



The Subversive Dionysian Modernity in the Absurd Plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco

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Abstract

The plays that Martin Esslin so famously classified as belonging to 'Theatre of the Absurd' depict a subversive modernity that can be considered as Dionysian in essence, to an audience which is essentially Apollonian. This paper argues that the sense of senselessness and the inadequacy of rationality, which form the hallmark of the 'Absurd' theatre, is the Dionysian aspect of the action. This paper will argue that the plays of the 'Theatre of the Absurd' are essentially based on Nietzsche's concept of 'Amor fati' and that they project an alternative modernity. In his famous book, 'The Birth of Tragedy', Nietzsche argued that the completeness of the Greek tragedy lay in its appropriate synthesis of the Apollonian and the Dionysian aspects, which has subsequently been lost. By extending the Nietzschean concept of the conflict between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, this paper will analyse select plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco as depicting the absurd as a cultural experience, very different from the Apollonian rationality to which the audience has been accustomed to, thereby imbibing a profound sense of disappointment and not only the failure of philosophy to justify moral principles. The notion of the absurd, this paper will argue, arises from the questioning of the very basic values, objectivity and rationality that we associate with our lives. In doing so, this paper will argue for the celebration of the diversity that is so much a characteristic feature of postmodernism, against the dominant notion of the pessimism associated with the studies of these plays.

Keywords: Absurd Theatre, Apollonian, Dionysian, Amor fati, Modernity, Postmodernism.

The plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco that Martin Esslin had referred to as the 'Theatre of the Absurd', referred to an attitude to a situation of crisis. As Esslin points out,

The hallmark of this attitude is its sense that the certitudes and unshakable basic assumptions of former ages have been swept away, that they have been tested and found wanting, that they have been discredited as cheap and somewhat childish illusions. The decline of religious faith was masked until the end of the Second World War by the substitute religions of faith in progress, nationalism, and various totalitarian fallacies. All this was shattered by the war. (P 4)

This crisis can be traced back to the 'antiphilosophy' of Nietzsche that dealt with societal, spiritual and psychological crises, generally referred to as 'Nihilism'. The situation of crisis that the plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco referred to arose due to the disruption of the illusion of the belief in the moral progress of the historical character of modernity. In the post-Second World War era, this crisis manifested itself in the form of existential modernity, posing a challenge to scientific rationality, variously referred to as the 'bourgeois



modernity' or the 'intellectual modernity' of the enlightenment project. One of the characteristics of the 'intellectual modernity' that defined scientific rationality was its auto-centric picture of itself as the expression of a universal certainty, whether the certainty of human reason freed from particular traditions, or of technological power freed from the constraints of the natural world. So, its history has always claimed to be a universal one, in fact, the only universal history. For this reason, however, it has also depended on assigning a different and lesser significance to things deemed purely local, non-Western and lacking a universal expression. It is this aspect of autocentrism of modernity and its refusal to appreciate the significance of the 'Other' that gives rise to 'Nihilism'.

'Nihilism', in general, refers to a philosophy that has evolved due to the loss of faith in the values that have sustained life. Nietzsche's famous definition of "Will to Power" points out that, nihilism refers to a state of being where 'the highest values have devalued themselves' (P 1). Nietzsche, whose name is often associated with nihilism, offers a way to combat it, not by considering it as a problem but by embracing it. In the Nietzschean genealogy, nihilism culminates from the negotiation between 'subject' and 'object,' in *The Birth of Tragedy*, wherein nihilism is represented as a Dionysian void that considers the dialogic of the Being/ Non-Being. This void is twofold, as is represented by the Apollonian and the Dionysian drives in *The Birth of Tragedy*.

The genealogical project of Nietzsche is significant not only for its historicity but because it traces the Apollonian rationality as "the disguise of morality that sustains moral values and a belief in their value." (Porter 317-318) The perplexing effect of this genealogy is the hallmark of the plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco. In creating this perplexity, according to Gemes and Sykes, "What Nietzsche wants is for his chosen audience to experience the depths of nihilism so that they, like him, may get beyond it." (Gemes and Sykes 387) By presenting the Dionysian identity in opposition to the prevalent Apollonian identity of man, Nietzsche placed the "ongoing life experience, the infinite complexity of their situatedness in the world" (Bindeman 2) at the centre of philosophical investigation.

