

The Experiment of Rebellling in Beckett: The Impact of Camus and Havel

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Abstract: The infinite and useless struggles of Camus's Sisyphus have long informed discussions of the philosophy and theatre of the absurd. In the Greek myth, which Camus reductively appropriates, Sisyphus relentlessly repeats his efforts to roll the rock up the hill, regardless of the sheer pointlessness of the endeavour. But what would be the consequences of a sudden termination of these struggles? What existential paradigm shift would be brought about if the rock finally stayed put at the peak, and what would be its repercussions in absurd drama? In Beckett's short play, *Catastrophe* the Protagonist's final gesture unexpectedly and irrevocably undermines the Director's coercive strategies. Dedicated to Havel, this play is politically inspired and presents a positively subversive cadence unknown in his other works. This epiphanic moment clearly disqualifies precepts of the absurd advocated by Camus, like hopelessness, meaninglessness, or uselessness. In this study I first demonstrate how these notions, together with the French philosopher's ideas of suicide, contradiction and selfhood are central to Beckett's work. Next, turning to the post-absurdist work of Camus, I point out how the act of rebellion and solidarity constitute a response to the absurd, displacing uselessness and meaninglessness. Finally, I trace the double meaning of rebellion in Camus's work and examine the Havel-inspired rebellion in the Beckett play together with the Beckett-inspired rebellion in Havel's play. By approaching Beckett's drama in this context I hope to demonstrate Beckett's contribution to a major – if not the only – transition from absurd drama to post-absurdist theatre.

Keywords: Václav Havel, Samuel Beckett, uselessness, meaninglessness, absurd, rebellion, solidarity

The infinite and useless struggles of Camus's Sisyphus have long informed discussions of the philosophy and theatre of the absurd. In the Greek myth,

which Camus reductively appropriates, Sisyphus relentlessly repeats his efforts to roll the rock up the hill, regardless of the sheer pointlessness of the endeavour. However, what would happen if this struggle was to suddenly cease? What existential paradigm shift would be brought about if the rock finally stayed put at the peak, and what would be the likely repercussions of such an action in absurd drama? I believe that the limits of the absurd can best be grasped if we transgress them. In my view Beckett – like Harold Pinter and Tom Stoppard – did probe these limits by occasionally exploring an alternative world view, a vision of the world incompatible with the Sisyphean *aporia*. I also believe that the emergence of this alternative vision has everything to do with Stoppard's and Beckett's personal concern with the work and political activities of fellow absurdist Václav Havel. In Beckett's short play, *Catastrophe* the Protagonist's final gesture unexpectedly and irrevocably undermines the Director's coercive strategies. Dedicated to Havel, this play is politically inspired and presents a positively subversive cadence unknown in his other works. This epiphanic moment clearly disqualifies such precepts of the absurd advocated by Camus as hopelessness, meaninglessness, or uselessness. It also invalidates a much earlier reservation Beckett formulated in *Molloy*, where the act of writing itself is likened to the labours of Sisyphus.¹

In this article I first demonstrate how these notions, together with Camus's ideas of suicide, contradiction and selfhood are central to Beckett's work. Next, turning to the post-absurdist work of Camus, I point out how the act of rebellion and solidarity constitute a response to the absurd, in effect displacing uselessness and meaninglessness. Finally, I trace the double meaning of rebellion in Camus's work and examine the Havel-inspired rebellion in Beckett's play together with the Beckett-inspired rebellion in Havel's play. By approaching *Catastrophe* in this context I hope to demonstrate Beckett's contribution to a major – if not the only – transition from absurd drama to post-absurdist theatre.

1 Moran's apologetic excuse for feeling incompetent to register the events in writing finds expression in the following lines: "And it would not surprise me if I deviated, in the pages to follow, from the true and exact succession of events. But I do not think even Sisyphus is required to scratch himself, or to groan, or to rejoice, as the fashion is now, always at the same appointed places. And it may even be they are not too particular about the route he takes provided it gets him to his destination safely and on time. And perhaps he thinks each journey is the first. This would keep hope alive, would it not, hellish hope. Whereas to see yourself doing the same thing endlessly over and over again fills you with satisfaction" (Beckett 2003, 133-34). See also Andrew K. Kennedy (1991, 121).

