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LIGHT, PROPS AND SOUND IN THE SELECTED PLAYS
OF SAMUEL BECKETT

1. "ROUGH FOR THE THEATRE II"

This little known, short one act play has not been performed as yet by any professional theatre, perhaps because formally it is the most traditional play Beckett has written, perhaps because it is less abstract and more emotional, it abandons the universal problems of existence and drifts off into the areas of human feelings. "Rough for the Theatre II" is interesting from my point of view because the way that light is used in it is not as abstract and metaphorical as in the other plays, though it is still a symbol to some extent.

The play begins in a quite ordinary, conventional way - in a room, where two men, A and B, after having collected some papers and documents concerning the past of the third character, C, try to sum up his life and discuss his future. C, who stands silently facing the window all the time, thinks of killing himself, as his life appears to have been a failure. A and B have been asked to help him make up his mind - they try to judge his life.

The window is opened on a bright night sky. There are two tables and chairs in the room, symmetrically set on the left and right. There is a lamp on each table. The lamps are the only sources of light on stage. When A and B talk and read some fragments of the documents they have brought with them, they do it by the artificial light of the lamps. There would

be nothing unusual in this fact, the lamps are switched on and off as needed, but then at some point one of the lamps suddenly goes out. At first they think that the bulb has blown, but the light keeps going on and off for no apparent reason:

A: Keep your hands off the table. If it's a connection the least jog can do it. [...] (The lamp goes out. B bangs on the table with his fist. The lamp goes on again. Pause.)

A: Mysterious affair, electricity¹.

When the troubles with the light continue, A and B begin to feel uneasy:

B: I'll take the lamp. (He draws it towards him.) Please God it holds out. What would we do in the dark, the pair of us? (Pause.) Have you matches?

A: Never without. (Pause.) What would we do? Go and stand by the window in the starlight. (B's lamp goes on again.)

A: Pass me a sheet. (b passes him a sheet.) Switch off. (B switches off.) Oh Lord, yours is on again (p. 84).

It seems worthwhile to think about the purpose of turning the spectator's attention to the faulty lamps. We may assume that this passage has not been written only to liven up the play in which the actors have not much to do. It serves as an interlude (A and B constantly try to repair the lamps, they switch them on and off, change tables etc.) but most of the readers or viewers would suspect that there must be some other reason, too. Most critical analyses have proved that nothing is redundant in the plays of Beckett. At the same time Beckett's capricious erudition has often set critics and commentators on a wild goose chase when they tried to build a sound hypothesis where not enough information was given. The information is also scarce in this case, so we must be satisfied with what we have and consider the facts. First of all, the light simply allows the two men to read

¹ S. B e c k e t t, *Bought for the Theatre II*, [in:] S. Beckett *Collected Shorter Plays*, Faber and Faber, London 1984.

out scraps of C's past, chosen at random, chaotically presented, lacking any kind of order. The weak light of the lamps, in other words, lets them see only a small and shallow part of C's life, they do not know what is concealed below the surface of letters and memoirs of his friends, they cannot see what is inside the man, his inner life remains in the dark. When the lamps go out they are like blind men without their sticks - they can see nothing. Judging another man's life is not possible, we can never know the whole truth. A and B are in the darkness all the time, there are only two brighter spots which allow them to feel their way about in it. The unexpected climax of the play takes place at the very end, when by the twinkling light of a match A discovers to his surprise that C has been crying. A is taken aback - life is not only composed of facts, there are also emotions and feelings. C's life may have been miserable, but they really know so little about it. They never suspected C to be capable of such a deeply human and natural reaction.

Let us briefly summarize the functions of light in this play:

- a) the lamps are the source of light on stage;
- b) contrasted with the surrounding darkness (perhaps symbolizing death again - C is about to commit suicide) they enhance the atmosphere of mystery and sadness and establish the mood of the play;
- c) they let the actors move around and hold the audience's interest, especially when they try to find out what is wrong with the lamps;
- d) they may be theatrical metaphors of incomplete, imperfect human knowledge.

I present this enumeration in order to show how even in a short and unpopular play like "Rough for the Theatre II" Beckett does not neglect the theatrical side of his dramas and constantly enriches his stage language. The seemingly unimportant, trivial lamps play a vital, structural and meaningful part in the play. Beckett shows how much can be cramped into just two table-lamps on a dark stage and proves again that he has a perfect ear for the dramatic pitch of non-verbal communication. In the next play to be discussed it is particularly well exemplified.