Historically, Dionysus is like any other Greek divine figure evolving, and modifying each previous identity and his overall concept. The ancient Greek culture was marked by an ever-evolving dynamics of differentiation and change. According to Nietzsche, the figure of Dionysus represents the affirmation of life against the autocentrism of modernity which represents the Apollonian impulse that had created a void. According to Nietzsche, this conflict between the two impulses constitutes the complete sense of modernity. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche seems to favour the Dionysian art drive although according to Gemes and Sykes, he is doing it because the Dionysian drive has long been suppressed against the Apollonian drive. Thus, Nietzsche's emphasis on the Dionysian art drive can be read as an attempt to balance, following the Greek Attic tragedies. With the evolution of the Nietzschean notion of Dionysus in his later writings, from referring to the Greek God of wine and sexual licentiousness to evolving the Mediterranean landscapes to finally being "subordinated to a larger conception in which the Dionysian signifies a union of the originally distinct terms..." (Forster Jr. 54) the notion of the dichotomy of the Apollonian and the Dionysian evolves as the two sides of the same coin. During the 1960s and immediately after, Dionysus and the Dionysian were frequently pressed into service as a metaphor or conceptualization of perceived crises (Nihilism) and not only within the narrow circle of professional classicists. Dionysian culture was eminently life-affirming, expressive of bodily energies and passions, and bound together individuals in shared cultural experiences of ecstasy, intoxication, and festivals, which Nietzsche believed created strong and healthy



individuals and a vigorous culture. By 1972, when a book entitled *After Dionysus: An Essay on Where We Are Now* appeared, its author, Henry Ebel, could be confident that his readers, presumably fellow academics, would understand the symbolic shorthand of his title. Just to be sure, however, he provided a gloss in his afterword: that in the decade just ended, the Nietzschean “assault ... on the traditionalist bases of Western culture” had won such wide acceptance that it threatened “to dissolve our texts and artefacts ('Apollonian') into the ritual, blood, and orgiastic irrationality of the 'Dionysian.’” (128) Thus, this second connotation: the ‘Dionysian modernity’ subverts the auto-centric or the ‘Apollonian modernity’.

Nietzsche’s desire to combat the nihilism by embracing it was to ensure the evolution of a stronger and more intelligent man, who could combat the nihilistic forces. He believed that new potentials for individual creativity and a “higher” form of culture, made possible by the eruption of the modern age, were being curtailed and suppressed by the ‘bourgeois’ and ‘intellectual’ modernity that manifested itself in the prevailing social, cultural and political norms and organization. This critique of the ‘intellectual/ bourgeois’ modernity leads to the alternate modernity that champions the cultural diversity and accommodation of conflicting values as the basis of the society. From a strictly Nietzschean perspective then, the subversive Dionysian modernity was required to combat and complete the project of enlightenment that has since been characterised by the ‘Apollonian’ culture that was homogenizing, repressive of the body and hostile to strong individuality. When Martin Esslin defined the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ as “striving for a unity of form and content”, (p 6) he was in a way referring to a characteristic feature of modernity – that of stylistic experimentation that characterized the writings of Nietzsche. Indeed, as Foster Jr. points out, “Nietzsche’s marked concern with expression has led twentieth-century philosophers of the austere analytic school to dismiss him as ‘merely literary.’” (Forster Jr. 4) The stylistic experiments of Nietzsche refer to a profound sense of cultural crisis which Frank Kermode, in his *The Sense of an Ending*, defined as a way of giving special importance against the backdrop of the ages to the piece of time in which we live.