Suicide

Camus famously addressed the question of the absurd and that of suicide in the context of overwhelming hopelessness dominating the period of hardly intelligible devastation brought about by World War II and its aftermath. The first sentence of *The Myth of Sisyphus* sets the key for the whole undertaking: "There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide" (Camus 1979, 11). To Camus this also entailed that questions rooted in the historical traditions and the cultural past of the millennia are no longer valid. Galilei's question concerning whether the sun orbits around the Earth or vice versa is of no importance (Camus 1979, 11). Instead, the most fundamental question for Camus becomes the acceptability of suicide for man recognizing the meaninglessness of life and the sheer pointlessness of all human endeavour. Man discovers his own uselessness, and painfully realizes that all goals and aspirations are a mere illusion, life is nothing but a "stage scenery masked by habit" (Camus 1979, 20).

The idea of uselessness is reminiscent of a key figure of Russian literature featuring in nineteenth-century novels.² This coincidence is not surprising since the great figures of this literary historical period appear as frequent reference points in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.

Goncharov's *Oblomov*, the prototype of this nineteenth-century hero, is reincarnated in Beckett's novels and plays, where the feeling of uselessness becomes predominant to the point that it engulfs the author himself,³ as well as the act of writing. No doubt, therefore, that the question of suicide for Camus is inseparable from the uselessness of which man becomes aware as "the stage sets collapse" (Camus 1979, 19). It is then that the why question comes up, as man reflects on and wonders about his life turned into a treadmill. This is the beginning of the consciousness awakening. Two alternatives present themselves for awakening man: suicide or recovery (Camus 1979, 19).

For Kierkegaard the release from the absurd was ensured by faith, and indeed, Camus claims the escape is always of a religious nature. This tradition conceives of death as non-final, as hope, as the promise of an afterlife the absurd remains reluctant to postulate. "It transcends my scale," says Camus, "I do not want to found anything on the incomprehensible. I want to know whether I can

2 Lishniy chelovek.

3 Beckett's nickname was *Oblomov*.

live with what I know and with that alone" (1979, 42). It follows that the absurd is by no means barren and infertile, since it is accompanied by awakening and the mind's recognition of its own limits. Instead of seeking a release from the absurd, Camus takes it as rigorously as possible to establish whether it is possible to live with it. The absurd man accepts the universe for what it is, and draws from it his strength, his refusal to hope, and "the unyielding evidence of a life without consolation" (Camus 1979, 59). Declining the alternative of self-destruction could not be more straightforward: "By the activity of consciousness I transform into a rule of life what was an invitation to death – and I refuse suicide" (Camus 1979, 62).

Turning to absurd drama, we find the same tenacious dismissal of suicide as a form of release. In Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, Didi and Gogo do contemplate hanging themselves from a tree, but instead of the expected notions of egress and escapism the characters are concerned with the derailing circumstance of erection. Similarly, in *Happy Days* Winnie, who is buried up to her waist in the mound in Act I, and up to her neck in Act II, fiddles with and even kisses her revolver Browning, but never fires it.

Contradiction

"It's absurd" means that "it's impossible," but also that "it's contradictory," says Camus (1979, 33). That contradiction is essentially inseparable from the absurd in Camus's thought is evidenced by the numerous allusions to Sören Kierkegaard, the philosopher of contradictions and paradoxes. Kierkegaard's aesthetic paradox is the first appearance of the absurd in existentialist philosophy, as Nicolae Balota points out (1979, 19). For Kierkegaard the aesthetic paradox is the combination of contradictory notions, such as, for instance, the coalition between the sublime and the comic: a coalition beyond explanation and rationality. Apart from the aesthetic paradox, Kierkegaard espouses ethical and religious paradoxes, as it is well known. Release from the religious paradox is to be found in the *credo quia absurdum*, claiming that faith provides the only explanation for the absurd.⁴

Needless to say, Camus rules out faith as a solution for the absurd, thereby consistently and rigorously retaining the element of contradiction throughout his philosophical investigations. Moreover, he seems to distance himself from the

4 For Kierkegaard's influence on Camus see Balota (1979, 19).

Danish thinker when quoting Ferdinando Galiani: “the important thing is not to be cured, but to live with one’s ailments. Kierkegaard wants to be cured [...] to escape the antinomy of the human condition” (Camus 1979, 41). Contradiction proves to be sticky and contagious; an incessant reminder of the limits of reason.

