STAGING OF INSTITUTIONAL TENSIONS IN BECKETT’S PLAYS

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In a number of plays Beckett deals with power relations in the medium itself (theatre or radio). He does not do so in any direct, explicit way, since his works are neither mimetic nor clearly parabolic. In his highly formalized plays, institutional relations have to be deciphered in terms of Beckett’s aesthetics. One of its prominent features is the disintegration of form: one single element is isolated and given an autonomous status. Thus character, voice, light or music are no longer part of a whole, fully integrating its various components; they are considered separate elements. (Siess 1994) This obsession with formal problems leading to an original poetics has fascinated the critics to such an extent, that some of the social and institutional dimensions of Beckett’s texts have been overlooked. A notable exception is C. Ziliacus’ subtle interpretation of the radio play Cascando on two levels: “It is, firstly, an image of a non-situational mental process. But it also embodies a very palpable and concrete situation: it is a work for the radio medium about the radio medium” (1976, 140).

Through his formal invention the playwright actually establishes a network of relations that are to be read on two interrelated levels. The first level shows the reality of power relationships in various situations, whereas the second level evokes the impact of power in the framework of the medium. By paying special attention to this second, ‘symbolical’ level, I will try to show to what extent institutional power and its impact on the artist appears in plays like Radio II, Theatre II, Play or Catastrophe.

In Pochade radiophonique (Radio II), the thematic aspect is still strong, so that the institutional dimension has to be discovered through a distressing situation and an impressive hierarchy. However, in Play and Fragment de théâtre II relationships between various agents of the institution do not appear thematically. They are built into the formal pattern of the play that has to be carefully analyzed on its surface level in order to display the problematic relations between author, actor and technician (in Play) or between author and literary agents (in Theatre II). Eventually, Catastrophe will be examined as a specific case, since the play within the play structure allows for another reading of the tensions and pressures within the institution.

In Pochade radiophonique we hear on the level of literal meaning the voices of the Animator and the Stenographer (female voice) and the
sound produced by a whip, handled by an assistant named Dick. We are faced with an experiment carried out by this team. The subject of this experiment is a human being, a man named Fox. This experiment enacts a psychiatric treatment, though it is not meant to help the patient. It aims or the contrary at delivering to the audience a highly intimate part of the subject under treatment. Fox is provoked to liberate something he represses or holds back. To obtain this effect Fox is gagged and covered by a hood except when he is taken to a session directed by the Animator. At the beginning of the session, that we as audience attend, the team takes the gag off Fox’s mouth and the plugs out of his ears. Then the Animator tells Dick to whip Fox in order to stimulate him. Thus verbal power is transformed into violence.

Though the Animator seems to have authority and freedom, he actually depends on a board of scientists (probably composed of psychiatrists). They have ordered the experiment and wait for a report. The Animator is subjected to them, as the Stenographer and Dick are to him, and as Fox is to the three of them. He has to follow the “exhortations” of the scientists. Their authority is present in the written word, as demonstrated by the rereading of their norms. Thus the Animator himself cannot feel free. To that purpose he must first fulfil his task: give a report containing the transcription of a very intimate utterance extorted from the subject. A: “Don’t cry, miss, dry your pretty eyes and smile at me. Tomorrow, who knows, we may be free” (Beckett 1977, 104).

On the second, ‘symbolical’ level we can understand the scene between the team and Fox as a performance in a broadcasting studio with “producer, secretary and technician” (Esslin 1982, 146). On this level Fox has the status of a collaborator compelled to fulfil a contract, of a narrator improvising his discourse on commission. The Animator as producer has to follow the strict norms set by his superiors. The board of directors is expecting the production of the unheard, of the radically new, of something the collaborator under contract has hidden from the institution. That is what the Animator explains to Fox: “Of course we do not know, any more than you, what exactly it is we are after, what sign or set of words. But since you have failed so far to let it escape you, it is not by harking on the same old themes that you are likely to succeed [...]” (1977, 102). The radically new seems to grant the success the medium wants to achieve: the highest value would then be the never-heard, and innovation would be the highest law, whereas repetition and variation of matters the writer has already dealt with are considered as a failure or a shortcoming.