

Abated Drama: Samuel Beckett's Unbated "Breath"

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AT THE BEGINNING OF THE THIRD ACT of *Measure for Measure*, as Claudio languishes in prison, sentenced to death for the crime of fornication, the Duke (disguised as a friar) counsels the condemned man to "reason thus with life":

a breath thou art,
Servile to all the skyey influences
That do this habitation, where thou keep'st,
Hourly afflict[.] (III.i.8-11)

Of all of Shakespeare's comedies, *Measure for Measure* is the most congruent with the works of Samuel Beckett; its bitter laughter, its depiction of pitiful humanity, and its preoccupation with death resonate throughout the Irishman's works. Whatever else Beckett's characters lack — limbs, mobility, sight, memory, or even life itself — they "are" breath; that is, their existence is confirmed by (and their subsistence consists of) breath shaped into words. *Cogito, aut loquor, ergo spiro, ergo sum* is, for all of them, the ultimate Cartesian reality: I think, or at least I speak, therefore I breathe, therefore I am. Even the Unnamable, a self-described "wordless thing in an empty space,"¹ must nevertheless "say words, as long as there are any" (p. 414), albeit "to the self-accompaniment of a tongue [and, presumably, a breath] that is not mine" (p. 306); the narrator of *How It Is* gasps and pants his way through both his narrative and the mud through which he crawls. They, like Beckett's other characters, remain "servile to all the skyey influences" which afflict them for reasons that they fail to understand: such is the force that (whether or not it

drives the flower) rings the bell in *Happy Days* and controls the light in *Play*. Its unknown agents (referred to only as “they”) transcribe and monitor the narrative of *The Unnamable* and perhaps administer the beatings in *Waiting for Godot*; it is also, according to the Unnamable, the unknown “they who have silence in their gift, they who decide, the same old gang, among themselves” (p. 325). “They” are nowhere in evidence in *Breath*, however, and their actions (if any) must be inferred by the audience in much the same way that their existence has to be postulated by the Unnamable himself. Whether or not “they” are assumed to be present, *Breath* — the most succinct of Beckett’s “dramaticules” — offers the ultimate distillation of his inimitable world-view. It culminates his on-going efforts to compress and edulcorate traditional genres, and it affirms — wordlessly but eloquently, in thirty seconds — the Duke’s bleak insight in *Measure for Measure*.

Beckett’s most controversy-ridden and “uneventful” play since *Waiting for Godot*, *Breath* can be easily summarized. The curtain rises on a dimly-lit, rubbish-strewn stage on which there are, according to Beckett’s specifications, “no verticals, all scattered and lying.”² Five seconds after the curtain rises, the audience hears a newborn child’s “faint, brief cry” — an “instant of recorded vagitus” — followed immediately by a ten-second inhalation, a five-second pause as the breath is held, a ten-second exhalation, and an immediate repetition of the recorded cry. After a five-second silence, the curtain descends and the “play” has ended — without a plot, without a word being spoken, without a visible character, and without even a movement taking place on stage. In fact, since both the baby’s cry and the breath itself have been *recorded* (according to Beckett’s production notes), the play does not even require the physical presence of an “actor” at the time of the performance.

Surely, all “minimalist” drama here reaches its apex: the “play” is a synchrony of sound and sight (the stage lighting increases as the breath is inhaled and diminishes as it is exhaled), an observed “event” in an empty space. As such, it culminates Beckett’s efforts to strip away all “inessential” components of

drama while retaining the ability to convey meaning and to offer an "imitation of life" — which, as the Duke's remark in *Measure for Measure* reveals, the "breath" in fact is.

With *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett signalled the abolition of plot in drama, while *Play* removed all gesture and, with the exception of the actors' mouths, all movement; *Not I* further reduces the essential components of the genre to a seemingly disembodied mouth and a separate, mute, rarely-gesturing, cowed body; *Act Without Words* excises language itself, and *All That Fall*, Beckett's radio play, confirms that — for a twentieth-century audience, unlike its counterparts in earlier times — neither the theatre itself, nor a stage, nor a setting of any kind is essential for the creation of drama, since the "play" consists solely of broadcast (recorded) words and sounds. Although a stage setting is required for *Breath*, this "dramaticule" surpasses all of Beckett's other works in radical excision, since all vestiges of plot, character, conflict, language, and even acting itself prove inessential to the genre. Relying *exclusively* on sensory perceptions (i.e., sight and hearing) and lacking any spoken words to be apprehended and considered by reason, *Breath* achieves a goal that Beckett expressed to Jessica Tandy about *Not I*: it is a work designed so that, first and foremost, it will "work on the nerves of the audience, not its intellect."³ If, as Pater maintained, all art aspires to the condition of music — the immediacy of apprehension, the unambiguity and universality of expression surpassing language and reason, the sublimity of pure sound — then *Breath*, an "orchestrated" and thematically significant sequence of sounds accompanied by a single theatrical (visual) effect, is drama's closest approximation of it.