When we look at any work of Beckett, we see an all-pervasive, all-inclusive obsession with contradiction, which is not just a major device of subversion and self-deconstruction, but also the greatest source of Beckettian humour. In contrast to Kierkegaard, Camus can accept no transition from contradiction and sin to God. Instead, the notion of sin is redefined, “the absurd is sin without God” (1979, 42). This idea together with the questions of contradiction and suicide lead us to Caligula. In harmony with the conclusion of *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Caligula condemns the destructive force inherent in extreme liberty/freedom (Balota 1979, 283). In this play, Camus demonstrates the dangers of amorality and incontrollable devastation stemming from the lack of sin and the sense of guilt immanent in the absurd. Caligula is a possible response to the fate of Sisyphus, inasmuch as the freedom gained in the absurd turns against itself and others. Camus condemns this amorality by presenting extreme liberty as the self-annihilation of madness. Caligula in this sense goes beyond Sisyphus when he cannot be satisfied with this world, “Really, this world of ours, the scheme of things as they call it, is quite intolerable. That’s why I want the moon, or happiness, or eternal life – something, in fact, that may sound crazy, but which isn’t of this world” (Camus 1958, 17).

Caligula seeks to establish the kingdom of impossibility, where all contradictions are resolved, “I want to drown the sky in the sea, to infuse ugliness with beauty, to wring a laugh from pain” (Camus 1958, 25). There is a fundamental difference between Caligula and Sisyphus, which goes beyond the difference between drama and myth. Caligula’s mission to enforce the legitimacy of absolute freedom is no less absurd than Sisyphus’ act. However, Caligula struggles with his fate, with the impossible, his mind set on changing the world. Sisyphus, on the contrary, perseveres in the futile and endless repetition of his act with no intent to change his destiny, let alone the world. Instead, he is engrossed in the absurd, or to speak with Camus, is “keeping the absurd alive” (1979, 53).

Caligula dismisses love and suffering, for in all human relationships he sees the curtailment of his power and desire for freedom, “Love isn’t enough for me” (1958, 75). For him real happiness is constituted by unbearable freedom and condemnation of all human beings. It is to be found in blood and hatred, the incomparable loneliness of man facing his life. For him happiness is “this

intolerable release, devastating scorn, blood, hatred all around [him] [...] the ruthless logic that crushes out human lives" (Camus 1958, 76). Needless to say, in his fall he is divided as he tumbles into the yawning abyss of nothingness, "I have chosen a wrong path, a path that leads to nothing. My freedom isn't the right one....Nothing, nothing yet." (Camus 1958, 77).

Self

Searching for one's identity is an epistemological problem for the *homo absurdus*, the limits of the self are the limits of knowledge acquisition. How can I claim that I know anything? – asks Camus. The self is part of the world, and as in the case of the world I can only have partial impressions about myself: "For if I try to seize this self of which I feel sure, if I try to define and to summarize it, it is nothing but water slipping through my fingers. [...] Forever I shall be a stranger to myself" (Camus 1979, 24).

In Camus, absurd identity can only be defined in terms of fluidity, of a flux. It is nothing but a continuous flow of being taking up new shapes but never crystallizing in any of them. Similarly, Beckett's Krapp listens in vain to the spools of memory to find something in his past he can willingly identify with. As it soon turns out, identity evades the quest and proves to be fragmentary and scattered in time resisting narrative accommodation. Krapp dissociates himself from his own past, becomes a stranger to himself and hardly understands his own language. Needless to say, Krapp in this sense is not an isolated hero, but a typical embodiment of Beckett's understanding of selfhood. To be sure, both in Beckett's entire work as well as in Camus's philosophy of the absurd we find an exclusive concern with the self. The Other for both authors will be accessible only through another mode of rebellion, a revolt against this encapsulation within the confines of the self.