2. "HAPPY DAYS"

For many, "Happy Days" is the least interesting play Beckett has written. The critics have always neglected it, and as a result not much of the play has been explained. However, when one examines the text more closely and reflects on it, one may find that the play is not all that simple and that below the surface there are problems well worth looking into. Although our considerations force us to abandon the discussion of the play in general, enough evidence to support the above statement may be found even in one of the few layers of "Happy Days", namely in the one that is of primary interest to us. It seems that the concept of light in this play acquires new meaning, a meaning which may be the key to the whole play. Furthermore, "Happy Days" develops the familiar sound of "Act without Words I". The whistle is replaced by a bell, its function is at the same time similar to the function of the whistle and different from it. The use and the function of props is taken a step further as compared to "Act without Words I" or "Act without Words II". In "Happy Days" for the first time a character (Winnie) comments directly on light and sound several times. Krapp's remarks were indirect - they were a part of his monologues, clearly constructed by Beckett for the purpose of shedding light on his protagonist, but Krapp did not necessarily have to be a conscious manichean, as James Knowlson suggested. There is nothing to indicate in the text that Krapp realized what had been concealed in the poetic images he used. If he tried to separate light from darkness it was primarily because Beckett made him do it. Obviously it is also Beckett who created Winnie, but when Winnie speaks of light and sounds she refers to them as to the two phenomena that her reality consists of. It is natural for Winnie to comment on these things and in this case it is clear that Beckett wants us to think of these comments as coming from Winnie only, and not from the author. Moreover, Krapp did not comment on light or sounds - he merely mentioned them in some of his speeches or used them metaphorically (consciously or unconsciously) in the lyrical passages. If the protagonists of both "Acts without Words" could talk, they would have probably commented on their

surroundings, just as Winnie comments on hers. We can observe how Beckett's treatment of light, props and sound changes - each play adds something new to the methods of their use employed previously by the artist and something new to the attitude of the characters towards the elements in question. In "Happy Days" Beckett uses the familiar concepts from the plays discussed previously and skillfully introduces new ones, which will later be developed and will reappear in a new form in other plays. I believe one must realize this in order to understand the play properly, because it not only demonstrates Beckett's mastery of his technical workshop and his ability to create a play out of nothing, but it also becomes an important step in his evolution as a playwright, a step which cannot be evaluated without the knowledge of his earlier plays.

In "Happy Days" Beckett returns to a two act play once again. The play has only two characters, a middle aged couple called Winnie and Willie. Winnie is buried up to her waist in sand and unable to move, like so many other Beckett characters, Willie stays out of sight most of the time.

He is not very talkative and utters only a few words in the whole play. His longest speech consists of two short clauses. As a result, Winnie is forced to hold the audience on her own, which in her situation is no easy task. The play is full of subtle theatrical tricks which help Winnie to surprise the audience and focus their attention on the stage. A. Alvarez characterized the play thus: "It has little of Beckett's bleak purity of language; instead, it is simply a text for acting, full of those weird verbal and visual running gags which work so well in performance, but nevertheless make for dull reading. For example, for much of the first act Winnie tries to read the writing on the handle of her toothbrush; 'fully guaranteed genuine pure' is perfectly clear, but what follows is hard to make out. For page after page of text the audience is kept on tenterhooks for her to say 'bristle'. It never happens. What she finally decipheres is 'Hog's setae'². As Alvarez says, it is a typical Beckett joke, but Beckett, of course, does not rely on the text only. He calls for various techniques to help him overcome the

² A. Alvarez, *Beckett*, Fontana Books, Glasgow 1973, p. 108.

obstacles he raised for himself in this play. The immobilized Winnie is set in a certain situation and a certain environment, and the very beginning of the play instantly carries one far into the artificial, theatrical world of Winnie, which is so different from ours that there can be no doubt that it is not reality that is being presented to us on the stage. Nevertheless, the internal truth of the play, though grotesquely overdrawn turns out to be yet another stage metaphor of the human condition, a metaphor which has a lot in common with "Act without Words I" and "Act without Words II". The stage directions for the opening of the first act read as follows:

Expanse of scorched grass rising centre to low mound [...] Blazing light.

Very pompier trompe-l'oeil backcloth to represent unbroken plain and sky receding to meet in far distance.

Embedded up to above her waist in exact centre of mound, WINNIE. [...] Beside her on the ground to her left a capacious black bag, shopping variety, and to her right a collapsible collapsed parasol, beak of handle emerging from sheath.

Long pause. A bell rings piercingly, say ten seconds, stops. She does not move. Pause. Bell more piercingly, say, five seconds. She wakes. Bell stops. She raises her head, gazes front. Long pause. [...]

The sound of the bell is heard before any words are spoken - it wakes Winnie up³. The bell makes Winnie begin her day, it makes her function. It bears a very strong resemblance to the goad of "Act without Words II", which served exactly the same purpose, and the whistle of "Act without Words I", which turned the attention of the man to different props on stage. As in the case of the whistle and the goad we do not know who or what stands behind them - they are external stimuli, coming from the unknown. In "Happy Days", the function of the bell is not limited only to waking Winnie up - it is also a cue for her to sleep. In "Act without Words II" A and B were woken up by the goad, but they crawled into their sacks without any cues from the darkness. Their biological functions were controlled only to some

³ S. B e c k e t t, *Happy Days*, Faber and Faber, London 1975.

extent, and the presence of some mysterious being, although enhanced by the darkness on the stage and causing a feeling of uneasiness, was not overpowering. For Winnie the unpleasant, piercing sound of the bell means the pain of existence, her days begin with the bell and end with it:

Whereas if you were to die [...] what could I do, all day long, I mean between the bell for waking and the bell for sleep? (p. 18)

Winnie is used to the bell, it does not surprise her that she leads her life according to its sound, day after day. The bell is a source of pain for her, because it begins 'another happy day', empty and monotonous like any day of Vladimir's or Estragon's:

Ah yes, so little to say, so little to do, and the fear so great, certain days, of finding oneself [...] left, with hours still to run, before the bell for sleep, and nothing more to say, nothing more to do, that the days go by, quite by, the bell goes, and little or nothing said, little or nothing done (p. 27).