The theme of *Breath* is the most comprehensive in all of literature: the human condition and the state of the world in which this life is passed. As Beckett indicated in referring to this play (in its French translation, *Souffle*) as a "farce in five acts,"⁴ the "drama" does in fact constitute a traditional "well-made play." Beyond the basic symmetry which Ruby Cohn has described in *Just Play*,⁵ *Breath* conforms with remarkable precision to (and offers the ultimate distillation of) the pyramidal structure which

was postulated by Gustav Freytag in *Die Technik des Dramas* in 1863:⁶

1. the initial pause and the first cry, representing birth, constitute the "introduction" and "inciting moment" of life in general and of this play in particular;
2. the inhalation, a symbol of growth and development, is clearly a "rising action" (of the thorax and diaphragm as well as of the play) which is appropriate for a second "act";
3. the pause while the breath is held is the climax and the third "act," the culmination of growth and maturation, the apex of the "vital capacities" of the lungs and hence of life;
4. the exhalation — a metaphor for the entropic decline of the body with advancing age, a declining "vital capacity," and death (i.e., *complete* exhalation) — constitutes the "falling action" of the thorax and the fourth "act" of the play, which is followed immediately by
5. the reiterated cry, the "catastrophe" or "resolution" of the play, and a final silence before the curtain descends.

Considered in the context of Beckett's other works, the final cry seems especially disheartening, even though it is a cry of (re-)birth and *not* a "death rattle" as a number of critics (including Ruby Cohn in the passage cited above) have claimed. As an indicator of entry into an unknown post-mortem realm, it is the exact counterpart of the opening questions of *The Unnamable* — "Where now? Who now? When now?" (p. 291) — which occur "immediately" after the death of Malone at the end of the trilogy's second novel, *Malone Dies*. However bleak the lives of Beckett's earth-bound characters (Murphy, Watt, Molloy, Malone, Mercier and Camier, Winnie and Willie, Didi and Gogo, *et al.*), the plights of those who lead an "unworldly" or "otherworldly" existence (e.g., the Unnamable, the characters in *Play*) are — necessarily — infinitely worse, because their torments are apparently interminable; their worldly sufferings are transferred and transformed — but never relieved — in the realm of the after-death. The Unnamable's contention that the sufferings and

pains of "all these Murphys, Molloy's, and Malones . . . are nothing compared to mine" (pp. 303-04) confirms Claudio's observation in *Measure for Measure* that

The weariest and most loathed worldly life
That age, ache, penury, and imprisonment
Can lay on nature, is a paradise
To what we fear of death. (III.i.127-30)

The precise nature of the other-worldly existence in *Breath* remains unknowable, determined by the Unnamable's "they who decide" (p. 325), Shakespeare's mysterious "skye influences" to whom all remain subject and duly servile. After the second cry, "the rest is silence," as Hamlet says.

Like many of Beckett's other works, *Breath* readily accommodates a specific scriptural text. On the stage, according to Beckett's specifications, there are to be "no verticals" but "all scattered and lying" — as if to confirm the prophecy of Matthew 24.2 that "there shall not be left here one stone upon another, that will not be thrown down" amid the desolation of those who, Christ says, "shall not see me henceforth" *until* the appropriate words — like those for which the Unnamable vainly searches — have been said at last (Matt. 23.38-39). Such are the words of the Unnamable's unknown and unnamed "Master" who, he contends, "knows the words that count, it's he who chose them" (p. 369); yet, obviously, *no* words are uttered during *Breath*, as if the obligation which the Unnamable terms the "imposed task, once known, long neglected" has indeed been "finally forgotten" (p. 314) twenty centuries and sixty generations after the prophecy was made. If so, herein lies the basis of Beckett's widely alleged — but *exclusively epistemological* — despair: man subsists amidst the desolation of the universe, alienated from and seemingly (perhaps willfully) abandoned by the transcendent but unknowable cosmic realities which must be the ultimate human concern — if, unknowably in their absence, they exist in fact at all.

