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Department of Anglophone Literatures and Cultures

### Opponent's Review

Vendula Kmoníčková, "Samuel Beckett: The Process of Impoverishment in his Theatre Plays,"  
MA thesis

Vendula Kmoníčková's dissertation proposes an examination of the trajectory of Beckett's theatre from an absurdist mode to a minimalist mode. The overall objectives of the work, as articulated in the opening chapter are basically clear. The contention that, "The labels of the Theatre of the Absurd and minimalism have up till now been used only separately and as unrelated when discussing different texts by Beckett. However, the fact that they both appear in relation to his work invokes the question of whether there possibly is any relationship between them" (4) opens a potentially fruitful area of investigation. As a word of caution, however, one might note that these are by no means the only 'explanations' of his work and both (in particular Esslin's label) have been contended, so logically, merely because they co-exist may not necessarily imply a "relationship."

In chapter 1 the reiteration of the main co-ordinates of the Theatre of the Absurd is thorough and well framed. This is certainly an approach of relevance to Beckett's early theatre, but notably it applies accurately only to the immediate post-war period. Section 3 is somewhat curiously titled, "Theatre of the Absurd as Realism of Our Time." One might ask who is the 'us' here and does this mean that the Theatre of the Absurd continues to function as realism? What about Minimalism? Might it too be considered as a "realism of our time"?

Chapters 2 and 3 together raise a number of issues that might be discussed further at the defence. With regard to chapter 2, I would value some further discussion of the philosophical paradoxes as they connect with the experience of space and time, since this is arguably what attracts Beckett to them. Chapter 3 is rather descriptive, often without advancing the argument of the dissertation as a whole a great deal. While it is accurately observed how Beckett progressively erodes the conventions of setting, character, plot and dialogue, the implications of his decisions need more critical attention. So for instance, as Elinor Fuchs argues in *The Death of Character* that character on stage functions metonymically, standing in for a notion of the human condition that solicits audience recognition and empathy. When a writer abandons character how does this transform that relation with an audience, and what are the ontological implications of abandoning character? Is it to be regarded as a post-humanist gesture? Dialogue similarly may be seen as a metaphor for the possibility of (rational) exchange; plot makes sense of a sequence of events through structure. What happens when language and story are discarded (and not just rendered absurd)? What does this mean for theatre? Overall, it seems that the analysis of the development/impoverishment of Beckett's theatre is hampered by a critical vocabulary that judges the work in terms of the conventions of the well-made play and naturalism. In other words, Beckett's work is evaluated in relation to dramatic conventions he relies upon and respects less and less a time goes on.

Chapter 4's examination of Beckett's later work in relation to minimalism raises some interesting points and certainly seems to be an apt description of the work. Yet, given the space afforded the Theatre of the Absurd, the treatment of minimalism is, ironically, rather minimal, and whether minimal could be considered as a principle in theatre more generally



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(as opposed to in art and music) is open to debate. Finally, I would disagree with the concluding comment on Beckett's art of impoverishment (to draw upon Bersani's words) that "At the end, after the process of reduction in all possible aspects, there is 'nothing left to say.'" This is only true if one expects a conventional dramatic mode of theatre built upon specific types of verbalisation and representation. After all, theatre is equally concerned with showing and affect.

In general, considering the extent of the critical work in print on Beckett's theatre, on the history of experimental theatre, and on theories of theatre, the dissertation seems somewhat under researched. Of use here would be the arguments presented by Hans-Thies Lehmann in *Postdramatic Theatre* where he contends that the movement in Western theatre in the course of the twentieth century has been from a dramatic to a postdramatic mode. This subsumes various tendencies from the experiments of the avant-garde, to the theatre of the absurd, to contemporary performance. The shift in focus is away from plot, dialogue, character, even language, and towards corporeality, performance, and the notion of theatre as event (again the issue of time and duration, so prominent among Beckett's concerns would arise here). Especially, attention to the dynamics of presence and absence, and the event, of something taking place, would be a productive way of approaching works like *Not I*, *Ohio Impromptu*, *Quad* or *What Where*. In addition, I would suggest that a different structure for the work as a whole would have served to realise its objectives more successfully—it would have been more logical to discuss the work to which the term absurdism applies and then to discuss the work to which the term minimalism applies and then to interrogate the theoretical and philosophical implications of the transition. As it stands chapters 2 and 3 are not sufficiently distinct in their focus, while chapter 4 only lightly investigates the possibilities of Beckett's minimalist theatre.

However, such points notwithstanding, the work displays an elegant writing style, attempts an appraisal of a number of major elements in Beckett's work, and has a good bibliography; citations are strategically used throughout and there is a strong attention to detail in presentation. Therefore, I recommend the thesis for defence and propose to grade the work "very good" / 2.

18.1.2011

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