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## Hegel with Beckett: The Persistence of Abstraction

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Fredric Jameson is best known for applying to social and cultural life the motto: historicize every phenomenon, locate it in its concrete historical totality. What I want to do in this brief reflection is to elaborate a properly dialectical reading of this motto, a reading which recognizes *abstraction itself as a concrete historical power*. What Marxism calls “antagonism” is precisely the persistence of abstraction in social reality itself.

## **Madness, Sex, War**

While every social edifice is held together by a thick texture of mores (*Sitten*), its stability is not threatened only from the outside (war with other states) since this external threat (of war) is what sustains a civilization from within (as Hegel knew very well). This is why a Möbius-strip reversal complicates today's urgent task to civilize (the relationship between) civilizations themselves (as Sloterdijk put it). Until now, each culture disciplined/educated its own members and guaranteed civic peace among them in the guise of state power, but the relationship between different cultures and states was permanently under the shadow of potential war, with each state of peace nothing more than a temporary armistice. As Hegel conceptualized it, the entire ethics of a state culminates in the highest act of heroism, the readiness to sacrifice one's life for one's nation-state, which means that the wild barbarian relations *between* states serve as the foundation of the ethical life *within* each state. Is today's North Korea with its ruthless pursuit of nuclear weapons and rockets to hit distant targets not the ultimate example of this logic of unconditional nation-state sovereignty? However, the moment we fully accept the fact that we live on a Spaceship Earth, the task that urgently imposes itself is that of civilizing civilizations themselves, of imposing universal solidarity and cooperation among all human communities, a task rendered all the more difficult by the ongoing rise of sectarian religious and ethnic "heroic" violence and readiness to sacrifice oneself (and the world) for one's specific Cause. Therein lies the catch: we cannot directly "civilize civilization" by way of simply expanding the peaceful relations guaranteed by the rule of law into the global sphere of international relations (this was Kant's idea of a world-wide republic); what is missing is, as Hegel knew, the barbarian core (war, killing enemies) in the heart of each civilization which sustains its ethical edifice.

Here we encounter the Möbius strip reversal: if we progress to the center of the ethical edifice of a state, we find ourselves on the opposite side, in the brutal battle for survival with external edifice, and each individual's readiness to participate in this barbarism is the ultimate support of the state's ethical edifice. How to resolve this deadlock? The standard desperate procedure here is to offer another war-like

struggle to replace war between states, another struggle which would overcome nation-state constraints and function as universal: from class struggle (“warfare”) which unites all individuals struggling for emancipation independently of their national belonging, up to the fight against ecological threats (which demands world-wide unity and coordinated efforts) or even war against possible alien attacks (Reagan evoked this possibility to Gorbachev when the Cold War was ending).

Back to a more general level, the twisted structure we are dealing with here was best encapsulated by Schelling in his “formula of the world” (*Weltformel*) from the third draft of his *Weltalter* fragments:

$$\left( \frac{A^3}{A^2 = (A = B)} \right) B$$

A and B stand here for the ideal and real aspect of every process in our reality: B is the contractive force of material density, and A is the counter-force of its idealization, “sublation” in higher and higher spiritual structures. Matter is thus gradually “idealized,” first in forces of magnetism, then in plant life, then in animal life, finally in spiritual life, so that we move further and further from immediate brutal materiality. However, this entire process is rooted in an external point of extreme singular density (the Ego as the ultimate self-contraction), in the same way that the social edifice of higher and higher ethical forms is sustained by the brutal violence of war.<sup>1</sup>

This means that, in the Hegelian edifice, abstraction (the excess of abstract negativity which cannot be sublated into a concrete totality) persists. It is not only war that plays this role of abstract negativity threatening to undo the rational social order: war is the third term in the triad of madness–sexuality–war. As Hegel puts it in proto-Foucauldian terms, madness is not an accidental lapse, distortion, “illness” of human spirit, but something which is inscribed into individual spirit’s basic ontological constitution: to be a human means to be potentially mad:

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed explanation of Schelling’s formula, see chapter 1 of my *The Indivisible Remainder*, London: Verso Books 1996.