And some time later Winnie says:

It is perhaps a little soon - to make ready - for the night [...] and yet I do - make ready for the night - feeling it at hand - the bell for sleep [...] sometimes I am wrong (p. 33).

This suggests that the bell for sleep does not necessarily sound in the evening, and the bell for waking in the morning, otherwise it would be easy for Winnie (presumably after many years) to predict when it will ring. Furthermore, such a pedantic artist as Beckett could not have forgotten to change the "blazing light" of the day into the grey, soft light of an evening, and the stage directions are explicit - throughout the play the light remains the same. This suggests that the bell is not dependent on time in any way and that it rings according to its own mysterious rules. Winnie's life is conditioned by someone who had taught her to recognize the sound of the bell as a signal for her to begin certain activities like waking, sleeping, opening and closing her eyes. During the second act Winnie is not al-

lowed to close her eyes - the bell rings every time and she obediently opens them. Act II begins similarly to Act I:

"Bell rings loudly. She opens eyes at once. Bell stops" (p. 38).

After a short monologue Winnie reflects:

"Long pause. She closes eyes. Bell rings loudly. She opens eyes" (p. 38).

And later:

"Long pause. Eyes close. Bell rings loudly. Eyes open" (p. 39-40).

There is no apparent reason for Winnie to open and close her eyes at the sound of the bell. There is no danger mentioned, no punishment or pain, and yet Winnie cannot help obeying the bell. It seems she detests it - she is the first character in the plays of Beckett to verbalize her attitude towards the unknown (symbolized by the bell in this case), the first to speak openly about it and admit she tried to ignore it and failed:

The bell. (Pause.) It hurts like a knife. (Pause.) A gouge. (Pause.) One cannot ignore it. (Pause.) How often [...] Pause. [...] I say how often I have said, Ignore it, Winnie, ignore the bell, pay no heed, just sleep and wake, sleep and wake, as you please, open and close the eyes, Winnie, open and close, always that. (Pause.) But no (p. 41).

She must obey the bell, even against her own self, as if she were not the master of her own reactions. Her behaviour is something more than merely habit:

[...] can't be long now, until the bell for sleep. (Pause.) Then you may close your eyes, then you must close your eyes - and keep them closed (p. 44).

From the psychological point of view, Winnie's behaviour might be explained with the help of the concept of the conditioned reflex, created by a Russian physiologist, Ivan Pavlov (1849-1936), a

Nobel Prize winner in 1904. During his research on digestion in higher animals he noticed that the dogs in his laboratory salivated when food was in sight. After some simple observations of salivating animals which sensed food, Pavlov conducted many complicated experiments where dogs being completely isolated from the outside world reacted to different artificial stimuli which they had been taught to associate with food. The most abstract of those stimuli was the sound of a bell. Their reaction (salivating) was called the conditioned reflex, which may be briefly described as a reflex that is acquired by an individual in the course of his life on the basis of his individual experience. Since 1904 the conditioned reflex has remained a basic factor in the research on the higher nervous system and the results of Pavlov's experiments were later laid at the foundations of a new trend in psychology, very popular in the United States at the time of World War I - behaviourism. Pavlov was the first to stress the significance of conditioned, habitual, self taught reactions in the lives of most animals, including man. Bearing this in mind, the analogy between the work of Pavlov and Winnie's behaviour does not appear as absurd as it may seem at first glance. Winnie is placed in a situation analogous to that of one of Pavlov's dogs - she reacts to external stimuli, even against her will, because she is governed by something stronger than reason - the conditioned reflex, one of the basic physiological reactions of any higher animal. Winnie is an animal that can reason, and so she is perfectly conscious of what is going on around her, she just does not know who and why is making her sleep and wake at the sound of the bell, and this makes her a tragically helpless figure, a human being reduced to his basic biological reactions, aware of his condition and desperately repeating: "Oh, this is a happy day, this will have been another happy day" (p. 47). Unfortunately, as has been stated before, Beckett never explains his symbols, he only gives clues and shows possible solutions, and so we can only gather that in all probability his opinion is that man may find himself in a situation where his reactions to external stimuli become involuntary. Whatever the source of the stimuli, it is unfriendly and unpleasant - Winnie is not free (in any sense), man is controlled by an unknown power which has maliciously picked him as the object of

an apparently perpetual, absurd experiment. Man is unable to defend himself, all he can do is try to pass the time somehow between the signal for waking and the signal for sleep.

There is no communication between Winnie and Willie and she is virtually left to herself. Like Vladimir and Estragon she tries to pass the time talking, but conversation with Willie is not possible. Her daily activities are much like those of A and B of "Act without Words II" - she begins her day with a prayer and then carefully brushes her teeth. All of her possessions (except for the parasol) are hidden in the back shopping bag lying on the ground beside her. The simple props allow to make the play very theatrical and easier to watch, and they allow Winnie to pass the time thanks to the various activities involving the objects she has in her bag. The bag contains a toothbrush and a tube of toothpaste, spectacles in a case, a bottle of red medicine, a revolver, a mirror and some lipstick. She spends her day brushing her teeth, trying to decipher the writing on the handle of the toothbrush, combing her hair, putting on her lipstick. Her daily routine is monotonous and desperate, performed in order to kill the merciless time. She finds it hard to converse with Willie, but at least she has someone she can incessantly talk to. But Winnie feels that even the flow of words can stop:

"Is not that so Willie, that even words fail at times? (Pause. Back front.) What is one to do then, until they come again? Brush and comb the hair, if it has not been done, or if there is some doubt, trim the nails if they are in need of trimming, these things tide one over" (p. 20).