Rebellion

Response to the challenge of the absurd can be solidarity or rebellion,⁵ though they can defeat the absurd only temporarily. The idea of rebellion appears already in *The Myth of Sisyphus* as one of the coherent philosophical stances. In this

5 *The Rebel* and *The Plague* can both be read as attempts to escape from the absurd (Balota 1979, 295).

work rebellion is approached in a metaphysical sense and bears on the human being's conviction of the inexorability of fate. Man confirms the absurd for himself, and rebels against surrendering.

In Camus's later work the rebel defies the servile subordination of Sisyphus, and transcends his lonely struggles through commitment to solidarity, "When he rebels, a man identifies himself with other men and so surpasses himself, and from this point of view human solidarity is metaphysical" (1956, 12).⁶ A similar transition presents itself from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, which is, as Balota quotes Camus, "a transition from isolated rebellion to the discovery of a community in whose struggles one feels obliged to share." And further, "if there is any advancement from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it is surely in the direction of solidarity and participation" (Balota 1979, 299).

The relationship between rebellion and the absurd in Camus's thought is not surprisingly contradictory, since though rebellion appears as an evidence within the experience of the absurd, it also harbours a moral rule which is clearly missing from the absurd.⁷

Rebellion is blatantly incompatible with extreme absurdism regarding defiance. Camus's rebel is a naysayer, he communicates and resists, whereas the absurd finds its most appropriate and eloquent manifestation in silence. This explains much of the stubborn speechlessness of Beckett's and Pinter's heroes, who intervene in and disrupt all pretentious sense-seeking dialogues and communication, thus exposing an introvert, mute self hardly expressible in words. Silence and speechlessness is perhaps the most poignant and extreme in Pinter's play *A Slight Ache*, in which a match seller shatters the life of the other characters without saying a word.

Compassion and the absurd *per se*

Rebellion and solidarity spring from the same root. As Camus argues, the rebellion that dissociates itself from solidarity becomes unworthy of its name (1956,

6 Camus's move from the lonely labours of Sisyphus to the notion of rebellion can be reformulated as the ethical move from the isolated individual to the Other. The idea of suicide discussed and discarded in *The Myth of Sisyphus* reappears in *The Rebel* as the idea of murder which is likewise dismissed, "Murder cannot be made coherent when suicide is not considered coherent" (Camus 1956, 7).

7 The rule concerning the right or obligation of murder.

15). At the same time, the enlightening confrontation between the absurd and rebellion sheds light on another important difference, this time with regard to suffering. As Camus points out, suffering is individual in the absurd. However, in rebellion “suffering is seen as a collective experience” (Camus 1956, 15). This is the point where we reach the limits of the absurd and enter the alternative world of compassion. Compassion, as love brings about the suspension of the absurd by terminating human solitude, and restoring man’s relationship with the world. These potential forms of human relationship put an end to man’s exile, to withdrawals into the self. In absurd drama we find individual calvaries and the merciless thwarting of all attempts at compassion. The common suffering of Beckett’s pairs contains only the illusion of compassion, the characters are never truly compassionate or empathetic with each other. The potential of compassion confirmed in these feeble attempts affect the reader/spectator precisely by remaining unfulfilled, thwarted. In this sense, too, Beckett’s plays appeal to what they deny.

Nevertheless, eliciting a response through denial is by no means reducible to any form of instruction or *katharsis*. To be sure, the absurd confirms nothing outside itself, but instead, makes repeated attempts to exhaust itself. In other words, as Camus testifies in his *Notebook* (Balota 1979, 310), the plague proves that the absurd teaches us nothing. The absurd cannot be resolved through any explanation of the world, but instead, it subverts all traditional worldviews. As Ionesco most succinctly put it, “Absurd is that which is devoid of purpose... Cut off from his religious, metaphysical, and transcendental roots, man is lost: all his actions become senseless, absurd, useless” (Esslin 2004, 23).