This interpretation of insanity as a necessarily occurring form or stage in the development of the soul is naturally not to be understood as if we were asserting that every mind, every soul, must go through this stage of extreme derangement. Such an assertion would be as absurd as to assume that because in the Philosophy of Right crime is considered as a necessary manifestation of the human will, therefore to commit crime is an inevitable necessity for every individual. Crime and insanity are *extremes* which the human mind *in general* has to overcome in the course of its development.<sup>2</sup> Although not a factual necessity, madness is a formal possibility constitutive of human mind: it is something whose threat has to be overcome if we are to emerge as “normal” subjects, which means that “normality” can only arise as the overcoming of this threat. This is why, as Hegel puts it a couple of pages later, “insanity must be discussed before the healthy, intellectual consciousness, although it has that consciousness for its *presupposition*.”<sup>3</sup> Hegel here evokes the relationship between the abstract and the concrete: although, in empirical development and the state of things, abstract determinations are always-already embedded in a concrete Whole as their presupposition, the notional reproduction/deduction of this Whole has to progress from the abstract to the concrete: crimes presuppose the rule of law, they can only occur as their violation, but must be nonetheless grasped as an abstract act that is “sublated” through the law; abstract legal relations and morality are de facto always embedded in some concrete totality of customs, but, nonetheless, the *Philosophy of Right* has to progress from the abstract moments of legality and morality to the concrete Whole of customs (family, civil society, state). The interesting point here is not only the parallel between madness and crime, but the fact that madness is located in a space opened up by the discord between actual historical development and its conceptual rendering, i.e., in the space which undermines the vulgar-evolutionist notion of dialectical development as the conceptual reproduction of the factual historical development which purifies the latter of its empirical insignificant

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<sup>2</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Encyclopaedia of Philosophical Sciences*, vol. 3, *Philosophy of Mind*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1970, par. 410.

<sup>3</sup> Op.cit., *ibid*.

contingencies. Insofar as madness de facto presupposes normality, while, conceptually, it precedes normality, one can say that a “madman” is precisely the subject who wants to “live”—to reproduce in actuality itself—the conceptual order, i.e., to act as if madness also *effectively* precedes normality.

Next comes sexuality which, in its extreme form, can also be characterized as a specific figure of madness. Far from providing the natural foundation of human lives, sexuality is the very terrain where humans detach themselves from nature: the idea of sexual perversion or of a deadly sexual passion is totally foreign to the animal universe. Here, Hegel himself commits a failure with regard to his own standards: he only deploys how, in the process of culture, the natural substance of sexuality is cultivated, sublated, mediated—we, humans, no longer just make love for procreation, we get involved in a complex process of seduction and marriage by means of which sexuality becomes an expression of the spiritual bond between a man and a woman, etc. However, what Hegel misses is how, once we are within the human condition, sexuality is not only transformed/civilized, but, much more radically, *changed in its very substance*: it is no longer the instinctual drive to reproduce, but a drive that gets thwarted as to its natural goal (reproduction) and thereby explodes into an infinite, properly meta-physical, passion. In this way, the civilization/Culture retroactively posits/transforms its own natural presupposition: culture retroactively “denaturalizes” nature itself. This is what Freud called the Id, libido. This is how, here also, in fighting its natural obstacle, opposed natural substance, the Spirit fights itself, its own essence.<sup>4</sup>

The underlying true problem is the following one: the standard “Hegelian” scheme of death (negativity) as the subordinate/mediating moment of Life can only be sustained if we remain within the category of Life whose dialectic is that of the self-mediating Substance returning to itself from its otherness. The moment we effectively pass from Substance to Subject, from Life(-principle) to Death(-principle), there is no encompassing “synthesis,” death in its “abstract negativity” forever remains as a threat, an excess which cannot be economized. Does this mean that