The visual contrast between immobilized Winnie, buried in a heap of sand, and the fact that in spite of her situation she combs her hair and trims her nails shows how little sense there is to the daily human activities. Alas, Winnie has nothing else to do - the words are not enough, and the contents of her bag are her only hope:

Or gaze before me with compressed lips. (She does so.) All day long. (Gaze and lips again.) No. (Smile) No no. (Smile off.) There is of

course the bag. (Turns towards it.) There will always be the bag. (Back front) Yes, I suppose no. (Pause) Even when you are gone, Willie (p. 22).

The number of objects in her bag is limited, and Winnie fears that one day when words fail her, the bag may turn out to be useless if she uses it too often:

Yes, there is the bag [...]. Do not overdo the bag, Winnie, make use of it of course, let it help you [...] cast your mind forward, Winnie, to the time when words must fail, and do not overdo the bag (p. 25).

And indeed, in the second act Winnie is embedded up to her neck in sand and her bag is no longer of use to her. She was wrong in her predictions - the bag failed her before the words did. Her misery has now reached its highpoint. She can only look at the things she played with before.

All the objects that belong to Winnie are quite usual and ordinary, but a revolver is not something one would expect to find in a shopping bag. If the other objects may be used to kill the time, the revolver may be used to end Winnie's life, but she does not even think of it, her ironic optimism and her instinct for life tell her to reject such an unnatural solution:

(To revolver) Oh I suppose it's a comfort to know you're there, but I'm tired of you. (Pause) I'll leave you out, that's what I'll do (p. 26).

Winnie clings to her life in spite of its obvious absurdity and pretends that she is living a happy life. In the second act the revolver which is a symbol of a quick and easy death lies safely on the ground beside Winnie's sand heap. She leaves it out when she puts her possessions back into the bag at the end of the day.

The props that Winnie and Willie handle (he reads a newspaper and a postcard) are human fetishes, things possessed by every civilized man, that have become indispensable in every household. When juxtaposed with the unknown Absolute they reveal the emptiness of our existence, they become absurdly unimportant. Once again Beckett uses a sharp contrast to produce an unforgettable,

impressive stage image. A comb in Winnie's hands loses its everyday meaning and becomes tragic, its function is just to give Winnie something to do, not to make her prettier. Without our fetishes we become frightfully lonely and helpless, there is nothing to ease our anxiety and make us forget about our pitiful situation. The props in "Happy Days", then, are first symbols in themselves, then they acquire new meaning when they are handled by Winnie and contrasted with the condition she is in, and finally they are effective theatrical means of attracting attention and they help the actors to overcome the obstacles they are bound to meet acting in a play where there is virtually nothing to be done. Structurally, they were probably the only way to solve this problem, but they also enabled Beckett to convey an important message which seems to be one of the main ideas of the play. The props in "Happy Days" resemble those of "Act without Words II", but their presence on stage is prolonged, their function is supported by the text and the attitude of the play's protagonist towards them is revealed. As far as the props are concerned, the idea of both plays is very similar, except that it is exploited more fully in "Happy Days", and here it becomes clear, straightforward and very telling. What matters is not what is being done on stage, but the bare fact of doing something.

The meaning of light in this play poses quite a problem. The light remains unchanged throughout the play like in "Godot" or "Act without Words I", it is very bright and this time no darkness surrounds the centre of the stage. I cannot agree with Ihab Hassan who when discussing "Happy Days" wrote that: "[...] bright light seems to be Beckett's theatrical symbol of sterility as well as of lucidity⁴". On the contrary, I am convinced that in this case the light has nothing to do with sterility or lucidity and there is no evidence in the play to support that opinion. When Winnie speaks about the light she uses two contradictory phrases and this may be misleading, but there is a long way from here to the sweeping and unsound conclusion drawn by Hassan.

The key to the concept of light in "Happy Days" appears to lie

⁴ Ihab Hassan, *The Literature of Silence*, New York 1967, p. 113.

in Beckett's short description of light in the stage directions: "Blazing light" (p. 9). The light is not only bright and violent, it also generates uncomfortable heat. The light in previous plays was not given this quality and so the heat is quite a new factor in the theatrical character of light. It may be identified with the sun, though it is given rather demonic and bizarre qualities. Towards the end of the day it is just as bright as it was in the opening scene of the play and Winnie warns Willie against it when she tells him not to "lie sprawling there in this hellish sun" (p. 20). Winnie mentions the light for the first time while polishing her spectacles and she describes it as: "holy light - bob out of dark" (p. 11). Beckett is quite fond of biblical allusions (he used them in "Godot" and "Endgame") and perhaps this is why this description echoes the very beginning of the Book of Genesis:

In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters. God said "Let there be light", and there was light; and God saw that the light was good, and he separated light from darkness. He called the light day, and the darkness night. So evening came, and morning came, the first day⁵.