In contrast, in both Greek and Shakespearean drama we find a mythological framework accommodating the absurd. In neither of these cases is the absurd a comprehensive universal attribute of being, but more like a temporarily derailed state of consciousness, a momentary lapse of reason (Pink Floyd). Both great periods of drama (Greek and Shakespearean) owned an all-encompassing worldview that rendered possible a conclusive and reassuring resolution of the absurd. We find concrete and straightforward explanations for absurd phenomena within the coordinates of Greek mythology and the Judaic-Christian worldview respectively. Consequently, there the absurd becomes subsumed and transubstantiated. Ajax’s absurd act of slaughtering the cattle instead of Ulysses is explained away by the intervening God, as is Heracles’ murdering of his own children or Oedipus’ self-blinding. In these systems of mythological thought

modalities of the grotesque and the absurd prove to be the means of learning through suffering (*to pathēi mathos*),⁸ namely of expiation, penitence, recognition, enlightenment.

In the Theatre of the Absurd, however, we find the Camuvian variant of the absurd, which resists containment: it is self-sufficient and unresolvable. On these grounds I contest Jan Kott's (1971), Martin Esslin's (2004) and Neil Cornwell's (2006) respective contributions to the understanding of the notion of the absurd, since in these otherwise insightful and indispensable undertakings we find a rather confusing blend between the above-mentioned variants. I believe it is only by taking the absurd as seriously and rigorously as Camus did, that we can hope to see where its limits crystallize.

The Catastrophe of Identification

Dedicated to Václav Havel, Beckett's *Catastrophe* (1982) is a response to contemporary Czechoslovakian politics as the Czechoslovakian born Tom Stoppard's *Professional Foul* and *Rock and Roll* were both inspired by Havel. To my knowledge no other Beckett work brings to play the political reality – and together with it the Camuvian notions of solidarity and rebellion – as directly and operatively as *Catastrophe*.

At first glance the play is about a rehearsal – at least according to the stage directions – and as such, Beckettian theatre *seems* to come closest to self-reflection. However, it soon turns out that it is not just about a rehearsal, and consequently, neither is it merely a Beckettian experiment in self-reflexive theatricality. Having established what it is not, let us take a look at what it is about.

The stage is bare except for the Protagonist standing barefoot on a black block with bowed head. The Director comfortably seated downstage addresses his dictatorial and often violent instructions to his assistant, who servilely provides the appropriate responses. As an increasingly poignant contrast the Protagonist remains silent throughout the play. All information about him is supplied by the Assistant who seems to be responsible for every detail and nuance concerning the Protagonist's appearance and posture. The Director's questions that could as well be ours – except for the occasional bursts of outrage – focus our attention on minute details as if to present the object of merciless scrutiny through

8 Beginning with Aeschylus, learning through suffering is the motor of tragic action.

a magnifying glass. In the course of the aggressive questioning, a strong sense of hierarchy is maintained with the Director on top, followed by the Assistant and Luke, who are in charge of the lighting, and the Protagonist at the bottom.

The Director's curiosity is at odds with the stage directions that emphasize the unimportance of age and physique. Similarly, the black dressing gown covering the entire body contrasts with the nuance-oriented directorial observation. The questions and demands of the Director are not triggered by any spectacular aspect of the Protagonist's appearance, but rather by the fear of the ordinary, of the unimportant that may conceal something beyond his control.

The Director is bewildered by everything that is invisible. The hand cannot remain hidden in the pockets of the gown, and when later the whole gown itself is removed the clenched fists of the Protagonist are revealed. Puzzled, the Director unclenches the fists,⁹ and orders the Assistant to whiten them to regain control and emphasize passivity and surrender. When even this fails to meet the expectations, the hands are joined and raised, which constitutes the first series of physical interference in the course of the play, to be followed by the repeated and thus emphatic bowing of the head amongst others. In this world of dubious unimportance the moment is made prospectively all-important when we think of the ultimate raising of the head, the Protagonist's sole independent movement.