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<sup>4</sup> For a more detailed deployment of these claims, see Interludes 2 and 3 of my *Less Than Nothing*, London: Verso Books 2012

we are back at the standard *topos* of the excess of negativity which cannot be “sublated” in any reconciling “synthesis,” or even at the naive Engelsian view of the alleged contradiction between the openness of Hegel’s “method” and the enforced closure of his “system”? There are indications which point in this direction: as was noted by many perspicuous commentators, Hegel’s “conservative” political writings of his last years (like his critique of the English Reform Bill) betray a fear of any further development which will assert the “abstract” freedom of civil society at the expense of the State’s organic unity, and open up a way to new revolutionary violence.<sup>5</sup> Why did Hegel shrink back here, why did he not dare to follow his basic dialectical rule, courageously embracing “abstract” negativity as the only path to a higher stage of freedom?

This brings us to the third figure of the excess of abstract negativity, war as social madness. Hegel may appear to celebrate the *prosaic* character of life in a well-organized modern state where the heroic disturbances are overcome in the tranquility of private rights and the security of the satisfaction of needs: private property is guaranteed, sexuality is restricted to marriage, the future is safe. . . In this organic order, universality and particular interests appear reconciled: the “infinite right” of subjective singularity is given its due, individuals no longer experience the objective state order as a foreign power intruding on their rights, they recognize in it the substance and frame of their very freedom. Gérard Lebrun asks the fateful question here: “Can the sentiment of the Universal be dissociated from this appeasement?”<sup>6</sup> Against Lebrun, our answer should be: yes, and this is why war is necessary—in war, universality reasserts its right against and over the concrete-organic appeasement in prosaic social life. Is the necessity of war thus not the ultimate proof that, for Hegel, every social reconciliation is doomed to fail, that no organic social order can effectively contain the force of abstract-universal negativity? This is why social life is condemned to the “spurious infinity” of the eternal oscillation between stable civic life and wartime perturbations—the notion of “tarrying with the negative” acquires here a more radical meaning: not just to “pass

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<sup>5</sup> Hegel died a year after the French revolution of 1830.

<sup>6</sup> Gérard Lebrun, *L'Envers de la dialectique: Hegel à la lumière de Nietzsche*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2004, p. 214.

through” the negative but to persist in it. In social life, this means that Kant’s universal peace is a vain hope, that *war* forever remains a threat of total disruption of organized state life; in individual subjective life, that *madness* always lurks as a possibility.

This is also how we should reinterpret the young Marx’s rather unfortunate formula of the reconciliation between man and nature: the becoming-man of nature and the becoming-nature of man (*Menschwerdung der Natur und Naturwerdung des Menschen*). Marx’s meaning is pretty straightforward and humanist: in Communism, when the self-alienation and class division of humanity are abolished, not only will nature lose its threatening character of an external force and be totally humanized, but humanity will also be totally naturalized, harmoniously immersed into nature. Our reading is radically different: humanity is “reconciled” with nature when it realizes that its own antagonisms, its own estrangement from nature and its processes, are “natural,” that they continue in a higher potency the antagonisms and imbalances that define nature itself—in short, man is united with nature precisely in what appears as its estrangement from nature, its disturbance of natural order.

Another lesson of this persistence of abstraction is that there is nothing more foreign to Hegel than the lamentation of the richness of reality that gets lost when we proceed to its conceptual grasping—recall Hegel’s unambiguous celebration of the absolute power of Understanding from his Foreword to *Phenomenology*: “The action of separating the elements is the exercise of the force of Understanding, the most astonishing and greatest of all powers, or rather the absolute power.”<sup>7</sup> This celebration is in no way qualified, i.e., Hegel’s point is not that this power is nonetheless later “sublated” into a subordinate moment of the unifying totality of Reason. The problem with Understanding is rather that it does not unleash this power to the end, that it takes it as external to the thing itself—like, in the above-quoted passage from *Phenomenology*, the standard notion that it is merely *our* Understanding (“mind”) that separates in its imagination what in “reality” belongs together, so that the Understanding’s “absolute power” is merely the power of our

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<sup>7</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977, p. 60

imagination which in no way concerns the reality of the thing so analyzed. We pass from Understanding to Reason not when this analyzing, tearing apart, is overcome in a synthesis which brings us back to the wealth of reality, but when this power of “tearing apart” is displaced from “merely our mind” into things themselves, as their inherent power of negativity.