Used by Kenneth Tynan for the prologue to *Oh! Calcutta!*, *Breath* seemed guaranteed an instant notoriety, not only because of its apparent audacity as a thirty-second, plotless, wordless, and

characterless play, but also because of its association with the sophomoric revue sketches and puerile skits which comprise Tynan's *succès de scandale*. A serious controversy arose soon after the show opened, however, when Beckett learned that among the debris on stage there were several naked bodies — a radical distortion of his presentation, obviously contradicting (and, indeed, making a prurient travesty of) its depiction of the entire human life-span; a photograph of the body-strewn stage accompanied the altered version of Beckett's text which appeared in the published script of *Oh! Calcutta!* later in 1969.⁷ Beckett promptly denounced Tynan as a liar and a cheat, after which, as Deirdre Bair notes in her biography of Beckett, Tynan threatened to sue him for libel, claiming that the change "was due to others."⁸ Advised that under his contract, Beckett could do nothing about the American production but could stop others which did not adhere to his text, Beckett decided against litigation. In October 1969 (three months after the New York premiere of *Oh! Calcutta!* on June 16) the unaltered version of *Breath* received its British premiere at the Close Theatre Club in Glasgow, according to John Calder's introductory remarks which accompanied publication of the text *and manuscript* of the play in *Gambit International Theatre Review* later in the year.⁹ *Breath* was also shown at the Oxford Playhouse on 8 March 1970 on behalf of the Samuel Beckett Theatre Appeal. Both the Glasgow and Oxford productions of *Breath* preceded the London production of Tynan's revue, which opened — minus the thirty-second prologue — at the Round House on 27 July 1970.

On 23 October 1969, within days of the premiere of the uncorrupted version of *Breath*, Beckett learned that he had been awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature — a fact which drew additional attention to his latest "dramatic" work; it remains, ironically, his most succinct summation of the human condition. Yet, despite its importance as the culmination of Beckett's experiments in the abatement of dramatic form, and despite the obvious importance that Beckett attached to it in his altercation with Tynan, *Breath* has received scant attention from scholars and critics, having been disparaged or dismissed by a surprising number of Beckett's admirers. In fact, the longest word in the

OED — floccinaucinihilipilification — accurately describes the prevailing critical assessment of *Breath*: the act of estimating something as worthless because it is small or slight. Even James Knowlson and John Pilling, whose recent *Frescoes of the Skull* provides invaluable background and commentary on even the slightest of Beckett's "later" writings, contend that *Breath*'s "dramatic interest and impact must be judged as severely limited" and that it has on occasion "been treated too reverentially . . . or has been considered a rather weak joke."¹⁰ John Simon, who has admired many of Beckett's earlier plays, cites *Breath* as one of the "twin peaks" of "the academic snob appeal of his work," namely the "inclusion of a wordless scene in *Oh! Calcutta!* and the Nobel Prize for Literature — two accolades which Beckett did not so much accept as endure," adding (in a comment on *Not I* which is equally applicable to the other "dramaticules") that

Such minimalism is not, I believe, to be countenanced from anyone, not even from Beckett. Up to a point, less may indeed be more; but beyond that point, less is nothing.¹¹

Beckett has relentlessly pursued the precise identification of that point throughout his career, of course, displaying a technical mastery of every modern genre, disregarding whatever even the most incisive critics believe may or may not "be countenanced," and proceeding (as if at Hamlet's behest) "in this harsh world to draw [his] breath in pain / To tell [his] story."

Admittedly, the play seems "slight" by any conventional standards — even those which are applicable to Beckett's other works; having excised both language and motion, it has less resonant ambiguity than his other writings, but its unique eloquence remains nevertheless. *Breath* is important not only because it culminates Beckett's "minimalist" experimentation and because it bears a unique relationship to the entire tradition of dramatic history and theory, but also because it has intrinsic merit as a complex and evocative theatrical image. For Beckett, as surely as for an expert archaeologist, the detritus of a civilization constitutes its most permanent and revealing record, remaining unchanged for centuries as individual lives and entire genera-

tions pass with the evanescence of light and breath. The rubbish strewn on stage thus affords a symbol of the physical world wherein all things — like Shelley's broken and eroded monument to Ozymandias — inevitably are eventually reduced to residua (a term that Beckett sometimes applies to his own works); it also comprises the wordless — and utterly "objective" — history of all that mankind has done or made. Across and through this age-old physical world, life passes, bound by time: the separation of the physical and spiritual selves (a preoccupation throughout Beckett's works) is here complete, as if to confirm at last the assertion of St. Paul that we have a spiritual body which remains wholly differentiable from its physical counterpart (I Cor. 15.44). The utterance — i.e., the cries, the breath, and the life that they represent — exists quite apart from its (unseen) incarnation, the physical and mortal utterer to which it is temporarily — and only temporarily — bound. The reiterated cry at the end of the play constitutes its sole "intimation of immortality," however, since there are no trailing clouds of glory from the silence that is its pre-natal, spiritual home (whether or not — unknowably — God is, as Wordsworth maintained, in fact there).