However, the very next phrase that Winnie utters is "a blaze of hellish light" (p. 11). So the light is for her holy and hellish at the same time. This could mean that light, a symbol of life as used in "Act without Words I" and II and "Krapp's Last Tape", is destructive for Winnie. Life contains elements of death - any living creature is doomed since its birth - and though it was supposed to be a blessing, it is painful, brings discomfort and misery. It burns, like the fires of hell. One must distinguish here between light as a symbol of life and light as the source of unbearable heat and torment. The biblical allusion is ironic - holy light, holy life is satanic. To put it briefly - life is hell. Winnie is perfectly aware of that fact. The light shining from above brings about destruction:

⁵ The New English Bible, Genesis I, 1-5.

(Maximum pause. The parasol goes on fire. Smoke, flames if feasible. She sniffs, looks up, throws parasol to her right behind mound, cranes back to watch it burning. Pause.) Ah earth, you old extinguisher (p. 28).

Peace may be found only in the soil, a funeral puts an end to the living hell of existence. Winnie seems to fear that what had happened to the parasol may happen to her, too. Our suspicions are confirmed by her words:

With the sun blazing so much fiercer down, and hourly fiercer, it is not natural things should go on fire never known to do so, in this way I mean, spontaneous like. (Pause.) Shall I myself not melt perhaps in the end, or burn, oh I do not necessarily mean burst into flames, no, just little be charred to a black cinder, all this - (ample gesture of arms) - visible flesh. (Pause.) On the other hand, did I ever know a temperate time? (Pause.) No. (p. 29).

Winnie has been suffering, is suffering and will be suffering, slowly approaching the end:

It is no hotter today than yesterday, it will be no hotter tomorrow than today, how could it, and so on back into the far past, forward into the far future (p. 29-30).

She has never known a temperate time, the light has made her suffer, towards the end of the play, when only Winnie's head is visible, the familiar association of death with darkness comes back again:

It might be the eternal dark. (Pause.) Black night without end (p. 45).

Death is not menacing for Winnie, it offers her relief and shelter from the blazing rays of the sun.

Who or what stands behind the light is not explained. It could be the same power that operates the bell, but as it is often the case with Beckett the question remains open ended. Winnie ironically calls the light holy, perhaps because its origin is beyond our comprehension. The religious myths Winnie may have come across all speak of light or life as God's gifts, yet the light

turns out to be the source of pain and discomfort. It seems that Winnie must be quite confused by the discrepancy between the myth and reality.

It is subtly hinted that Winnie suspects someone's presence behind the light and the bell. At the beginning of the second act she ironically welcomes the light:

Hail, holy light. (Long pause. She closes her eyes. Bell rings loudly. She opens eyes at once. Bell stops. She gazes front. Long smile. Smile off. Long pause.) Someone is looking at me still, caring for me still (p. 37).

It seems rather unlikely that Winnie should be referring to her partner, hence the only logical possibility appears to be the God - like power behind the light and the bell. Winnie senses its presence even though she is unable to identify and locate it:

Oh I know it does not follow [...] that because one sees the other the other sees the one, life has taught me that, too.

Winnie's tormentor remains invisible, the fact that she cannot see him does not mean that he does not exist.

Winnie's comments lead us to the assumption that the nature of light in this play is at least two-fold; first of all, light conceived as the symbol of life is compared to the burning fires of hell, and second of all, it is identified as a means of inflicting pain, used by Winnie's powerful and omnipresent tormentor. The light and the sound, then, play a very different role from the one of the props. The three factors mingle and complement one another, neither of them can be ignored in any serious professional production without crippling the whole play. Light, props and sound and the text are fully interdependent in this play. As a matter of fact, it is that kind of a dramatic piece of work which can be fully appreciated only in the theatre, in performance, when all our senses are attacked by the various stage images, by colours, sounds and visual gags. If one wishes to evaluate the play, thoroughly reading it will not suffice. To many questions the reader or the spectator may supply his own answers, as no schematic solutions fit Beckett's plays, and the

interpretation suggested above does not have to be the only possible one. Whatever feelings one might have after seeing or reading the play, the significance of light, props and sound in "Happy Days" is not to be neglected. Beckett impressively shows how well he can handle the theatrical material, he shows that he is not only a gifted playwright, but also an expert on the art of theatre. His stage language is rich, vivid and original, his workshop unconventional. Beckett's next play, "Play", proves this and adds yet a new dimension to his theatre. As Beckett's characters speak less and less, little by little lose their mobility to become just containers for human voices in the end, the significance of all extra-literary means of expression begins to stand out quite distinctly.

3. "PLAY"

In "Happy Days" Beckett carefully balanced all the elements of the production (the text, light, props and sound) and achieved a harmonious whole where the theatrical emphasis was evenly divided between the four factors. In his idiosyncratic desire to reduce the plays to the minimum "Play" is the next logical step.