This point can also be made apropos of the properly dialectical notion of abstraction: what makes Hegel’s “concrete universality” infinite is that *it includes “abstractions” into concrete reality itself, as their immanent constituents*. That is to say: What, for Hegel, is the elementary move of philosophy with regard to abstraction? To abandon the commonsense empiricist notion of abstraction as a step away from the wealth of concrete empirical reality with its irreducible multiplicity of features: life is green, concepts are grey, they dissect, mortify, concrete reality. (This commonsense notion even has its pseudo-dialectical version, according to which such “abstraction” is a feature of mere Understanding, while “dialectics” recuperates the wealth of reality.) Philosophical thought proper begins when we become aware of how *such a process of “abstraction” is inherent to reality itself*: the tension between empirical reality and its “abstract” notional determinations is immanent to reality, it is a feature of “things themselves.” Therein resides the anti-nominalist accent of philosophical thinking—say, the basic insight of Marx’s “critique of political economy” is that the abstraction of the value of a commodity is its “objective” constituent. It is life without theory which is grey, just a flat, stupid reality—it is only theory which makes it “green,” truly alive, bringing out the complex underlying network of mediations and tensions which makes it move. Such an approach provides a different accent in the reading of Hegel: the properly Hegelian reconciliation is not a peaceful state in which all tensions are sublated or mediated but a reconciliation with the irreducible excess of negativity itself.

### **Beckett as the Writer of Abstraction**

To recapitulate, the “empty” Cartesian subject (\$) is not just the agent of abstraction (tearing apart what in reality belongs together), it is itself an abstraction, i.e., it emerges as the result of the process of abstraction, of self-withdrawal from its



real-life context. This is why the “materialist” demands to localize a subject into the texture of its “concrete” historical situation misses the key point: what disappears if we do it is the subject itself. And, again, this does not mean that subject is a kind of user’s illusion which persists only insofar as it doesn’t know fully its concrete material conditions: the network of “concrete material conditions” is in itself incomplete, it contains cracks and inconsistencies which are the points of the rise of subjects. In his detailed reading of Schubert’s *Winterreise*, Ian Bostridge<sup>8</sup> deploys the implications of the fact that, as we learn in the very first lines of the first song, the narrator comes and leaves the house as a stranger. We never learn the reason why he leaves: was he thrown out by the prohibitive father of the family, was he rejected by the girl, did he escape out of fear of marriage promulgated by the girl’s mother? This vagueness which creates anxiety is a positive feature in itself: it positively defines the narrator as a kind of empty place between parentheses, as a barred subject in the Lacanian sense of  $\$$ . This emptiness is constitutive of the subject, it comes first, it is not the result of a process of abstraction or alienation: the barred/empty subject is not abstracted from the “concrete” individual or person fully embedded in its life-world, this abstraction/withdrawal from all substantial content constitutes it. The “fullness of a person,” its “inner wealth,” is what Lacan calls the fantasmatic “stuff of the I,” imaginary formations which fill in the void that “is” subject. Here also enters what Lacan calls *objet a*: *objet a* (as the stand-in for a lack) is the objectal correlate of the empty subject, that which causes anxiety. Back to *Winterreise*: *objet a* of the narrator is not the secret true reason why he had to leave the house, it is the very cause/agent of the narrator’s “emptying” into a stranger whose true motivations are obscure and impenetrable. As such, *objet a* is the object which would have been lost the moment we were to learn the “true” particular cause of why the narrator left the house.

