Chapter One

The Otherness in Beckett’s theatre:

The Physical Theatricality in *Endgame*

In this chapter, the stress lies in the level of performance, mainly in the physical theatricality from two aspects: the function of darkness as well as the role of actor. I hope to testify the fact that Beckett redefines the notion of subjectivity by reexamining the subjective freedom of the director, the actor and the spectator in the performance. In his theatrical performance the subjective freedom lies in the subject’s being captive to the unknowable. In the performance with relation to the infinite, Beckett resuscitates his creative power and the actor/spectator obtains afresh his new birth in the playing/viewing process. First, I would put Beckett’s theatre in comparison with the conventional theatre in order to make explicit Beckett’s uniqueness in the stage design and in the actor’s performance. Second, the dilemma for Beckett between the roles as a playwright and as a director will be illustrated to further discuss the predicament that baffles his actors while they play the roles. Third, I would focus my discussion on the kind of interaction between the actor and the spectator.

Beckett, Brecht and the Conventional Theatre

As Christopher Innes points out: “The nature and function of theatre has been questioned, dismantled, redefined in a process of continual revolution…” (Innes 2), we see that the subject matters of theatre, which are often decided by their function, must undergo various changes. Herein, I do not intend to draw a whole picture of the evolving process of the theatrical history. My emphasis is mainly on Beckett’s position in the theatrical development that unfurls from realism to anti-realism which is a changing process based on the different functions of the theatre. In the legacy of Aristotelian mimesis, art is to imitate nature. In Aristotelian theatre, the theatre is a place representing *the* reality (Barranger 56).
The theatre of realism believes in the reproduction of the reality in the theatrical performance.

Its main issues concern with the contemporary world, especially on the social and political aspects in the hope of “addressing questions of justice or calling for revolution” (Inns 5). The authorial intention with an ideological consciousness, which is inserted in the play, has an enormous influence on the audiences’ judgment. The actors have to identify with the characters in order to become a definable subject on the stage.

Nevertheless, other genres refute the validity of full representation of the reality in theatre. Amongst them, the epic theatre is prominent because of its great impact on the contemporary theater. The epic theatre is characteristic of its replacement of the “cause-and-effect plot with montage structure” (Innes 5), of exposing the stage illusion\(^1\) by separating actor from character,\(^2\) and of the intention to alienate the audience from their empathy with the play. Yet, these theatrical forms are not really in opposition to those of realism, but rather lead to an alternative mode of depicting the society with an acute political attention. In addition, the strategies such as “interjected songs,” “verse dialogue,” or the insertion of historical figures can immediately evoke the “social relevance” for their being tinted with political interests (ibid.).

Laying claim on the spectator’s intellectual judgment, Bertolt Brecht, the founder of the epic theatre, alienates the actor from the character, prevents the effect of empathy with which the spectator submit to uncritical emotional affinity, and reorients the spectator’s thought to the viewing process itself. That is, in the viewing process the spectator is “put through a

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\(^{1}\) The stage illusion refers to the notion that the spectators “are looking into the actual lives and situations of others, usually people like ourselves,” so the stage illusion is a kind of “stage realism” that reflects “the times, its people, and universal truths” (UP 442-43). In this way, the stage becomes a place that various human experiences are delivered, i.e., the theatre becomes a mirror of the universe.

\(^{2}\) Martin Esslin provides a clear explanation: “They [Brechtian actors] must be supplemented by acute and fully rational observations; by implied comment on the character’s actions so that the audience can see the actor’s approval or disapproval, his pity, or contempt for the character” (122). Herein, the alienation between the actor and character is to evoke the spectator’s objective intellect, and the effect is often achieved by the actor’s self-refraining attitude from “goring over wholly into their role.” That is, in Bertolt Brecht’s way of speaking—the actor remains “detached from the character” and thus “[invites] criticism of him [the character that the actor is playing]” (UP 725)
process of alienation” (UP 725), rather than indulges himself in the development of the plot, or in the mental condition of the character. Ideally, the actor intends to identify with the character whereby he knows the way to perform on the stage space by citing the character’s language to confirm the act of playing, or by imitating the character’s gesture to achieve their mutual identification. Given this, the character is incarnated by the actor as a subject on the stage. The Brechtian actor alienates himself from the character and does not identify with the latter (Kalb 247). Although the actor does not imitate the character, as Michael Goldman observes, there is already a “privileged truth” that “lies in the actor’s commitment to the social interpretation of the character” (qtd. in Kalb 38), and consequently the predestined context adumbrates the purpose of the actor’s performance and conveys specific bits of information through performance (ibid.). So, Brecht remarks that his performance is a representation that alienation “is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem ‘unfamiliar’” by using some applications, such as songs or placards (qtd. in Kalb 46). Hence, the strong authorial intention can still communicate with the audience through performance though in an unfamiliar way. The spectator needs to find out what kind of message is conveyed through the performance.

However, Goldman continues to argue, the confident attitude that “I [the spectator] can get behind these appearances” does not take place in Beckett’s theatre (qtd. in Kalb 38). Beckett’s plays are not didactic,³ and have no pedagogical implications. In Beckettian theatre, although there also exists the alienation of the actor from the character, the effect of alienation functions in a way that differs from Brecht’s style. Whereas Brecht’s notion of alienation is to prevent the emotional empathy of the spectator with the character in order to stir the spectator’s objective judgment and social concern, Beckett does not use alienation to

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³ Martin Esslin indicates that Bertolt Brecht in the early age proclaims that the theatre should be didactic and that his task is to offer some “teaching aids” that serve for the community by “teaching it [the community] how to live;” in this sense Brecht regards the function of the stage as something based on the “social usefulness” (105, 116).
call for the spectator’s political or social judgment. In contrast to Brechtian actor, Beckett’s actor is not allowed to use language to convey political issues, and is not presented as “a palpable subject” (Kalb 46-47). There is a confusion aroused in the actor and the spectator whose subjectivities are in an uncertain state due to the lack of an identifiable subject on the stage. Since the dilemma of the actor and the spectator will be accounted for in the latter section, at this point I’d like to continue discussing Beckett’s insights of performance.

Although Beckett addresses the issue of the unstable and fragmentary subjectivity, what he concerns more is to express the subject’s existence beyond the universal rules and to address the relation that gets involved with the unknowable. As Judith Dearlove observes that Beckett tells us not “the uncertainty of universe or individual,” but rather “the incoercible absence of relation” (5). In Dearlove’s viewpoint, Beckett as an artist sets a relation to the unknowable in a way that is both relating and departing in order to question “the metaphysical traditions which assert that there is a rational and harmonious system but also that it is knowable and imitable” (ibid.). Being an artist, in this case, a playwright as well as a director, he seeks to transcend the established judgment by relating his creation to the unknowable realm.

The alienation between the actor and the character leads to a performance that is put in opposition to that of the conventional theatre and the Brechtian one. Since in Beckett’s performance the notion of a palpable subject or a secure identity is invalid, it is necessary for us to reconsider how Beckett reshapes the notion of subjectivity in order not to misunderstand the impalpable subject as a negation of subjectivity. Hence in the following sections, I would like to account for Beckett’s notion of subjectivity via the examination of the

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4 Levinas states that his theory of the Other aims to defend the notion of subjectivity against that in the traditional Western philosophy as a subjectivity of self-economy (TI xiv, 25). In the following sections, I would like to draw on Levinas’s theory of the self and the Other to make a defense for Beckett against the interpretation ascribed to the vein of poststructuralism that deconstructs the subjectivity in Beckett’s play, and also against the interpretation pertaining to the vein of essentialism that celebrates the human existence based on the virility or heroism of the human will.
subjective freedom ascribed to the three kinds of people that are involved in the performance: the director, the actor, and the spectator. The examination is of threefold: first, Beckett’s aesthetic attitude; second, the actor’s performance; and third, the interaction between the actor and the spectator.

Beckett’s Dilemma: As a Playwright and as a Director

Dramaturge, by Kalb’s definition, is “primarily interested in how plays generate meaning in performance” (2). That is, there are some techniques applied to transforming the script to the performance with the purpose of creating meaning in the viewing process of performance. As noted, alienation between the actor and the character is characteristic of Beckett’s performance, and the question that is worth thinking is why alienation is requisite for expressing Beckett’s view of performance. There are at least two possible answers from two different perspectives. First, Beckettian characters’ mental conditions and behaviors are unintelligible, so it is impossible for the actors to imitate or identify with the roles. The uncertainty and equivocation of Beckett’s performance result from the unique interaction between the actor and the character. The actor should not seek to enact the character with recourse to the analysis of the latter’s fragmentary subjectivity; instead he is required to ask “how” to play, rather than “what” to play. Second, in answering the inquiry about the way of playing, Beckett, as a director, tells his actor not to play when he enacts the character, and forces the former to keep a distance from the latter.