The protagonists of "Play" find themselves in the situation of Winnie in the second act of "Happy Days" - they are totally immobile, encased in urns, unable to make any gestures, even facial expressions have been eliminated. The three actors only speak, literally nothing else happens. There are no props, the only elements of the stage set are the urns from which the heads of the actors protrude. This time there are no sounds, too, only the light is active and emphatic. As a matter of fact, the use of light in "Play" is remarkable in its simplicity and originality, although its roots appear to spring from deep philosophical reflections. Sound and props disappear - "Play" is a play for three human voices and light.

The three actors - two women and a man - are encased in three identical grey urns, their faces ageless and expressionless.

Their speech is provoked by a spotlight projected on faces alone. The transfer of light from one face to another is immediate. No blackout, i. e. return to almost complete darkness of opening, except where indicated.

The response to light is immediate.

The curtain rises on stage in almost complete darkness. Urns just discernible. Five seconds.

Faint spots simultaneously on three faces. Three seconds,
Voices faint, largely unintelligible⁶.

This is how the play begins. In "Happy Days" the bell was a cue for Winnie to wake and sleep, in "Play" the spotlight is a cue for the characters to talk. They speak only when the light is on them, when it moves off they must stop, often in mid-sentence. In his comments to the play Beckett insists on the simple source of light situated at the centre of the footlights. "The method consisting in assigning to each face a separate fixed spot is unsatisfactory in that it is less expressive of a unique inquisitor than the single mobile spot" (p. 158). Beckett's intention, then, is that the light should act as a kind of silent inquisitor, an inquirer who is interrogating all three characters. One of the women is the man's wife, the other his mistress. In the first part of the play they tell their classic story about an adulterous triangle, filled with hatred and contempt. There is nothing exceptional about the story, but the circumstances in which it is told make it eerie and unreal. It seems that the characters lead some kind of after-life⁷, they appear to have died in one way or another (they are trapped in funereal urns), but as usual there is not enough information in the play to draw such a conclusion. What one can be absolutely sure of is that the characters are much further outside time than in the previous plays - there is no suggestion at all of any kind of division into days.

The light makes the characters speak. The strength and com-

⁶ S. Beckett, *Play*, [in:] S. Beckett Collected...

⁷ This has been suggested by a number of critics, H. Kenner and A. Alvarez among them. For a more complete list see J. Dudkiewicz, *The Problem of Time in the Plays of T. S. Eliot and S. Beckett*, Łódź 1982, p. 224-228 (Ph. D. Thesis unpublished).

prehensibility of voices depends on the strength of the light; when the light is faint and weak, so are the voices. They are totally dependent on the light. This time the stories are not told in order to pass the time, the characters must speak, they must obey the light as Winnie had to obey the bell. The tempo of the play is quite rapid, the spotlight seems to be operated not by a cool-headed experimenter but by a vicious, pathological maniac. The reaction of the characters is the conditioned reflex speeded up to an abnormal pace and transformed into an unnaturally hysterical response. Their behaviour no longer resembles that of Winnie - it is much more abstract and artificial. The three characters are full of malice, they accuse one another and no forgiveness is offered by any of them. Their lives were conventionally sinful - perhaps they are now repenting in a bizarre purgatory, where they are forced to retell their story endlessly. Indeed, the play is repeated a second time. Since childhood Beckett has been obsessed with visions of posthumous punishment; the first of all his heroes was called Belacqua, after an inhabitant of Purgatory from Dante's "Divine Comedy".

R. Heyman associates light with the protagonist's consciousness⁸ which will not leave them in peace - it is not out of the question and such an explanation is not contradictory to the first one. If Heyman should be correct in his assumptions then there is no end to the tormenting flow of words, for there can be no escape from one's self. In the second part of the play, however, when the characters discuss their present situation (they frequently address the light itself) some form of relief may be sensed:

W 1: Or will you weary of me.

(Spot from W 1 to M)

M: Down, all going down, into the dark, peace is coming, I thought after all, at last I was right, after all, thank God, when first this change [...]

W 2: When you go out - and I go out. Some day you will tire of me and go out for good (p. 152).

⁸ R. H e y m a n, S. Beckett, Heinemann Educational Books, London 1970.

The characters hope that one day they will be left in peace, their suffering will cease. Once again relief is associated with darkness, only the dark affords peace and release from the bonds of pain. One of the earlier heroes of Beckett's prose, Murphy, said that in the dark there was peace, "nothing but forms becoming and crumbling into the fragments of a new becoming, without love or hate or any intelligible principle of change"⁹. There is freedom in the darkness. The characters, who are being brutally interrogated like criminals at police headquarters blinded by the violent lamp-light, long for silence and peace. The piercing light brings disquiet and discomfort, creates a half-light zone Murphy described as very unpleasant, and W 1 of "Play" twice calls it "hellish half-light". The anxiety of waiting for peace is unbearable - the half-light promises relief, but the dark has not arrived as yet. The characters detest the light, they cannot stand it any longer. In the second part of the play they address the light directly:

W 2: Give me up, as a bad job. Go away and start poking and pecking at someone else. On the other hand -

(Spot from W 2 to W 1)

W 1: Get off me! Get off me! (p. 152-153)

The power which rings bells, blows whistles and pricks with goads now presents itself as a single beam of light, but it still tortures the pitiful characters. A and B of "Act without Words II" did not speak at all, Winnie commented on the nature of the bell and the protagonists of "Play" talk to the light and ask it questions:

W 1: Is it that I do not tell the truth, is that it, that some day somehow I may tell the truth at last and then no more light at last, for the truth?