This subversive ‘Dionysian modernity’ finds its expression in the plays that the critic Martin Esslin so famously classified as belonging to the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’. Although it was not a collective and conscious movement initiated by any particular playwright, the plays were characterised by certain common features that were considered avant-garde at that particular moment. These common features included illogical plots, irrelevant dialogues and the use of silences and pauses. Most importantly, the characters were presented at a critical juncture of their lives wherein they were stuck in dialectic situations and needed to make a decision. In its attempt to create a ‘unity between form and content’ these plays were devoid of an Aristotelian beginning and an end, comprising only of the middle. The typical playgoer had never seen anything like this on the stage before. Samuel Beckett’s masterpiece of such plays, *Waiting for Godot*, one of the great plays of the 20th century and Eugene Ionesco’s ‘*Rhinoceros*’ present such a situation to the audience, who, in the absence of proper knowledge of the beginning that led to the ‘middle’ of the action going on in the stage, react to these plays as ‘absurd’. It would not be wrong to take Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco as envisaging a Dionysian modernity when we see their plotless plays as challenging the theatrical tradition that has been in vogue, according to Nietzsche, ever since Socrates. In pursuing, if it may be so called, ‘antimodernism’ (a term drawn in sync with the well-known concept of ‘antiphilosophy’), the plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco take the conventional notions of Apollonian rationality to the farthest point to make the audience aware of its collapse. Thus, Samuel Beckett’s well-known play *Waiting for Godot* presents



two tramps just waiting for the arrival of the titular character Godot, who never arrives, but does not provide sufficient clue to the satisfaction of the audience.

Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* features illogical and purposeless activity in the plot and the endless contradiction of language and action in dialogue on a bare stage. Creating such innovative drama, perfectly different from the conventional drama of representing the characters in defined regulation and frame, Beckett's purpose was to discover the limits of drama and to challenge audiences to move away from their complacent and comfortable roles of being spectators in the theatres. Beckett's dramatic art was designed, wittingly or unwittingly, to give the audience a good shake. Beckett's play defies the conventional Aristotelian dictum of a logical flow from complication to resolution and presents life as simply or merely lived while acknowledging the inherent absurdity of existence. Thus, at the end of each of the two acts, the two characters Vladimir and Estragon, despite deciding to leave, continue to stay on.

According to Calderwood, metatheatres "is a dramatic genre that goes beyond drama (at least drama of a traditional sort), becoming a kind of anti-form in which the boundaries between the play as a work of self-contained art and life are dissolved". (As quoted in Jingxia, 'Understanding Metatheatres' 36) In his pursuit of a theatre of silence, Beckett created a 'meta-theatre' of subversive modernity that devalued the logos of the Apollonian modernity. Adding to these features is the use of incoherent dialogue, (Lucky's long speech in Act I is a brilliant example) that further subverts the Apollonian logic and seems to champion, just like Nietzsche, the Dionysian frenzy. Through both earlier and later plays Beckett, the characters permanently fall silent, amazed or terrified and their feeling of silence is beautifully conveyed, through the context of the play, to the audience. In *Waiting for Godot*, in the second dialogue about sand, Estragon breaks the silence first and says:

ESTRAGON: In the meantime nothing happens.

POZZO: You find it tedious?

ESTRAGON: Somewhat.

POZZO: (to Vladimir). And you, Sir?

VLADIMIR: I've been better entertained. (Silence) (Waiting for Godot 46)

This silence is a hallmark of Beckett's plays and the 'Theatre of the Absurd' in general that distinguish them from the conventional theatrical practices. Traditional plays begin with some actions or events that result in dramatic conflict, an imperative element of Aristotelian dramatic theory. However, Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, known for being one of the most controversial works of twentieth-century drama, is known for its minimal approach to dramatic form, its powerful imagery, and its brief, fragmented, and repetitive dialogue. *Waiting for Godot*, for instance, begins with no deliberate movement. Whatever physical movement takes place on stage does not help in escalating the crisis and its resolution. Rather, the movement is limited only for its own sake, not contributing anything either to the development of the crisis or its resolution. Vladimir and Estragon, two tramps, wait on a desolate piece of land to keep an appointment with someone called Godot. Likewise, in *Endgame* two men, Clov and Hamm, are faced with the nothingness of their existence as they attempt to validate their lives. Eventually, we see that both of them fall back on their memories to justify their existence.