With regard to the first answer, Charles Lyons observes that in Beckett’s play the character’s life episodes are like “temporal units” that build an “equivocal” relation with the larger narrative structure of the whole play (306). That is, the episodes are dispersed loosely and fragmentarily in the character’s narrative stories, rather than in a consistent way therewith we can constitute a verified “narrative whole” of the character (ibid.). Hence, the
whole narrative does not consist of a series of constant events and thus it renders more about its unreliability. The character is, in this case, unable to be called a unified subject in the traditional sense that defines the subject’s life experiences in a continual temporality of which each episode is positioned in order. Lyon is insightful to discover the discontinuity or contradiction in the characters’ narratives, but we can further look into the disruption between the word and gesture performed by the actor in order to investigate the disconcerting sense stirred by such alienation. Beckett, in his directing *Endgame*, asks his actors to make a disjunction between gesture and word: they have to “assume an attitude” and then speak words. The effect of the discontinuity is “disturbing” and the actors are regarded as people who are unable to move and speak simultaneously. This disruption in word and gesture also makes the character unconvinced. The gesture goes first and makes words like an adding footnote to the action. This discontinuity signals Beckett’s stress on the physicalness because the gesture draws the spectator’s attention and reduces the validity of the spoken language which originally should be emphasized with the assistance of the bodily gesture. The gesture does not enact like a sign associated to the word. It absolves the definition (or meaning) from words, and becomes a manifestation of itself. Speaking in this case becomes a recommenced action that is to clarify the meaning of the previous bodily gesture. Hence this kind of discontinuity resists the definitive specification. As a result, words incessantly try to interpret the gesture but the effort is constantly interrupted for gestures do not completely corresponds to the words. Each interpretation is consequently invalid in the discontinuity. In addition, for Beckett claims that *Endgame* is a play of “a matter of fundamental sounds” (*Disjecta* 109)—the sounds may refer to those of Clov’s tramping steps or the impressive scenes of

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5 This refers to Beckett’s directorial experience of *Endgame* in Berlin in 1967 (Ruby Cohn 235-45).
6 See Ruby Cohn, *Just Play* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1980), 243. The quoted remarks are derived from Cohn’s description of Beckett. Anna McMullan also points out that “the separation of speech and movement” is one of Beckett’s directorial principles (197).
pause\(^7\) (which is resonant with the silence), it is the body language that becomes the concrete language on the stage (Steven Connor 1988, 157). This discontinuity disables “the speaking subject” from taking possession of its body and thus calls into question the full presence of the subject. From Lyon’s and Cohn’s observations, we see that Beckett as a playwright, invents his characters in a memory fallacy, and as a director he guides his actors to distort the harmonious relation between speaking and acting. From the two cases, Beckett’s characters are not verified as a real figure or an actualized subject on the stage.

With respect to the second answer, that Beckett’s inhibition of “playing” leads to the effect of alienation serves to maintain the distance between actor/character, and actor/spectator. As a director, Beckett refuses to analyze the character’s personalities to endow him with a psychological realism, and forbids the actors to identify with the characters. This attitude seems to neglect the significance of interpreting the script and to seek a kind of performance that departs from the script. Yet on the other hand, he is demanding that the stage design should be exactly faithful to his stage directions. In the former case, Beckett’s characters in the script are not definable subjects (they are inimitable), whereas in the latter, the stage directions about the stage space are required to be followed and thus the stage space described in the script can be represented to the most degree. Obviously, Beckett, as a director, takes different attitudes toward his script, which is regarded as a source and the only model. On the one hand, he discounts the script by preventing his actor from identifying with the role. On the other, he pays great attention to the authorial sovereignty by obeying the stage directions in the script. Thus Beckett’s performance at the same time renders a tendency to be faithful to the script and subverts the conventional theatrical style which emphasizes the realistic representation of the script in performance. The dilemma in this case implies the fact that Beckett calls into question the way that regards the performance as the body of the script,

\(^7\) Beckett requires Clov to act in a rapid and repeatable speed, which puts the scene of pause into a sharp contrast to the sounds of the rapidly tramping steps for the actor/spectator.
which is based on “Cartesian psychological frames and quantified sense of time, space, and perspective, as well as its dependence on causality” (Michael Heuval 73). Performance is not to represent the reality of the script envisioned by the playwright, but rather, it is the locus in which the sovereignty of the playwright confronts that of the director.

Beckett’s performance simultaneously returns to and frees itself from the script. Why is Beckett’s attitude to his script different from these two aspects, namely, the stage design and the actor? According to Gontarski, Beckett’s insistence on the stage directions is “due in part to Beckett’s continued work on the central visual imagery” of his play (142). What kind of imagery does Beckett picture in his mind? In the following section, we will examine Beckett’s aesthetic idea with which he envisages the design of the stage space that presents his physical theatricality.

An Expression of “There Is Nothing to Express”

If for Beckett theatre is a place where he can control a small group of people on the stage under a certain light, the theatrical space functions as a limitation or a finite that makes the matter of representation easier in his creative realm. From prose to play, Beckett escapes from the torment of the non-expressible abstract idea (the prose writing as a process of self-cancellation towards the state of no “I,” no “have,” even no “being” [Brater 1989, 55] ) as he is committed to the domain of performance. It seems that “the finite boundaries of a stage” (Enoch Brater 85) functions as an alternative medium for expression and enables Beckett to win a temporary reprieve from the exhaustion of his creative power.

What does Beckett discover in the performance that revivifies his creative energy? In the performance there lie the possibilities for Beckett to concretize his mental landscape and that at the same time sustains the sense of subjectivity in the process of creation. Hence the fact that he insists on the stage directions shows his intention to express something that is unable
to be represented (in the prose writing). That is, Beckett’s expression in performance already presupposes that there is nothing to express, or precisely speaking, there is nothing able to be represented. Thus what Beckett says of his aesthetic expression is worthy of the citation as follows,

The expression that there is nothing to express, nothing with which to express, nothing from which to express, no power to express, no desire to express, together with the obligation to express. (qtd. in Gerry McCarthy 253)

As cited above, the “nothing”8 predestines Beckett’s idea of expression. Beckett has no power to express because nothing exceeds his knowledge. He has no desire to express because what he desires is not a lack that needs to be fulfilled, so the desired disables him from obtaining a sense of satisfaction from which the wish of desire and the desired correspondingly fit into each other. Since the desiring subject does not feel satiated with the desired, what is the relation between the desiring and the desired? From Beckett’s perspective, it is the relation of “obligation” that binds him and nothing.

The obligatory relation can be accounted for from two aspects. On the one hand, in the grammatical statement, nothing is something with which and from which Beckett expresses. In other words, nothing serves as a creative source of Beckett’s artistic expression. And it is via the expression of nothing that Beckett carries out an experiment on the theatrical performance. As a desiring subject, Beckett desires nothing that is the irrepresentable desired. On the other hand, because nothing overpowers the desiring subject’s intentionality, it takes command of the subject and calls for his response. Hence in performance Beckett is obligated to respond to the nothing, or the Other (in Levinas’s sense, it refers to the desired that is invisible and non-conceptual), and is immersed in the relation that the desiring subject is

8 Hereafter in this chapter, nothing in italics refers to the “nothing” mentioned in the citation above.
suffering and even dying for the Other.  

In addition, we must go further to discuss another aspect of nothing. That is, nothing not only serves as the Other desired by Beckett, but also functions as a threat imposed on him. What kind of threat is aroused by nothing? When Beckett turns to commit himself to the theatre, it is the stage space that, as a finite terrain, attracts his attention and prevents him from the solipsism of self-centered identification (and thus of self-destruction) in the process of prose writing. He admits that in the theatre the concrete space and the tactile people, both granting him a sense of “undeniable presence” (Steven Connor 1992, 7), relieve him from the incapability of self-expression. Hence we see that the paralyzed creativity that results in Beckett’s self-abnegation makes nothing horrible because it is the sense of “being buried alive” symbolically (qtd. in Didier Franck 17) that nothing brings forth. In this case, nothing does not only enact like non-being (which may revoke the subject’s anguish of being a dead will by the possibility of total annihilation), but points to a state that each individual is leveled down to be a dead will so that it is impossible for the subject to express himself. In order to explicate the horror of nothing, it is useful to turn to Levinas’s notion of the “there is,” which gives an insight for us to envisage the force of totality more deeply.

In Levinas’s viewpoint, the “there is” is that which is impersonal as well as anonymous, in which things and persons return to the state of nothingness. Since the “there is” is a nocturnal space over which the darkness prevails, things or persons are dissolved into the darkness and are negated to be a density of structure-less-ness without direction or meaning. Hence in the “there is,” the nothingness is not pure nothingness, but a plenum full of

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9 Gontarski observes that Beckett as a director makes efforts “to collaborate with the author of the texts [his published plays]” and regards the directorial self as “his ‘other’” in the process of doing a performance. Because Beckett finds that the production on the stage is not anything like a “‘definitive’ text,” he can never accomplish his creative process until his physical death (135, 144). In his creative process Beckett is always desiring and dying for the performance which is in relation to the infinite, namely, the Other.