The abstraction enacted by subject is not the end result, it is the point of passage to a new concretion. There is a passage in Proust’s *Recherche* in which Marcel uses a phone for the first time, speaking to his grandmother; her voice, heard alone, apart from her body, surprises him – it is a voice of a frail old woman,

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<sup>8</sup> See Ian Bostridge, *Schubert’s Winter Journey*, London: Faber and Faber 2015

not the voice of the grandmother he remembers. And the point is that this experience of the voice isolated from its context colors Marcel's entire perception of the grandmother: when, later, he visits her in person, he perceives her in a new way, as a strange mad old woman drowsing over her book, overburdened with age, flushed and course, no longer the charming and caring grandmother he remembered. This is how voice as autonomous partial object can affect our entire perception of the body to which it belongs. The lesson of it is that, precisely, the direct experience of the unity of a body, where voice seems to fit its organic whole, involves a necessary mystification; in order to penetrate to the truth, one has to tear this unity apart, to focus onto one of its aspect in its isolation, and then to allow this element to color our entire perception. Such a "re-totalization" based on violent abstraction is what we should call "concrete abstraction," abstraction which grounds its own concrete totality.

Another case of violent re-totalization is provided by movie actors who are as a rule identified with a certain screen persona: neither the character(s) they play in a film nor what they really are as private "real" persons but a certain personality that transpires through multiple roles as the "type" an actor is playing again and again. Humphrey Bogart was playing the same cynical and wounded but honest character, Gary Cooper played the same terse and abrupt courageous type, Cary Grant played the same hectic hyper-active type, etc. There is, however, usually in their career at least one film in which they play a type running against their screen persona. Henry Fonda continuously played a strictly honest and highly moral character, but late in his career, he made an exception – he decided to play the main bad guy, a brutal sadistic killer working for the rail company in Sergio Leone's *Once Upon a Time in the West*. The interesting thing is how this role (and Fonda plays it with obvious pleasure!) retroactively changed our perception of his standard screen persona and enabled us, spectators, to perceive cracks in it – say, to discern traces of brutality and arrogance in the way he played the great heroic figures from Abraham Lincoln to Colonel Thursday in John Ford's *Fort Apache* who causes a massacre of his soldiers when he leads them to an hasty attack.

Or let us take Ben Kingsley; the role that defined his screen persona was that of Gandhi in Attenborough's rather boring "masterpiece" – a dull and preaching agent of justice, equality and Indian independence. However, just a couple of years later, Kingsley excelled in *Love Beast* where he plays a brutal mob enforcer bursting with evil wit and irony. So, perhaps, the fact that two big movie roles of Ben Kingsley are Gandhi and the ridiculously-aggressive English gangster do bear witness to a deeper affinity: what if the second character is the full actualization of the hidden potentials of the first one? If we look back at Gandhi from this standpoint, we are forced to bring out the weird and very problematic features of his character ignored by the media hagiography... (There is another role played by Kingsley which breaks out of this duality and moves to a totally different dimension: in 1988 TV drama *Lenin: The Train*, Kingsley gives a very sympathetic portrayal of Lenin on his legendary train voyage from Zurich to Petersburg in the Spring of 1917, with Dominique Sanda as Inessa Aemand and the old Leslie Caron as Nadhezda Krupskaya.)

Our last example in these series is Tom Cruise. His exception – the exception to his standard screen persona – is what I consider by far his best role, that of Frank Mackey, a motivational speaker peddling a pick-up artist course to men, in P.T.Anderson's *Magnolia*. What is so striking is the obvious pleasure with which he plays this extremely repulsive character, an extrovert hard-talking guy who teaches his pupils how it is all about fucking women and how to dominate them. (Later in the film his character gains some complexity, but what we get is just the twisted inner life of a vulgar corrupted person.) Again, if we look back at his other roles from this vantage point, we can easily discern the immanent vulgarity of his screen persona which transpires even in his "socially-critical" roles like that of playing the anti-war activist Ron Kovic in Oliver Stone's movie adaptation of Kovic's memoir, *Born on the Fourth of July*. We can perceive the vacuity of his arrogant sarcasms in *The Color of Money* or in *A Few Good Men*, the vain pretentiousness of *Vanilla Sky*, up to the flat and unconvincing heroism of his Stauffenberg in *Valkyrie*. The point is not that this is his "real person" but that it is the reality beneath his

screen persona. In short, the old Marxist and Freudian rule holds here also: the exception is the only way to universal truth.