The Director is attentive to all body parts including the toes, whose visibility is enhanced by the raising of the pedestal. There is one thing that must remain unseen: the face. From the beginning the hat is used to hide the face, and when the hat is taken off, it is done merely to reveal the cranium, while the face remains hidden. Its exposure is to be feared and avoided by all means:

A: (*Timidly.*) What if he were to... were to... raise his head... an instant... show his face... just an instant.

D: For God's sake! What next? Raise his head? Where do you think we are? In Patagonia? Raise his head? For God's Sake! (*Pause*).

Good. There's our catastrophe. (Beckett 1990, 460)

An instant of revelation would invalidate the whole meticulous composition. It seems that there are a number of disturbing threats endangering the immac-

9 The fists must not be clenched, to reveal the "fibrous degeneration" (Beckett 1990, 458). Enoch Brater points out the striking biographical allusion (1987, 146).

ulate rendering of the Directorial concept. Apart from the reservations concerning the Protagonist's clothes and appearance, further regulations are introduced by the cantankerous Director to delimit and preordain spectator response. Besides the ban on showing the face, the use of a gag is also immediately ruled out. Bans and interdicts dominate this world, and an almost superhuman effort is made to eliminate even the possibility of individual initiative, physical movement and facial gestures as attempts to communicate. The comprehensive concept in the name of which all these laborious preparations are made remains vague and perhaps, irrelevant. What makes it both concrete and relevant is nothing but the dedication itself.

As the quotation above tells us, the term catastrophe refers to the manifestation of something that is incompatible with the Director's concept, and that may even question and endanger its legitimacy. Shivering is the only permitted "act" that fits in the pattern without any cosmetics ("Bless his heart." Beckett 1990, 460). It never becomes the object of scrutiny, or questioning, let alone resentment. The Director seems to be more concerned with the whitening of the bare parts of the body including the skull, the hands and the shins. Furthermore, the Director orders Luke to darken the stage so that only the whitened skull remains visible. Besides bringing to play one of Beckett's favourite contrasts - the black and white - here the lighting constitutes the finishing stroke for the finale in which the instrument of power is used against power.

As I mentioned above, power is strictly hierarchized in the play. Beyond the Director's endless series of demands and instructions there are numerous signs of his full powers, of a system of dictatorship and totalitarianism. Indeed, the Dictator is fully aware of his position, which is never questioned till the end and is ready to take advantage of it throughout the rehearsal. In the beginning, he is sitting in an armchair showering questions at the Assistant who stands beside him, and as the Director moves closer to the Protagonist, he takes out a cigar and demands a light. His presence alone puts pressure on his environment, bringing the well-established operations of surveillance palpably close. Taking note of all the instructions on a pad, the Assistant remains servile and complicit throughout, even occasionally overdoing it by making unnecessary suggestions, "What about a little... a little... gag?". The Director is outraged at the potential exposure of the subtle mechanisms of authoritarianism, "For God's sake! This craze for explicitation! Every i dotted to death! Little gag! For God's sake!" (Beckett 1990, 459).

Apart from Pozzo's bossing about Lucky in *Waiting for Godot*, this coercive language is unique in Beckett. This language use – language used to exert power – is more reminiscent of Harold Pinter's theatre, perhaps mostly of Goldberg's and McCann's brutal cross-examining of Stanley Webber in *The Birthday Party*, or the sometimes violent verbal exchange between Ben and Gus in *The Dumb Waiter*. At the same time I hasten to add that though Pinter insisted on the comic aspect of these dialogues, it would be preposterous to claim that Beckett's language in the *Catastrophe* is hilarious. The predominant and pervasive lack of comedy in the play derives from its political topicality. *Catastrophe* was written originally in French in 1982, at the time of Havel's incarceration. Much like Ionesco, Beckett protested against the political harassment which fellow absurdist, Václav Havel, suffered as a result of his writings and involvement in human rights activities. In a letter to Beckett written after his release from prison, Havel expressed his gratitude for the international solidarity and for Beckett's play especially,

The shock I experienced during my time in prison, when on occasion of one of her one-hour visits allowed four times a year, my wife told me at Avignon there took place a night of solidarity with me, and that you took the opportunity to write, and to make public for the first time, your play, *Catastrophe*. For a long time afterwards there accompanied me in prison a great joy and emotion that helped to live on amidst all the dirt and baseness. (qtd. in Brater 1987, 140)

The topical relevance and cathartic impact of the play is confirmed by the fact that Havel himself wrote a play in response to *Catastrophe*. *Mistake (Chyba, 1983)* was performed together with Beckett's play as a double bill on an evening of solidarity organized at the Stadsteater in Stockholm, on 29 November 1983 (Brater 1987, 140).