10 From Levinas’s point of view, the self identification is an announcement of the self as a dead will.

11 Beckett says that The Unnamable (one of his novels) has finished him or expressed his finishedness (Brater 55).
indeterminateness, senselessness and thus terrifying chaos (Alphonso Lingis 222-23). In other words, in the darkness there are points everywhere which divert and disconcert the self’s intentionality. Thus it seems that the darkness watches the self and submerges its individual will. Most prominently, since the self is unable to apply its intentionality to comprehend things around (actually the self is “steeped in” the “there is” [LR 29]), it is impossible for the self to draw up a separate line between it and the other. In this way, the self loses his identity and sovereignty. To sum up, the “there is” is a kind of existence without existent, and thus is also named as Being, which refers to “being in general” that negates the individuality of each being. Hence the “there is” is a kind of totality in which each individual is leveled down and in a sense is dead. Although there are things or persons in the darkness, it is too opaque to see them appear. The “there is” is therefore a presence of nothingness, not because there is nothing but because nothing could be brought to light.

The self has to separate from itself in order to reserve a distance from the other things, so that it can enjoy the other things by objectifying or representing them. Vision (together with the notion of light that gives luminosity of things in the darkness) and touch are the most significant human senses because via their contacts with the world can most of the self’s experiences be constituted. Yet Levinas points out that this kind of self-enjoyment does not break with the totalizing system in which the self exists. Because the self views, comprehends, and handles the other things as parts of the worldly universal panorama, he cannot transcend the horizon of the mundane world, namely, the function of the totalizing system (Peperzak 163). That is, the self is confined to itself in the enjoyment and thus cannot set himself off against the totality. In this sense, the enjoyment contributes to a self-illusion, a self-consciousness of abstraction that constitutes a “subordinate reality” (Peperzak 166) by objectification or representation. This kind of self lays claim on its autonomous freedom, and appropriates the worldly things in a self-sufficient way. In this case, the relation between the
self and the other is a correlation that the self absorbs the other into its horizon of knowledge and integrates the other to be part of his whole (identity). Thus the self is left alone with itself. It is determined by being “immersed in the empirical world” (TO 74). And “through its identification the existent is already closed up upon itself; it is […] a solitude” (TO 52). That is, by self-identification the self is enchained to itself and is alone as well as definitive.

Even though the enjoyment is “the beginning of meaning” (through vision and grasping the meaning reveals itself, i.e., through them the self acquires the knowledge that makes the others representational and sensible), it does not “abolish […] the quasi-nothingness [the “there is”] that is the condition of all thingness” (Peperzak 163). In enjoying things the self embarks on a process of self-identification. Each self, as being produced in the self-separation from Being, is “the lag behind itself [the self] recaptured by itself” (Franck 22). The I in its self-identification reasserts the return to, as Levinas says, “the I [which is] already bound to itself, already folded back onto a self” (qtd. in Franck 22). As a result, the self cannot completely sever itself from Being because it is from its charge over Being that the self is initiated and is constituted. Consequently the self is still definitive though it refuses to be. The self in enjoying things is reabsorbed by the totality (the state of Being). The relation between the self and the other is formulated through the worldly principles and thus is reduced to a finite and symmetrical correlation.

So “[w]hat is denied is the independence [the self-enjoyment] of the existents” (Theodore De Boer 90) because the dependence (the self is at any time, even in enjoyment, threatened to be subsumed by Being, or totality) is always required. At this point, Levinas argues that the body that inhabits the empirical world and enjoys the worldly things serves as base for the emergence of the self. Then he continues to argue that the body does not only serve as the incarnation of thought or the fulfillment of the self’s appropriation of the other things, but also serves as the possibility of being corrupted or enslaved. Thus the
self-enjoyment does not prove to be a radical liberation from the encompassing power of the
“there is.” Or to speak specifically, being detached from the “there is,’ the existent (the self) is
enchained to himself, and thus definitely alone. The freedom obtained by being detached
from the other things, namely, by being able to enjoy things, is a “conditioned freedom”
(Franck 23).

As a result, nothing includes the domain of the “there is” and that of the Other. The
obligation to nothing opens Beckett’s artistic expression onto the infinity in desire and at the
same time threatens to subdue Beckett to a dead will. The horror of nothing furthermore
forces Beckett to turn from the solipsistic illusion of prose writing to the physicalness of the
theatrical performance. The transition from prose to play parallels the departure from Being
(wherein nothingness negates the individuality) to being (which is a state that the self,
through the body as a sentient, takes part in the empirical world). To take the departure the
first step is to enjoy the others through the body, a visible and tactile entity. Similarly, it is
necessary for Beckett to search for a practical and concrete medium through which he can
express himself. Moreover, in Levinas’s viewpoint, the body simultaneously appropriates the
others and is expropriated, and thus the body manifests itself as a mode of existence which
goes beyond the thematization of intentionality. Likewise, for Beckett refutes the
conventional theatre that treats the relation between the script and the performance as the
soul/body binary, his performance is not only the incarnation or body of the script. Given
Levinas’s notion of body, Beckett’s performance is a “body” that simultaneously serves to
fulfill his intention of expressing nothing and to frustrate his intention. The performance
might be a frustrating failure because there are possibilities that the performance falls
enslaved or manipulated by nothing that is beyond comprehension and thus beyond control.
Therefore while Beckett reserves a distance from the prose writing, he gets a temporary
reprieve from self-abnegation and has a resurrection of his selfhood. In order to avoid the
dead-end of the self-identification (he does not want to write prose then), he commits himself to the theatre. The commitment to the theatre unfurls the possibility for him to desire the Other and his self can be unremittingly reborn, shunning the destine to become a dead will. Yet at the same time the theatre (or the performance) serves as the Other that might overpower Beckett’s subjectivity and thus might frustrate him again. For “the infinite overflows the thought that thinks it,” “the idea of infinite is not a concept, and the infinite is not an object” (Theodore De Boer 94). According to Levinas, that the Other resists the self’s comprehending capability indicates that he calls into question the self’s freedom in the joyous existence. In this sense Beckett’s turning from being a novelist to a playwright is an arduous attempt that he ventures into placing his subjective sovereignty into a different experiment. Likewise his turning from being a playwright to a director is also an adventure that, being analogous to the relation stated in the above case, challenges his subjective freedom of self-complacency.

Therefore for Beckett the performance is not only a medium of artistic expression. The relation between Beckett and his performance should be considered an encounter of the self and the Other in theatre as well as in life. Given this perspective, Beckett’s refusal to give interpretation or to be interpreted\(^\text{12}\) can be accounted for as a “refusal of the definitive” (Franck 23). Any hermeneutical approach, no matter it is a moral, social or political way, runs the risk of reducing the otherness of his performance. Hence every encapsulating interpretation is the reduction to the totality. For Beckett each performance deserves a new birth. For the director, the actor, and the spectator the performance offers a possibility for them to be in relation to the Other and thus to avoid the self-identification. In Beckett’s performance the director/actor/spectator is bereft of his self-claim, i.e., his subjectivity

\(^{12}\) In a letter to Alan Schneider he writes: “[…]when it [the performance of Endgame] comes to journalists I feel the only line is to refuse to be involved in exegesis of any kind. And to insist on the extreme simplicity of dramatic situation and issue. If that’s not enough for them, and it obviously isn’t, it’s plenty for us, and we have no elucidations to offer of mysteries that are all of their making” (Disjecta 109).
grounded on the self-enjoyment as an absolute freedom, either that in the empirical world (the totality) or that in the “remembrance,” the memory. This kind of subjectivity is put into question. The director/actor/spectator cannot accumulate the performing experiences with which he can become experienced, because the Other he encounters is not in a quantitative sense; rather, the more times he gets involved in the performance the more insatiable he feels about it. Like Levinas, Beckett also “nourishes the self by its own hunger” (Boer 93). In this way each performance is individualized and unique.

Furthermore, as noted, the self takes charge of Being and always faces the destiny of death when he feels satisfied with the enjoyment or refutes the calling from the Other. By encountering the Other the self henceforth departs from his obsolete self without return and thus in the meantime announces his own death and celebrates his resurrection. For the director, the actor and the spectator each performance simultaneously mourns for the past one and welcomes the present even the future one. In each performance they are inhibited to appropriate or remember the previous performing experience in order not to fall victim to the totalizing system. Just like Levinas says: “The absolutely new is the Other” (TI 219). As a result, each performance serves as a discontinuity from the others and provides a renewed experience. Thus what Beckett shows in his aesthetic attitude is not a self-centered love that satisfies himself with an aesthetic ecstasy but rather a commitment with a gratuitous desire to the Other, the infinity.