But the great writer of abstraction is Samuel Beckett, and to a partisan of the standard Marxist concrete historical analysis of the works of art in the style of Lukács, the way he practices abstraction in his work cannot but appear as resolutely “anti-Marxist.” When he depicts the subjective experience of terror, loss, suffering and persecution, he does not endeavor to locate it into a concrete historical context (say, making it clear that it is a moment of Fascist terror in an occupied country, or of the Stalinist terror against dissident intellectuals). Beckett does (almost – not quite, of course) the exact contrary: he puts particular forms of terror and persecution which belong to different contexts and levels (Fascist terror, the “terror” of anti-Fascist revenge, administrative “terror” of regulating the repatriation of refugees and prisoners) into a series and blurs their distinctions, constructing an abstract form of de-contextualized terror, one can even say: a Platonic Idea of terror. Why this? Shouldn’t we locate every terror within its concrete historical situation and distinguish between Fascist terror, authentic revolutionary terror, Stalinist terror, consumerist terror, etc.? Why is Beckett’s abstraction from concrete social context not only psychologically (a victim experiences his situation as abstract), but also ontologically, with regard to social totality itself, more truthful than a “concrete” realist image of social totality? Let’s take a closer look at how Beckett proceeds. He does not simply erase echoes of historical reality – abstraction is in his writing a process, not a state. As Emilie Morin perspicuously noticed:

on the surface, there is little about his destitute characters that might suggest an aspiration to political theorising or political action. And yet they partially function as political metonymies: the political order to which they belong, sketched in the shadows and recesses of the texts, materialises precisely as they struggle through ruins, mud, deserted landscapes, empty rooms and other residues of a historical horror escaping categorisation.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Emilie Morin, *Beckett's Political Imagination*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2017, p. 3

Beckett is often seen as the exemplary apolitical writer, dealing with basic existential deadlocks and dilemmas. However, a close reading of his works makes it clear that Beckett's entire opus is impregnated by (traces of and echoes to) political events: the political turmoil in Ireland around 1930, the struggle between Fascism and anti-Fascism through the 1930s, Resistance against Fascist occupation, the struggle for Blacks emancipation against apartheid (his only financial donation to a political party was to ANC), Algerian war of independence (apropos French colonial war in Alger, he coined the term "Murderous Humanitarianism" in order to designate the truth of the French "civilizing" colonialism), Vietnam war, Palestinian resistance, defense of persecuted writers... all is there, but not directly ("realistically") represented. A gap persists between the two levels perfectly rendered by Beckett who wrote: "The material of experience is not the material of expression." The "material of experience" are the historical data, social events; the "material of expression" is the universe depicted in Beckett's world; and the passage from one to the other is abstraction. It is in this precise sense that Beckett called for "an art of *empêchement* (impediment or hindrance), a state of deprivation that is material and ontological in equal measure"<sup>10</sup>: an invisible obstacle renders impossible the continuous transition from abstract experience to concrete social totality. This obstacle acts like the Lacanian Real/Impossible which makes reality (the reality of social totality, in this case) incomplete, cracked. The persisting unfreedom, uneasiness, and dislocation in a modern formally "free" society can be properly articulated, brought to light, only in an art which is no longer constrained to the "realist" representative model. The modern uneasiness, unfreedom in the very form of formal freedom, servitude in the very form of autonomy, and, more fundamentally, anxiety and perplexity caused by that very autonomy, reaches so deep into the very ontological foundations of our being that it can be expressed only in an art form which destabilizes and denaturalizes the most elementary coordinates of our sense of reality.

