CACS102: Critical Frameworks in Creative Practice

Week 9
Landscapes of Catastrophe: Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* II

- Analysis of *Waiting for Godot*
  - Drama
  - Time in *Godot*
  - Language and character in *Godot*

- Beckett, Drama and History

- From Modernism to Postmodernism

‘Tragedy is not an imitation of persons, but of actions and of life’ (Aristotle 1996: 11).

Drama: ‘to do, act, perform’ ≠ waiting

‘Drama falls silent and becomes gesture, frozen amid the dialogues’ (Adorno 1962: 125).

Estragon: ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful’ (Beckett 1965: 41).
‘It is to Hegel that we owe the idea of drama as such as the product of modernity, of those epochs in which individual [subjective] self-consciousness has reached a high state of development’ (Kruger in Knowles et al 2003: 81).

For Hegel drama is the ‘collision of circumstances, passions and characters’ leading dialectically to ‘actions and reactions that require a resolution or settlement [Schlichtung] of conflict and discord’ (Kruger in Knowles et al 2003: 81).

‘... to ask who or what the expected Godot is, is meaningless. Godot is nothing but the name for the fact that life which goes on pointlessly misinterprets itself as ‘waiting’, as ‘waiting for something’’ (Anders 1965: 143).

Activity: Does Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* retain features consistent with dramatic form? If yes, what are those features?

Theatre Royal Haymarket 2009

‘The three Aristotelian unities are retained, but drama itself perishes’ (Adorno 1982: 136).

Unity of time, place, action

Dialogue

‘Form becomes content; content is form’ (Zarrilli 2006: 365).
"How does time behave on this planet? Does "time stand still"? Is time frantic ... Is it leisurely, easy-going time? How is time marked on this planet? By clock? By the sun? By the sound of footsteps? What kind of time are we in? Cyclical time? Eternal time? Linear time? What kind of line? One day? One lifetime?" (Fuchs 2004: 6).

Pozzo: '(suddenly furious). Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you, one day he went dumb, one day I went blind, one day we'll all go deaf, one day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second, is that not enough for you? (Calmer.) They give birth astride of a grave, the light gleams in an instant, then it's night once more ...' (Beckett 1965: 89).

Vladimir: '... Astride of a grave and a difficult birth. Down in the hole, lingeringly, the grave-digger puts on the forceps. We have time to grow old. The air is full of our cries. (He listens.). But habit is a great deadener ...' (Beckett 1965: 90-1).

'Now we have seen that in Estragon's and Vladimir's lives, objectives no longer exist. For this reason in the play time does not exist either. Life is 'treading water', so to speak; and it is for this reason, and quite legitimately, that events and conversations are going in circles ... after a while this circular movement gives the impression of being stationary, time appears to be standing still and becomes (in analogy to Hegel's 'bad infinity') a 'bad eternity'" (Anders 1965: 146).
'Meaning is absent, but speech remains. The disappearance of meaning does not result in the disappearance of speech: speech is still there, it is represented, it fills the world and the play, but it is now autonomous, uncommitted to anything whatsoever, and free of all meaning' (Milutinović 2006: 339).

Dialogue ≠ meaning
Plot = waiting ≠ action (drama)
Clowns
Pairs of men

"... just as untheatrical and just as inconsistent as the average mass man actually is. For mass men, after all, don’t give up living even when their life becomes pointless" (Anders 1965: 143).

'Since the early thirties when Hegel’s dialectic and Marx’s theory of class struggle began to interest the younger generation in France, the famous image of the pair ‘master and servant’ from Hegel’s *Phaenomenologie des Geistes* [Phenomenology of Spirit] so deeply engraved itself into the consciousness of those intellectuals born around 1900 that it occupies today the place which the image of Prometheus held in the nineteenth century: it has become the image of man in general’ (Anders 1965: 149).
"... 'Man' is now seen as a pair of men; that the individual (who, as a metaphysical self-made man, had fought a Promethean struggle against the Gods) has now been replaced by men who fight each other for domination. It is they who are now regarded as reality; for 'to be' now means 'to dominate' and to struggle for domination; and they alone are seen as the 'motor of time'; for time is history, and history in the eyes of dialectical philosophy, owes its movement exclusively to antagonism (between man and man or class and class); so exclusively, that at the moment when these antagonisms came to an end, history itself, would cease, too' (Anders 1965: 148-50).

Classical drama's conflicts and resolutions 'has been the model for a desired, imagined or promised development of history' (Jürs-Munby in Lehmann 2006: 13).

'Beckett and Heiner Müller avoided the dramatic form not least of all because of its implied teleology of history' (Lehmann 2006: 39).

The act of deforming classical beauty, for me, did not take place in the territory of aesthetic categories. The time of war and the time of the 'lords of the world' made me lose any trust in the old image which had been perfectly formed, raised above all other, apparently lower species [...] Behind the icon a b e a s t was hiding (Kantor in Kobalca 1993: 279).
‘The main idea [of the postmodern] is simple: we can observe with certainty a sort of decline in confidence which Westerners of the past two centuries place in the general progress of humanity. This idea of progress – possible, probable, or necessary – was rooted in a certainty that the development of the arts, technology, knowledge, and liberty would benefit humanity as a whole ...

After these two centuries, we have become more sensitive to signs which indicate a contrary movement. Neither liberalism, economic or political, nor the various Marxisms, survive these two bloody centuries without sustaining accusations of crimes against humanity’ (Lyotard in Corcoran 1989: 502).

References