Beckett’s Theatrical Reality: the Stage Design and the Darkness

In this section I continue to argue that Beckett presents a reality in the theatre that is not the reality of Being (the totality, the universal rules, the convention, etc.). Rather he presents

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13 According to Levinas, he says that “in ecstasies the subject is absorbed in the object and recovers itself in its unity” (TO 41). In this way the otherness of each other disappears, no matter it is the otherness of the subject or that of the other (ibid.). From this perspective, Levinas does not regard the subject in ecstasy as a transcendence from itself. The relation between the self and the other should be inassimilable and asymmetrical.
the reality of the theatrical experience that is based on the relation of the self and the Other, or “the totality and the infinity” (which is the name of one of Levinas’s works). I will account for my argument by examining the relation between the stage design and the darkness, and that between the darkness and the actor/spectator in Beckett’s theatre. In addition, some references to Endgame will serve as more clarifying instances.

As noted, the “there is” is a nocturnal space wherein nothingness subdues the individuality and reduces the otherness of the existent. The “there is” is tantamount to the totality, or Presence. The self is produced in its self-separation, with which the self takes part in the empirical world through its body. By means of enjoying the other things, the self is independent from the other things since it can detach itself from them. This independence contributes not only to a self-autonomy but also to a self-illusion. This kind of self is “non-recognized,” just “the very myth of the I” (TI 61). The independence brings forth a freedom that is conditioned by its taking charge of the “there is.” Therefore the self-complacency only leads to an evanescent severance from Being because for the self, as Levinas says, “the point of departure” is “the point of arrival” (qtd. in Franck 22). The self is definitive since it is the captive of itself. Yet, the independence of the self serves as base for the encounter of the Other, or the infinite. The self does not “rest on the other in complete security” (TI 60). That is, there is not a union between the self and the Other because their relation “does not issue in totality” (ibid.). Hence the Other does not annul the independence of the self, but maintains it and in the meantime questions, criticizes and judges it. Since the Other is beyond the power of totalitarianism and is incalculable as well as unpredictable, the relation between the totality and the Other is of an asymmetrical structure. That is, there is a disproportion between the infinite (the desired) and the conceptualization of the infinite (which is what the desiring subject cannot help but do). According to Levinas, this relation of the self to the Other based on the asymmetrical structure contributes to the primary reality
between humans that the otherness of one another will not be reduced. He remarks: “All
knowing qua intentionality already presupposes the idea of infinity, which is preeminently
nonadequation” (TI 27). To put it in another way, the primary reality indicates that the
inadequate relation of the self to the absolute otherness is presupposed for the objectifying
actions such as representation, thematization, or conceptualization. Given this perspective,
the reality of our daily life is only a “subordinate reality” that comes into being in the second
place and is constituted by intentionality as a self-illusion (Peperzak 166). If we follow
Levinas’s theoretical route, perhaps we are able to have a primary relation with the other that
goes back to the very beginning: a relation of desire, not of need or satisfaction.

As observed, what Beckett concerns is not doing violence on the actor, the spectator,
even himself as a creator, with aesthetic ecstasy. His performance serves to free him from the
“there is.” But since his performance presupposes nothing, it is conditioned by taking charge
of Being. We have noted that nothing for Beckett functions in two ways: the calling of the
infinite and the terror of Being. While transporting Beckett’s artistic idea to the level of his
stage design in the theatre, we can see that the stage design is attuned to his “central visual
image”—a mind-reflecting image of nothing itself. On the one hand, he presents nothing on
the stage by creating a nebulous environment. Nothing is not pure nothingness. It is a state
that something is there but is not allowed to appear or is merely allowed to appear vaguely.
Things are threatened to be devoured. In the ambience of totalitarianism, the self emerges to
have consciousness in order to avoid the darkness, “the empire of sameness” (Colin Davis
40). On the other hand, nothing is invisible as well as intangible and can only be accounted
for as the Other. Nothing entails the preservation of both the self and the Other—a mode of
being that the subject exists by having charge of Being and in relation to the Other. That is,
nothing is the relation of the self and the Other, the primary and fundamental relation
between humans.
Inasmuch as *nothing* is the thing that Beckett is obligated to express, he desires to show the primary reality based on the primary relation. Since *nothing* includes the desire for the Other and the terror of Being, i.e., the self is unable to have a self-complacency or an absolute independence but must encounter with the Other, how does he present the “primary reality” in practice? We should first pay attention to the characteristics of his stage design in order to obtain a concrete exemplar. Herein I draw on the stage design of *Endgame* as an instance for its style most accords to Beckett’s visualized expression of his mind vision of the stage space. Grounded on the “intense visualization,” says Beckett, that he is “trying to see” (qtd. in Cohn 234), we can further explore the relation between the actor/character and the actor/spectator in the hope to see to what extent Beckett’s performance implements the primary reality in the theatre.

Beckett once said that “Any production of *Endgame* which ignores my stage direction is completely unacceptable to me. My play requires an empty room and two small windows” (qtd. in Kalb 79). In another case, he indicates that *Endgame* is as “dark as ink” (Worth 43). Here we see two characteristics of Beckett’s stage design. One tells about that the stage space is almost laid bare, and the other indicates Beckett’s emphasis on the image of darkness as an elemental phenomenon of the stage space. His world is unique for its nearly bare stage space under the dim light in the dark.

*Endgame* is characteristic of the darkness as an important element in performance. Since darkness is emblematic of the theatre, in many performances (even not directed by Beckett in person) the directors are alert to use the weak light which is rigidly restricted and not leisurely dispersed on the stage. For instance, in Herbert Blau’s performance, the light is only dropped on three spots on the stage space: one is on the wheelchair, in which Hamm has a

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14 *Endgame* is the one that Beckett “dislike[s] the least” in his plays. As Brater says: “For in this work the mise-en-scene is more strictly determined to take command of ‘the greater smallness’ that has always been a playwright’s interpretive space, the finite boundaries of a stage” (85).

15 Beckett says that theatre is “its own darkness” (qtd in Gussow 32).
seat, another is on Clov who initially stands on the verge of the stage before the play starts, and still another is on the trash bins—the rest of the stage space is immersed in darkness.

In this way, darkness is not only a “theatrical blackout,” but also “the most important single element of the image;” thus the actor and the spectator are put in the “floating yet fixed” blackness, which is “present in a manner of…nightmares” (Xerxes Mehta 170). Hence darkness becomes a form of disillusion, deprives the actor and the spectator of their consciousness and “cancel[s] the group existence of theatre” (Mehta 170). Each individual is positioned alone from one another. This scenic image thus imposes the threat upon the actor as well as the spectator and makes them in the condition of being mentally solitary.

In such a nebulous phenomenon everything is indefinable and indeterminate (both for the actor and the spectator). Beckett constantly avoids being a spokesman of any stabilized social rules. Enhancing the position of darkness to the level of becoming the most prominent image on the stage, he seeks to make invalid the signifying system or a clear inference to the external world. The expression of darkness is accompanied with Beckett’s theatrical technique of minimalism that is to make the stage decors as sparse as possible. But only sparseness and darkness are insufficient to express Beckett’s idea of nothing, the stage space has to be inconceivable and non-conceptualized lest it should be simply reduced to a certain meaning for the self-centered domain. Thus Beckett avoids “references to time and place” and lets go of the “authorial power and interpretive omnipotence over a solid, given reality”.

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16 Heuval points out that because Beckett refutes the “classic realism” (3) and thus he draws on the expression of a bare and dark stage space. The classic realism emphasizes its illusionism, which is constructed by the universal reality and is in conformity to “prevailing discourses and reading strategies” (ibid.). The specific dominant discourse in the classic realism often diverts the spectators’ viewpoints from differences to consensus, to which men live a re-made existence. The signifying system is so overarching that each individual would be represented in the impersonal “Presence” (4-5).

In addition, Michael Worton also observes that Beckett dares to question the conventional structure and reasserts that the play is to “offer a mimesis or representation of reality that recognizes and inscribes the formlessness of existence without attempting to make it ‘fit’ any model” (74). This indicates that the style of representation that acknowledges the “formlessness” in reality is a mode named as “new realism” (Heuval 16), in which various realities are accommodated. Heuval thinks that diverse realities in form of “expressionism” or “self-conscious theatricality” can help to present the sense of contradiction “that informs contemporary experience” (ibid.). New realism, in a sense, becomes a mode of performance that strides between modernism
By doing this he creates the non-identifiable stage space, which is of help for him to transcend the judgment of the established convention. In other words, since a realistic stage design conditions the performance to a conterminous event, Beckett devalues the straightforwardness of full representation in the theatre in order to search for a “new mode of reality” (Cohn 3). Any chronological structure is deconstructed in the primitive scene of darkness.