Perhaps the exemplary case of Beckett's procedure of abstraction is his *Malone Dies* whose entire topic and details clearly relate to the French peripeties

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<sup>10</sup> Morin, op.cit., p. 239.

during the German occupation and its aftermath: the Nazi and collaborationist control, terror and oppression, the revenge against collaborationists and the way refugees were treated when returning home and recuperating. What gives such a power to the novel is precisely that these three domains are condensed into a single suffocating experience of an individual lost in the web of police, psychiatric and administrative measures. However, Beckett's procedure of abstraction reaches its peak in *Catastrophe* (1982), a late short play which may appear to violate his rules: it is a "realist" play staging the rehearsal of a theatre play on the brutal interrogation of a nameless prisoner, and it shamelessly relies on a parallel between oppressive interrogation and the ruthless domination of a theatre director over his actors in rehearsing a play. *Catastrophe* can thus be read "as a solipsistic reflection upon the dispossessed body; as a rumination on the mechanics of theatrical spectacle; as an exposition of the tyranny practised by Soviet Communism; as an examination of the enduring power of dissent in the face of oppression."<sup>11</sup> All these disparate levels are condensed into one, the Idea of the mechanics of oppression, and the ambiguity affects even the conclusion:

The play can be viewed as an allegory on the power of totalitarianism and the struggle to oppose it, the protagonist representing people ruled by dictators (the director and his aide). By "tweak[ing] him until his clothing and posture project the required image of pitiful dejectedness," they exert their control over the silenced figure. "The Director's reifying of the Protagonist can be seen as an attempt to reduce a living human being to the status of an icon of impotent suffering. But, at the end of the play, he reasserts his humanity and his individuality in a single, vestigial, yet compelling movement"<sup>12</sup> – in an act of defiance, the man looks up into the audience (after having been looking down the entire time). In answer to a reviewer who claimed that the ending was ambiguous Beckett replied angrily: "There's no

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<sup>11</sup> Op.cit., p. 243.

<sup>12</sup> James Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett*, London: Bloomsbury 1996, p. 679

ambiguity there at all. He's saying, you bastards, you haven't finished me yet."<sup>13</sup>

In short, he is making Beckett's standard point of persisting in resistance: "Try again. Fail again. Fail better." However, what we should bear in mind here is that, in this case, "bastards" are also members of the public who enjoy the show, and "you haven't finished me yet" also means: I will not resign myself to play the suffering victim in order to satisfy your humanitarian needs. Although Beckett dutifully signed petitions in solidarity with the artists persecuted in "totalitarian" (mostly Communist) countries, he was also aware of "what becomes of solidarity under the imperative to transform suffering into spectacle. The play offers a rebuke to the expectations of an imagined audience attending a charity event, awaiting a predicted performance of hardship in exchange for its donation."<sup>14</sup> *Catastrophe* was first performed precisely as part of such a public spectacle of solidarity with Vaclav Havel (imprisoned in Czechoslovakia), so that when, in the play's very last moment, the victimized Protagonist raises his head and takes a direct look at the audience, this gesture should definitely be read also as addressing the public with a message like "don't think you are much better than what is portrayed in my short play, the anonymous prosecutor terrorizing the Protagonist, and the theatre director terrorizing the actor – you are part of the same hypocritical game, enjoying the spectacle of suffering which makes you feel good in your solidarity with the victim." This is the art of abstraction, of reduction to form, at its most radical, brought to the self-referential extreme: with regard to content, it slides metonymically from the terror of totalitarian interrogation to the terror exerted by theatre directors on performers, and from there to the terror exerted by the benevolent humanitarian public on the theatre ensemble itself. Nobody is simply innocent, nobody is totally exempted.

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<sup>13</sup> Quoted from [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catastrophe\\_\(play\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catastrophe_(play)).

<sup>14</sup> Knowlson, op.cit, ibid.