(Spot from W 1 to W 2)

W 2: You might get angry and blaze me clean out of my wits. Mightn't you? (p. 153)

⁹ S. B e c k e t t, Murphy, Picador, Pan Books, London 1973.

The women sense that their mute tormentor wants something of them, but they are not sure what it might be. W 2 thinks that the light is capable of feeling. The light as envisaged by the women receives antropomorphic qualities, characteristic of most religious myths. They are unable to give what is demanded of them, they are confused and do not know what the light really signifies, they only know that it provokes the incessant flow of words. Towards the end of the play they desperately and obsessively try to define the light:

W 1: Yes, and the whole thing there, staring you in the face. You'll see it. Get off me. Or weary.

(Spot from W 1 to M)

M: And now, that you are [...] mere eye. Just looking. At my face. On and off.

(Spot from M to W 1)

W 1: Weary of playing with me. Get off me. Yes.

(Spot from W 1 to M)

M: Looking for something. In my face. Some truth. In my eyes. Not even.

(Spot from M to W 2. Laugh as before from W 2 cut short as spot from her to M)

M: Mere eye. No mind. Opening and shutting on me. Am I as much -

(Spot off M, Blackout. Three seconds. Spot on M)

Am I as much as [...] being seen? (p. 157)

The play is repeated twice and as it ends the whole cycle is about to begin again. The tortured characters may have to wait forever for their silent inquisitor to let them alone; The hell light had created for them echoes the perpetual evening of "Waiting for Godot" and the two tramps, awaiting the night and relief to be brought by Godot. At first glance the nature of light in "Play" has nothing to do with what light had often symbolized before, i.e. life, birth or existence. However, as J. Dudkiewicz rightly observes¹⁰ in her dissertation on "Play", the characters of this play are totally dependent on the light - spatially and temporally. They not only speak when the light is flashed on

¹⁰ D u d k i e w i c z, The Problem of Time..., p. 224.

them, it is also then that they come to exist, physically and temporally. In "Play" the concept of existing only when being perceived by the other is presented visually for the first time. Later Beckett's "Film" (1963) will be based on that idea: "esse est percipi". The characters of "Play" seem to realize that their existence is subordinated to the light:

W 2: When you go out - and I go out (p. 152).

The notion of 'esse est percipi' is not new and it was not formulated by Beckett. It was first formulated by bishop George Berkeley (1685-1753), an Irish theologian and philosopher, a contemporary of David Hume, who was a representative of radical empiricism and immaterialistic metaphysics. Berkeley believed the world to be nothing more than perception. For the objects of the material world to "exist" means "to be perceived" (esse = percipi). All things other than perceptions are mirages of the mind. Berkeley also distinguished two kinds of being - the material and the spiritual one. The material world exists because it is perceived (by minds, spirits and by God), the spiritual beings exist because they perceive. The characters of "Play" exist, for they are perceived by the light. Hence the true nature of the light, if we are to follow Berkeley's train of thought, must be spiritual. "Play" is constructed in such a way that when light is flashed on one of the characters the other two can be neither heard nor seen - they are not perceived, and consequently, they do not exist. When there is a blackout, all three disappear until the light brings them back to existence again. The reflector does not only provoke the speaking, but it also provokes existence, some kind of being. It appears that light may be safely associated with life again (although this time in a different aspect), for life is a form of being, existing. The characters frequently allude to their being seen by the light:

M: Mere eye [...] Am I as much as [...] Being seen?

Winnie was right - the fact that the other sees the one does not mean that the one sees the other. The three trapped people are perceived, but they cannot tell who is looking them in the

face, the light being too immaterial, etherial, defying their descriptive powers. One is unable to describe a spirit. The fact that they are ignorant of the identity of their inquisitor adds to their suffering. The state of non-existence is peaceful and pleasant compared to the life they are forced to lead. After the first longer blackout the Man says:

M: When first this change I actually thanked God. I thought, it is done, it is said, now all is going out
[...]

M: Down, all going down, into the dark, peace is coming, I thought, after all, at least, I was right, after all, thank God, when first this change.

The protagonists of "Play" strive after darkness and peace - they long for non-existence. In "Happy Days" Beckett was trying to show how hellish and painful life can be. If the three people trapped in urns lead an after - life, then they have exchanged one kind of hell for another. To die is not enough - as Vladimir and Estragon said:

Estragon: They talk about their lives.

Vladimir: To have lived is not enough for them.

Estragon: They have to talk about it.

Vladimir: To be dead is not enough for them.

Estragon: It is not sufficient¹¹.

The final relief may be found only in absolute nothingness. But the characters are in the power of the mysterious beam of light, which can create and annihilate them at will. Their only hope is that one day it will grow tired of playing with them and only then will they be able to be at one with the void.

Berkeley's notion "esse est percipi" means that we exist because we are perceived by the other.