For this work, Beckett has selected the most ancient images of the human spirit, breath and light. Indeed, in the classical languages, the words for "breath," "spirit," and "wind" are identical (Greek *pneuma*, Latin *spiritus*) or are closely related (Latin *animus/anima*); the conception of the soul as light is equally old. As a representation of the brief passage of the soul through the world, proceeding from the dark silence of the unknown and returning to it once again, *Breath* is also a theatrical rendition of the earliest such image in English literature, which occurs in the Venerable Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*:

"This is how the present life of man on earth . . . appears to me in comparison with that time which is unknown to us. You are sitting feasting with your ealdormen and thegns in winter time; the fire is burning on the hearth in the middle of the hall and all inside is warm, while outside the wintry storms of rain and snow are raging; and a sparrow flies swiftly through the hall. It enters in at one door and quickly flies out through the other. For the few moments it is inside, the storm and wintry tempest

cannot touch it, but after the briefest moment of calm, it flits from your sight, out of the wintry storm and into it again. So this life of man appears but for a moment; what follows or indeed what went before, we know not at all."¹²

Ironically, in Bede's work, this image of human life is part of an argument in favour of accepting the new religious faith, Christianity; for Beckett, however, only the silence of the vast unknown can with certainty be avowed. The bird, like breath and light, is a traditional symbol of the spirit (the three are combined in traditional Christian representations of the Paraclete), and its passage through the warmed and lighted mead-hall finds unique — and precise — symbolic reiteration as, through twentieth-century technology, the disembodied *spiritus*, the *anima*, passes wordlessly through our own artificially lighted and comfortably heated (or cooled) assembly-hall, the theatre itself.

More closely akin to Brancusi's *Bird in Space* or Mallarmé's nearly-blank pages of poetry than to John Cage's silent music, *Breath* may also be seen as ironic culmination of the particularly French obsession with the "purification" of poetry, metaphor, language, and drama. Paradoxically, it expands the capabilities of theatrical expression by constricting them further than ever before, rendering ineffective even the broad definition of the genre offered by Peter Brook at the beginning of *The Empty Space*:

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and that is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.¹³

As a meaningful "act of theatre" (rather than a theatrical gimmick, as its detractors allege), *Breath* proves that the man himself is an expendable part of the definition, much as *All That Fall* demonstrated that the "empty space" need exist only in the audience's imagination. The standards by which this "act of theatre" should be judged are precisely those which Knowlson and Pilling suggest in rightly claiming that *Happy Days* is the most widely underestimated of Beckett's longer plays: "the challenge offered to the dramatist by the choice of setting, situation, and characters . . . sounds like a deliberate accumulation of diffi-

culties"¹⁴ which are successfully, astonishingly overcome. To have proffered an image of the human condition and the state of the world in a mere thirty seconds, in an "act of theatre" without characters, during a performance without the presence of actors, in a scene without dialogue, through a Shakespearean metaphor expressed without language, in a "dramaticule" without plot, is, indeed, Samuel Beckett's *Breath*-taking achievement.

NOTES

- 1 Samuel Beckett, *The Unnamable*, in *Three Novels by Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), p. 386. All subsequent references cite this edition and have been inserted parenthetically into the text.
- 2 Samuel Beckett, *Breath*, in *First Love and Other Shorts* (New York: Grove Press, 1974), p. 91. Subsequent quotations from *Breath* have been taken from this edition and this page, on which the entirety of the play appears.
- 3 Quoted in the introduction to *Samuel Beckett: The Critical Heritage*, ed. Lawrence Graver and Raymond Federman (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979), p. 36.
- 4 Quoted in James Knowlson and John Pilling, *Frescoes of the Skull: The Later Prose and Drama of Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1980), p. 127.
- 5 Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett's Theatre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980), p. 4.
- 6 *Freytag's Technique of the Drama: An Exposition of Dramatic Composition and Art by Gustav Freytag*, trans. Elias J. MacEwan (New York: Benjamin Blom, 1968), pp. 114-40.
- 7 The altered text, which includes the phrase "miscellaneous rubbish, including naked people," appears in *Oh! Calcutta!* (New York: Grove Press, 1969), p. 9. Undoubtedly, the fact that the corrupted text was issued by his own publisher, Grove Press, aggrieved Beckett even further. This is probably why no details of previous publication and no record of the performance history of *Breath* appear in *First Love and Other Shorts*, although such information is given for all other works in the collection.
- 8 Deirdre Bair, *Samuel Beckett: A Biography* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), p. 603. To Beckett and his partisans, however, the actions of Tynan's unspecified "others" must seem as imperious and absolute as those of the unknown "they" that besets the Unnamable and the tramps in *Waiting for Godot*.
- 9 *Gambit International Theatre Review*, 4: 16 (1969), 6-9.
- 10 Knowlson and Pilling, p. 12.
- 11 John Simon, *Uneasy Stages: A Chronicle of the New York Theatre, 1963-1973* (New York: Random House, 1975), p. 441.
- 12 *Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. Bertram Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 183, 185.
- 13 Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (New York: Atheneum, 1968), p. 9.
- 14 Knowlson and Pilling, p. 108.