Beckett puts the actor and the spectator in the primitive scene of darkness that exists before consciousness\(^{17}\) (the actor and spectator are deprived of consciousness). In the stage space the reality is not the “subordinate reality” constituted by intentional objectification of things. On the contrary, the stage space is the “primary reality” that is presupposed for the “subordinate reality.” For Beckett the theatrical reality is the primary reality constituted by the primary relation of the self and the Other. I will further account for the primary reality by examining the function of the stage decors. Then we can look into the theatricality (which is disclosed through the design of the stage space) in the theatre in order to see the interaction between the primary reality and the subordinate one.

The number of décors on stage is sparse and must be designed to the most specific degree. They are designed in a non-referential realm. Thus they don’t provide any clue for the actor or the spectator to apprehend “what’s happening” (E 17) on the stage, but are embedded in the darkness to confuse people’s consciousness. The decors render their effect without recourse to their ordinary use. For instance, in *Endgame*, the wheels of the chair are not movable, even after they are oiled (the action of oiling proves to be just an unnecessary trifle); the telescope is used for watching “nothing” outside; Hamm’s glasses are a redundant for a blind man; the sand for the couple’s torsos is of no matter; the only exit on the stage, postmodernism, because it blends “the qualities of [classic] realism with more adventurous styles” (ibid.). By doing this, Beckett’s play is flexible and able to “voice …uncertainty, and alienation” (Heuval 15). Both Worton and Heuval regard Beckett’s play as a mode that can “accommodate the mess” (this is Beckett’s wordings, qtd. in Heuval 15), or in Dearlove’s phrase, “accommodate the chaos” (9).

according to Beckett, is the only one door for Clov to head for his kitchen, and therefore functions not as an exit but as an entry into another “room,” “cage” or “cell”—these spaces are by definition similar in their connotation of confinement. The fake dog is reified as a paralyzed listener, confounded and dumb, unable to make any response. In this kind of theatre, there are shapes of the objects without internal meanings (because each object is disjunctive from the established and definite interpretation) for the actor and the spectator who are deprived of their intentionality in the dark.

In addition, most of the time the decors are dissolved into the darkness, so their disappearance or vague appearance disables the actor and the spectator from seeing clearly. It is as if the actor/spectator were viewing nothing. Therefore the most impressive image of the stage space is the darkness, the emptiness, and the nothingness. The performance is almost the one that makes the absence presentable. The actor/spectator receives nothing, possesses nothing, and even the luminosity of the actor on the stage is compressed by the darkness into the nothingness, the totality.

The sense of void on the stage space makes the actor and the spectator unconsciously focus their attention on the stage as such. Since Beckett’s stage design does not refer to any representational epoch, it should not be considered a mirror that reflects life. So the stage space is almost a well-nigh presentation of itself. For Beckett, this kind of (re)presentation of the stage space, which tends to reach the proximity of the actual stage space, pinpoints the fake reality of the theatre (that advocates the function of theatre to represent the reality). By

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18 Here *Endgame* is taken as example for the analysis of the theatricality of the stage space. Hugh Kenner suggests that the stage space of *Endgame* is the set as the actual stage space before the spectator, and “the set does not represent” (Kenner 121). Steven Connor further asserts that although the stage space is almost a presentation itself, it “still requires representation of some kind” because it is an imaginary space different from the actual stage space in reality that people rehearse (Connor 142). According to Connor, the stage space is irreducible only if it ceases to be itself. At this point, Jonathan Kalb also comments that Beckett “really represents a third category...because of the way he renders the presentational and representational indistinguishable” (Kalb 38).
doing this the performance emphasizes the interaction\(^{19}\) between the actor and the spectator instead of appealing to the emotional charge of the actor/spectator. In this way Beckett intends to blur the line that separates the reality/theatre\(^{20}\), and life/performance. As noted in my previous section, Beckett revivifies his creative energy as he is committed to performance because the performance is the infinity to which the self searches for a new birth. Since the boundary of the reality and the theatre is obscure, the primary reality, i.e., the relation of the self and the Other shown in the stage space, can be transported to the domain of the reality. In this way, the primary reality in Beckett’s theatre places an opposition to our reality (which is “subordinate reality” constituted by objectification), and awakens the actor and the spectator to recognize the primary relation. Furthermore, because the primary reality is not based on the intentional thematization or objectification, Beckett does not intend to build up another self-centered territory in order to subvert the subordinate reality. His performance is to open the dimension of the infinity which gives the finite reality a transworldly perspective.

For Beckett, performance that is a “theatrical event” (Xerxes Mehta 182) takes place as it departs from the finite reality to the infinite performing domain. Beckett extends the function of the stage space to be an irreducible medium by relating it to the finite reality as well as to the infinite performance. In this sense, the stage reality is the primary reality and the stage time is the time in relation to the infinity, the Other. Hence in each performance the director, the actor and the spectator are obligated to respond to the Other in order to reconfirm their subjectivity, in this case, not the one of self-reliance. To explicate further, while being involved in the performance, the subject in the theatre claims its existence first by feeling that

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\(^{19}\) Since things are almost dissolved in the darkness, the spectator sees nothing on the stage space, but the nothingness is not pure nothing. This is the primordial phenomenon of the reality of the stage space which Beckett wants to introduce to the audience, instead of showing them the light. In the darkness the dim light appears not for the audience to view the performance comfortably, but to remind them that they should be alert to the perilous condition of the actor’s existence on the stage space, because the darkness prevailing over the stage space seems to be devouring the actor at any time.

\(^{20}\) The reality mentioned in this paragraph refers to our daily life.
he is there alone and exposed. He feels a sense of horror aroused from the darkness that seems to be devouring him. This kind of existence, though being alone, frees the subject from the chaotic disorientations of the darkness. However, the sense of self-boredom also frightens him. Only when he encounters the Other can he obtain the meaning of existence and reclaim his subjectivity that depends on the Other. Although the encounter with the Other does not guarantee a pleasurable outcome, it is the ultimate authority that the self can rely on. Furthermore, for the Other does not exist in the horizon of the self’s knowledge, it is unaccountable in the self’s whole life. In this sense, the Other and death are located in the same dimension. Is not the desire for the Other analogous to the desire for death? “Yes” could be Beckett’s answer. It is a death wish for rebirth, rather. We have seen in Beckett the fervent penchant for the unknowable desired. Likewise, in his performance the actor and the spectator are obligated to face the nothing—in the stage time they are dying for the Other.

The nebulous phenomenon is the “infinite emptiness” (E 28), the “nightmare” (Mehta 171), or “a kind of lumpish materiality of nonobjective forms” (Herbert Blau 61) that makes the actors and the decors indiscernible and creates a sense of indeterminacy.21 Because in the indeterminacy the actor/spectator makes himself present in front of the Other, he is not free to refute the imposition of the Other. The Other always outwits the actor/spectator, so that it cannot be absorbed into “the empire of sameness” (Davis 40). Even though the Other exists prior to the self’s consciousness, already grounding a relation to the self, he ‘invites’ (TI 218) the self rather than coerces him into making a response. The Other is not a totalizing violence that assimilates the self into his domain in the hope of “offsetting the shock the alterity

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21 About the indeterminacy of the darkness, James Knowlson and Katharine Worth provide their insightful observations. Knowlson states: “[A]ll Beckett’s people [Beckett himself included?] are in the most profound sense, exiles, excluded from some inner reality of the self, which, if it exists at all…that it should, would lie outside the dimensions of time and space…Darkness is then understandably to be feared as well as earnestly desired” (qtd. in David Pattie 142, italics added). Or like Worth suggests: “The enveloping dark […] is a disturbing force in Beckett’s theatre, though there are many hints that it could be the source of a relief or creative renewal so deep that it would constitute a new dimension” (44). From their observations, the darkness serves as an enigmatic source that not only brings forth desire but also evokes dread.
"otherness)" (Davis 40). So the actor/self dislodges from the fixated position with himself, but does not become only a flowing object immersed in the darkness. That is, the Other exists and props up the self’s subjectivity by offering an account for the self (who is in the independent existence) that he has been involved in the primary relation. Thus the sense of indeterminacy, though it calls forth terror, also confirms the “unicity” (TI 219) of the self-separation from Being (totality), sustaining the self’s subjectivity.

Hence in performing the darkness, Beckett, with desire as much as with terror, puts the actor, the spectator, or even himself into the experiment. Such an experiment is a terrifying journey that the actor, the spectator, and Beckett himself are not absolutely free in self-enjoyment, but are relevantly free to respond to the Other, no matter to what extent. In opposition to the absolute freedom, the freedom that depends on the Other can absolve the self from itself, and thus enable him to be a free agent as such. In this sense, Beckett’s performance grants the actor/spectator the subjective freedom that is not limited by the physical resistance or by the intellectual limit (which might happen to the actor/spectator; for instance, they are perplexed by the enigmatic character or the unintelligible language), but frees the self radically from Being.

