction and Drama*, ed. J. Acheson, K. Arthur (New York: St. Martin, 1987) 168-92, which treats how the resolution of light imagery marks a change in Beckett's style. Among the numerous discussions comparing Krapp and Proust, see Rosette Lamont, "Krapp: Anti-Proust," in *Theatre Workbook I*, ed. James Knowlson (London: Brutus Books, 19) 158-73; Arthur K. Oberg's "Krapp's Last Tape and the Proustian Vision," *Modern Drama 9* (December 1966) 333-38, and Sandra Gilbert's "All the Dead Voices: A Study of Krapp's Last Tape," *Drama Survey 6* (Spring 1968) 244-57.
[39] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 218.
[40] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 219.
[41] Beckett, *Dramatic Works*, 221.
[42] Knowlson and John Pilling, in *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 1979) 86-87, suggest that Krapp's rejection of earthy love is in the gnostic, Manichean tradition. See also Gontarski 56, which identifies Krapp's darkness as Schopenhauer's Will.
[43] Lois Gordon, *Krapp's Last Tape: A New Reading* (Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism, Spring 1990), 104.
[44] Indeed, Beckett's active participation in directing, along with his elaborate production notebooks, refine every detail. See James Knowlson, *Krapp's Last Tape*: The Evolution of a Play, 1958-1975," *Journal of Beckett Studies I* (Winter 1976), 50-65, which discusses the seven stages of the play's composition.
To construct a veritable list of critical works on Beckett, see Roy Walker, "Samuel Beckett's Double Bill: Love, Chess and Death," *Twentieth Century*, 164 (December 1958) 533-44; Robert Brustein, "Krapp and a Little Claptrap," *New Republic*, 143 (February 22,1960) 21-22; Ruby Conn, *Samuel Beckett: The Comic Gamut* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 1962) 248-50; Frederick J. Hoffman, *Samuel Beckett: The Language of Self* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois Press, 1962) 155-59; Alec Reid, in *European Patterns*, ed. T.B. Harward (Dublin: Dolmen Press, 1964) 38-43; Richard Coe, *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove, 1964) 102-105; John Fletcher, "Action and Play in Beckett's Theater," *Modern Drama 9* (December 1966) 242-50. See also Hugh Kenner, *A Reader's Guide to Samuel Beckett* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1973) 129-35; Ruby Conn, *Back to Beckett* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1973) 165-72; Bernard F. Dukore, "Krapp's Last Tape as Tragicomedy," *Modern Drama 15* (March 1974) 351-54; more recent essays include Sueellen Campbell, "Krapp's Last Tape-Critical Theory," *Comparative Drama 12* (Fall 1978), 187-99; Andrew Kennedy, "Krapp's Dialogue of Selves," in *Beckett at 80/Beckett in Context*, ed. Enoch Brater (New York: Oxford UP, 1986) 102-109; Vivian Mercier, *Beckett/Beckett* (New York: Oxford UP, 1987), 196-202.
[45] Martin Esslin, "The Theatre of the Absurd" *The Tulane Drama Review* (United States: Cambridge MIT Press, Vol. 4 No. 4, May 1960), 6.