Not surprisingly, Havel's play is set in a prison, where Xiboy, the newcomer and protagonist throws a spanner in the works by smoking before breakfast. As in *Catastrophe* there is a strong sense of hierarchy impersonated by the King, a trustee and his subordinates, the prisoners (numbered one to three), who menacingly encircle Xiboy, demanding an explanation. Xiboy, like Beckett's Protagonist, remains silent, as he finds himself in the focus of public scrutiny. As expected, his silence infuriates the prisoners who aggressively corner and insult him, "What a stubborn bastard! [...] You fucking mother-fucker!" (Havel 1993, 273). The King outlines the internal regulations of prison life and together

with the complicit Prisoners demands unconditional compliance. Apart from being embarrassed and shrugging his shoulders, Xiboy makes no response whatsoever, which is interpreted as a sign of disrespect and nonconformism. By the end of the short one-act play they discover that Xiboy is “some kind of a bloody foreigner,” and move towards him with the King’s offensive, “Well, that’s his bloody funeral” (Havel 1993, 273).

Xiboy is a victim of overwhelming aggression as the Protagonist of *Catastrophe*. His mistake is throwing a spanner in the works, which is nothing less than a sequel to the gesture of Beckett’s Protagonist, but in contrast with the latter it is not a culminating but an initial act that subverts the *status quo*. In other words, *Mistake* begins where *Catastrophe* ends, suggesting continuity, especially when we think of the two plays performed in succession as a double bill. Such continuity sheds light on the potential implications and consequences of the manifestation of human freedom and human rights. The theatre becomes a prison, Havel’s prison where he was sentenced for his rebellion. What is an experiment for Beckett is no less than an inexorable political reality for Havel.

In the political context, the Director of *Catastrophe* is a Chief Officer laboriously humiliating the Protagonist with the help of his subordinates. What is more, the authoritarian attitude is exacerbated by crude male chauvinism, when we consider the fact that the Assistant is a woman.

Besides *Catastrophe*’s obvious political thrust, however, we must not forget that Beckett’s play is after all about a rehearsal. The Director perhaps is only a director narcissistically imposing his own ideas on the character as – one may argue – all directors of plays do. Indeed, in the end Beckett does seem to adumbrate and reinforce theatricality with all available means. Lighting is so emphatic in this play that the person in charge has a name in the *Dramatis Personae* and a specific place in the hierarchy. Luke remains in the background throughout, but his contribution is indispensable both for the Director and Beckett. In the end it is all about the most accurate composition of a stage-set rendered through the contrast of light and darkness.

As the final touch is made, and only the head of the Protagonist is lit, the Director runs out of instructions and narcissistically applauds himself for the immaculate composition:

[*Fade-out of general light. Pause. Fade-out of light on body. Light on head alone. Long pause.*]

D: Terrific! He'll have them on their feet. I can hear it from here.
 [Pause. Distant storm of applause. P raises his head, fixes the audience.
 The applause falters, dies. Long pause.] (Beckett 1990, 461)

Light and sound effects (applause) take over the scene, concentrating all attention on the gesture that subverts the whole directorial concept. In spite of all the instructions and physical violence (the repeated bowing of the head), the Protagonist raises his head to reveal his face. This epiphany¹⁰ is the catastrophe itself ("There's our catastrophe") when what was to be concealed at all costs is revealed. It is the failure of political identification when the statue comes to life and removes the strait jacket of identification to reveal his inalienable right to self-identity.

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10 Or as Gontarski has it, "revelation" (1985, 141).

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