To speak further, that the self independence is produced in the self-separation is possible only because the Other is there. Since the Other is irreconcilable to the self-centered terrain, the relation between the self and the Other emerges as a disruption that cannot be eliminated or it causes a disproportion that cannot be offset, and thus makes possible the self-separation. Although the freedom of enjoying things comes into being as the self-separation occurs, it is made possible only if the Other also exists and serves as the impossibility of being mastered by the self so that the freedom can be free (from Being). Hence the subjective freedom is

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22 The physical limitation always happens to Beckettian actors. For example, in Endgame the actors have to play by being handicapped, by making mechanical action, or by being restricted in the trash can. As observed, the physical restriction is not to limit the actor’s freedom (I will later expound the actor’s freedom in the following sections).
allowed to extend and elongate by depending on the Other as the unknowable and the unknown. In Levinas’s sense, the subjectivity is able to proliferate as that in pluralism. The Other “defines the entire domain that I [the self] inhabit” (Davis 54). That is, the Other demands stringently on the self, not in the way as a conquering violence, but opens a space beyond the totality, and the definition (or judgment) by the Other is that the self is free without being defined.

Nevertheless, the self does not encounter the Other in peace. There always exists a sense of resistance between the self and the Other. The resistance does occur outside of the human experiences (the totality) and it is a kind of limit that “does not separate but connects [sic] ” (Boer 93, italics added). It causes the fissure in the totality yet still maintains outside of the totality. The Other makes possible the self independence or the self’s absolute freedom and at the same time calls it into question. Therefore Beckett, once claiming that he wants to write a play that is without the spectators (NC 138), does not mean to arbitrarily sunder his play from them (the public eye). On the contrary, he tends to build up “a relation without relation” (TI 80) with the spectators, which does not totalize their individuality (their free will) and at the same time connects with them from the domain beyond the totality, the dimension of the Other. Likewise, the “relation without relation” is what Beckett requires the actor by “playing without playing.”

Thus Beckett’s performance taken with threatening uncertainty will shatter the actor’s and the spectator’s expectation of acting/viewing experience and force them to encounter the infinite. The actor and the spectator desire for acting/viewing even in the dark. But when the action of acting and viewing are more intense, they find that they are less satisfied because their intention cannot be realized. In the dark they are not present to what they desire, because the action of acting/viewing in this case is not a process of procuring a knowable object. We

23 In Levinas’s sense, peace is the dialectical counterpart of war (which explicates the totalizing force by assimilating and conquering the other), and thus is still a notion in the ideology of totalitarianism.
have seen that the world for the actor and the spectator is fraught with objects that are not offered to their intentionality or possession. In the following sections I will examine the actor’s performing skill and the interaction between the actor and the spectator in the hope of further exploring the dimension of the unknown in Beckett’s theatre.

Actor and Darkness

As noted, we see that the actor is alienated from the character and is under the threat of being unable to play (in this way he is dead on the stage). Now the question that deserves our inquiry is what happens in the actor’s playing process when he is required not to play. To what extent is this requirement meaningful to the actor?

We have seen that the darkness in Beckett’s play brings forth the sense of desire and fear for the actor. The darkness in theater prevents an actor from clearly viewing the other actors and decors on the stage, encompasses all the actors and makes each of them marooned on his own spot. The light that is dropped on the actor is to remind him that he is there on the stage—just like what Robbe-Grillet remarks that a state of being is always “irremediably present” (qtd. in Kalb 47), instead of serving to make visible the other actors or objects.

Assuming a place on the stage, the actor is isolated in the formless darkness wherein the signifier dislodges from the signified which is characteristic of Beckett’s performance. In Beckett’s performance it is the unique interactions between actor/character and actor/spectator that are worthy of our discussion. Because there is not a definable figure for the actor to imitate and not a peculiar “truth” lying behind or imposing on the actor (Kalb 146), the actor faces expulsion from the character. As a result, the actor oscillates in the dilemma between the incapability of identification and the obligation to play on the stage without any recourse to the performing technique that is familiarly witnessed in the conventional theatre.
Actor and Character

In Beckett’s theatre the actor is unable to incarnate or identify himself with the character, so what is the relation between them? The incommensurability between the actor and the character signals the impossibility for the former to objectify the latter. In a sense the character enacts like a “foreign will”\textsuperscript{24} that is free from the actor’s control. Yet on the other hand the actor is not allowed to depart from the character because the performance on the stage is by nature a representation even to the least degree, and so the actor cannot just present himself as an actor qua actor. Hence the relation between the actor and the character is radically alien and mutually reliant. Apart from being isolated from the other actors by the darkness, most of the time the actor is placed alone on the stage and is accompanied with the threatening darkness as well as with a sense of uncertainty aroused by the unverified character. The threat of the darkness evokes the fear of being flung into the sheer reality and thus propels the actor to continue playing even though he is forbidden to do it. Inasmuch as the validity of language is degraded, the way to play by not playing focuses its attention on the expression of physicalness in Beckett’s performance.\textsuperscript{25}

The notion of physicalness concerns two aspects about the actor’s conditions: one points to his concrete feeling of being there on the stage and the other refers to the actor’s corporeal perception. Concerning the first aspect, we see that the actor is knotted to the stage and is chained to himself because it is difficult for him to define or keep a distance from the other objects. The actor in this case is the captive of himself so that he is unable to be absolved from the state of being solitary and exists with the impossibility of withdrawing himself back from the approach of the dead end of performance. In performance what the actor initially

\textsuperscript{24} According to Levinas, “the foreign will” refers to the invisible, unpredictable and incalculable Other (\textit{TI} 230).

\textsuperscript{25} Roby Cohn mentions that as Beckett directs \textit{Endgame}, he concerns more about “the physical rather than the metaphysical” (238). JoAnne Akalaitis pinpoints that when he directs \textit{Endgame}, he is “very interested in the physicalness of it” (Akalaitis 139). Gerry McCarthy also stresses on the discussion about the actor’s body in Beckett’s plays (McCarthy 257-59).
encounters is the situation wherein he is kept alone on the stage, obligated to perform and circumscribed by the surrounding darkness. About the second aspect, the body makes possible the resolution for the actor to release himself from the state of being alone because there is “somebody who’s spiraling inward”26 (qtd. in Kalb 147) the actor’s body who makes him concentrate on the bodily perception or on the “shape of the body.”

Thus the actor’s body changes to be an “agent”27 whereby the actor and the character confront each other. The fact that the character is unverifiable emphasizes the incapability of fabricating an illusionism about the character’s subjectivity. Hence the character enacts like a foreign will to which the actor is subjugated and obligated due to his being on the stage in performance. In this way, what the actor plays is neither the character nor the actor qua actor, but is an expression of the relation with the character as an irreducible otherness to the actor. Therefore the movement of playing is “a playing qua playing,” and would not be satisfied because it is a process as a desire in relation to the unknowable character, i.e., an impalpable other. In this way, the actor is unable to be a self-assured subject due to the annulment of his intentionality and is simultaneously able to get rid of being fixated alone on the stage because he ventures on the radical transcendence from himself to the otherness revealed by the character. In consequence, the actor does not exist self-reliantly but on the contrary with the character through his body. The actor oscillates in the dilemma that there is no access to understanding the character and there is no permission to recoil back to be himself. Yet the dilemma paradoxically gives the actor a finite freedom that releases him from being stuck in the stalemate of “not playing” by playing in relation to the non-representability of the character.

If for the actor the existence lies in the dilemma, then he is undoubtedly at risk of being

26 These are Billie Whitelaw’s wordings, which describe the intense force engendering inside from her body as a demanding requirement for her to play as it calls for.
27 Pierre Chabert describes that “the irreducibility of the body” in Beckettian stage “reminds us that it remains an agent of disclosure” (27), which tells a inadequate relationship between body and mind, and which the body is not regarded as an object being appropriated by a subject.
exposed to the emptiness on the stage\textsuperscript{28} because he is not allowed to recoil back behind the illusionism of the character or the protection of his self-sufficiency. The action of playing qua playing is a self-exposing rather than a self-preserving process. That is, the inadequacy between the character and the actor, though it stirs the perplexing question such as “who is on the stage?” makes possible the actor to delve into himself for his unknown part. So in the process of playing the actor’s subjectivity is produced neither from the actor qua actor nor from the character. His subjectivity owes its existence in relation to the unverified character, whose inner world the actor desires to apprehend without satisfaction. In addition, the actor’s subjectivity comes into being in the relation to the fear that takes place in the actor’s being alone with himself. In this way, the actor is no longer in the time of his solitary presence on the stage but is in the time in relation to the other person, in this case, the character. In other words the actor becomes a temporal being because he is (un)willing to forgo his narcissistically self-claimed sovereignty and to expose himself to the relation with the unknowable that entices the actor into denuding the unknown part of himself unconsciously.