The fact that we cannot perceive the other (we can only see light or hear sounds which are probably the other's instruments of control) is extremely frustrating and unnatural. Why did Beckett choose to use light to cue the speeches of the charact-

¹¹ S. B e c k e t t, *Waiting for Godot*, Faber and Faber, London 1979, p. 63.

ers? First of all, there was no other way if he was to follow the concept of esse=percipi and show that the three urns come alive only when they are perceived from the outside. Another reason may be that Beckett could think of no better way of saying that the nature of the silent interrogator is immaterial, spiritual.

To this day the scientists cannot agree on the question of the structure of light - it remains one of the few earthly phenomena which cannot be captured and examined, and at the same time it is one of the primeval, archetypal elements like water or earth that are necessary for all living things.

"Play" is poorer in the theatrical tricks and gags that enable the actors of Beckett's plays to keep the audience interested and give them something to do. This time the three actors do absolutely nothing except talk - but this does not mean that "Play" is little more than a radio play, as some critics suggest¹². Light could not be replaced by any other form of cueing without changing the background and meaning of the play. Light is a typically theatrical means of expression, highly effective in abstract plays like "Play", where it replaces all gestures and activities of the actors. It is true that the actors only talk, but Beckett in his tendency to reduce the plays to the minimum also wishes to cut down on the number of words (words are imperfect). His plays steadily become shorter and shorter, in some of them Beckett dispenses with words altogether. What becomes very important is the theatrical, visual aspect of his plays, the text is only one of the many factors of a performance and not necessarily the most significant one. His object seems to be to say as much as possible with a minimum amount of words. To achieve his artistic goal he must include non-literary means of expression in his stage vocabulary. The result of this search for a more capacious language is a unique kind of drama, which belongs to literature no more than it belongs to theatre. Beckett has evolved an individual style of translating his vision into concrete stage terms. The form of his work, although dictatorially reduced, remains imaginative due to the unconventional use of light, sound and props.

¹² E.g. H a y m a n, S. Beckett...

One more remark must be made - in the plays discussed earlier light was always static and did not change throughout the given play. In "Play" Beckett makes light a dynamic, movable element of a performance for the first time. The brightness of light changes when needed, swivels from face to face or brings all three faces simultaneously out of the dark. It is the only active and dynamic factor of the play, the only one that is alive and can move from place to place, transform and disappear at will. In fact, the light becomes the fourth character, even though it is mute and immaterial. The three trapped people ask it questions, try to communicate with it, treat it as if it were some kind of living being. Since there are no props and no sounds taking part in the structure of "Play" the light is the only structural element that is juxtaposed with the words and forms a harmonious counterbalance to the utterances of the actors. Beckett discovered for himself the possibilities changing light offers in the theatre and he will use it in his later work. He also undoubtedly noticed that the rhythm and pace of the play may be equally well marked by light as well as by, for example, sound. The chaotic swivel of the spotlight, its rapid movements establish a distinct tempo of the play. Together with the darkness and the shadows on the stage it also effectively creates a chilling, enchanting mood which gives the whole play a clearly poetic quality. Let us not forget that along with the strictly theatrical function of the light it remains symbolic and carries a profound philosophical message. Little more could have been got out of it in one play - Beckett's command of theatrical technique is indeed masterly.

Remarkable as "Play" is, it is a pity it is performed so rarely. In Poland it has been performed twice up till now (by professional theatres). Other plays Beckett was to write after "Play", though they received acclaim and recognition, were not commercially successful, either.

Nevertheless, they are unique in their form and original treatment of the word and the actor and they stand out in the history of contemporary theatre.

Maciej Świerkocki

ŚWIATŁO, DŹWIĘK I REKWIZYTY W WYBRANYCH DRAMATACH
SAMUELA BECKETTA

Niniejszy artykuł jest fragmentem pracy magisterskiej pod tym samym tytułem i zawiera omówienie trzech dramatów Samuela Becketta, stosunkowo reprezentatywnych dla całej jego twórczości. Celem autora artykułu było podejście do dramaturgii Becketta od strony jej teatrologicznej, scenicznej egzystencji, a także wskazanie na niezwykle istotne znaczenie pozasłownych elementów dramatu, szczególnie często stosowanych przez Becketta w jego sztukach, tj. światła, dźwięku oraz rekwizytów. Znaczenie pozaliterackich środków wyrazu uwydatniają także liczne uwagi zawarte w didaskaliach oraz stosunek samych postaci dramatu do tych elementów przedstawienia teatralnego. Ciekawe i celowe wydaje się prześledzenie ewolucji twórczej Becketta, którego dążenie do minimalizacji spektaklu wyraża się m. in. w stopniowej redukcji, a nawet zastępowaniu aktora przez symboliczny rekwizyt (np. światło w "Komedii").

Całościowe, syntetyczne spojrzenie na twórczość Becketta powinno zawierać uwagi dotyczące scenicznych realizacji jego dramatów, będących istotną pomocą w zrozumieniu autorskich intencji, unykających niejednokrotnie przy samej tylko lekturze. Takie podejście pozwala na zaobserwowanie niezwykłych teatralnych zdolności Becketta, umożliwiających mu skuteczne działanie na wszystkie zmysły widzów za pomocą środków nierzadko lekceważonych przez innych autorów.

Przedstawiona tu analiza "Fragmentu teatralnego nr 2", "Szczędliwych dni" oraz "Komedii" usiłuje wykazać na konkretnych przykładach słuszność przedstawionych twierdzeń.