Ionesco's *Rhinoceros*, more than any other play, reveals the absurd condition of what can be considered as the steady realization of the 'Dionysian modernity'. What begins as a humorous phenomenon of men turning into rhinoceroses becomes unsettling, even horrifying, as every human being (save one) turns into a vicious animal, wherein by the end of the play,



Berenger, the protagonist, is forced to be locked away in his room, ignoring the chaos of the rhinoceroses outside. Berenger's dilemma throughout the play reveals his unwillingness to embrace the rational strategies of the 'intellectual modernity' best illustrated in the character of the Logician. Berenger is shown to be shuffling between succumbing and resisting the 'irrationality' of the rhinos. Towards the end of the play, he feels tempted to succumb to the 'rhinoceritis':

BERENGER: I'm not good-looking, I'm not good-looking. (He takes down the pictures, throws them furiously to the ground and goes over to the mirror.) They're the good-looking ones. I was wrong! Oh, how I wish I was like them! (Ionesco 225)

However, the play ends in what might be considered to be an affirmative tone, as Berenger is seen pledging to revive mankind:

Oh well – too bad! I'll take on the whole of them! I'll put up a fight against the lot of them – the whole lot of them! I'm the last man left, and I'm staying that way until the end. I'm not capitulating! (Ionesco 226)

In making such a claim, Ionesco's Berenger is taking a position akin to Nietzsche's Zarathustra, who, in claiming the death of God, revised the claims of modernity by drawing on the myth of Dionysus.

Rhinoceros hinges on Berenger's gradual realization of the power of his own will to transform him from an alcohol-riddled, apathetic man into a self-proclaimed saviour of humanity. His evolution to the realisation of the knowledge of the self and the subsequent recognition of the absurd is a classic example of existentialism: how to confront the meaning inherent in the apparent absurdity of free will rather than conform to the dominant social behaviour, akin to Sisyphus of Camus. As Deborah Gaensbauer says,

Berenger is an anti-hero whose immunity to rhinoceritis, having begun as the cloud of a hangover, is an instinctive resistance to ideology and propaganda for which, according to Ionesco, 'it is probably impossible to give any explanation. (Gaensbauer, 104 as quoted in Haney, II, 58)

The play emphasizes the freedom not only to each of its characters to choose their path of action, but also to the playgoers to lend meaning to it through their experience of the world, across different locations, at different periods of history. Thus, one might argue that the play is not about logical construction of meaning, but about personal discoveries of meaning amidst possible options. For instance, one cannot start explaining either the mutations or the implications of either animal's presence. Ionesco, like many other plays of the 'Theatre of the Absurd', brings forth a play about conformity and loss of humanity.

The theatre of the absurd is located within a modernist understanding of the world and of the human condition. As Albert Camus points out,

A world that can be explained by reasoning, however faulty, is familiar. But in a universe that is suddenly deprived of illusions and of light, man feels a stranger. He is an irremediable exile because he is deprived of the memories of a homeland as much as he lacks the hope of a promised land to come. This divorce between man and his life, the actor and his setting, truly constitutes the feeling of Absurdity." (Camus 15)

The 'unfamiliar' world, against the backdrop of which the 'Theatre of the Absurd' evolved, has the background of the two world wars, which forced the man to reconsider the 'Apollonian' modernity and start appreciating the 'Dionysian' impulse which provokes the constant differentiation and change. Just like Nietzsche's notion of genealogy, the 'absurd'



plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugene Ionesco, by championing the Dionysian modernity, “unsettle the claims of moral reason by unsettling the historical reason.” (Porter, 319) As Esslin points out,

The Theatre of the Absurd has renounced arguing about the absurdity of the human condition; it merely presents it in being – that is, in terms of concrete stage images. (Esslin, 6)

However, it also exposes the “kind of “stupidity”, or blindness in contemporary historical and ideological thought.” (Porter 320) In doing so, the plays of the ‘Theatre of the Absurd’ subverts the ‘Apollonian modernity’ by its counterpart, the ‘Dionysian’. These plays can be seen as promoting the Nietzschean sense of ‘Amor fati’, which according to him, is a ‘formula of greatness’.

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