In the performance unto death the actor goes on playing by desiring for the inimitable character for fear of being fixated alone on the stage and thus simultaneously by desiring an unknown self that keeps shunning the definition by the self who is limited in the reality. Such a desire is not an anticipation to integrate the desired, but is the one that forever unfolds the impossibility of the union between the desiring and the desired. Thus the actor has his freedom freer than that given in the reality (which accords to the well-institutionalized rules)

\textsuperscript{28} Kalb provides a valuable observation of the actor’s action of acting qua acting in the following paragraph:
Performers in the early works have found that they can progress only so far by imagining and imitating specific personalities; even after developing strong characterizations, they find themselves facing an emptiness on stage that is unbearable for them as actors. That emptiness is the essence of what Robbe-Grillet called their “irremediable presence,” also a primary experience for spectators, a condition of acting qua acting that makes it impossible for audiences to believe completely in either the action’s lifelikeness or its illusionism…….The general dilemma of the Beckett actor is subsumed in this problem of suspension: he need not convince anyone of particular truths (that his character or situation or real, for instance, or that we should accept this or that ideology), he need only keep on going, keep on acting, but with conviction and clown-like chrisma if he is not to lose his audience and with his raison d’être. (146, emphasis mine)
and in the conventional theatre (which advocates the representation of the character rather than the discovery of the actor’s unknown self).

**Actor, Body and Freedom**

So far we have seen that the actor is given the freedom, but the question we must ask is what kind of freedom it is and then we can further define the notion of freedom in Beckett’s performance in the hope of unraveling the enigma that the actor is asked not to play but needs to play nevertheless.

Freedom by definition is “the state of not being a prisoner or a slave” (*Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary*, 471). This kind of freedom is a freedom of consciousness or intentionality that serves to detach the self from the surrounding objects in order to constitute its sovereignty. Yet from Levinas’s viewpoint, this remains a “conditioned freedom” (Didier Frank 23) for it cannot spare the self from the fact that it is always with itself and is chained to “the solitude founded on the relation to Being” (ibid.). For Levinas, the freedom is not a spurious claim on the mastery over the others in order to maintain the self’s sovereignty—especially the self as a body-master; rather it should be a finite freedom that exists in the possibility that a body-master may turn into a body-slave. The finite freedom exerts its power in the dying process wherein the self suffers from sickness or pain before the approach of death.

In Beckett’s performance the actor’s body is mutilated or mired and thus the actor becomes his body’s captive rather than master. The actor is not allowed to divert his attention from the sickness or pain but he is destined to suffer it. Only if the actor chooses to suffer can he be aware of the imminence of the death moment in performance and be alert to the residual time left in the postponement of death. As noted in the previous section, the relation

of the self to the performance is that of the self to the Other. The stage time is the time that is
dying for the Other. This primary relation enables the actor’s action of playing qua playing to
take on meaning by making the actor the captive of the Other rather than that of himself. The
actor thus lives a mode of existence through the corporeal materiality of which the physical
decay or senescence signals the body’s being expropriated by the Other. In other words the
actor’s body is not an auxiliary apparatus applied to incarnate his thought and thus enables
him to announce his Cartesian subjectivity. The actor’s body exceeds the dichotomy of
subject/object as well as mind/body. Hence the body is itself a mode of existence of which
the physicalness is the fundamental essence of the actor’s subjectivity. The actor’s
subjectivity lies in the irremissible presence on the stage which proceeds on the action of
playing qua playing.

Hence the actor is paradoxically given the finite freedom due to his being prohibited to
identify with the character, no matter through the internally psychological attunement or
through the externally physical comportment. The actor owes his subjectivity to the action of
playing per se in which the relation with the unintelligible character makes open the actor to
achieve a self-discovery without the intentional accomplishment. Thus the actor’s physical
presentation on the stage reveals the time in relation to the other person. The actor proceeds
on playing in order to develop his subjectivity in relation to his unknown one. In performance
the actor thus becomes a free agent in opposition to the actor in the reality because he is in
relation to the infinity of his unknown self/other. At the same time the actor’s freedom is
conditioned not because he is unable to manipulate himself but because the more freedom he
owns the more he is subjugated to the unknowable which is beyond his intelligence.

As a result, Beckett’s notion about the actor’s performance accords to his theatrical
reality wherein the performance is the delaying time in face of its end, and in the process the
dread and the desire coexist for the actor. With the redefinition of freedom, Beckett makes the
actor free to play rather than restricts him.
Actor and Spectator

Beckett’s physical theatricality, expressed in the stage design and the actor’s performance, contributes to a unique mode of interaction between the actor and the spectator. The physical theatricality is disclosed in two ways. First, because the stage design is almost a presentation of the actual stage space and is devoid of the representation of the reality, the spectator is deposed of intentionality in this environment. The spectator’s mental condition is akin to that of the actor—a state of being alone in the darkness (the spectator is mentally solitary) and dissociating from his life experiences (he cannot comprehend what’s happening on the stage, either). Second, since the spectator, whose expecting empathy with the actor is gradually phased out, is deprived of the intellectual ability in the viewing process, the spectator is alien from the actor’s subjective implication so that he diverts his attention to the viewing process itself. Insofar as the action of “playing qua playing” manifests the impossibility for the actor of regarding “the (relative) otherness of worldly beings as objective, presentable, and thematizable things” (Peperzak159), the spectator cannot expect the actor to be “an interpreter or incarnation of surrogate emotion” (Richard Gilman 85); rather, the spectator is simply engaged in “the professional embodiment of an activity [the playing per se]” (ibid.). Since the actor is no longer a palpable subject on the stage, the spectator is incapable of imagining the actor as “true” or “artificial” (Gilman 84-85), and unable to discern between the actor qua actor or the character. In this sense, there is not a distinct line between life and theatre.

Since the line between life and theatre is obscure, the spectator is aware of the effect of meta-play, and feels himself “to be along with the ‘actor’” (UP 443)—to be in the same condition with the actor, and thus the spectator does not emphasize the character but focuses his attention on the interaction between the actor and himself. Like the actor, the spectator is
fixated, exposed, exhausted, viewed,\textsuperscript{30} and wakeful in the viewing process. Couldn’t the spectator just negate the excruciating and threatening viewing process by falling into sleep in order to dispel this kind of threat and maintain his self-assured mind? Certainly he could, but by doing this he is not qualified to be a spectator who gets involved in the performance because in sleeping the relation with the other is entirely abolished, no matter it is the tie of emotion\textsuperscript{31} or of intellect. Hence the spectator is in a dilemma between the encounter with the unintelligible performance on the stage and the unwillingness to become a dead will during the viewing process by falling into sleep or behaving aloofly.

Thus how are we to account for the relationship between the actor and the spectator in this case? How does a spectator make his response to the actor’s action of “playing qua playing?” The relation between the actor and the spectator is simultaneously separate and relative. The spectator is separate from the actor because he cannot have empathy with the latter, and more importantly, because he cannot make sense of what’s happening on the stage. On the contrary the spectator associates with the actor for it is via the actor’s playing that the spectator is related to the performance. Their relation is a way of desire that transcends the horizon of the spectator’s knowledge, and leads the spectator to a different dimension in which the notion of identification is impossible. The relation between the desiring (the spectator) and the desired (the actor’s playing) is insatiable because the desired does not exist in the knowledge structured by intentionality. Thus the spectator, who is not allowed to view the performance comfortably and indolently, keeps awake in face of the actor’s suffering. In the process of playing qua playing the actor seeks to transcend himself to the infinity and

\textsuperscript{30} For example, in \textit{Endgame} Clow says to the auditorium: “I see … a multitude … in transports … of joy” (\textit{E}, 25). This kind of action seems to be an “improvisation” (Kalb 92) that the actor attempts to “depart from” (ibid.) the character. In this sense, the actor at times becomes the viewer and the spectator becomes the one who is viewed by the actor. Thus what Simon Critchley describes accords with the spectator’s metal condition: “This is the night of insomnia, the passive watching in the night where intentionality undergoes reversal, where we regard things, but where they seem to regard me (Critchley1997, 57).

\textsuperscript{31} According to Levinas, even hatred is the way that enables the self to be related to the other and in this sense it absolves the self from the state of being solitary (\textit{TI} 239). Hence to hate or negate Beckett’s performance does not abdicate a relation with it.
makes himself an unstable identity in order to be reborn incessantly. The unstable identity disables the actor or the character from presenting himself. Thus it puts into question the spectator’s subjectivity because it invalidates the spectator’s intention to be a free subject in the viewing process.

The actor’s unstable subjectivity signals his resistance to becoming a dead will. His will simultaneously seeks to preserve its sovereignty and exposes to the other’s otherness. That is, the actor’s subjectivity is incessantly reborn in the infinity, which transcends the obsolete self in order not to become just a name in a necrology. As a result, the actor’s will confronts with the spectator’s will that tries to make it definitive, and escapes from the spectator’s intentionality by responding to the other, which exceeds the category of the spectator’s knowledge. The actor’s performance refuses any kind of impending approaches to it and nullifies any intention to submit its otherness to one’s self-centered realm. Hence Beckett, by asking his actor not to play, makes the spectator encounter with the infinity. There engenders the breach of totality in the relation between the actor and the spectator.

Beckett and Spectator

Since the spectator’s thought does not equate with that of the actor, their inassimilable relation presupposes a resistance against totality (in this case something like “empathy” between the actor and the spectator is a kind of totality because it tries to lead the performance towards a mode of homogeneity). That is, there implies a violence in the relation between the actor and the spectator. We may examine Beckett’s attitude towards the spectator in order to see how Beckett creates his performance that continues to “stretch out to infinity” (Worth 37).

Due to the awareness of protecting the liberty in his work, Beckett refuses to overcome

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32 Mel Gussow remarks: “One could trace through Beckett’s life a full and compassionate commitment on questions of liberty,” and to speak more specifically, Beckett concerns the liberty of a writer whether “if censors
the spectator or to cow him “into submission,” for in this sense the spectator’s independent and resilient spirit is reduced (Gussow 42). At this point, what Beckett concerns is try to confer value on the spectator’s free will. As evinced, in the viewing process the spectator’s will endeavors to grasp the meaning of the performance in order to reduce the performance into its thematized categories and to preserve its sovereignty. Yet the outcome is contradictory. For the spectator’s will is exposed to the actor’s will as an alien one, the spectator is unable to construct his “inwardness” as “the content of … [his] experiences” (Gilman 85). What Beckett presents on the stage, via the nebulous environment and the actor’s playing, engenders a self-exposing threat to the spectator who is incapable of relying on his knowledge or experience and who is forced to stay awake without having a subjective empathy with the actor. To explain the violence between the actor and the spectator, the first thing is to define the violence and then we can more specifically discuss the spectator’s position in Beckett’s performance via the notion of violence.

Spectator and Violence

According to Levinas, the self’s will is “the embodied unity of independence and dependence” (Peperzak 188). The independence is the possibility for the self to announce “I can” and to enjoy things freely. On the contrary, the dependence points to the exposure of the self to the other and in this way the self is vulnerable to be usurped or misunderstood by the other. When encountering the other’s will that goes out of the self’s comprehension, the self’s will, which is exposed to the alien force and still tries to preserve its sovereignty, is conscious of the residual time and seeks to parry the attack from the alien will. Because the other is indeterminate, the self’s will is aware that he cannot conjoin with the non-self (the other). As Levinas says: “To say that the being is partially free immediately raises the problem of the
relation existing in it between the free part…and the non-free part” (*TI* 223).

Violence is produced when two wills encounter each other. Thus it presupposes that there is resistance against being totalized. Since the self’s will is graspable by the other’s will and at the same time escapable from it, violence only exists in the non-equation\(^{33}\) between the two wills. As Levinas remarks: “Violence bears upon only a being both graspable and escaping every hold. Without this living contradiction in the being that undergoes violence the deployment of violent force would reduce itself to a labor” (*TI* 223). To put it in another way, violence disappears while the subject is completely self-possessive and manipulates things at his will. In this sense the self-assured region enacts like a totality. Hence the antagonism of forces between wills cannot amount to a calculable mode because in that way the totality absorbs each individual will and makes violence impossible. Therefore, violence is “an existence that maintains itself outside of the totality” (*TI* 222). That is, because the alien will is inconceivable, violence cannot be subdued by measurable rules or systems. In consequence violence exists when the self cannot estimate the outcome, and it is incalculable as well as unpredictable for the alien force is like an inexorable and invisible adversary who threatens the self’s sovereign will. As a result, violence appears in the time left by the alien will for the self to avoid the direct attack. So in violence the self has the finite freedom as the “adjournment by time” (*TI* 224) and to fight with the unknowable. Hence death or something “unforeseeable” (*TI* 225), namely the Other, is the mode of the ultimate violence to which the self is exposed. For violence exists beyond the judgment of the well-made rules, it is considered an excess beyond the institutional limitations and thus it arises from the tensions between the intersubjective relation of the self to the other as someone whom the self cannot make a reduction. In this way the self’s freedom is finite and functions as a self-consciousness that resists being silenced by the force of totality.

Therefore what Beckett tries to give the spectator is not a freedom of self-enjoyment but

\(^{33}\) Levinas states that violence “consists in welcoming a being to which it is inadequate […]” (*TI* 25).
is a freedom in the face of and in relation to the other (the actor) who is suffering as well as on the verge of dying. This kind of freedom does not guarantee the spectator from the offence that challenges his subjectivity in the viewing process. On the contrary, the violence arising from the tension between the spectator’s will and the actor’s will (which is a relation of the spectator’s independence from and dependence on the actor and thus is a relation of the self and the other) is incalculable so that the spectator feels a sense of threat as he gets involved in the performance. Consequently, this kind of tension at the same time delivers a sense of freedom and a sense of horror to the spectator, and it contributes to the resistance against the constitution of totality.

The actor as the other calls into question the spectator’s sovereign will that pertains to the subjectivity. Thus in the performance the time of the spectator is that in relation to the other, in this case, the actor. The spectator’s will is dedicated to the actor’s will but it does not yet abdicate its will for self-assurance. In this sense the spectator’s subjectivity lies in the emergence of violence from the confrontation of the actor’s will and the spectator’s will. The spectator’s interrogation or disapproval of what is happening on the stage is his self-awareness of the indeterminacy of the performance. In order to preserve his subjectivity, the spectator must take the risk of embarking on the adventure towards the otherness without return (i.e. without the possibility of grasping meaning in the horizon of his knowledge). The indeterminacy of the performance offends the spectator’s subjectivity but also gives the spectator the finite freedom to make a self-defense. The defense is not of the mode that claims the self-centered enjoyment but is that which converses with the other on the stage. In other words, the spectator, as he does choose to recognize the sense of uncertainty, is deposed of his self-arrogance.

In this way what the performance shows to the spectator is not a possibility for him to prove his subjectivity because he cannot understand its meaning through its visualization. Rather, it makes obvious the spectator’s obligation to the actor to whom the spectator is
obliged to make a response. Thus the actor’s action of playing in suffering cannot be considered a feigned illness or pain; rather it calls for the spectator’s response after the spectator forgoes his subjective sovereignty. That is, the actor’s action of playing is authentic not because the actor imitates the state of suffering perfectly with which the spectator has empathy, but because the actor’s performance is a mode of existence to which the spectator owes his subjectivity. Beckett’s performance militates against the spectator’s success of self-possession, and thus imposes on the spectator with an indirect threat that seeks not to “cow” the spectator but forces him to be a free agent whose will is not a heroic one that lays claim on a complete freedom. Hence the spectator’s free will is a kind of consciousness of the other’s suffering with which the spectator’s subjectivity is positioned. Since the violence that occurs in the tension of wills leaves time for the spectator to desire for the infinity, Beckett also provides the opportunity for the spectator to find out his unknown part of himself. Beckett’s performance is like a threatening adventure for the spectator who is not a coward but is a brave captive to the unknowable.

**Conclusion**

The basic tenet of what we’ve discussed in this chapter is the asymmetrical relationship Levinas proposes that “I” maintains with the Other, which is an ethical relation indeed. Since an actor is required by Beckett not to actually play on the stage, he is untied from the knot with the character, and it becomes inevitably incumbent on him to face the challenge of the unpredictable. As a result, he is situated in a non-site in which he has an infinite responsibility for the Other. And for the spectator, the playing of the actor imposes a vocative force on the spectator, and it is an imminent and uncompromising calling to which the spectator is obliged to respond. Nevertheless, the events occurring on the stage are either already gone or yet to come; it is almost impossible to freeze the happening, cut off a slice of it, and regard it as a presence. The spectator cannot synchronize the present moment with the temporality that is
either anterior or posterior to the present. In Beckett’s performance, the time, having its way to concern the self in the moment of the actual staging, is hollowed out of the ordered temporality, because it is founded on the incommensurable temporality between the actor’s time and the spectator’s time, which forms an ethical bond that undoes the order of presence. Although the actor and the spectator are at the same time tied together with the performance, which causes the sham simultaneity, it is the dispersed temporality that proliferates the possibilities connecting with the Other, rather than an ordered temporalization of the presence. By so doing, the finite space in the theatre is given the infinite possibilities in virtue of the asymmetrical structure of temporality. Therefore, after we have a general understanding of Beckett’s “asymmetrical relationship” with the Other shown in his performance, in the following chapter, I’d like to further elaborate the time hollowed out of the present from the perspective of Levinasian ethics that regards time as dying, as senescence that goes beyond resuscitation of memory, but is a non-return that concerns the self.