Samuel Beckett and the Postmodern

Finally one begins to have no further idea of what is meant by coming, coming before, coming after, warning, coming back- and the difference between generations, as well as inheriting, writing one’s will, dictating, speaking, being dictated to, etc.

Jacques Derrida. *La carte postale*

The shift from structuralism to poststructuralism occurred simultaneously with the forming of a chain of theories that are broadly classified under the general term postmodernism. Postmodernism is one of the most complicated terms in critical and cultural discourse. It sometimes appears as if there are as many postmodernisms as there are critics writing about the field. For the
purposes of textual study, though, there are particular common aspects to
the phenomenon that attracted special attention of the generation of Beckett
scholars who made significant contributions during the 1980s. First, critics
suggest the notion borrowing from poststructuralism, that the writer had no
final authority over the text; a text was no longer thought to be a clear
display of the writer’s worldview, but was seen as a boundlessly perplexing
subversion of the author’s prime intentions. Second, the postmodern text,
unlike its antecedents, did not even demand a self-contained and self-ex­
planatory existence. It was by its very nature fragmented, unreliable, formed
of elements that parodied or pastiched other texts. It was a text that made
a start by questioning the foundations on which texts themselves were con­
structed, a text which gave particular importance to the fact that it was
written; and a text that did not end with a straight and definite conclusion.

These contentions moved towards deconstruction, the subversion of
binary oppositions and predetermining structures. Beckett’s dramatic works
point to an obvious failure in Western thought and culture. Levy takes a
similar position:

Thus, in the pure narrator and his experience of Nothing,
Beckett expresses the impasse reached by the great enter­
prise of western Humanism. With Beckett, as throughout this
tradition, the ultimate task of self-consciousness is to know
oneself qua man; that is, to decipher in the contours of
personal experience the trace of species in us all. Interpretations of this trace have never been constant, and more theological eras have seen it as rooted to an absolute or participating in God. For Beckett the trace of species appears in the need to structure experience and fix the poles of self and world. The real Fall occurred not in Eden but in our century. After the accumulation of too much history, we have lost the innocence required to believe in any more explanations. The only certainties left are the falseness of all interpretative structures and the radical unintelligibility of human experience without them.¹

Here we can argue that Beckett’s dramatic works are wide-ranging attacks on the metaphysical system that supports Western thought. The encouraging illusion that underpins Western metaphysics is that the world can be described and understood, that there is a link between the external world, the words used to describe that world, and the mind of the person who describes or receives the description. Beckett’s art intends to undermine these connections; as such, it is related to a more general sense of cultural and social uncertainty. In casting doubt on the accuracy, sufficiency and existence of a connection between the artist and his situation Beckett is taking a critical view of the metaphysical traditions which maintain that there is a logical and compatible system but also that it is lucid and imitable. Art
repudiates the explanations and meanings provided by external orders.

The overall picture is that Beckett's theater subverts the established structures of perception that have been common to all Western societies since the Renaissance: in his work, neither the characters nor the spectators can depend on a constant perceptual system, in which every element is clearly stable in space and time. Rather, Beckett's characters are in a thoroughly disorienting world that they strive and succumb to order in accordance with a constant perceptual system. One can argue that this disorientation is most evident in the disrupted perception demonstrated by many of Beckett's characters; undoubtedly many critics view *Endgame* as a main example of Beckett's disorienting theatrical world.

Discussions of postmodernism, at least in the social sciences and art, almost constantly revolve around the work of Jean-François Lyotard. His work not only embodies many of the characteristics of postmodern thinking, but in large part was responsible for constructing and institutionalizing the postmodern model.

Lyotard's 1984 book *The postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* provides a suitable place to start. For him, societies are formed not just around technologies but also around "language games" and discourses.

*Waiting for Godot* demonstrates two characters, Vladimir and Estragon, who pass the time while waiting by playing at a series of games, language games, which form their existence and make up their social bond.
Language games and play can be regarded as two important concepts in much of contemporary theories. Wittgenstein, the father of language-game theory, argues that the term "language game" throws light on the fact that the speaking of a language is part of an activity, a form of life. According to Wittgenstein, a word is equal to a chess piece, and utterances can be seen as moves within the language games that constitute the human social bond. This view of language games, as borrowed from Wittgenstein and revised by subsequent philosophers, has had an immense impact on contemporary philosophy of language. It changes the emphasis of language study from a search for the meaning of an utterance (signification) to its role in a language game (function). In his longish foreword to The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge, Fredric Jameson presents the basic framework for Lyotard's methodological perspective, in which legitimation is secured:

... a return to pragmatics, to the analysis of language situations and games, and of language itself as an unstable exchange between its speakers, whose utterances are now seen less as a process of the transmission of information or massages, or in terms of some network of signs or even signifying systems, than as (to use one of Lyotard's favorite figures) the "taking of tricks," the trumping of a communicational adversary, an essentially conflictual relationship between tricksters.
This sort of theme is apparent in the condition of language games in *Waiting for Godot*. It is the play of Vladimir and Estragon's utterances, not any consensus on meaning for them, which forms their social bond. From the very beginning, it is inessential to wait for legitimation of their society by Godot. They establish a society which is constituted by their participation in language games. Lyotard clarifies the issue:

But there is no need to resort to some fiction of social origins to establish that language games are the minimum relation required for society to exist... the question of the social bond, insofar as it is a question, is itself a language game, the game of inquiry. It immediately positions the person who asks, as well as the addressee and the referent asked about: it is already the social bond.3

Lyotard's concept of "metanarratives" is pivotal for understanding of *Waiting for Godot*. At this point, it seems to me, it makes sense to have a detailed account of metanarratives. Lyotard puts peculiar weight on the role of narratives in social life. In non-industrial societies, myths and stories possessed a religious nature and played a part in the reproduction of the social order. With the emergence of the Enlightenment a new chain of narratives became prominent alongside the rise of science. These called atten-
tion to the significance of progress, reason, knowledge, and technology in unchaining man from ignorance, deficiency and tyranny. The major portion of such narratives is devoted to a sense of purpose which they gave to social life. They legitimated the social order and framed a structure within which to weight up human activity.

Lyotard gives the idea that we have now moved into a new, postmodern epoch. Science, technology, complicated administrative systems, and computers have become widespread to a degree that “knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades.” This change has had a qualitative as well as quantitative aspect. The utopian aspiration, humanistic discourses that once encourage social life have lost their vigor. Lyotard describes this as the “decline of grand narratives.” He argues that “the grand narrative has lost its credibility, regardless of what mode of unification it uses, regardless of whether it is a speculative narrative or a narrative of emancipation.” Most people no longer put faith in science, reason, or “truth” to solve social problems or to allow us to make a better world. Nor do they believe that we can construct a single theory or worldview that can successfully bring all knowledge and experience under one umbrella (e.g. Marxism). Moreover, nobody thinks that we can find a god-like place from which to build up knowledge that is unwavering or universally well-grounded. Therefore knowledge (and society) breaks into local and multiple areas, with grand humanistic perceptions failing to make real progress in life.

The postmodern social bond is brought to an end in Waiting for
Godot by Vladimir and Estragon's motivation to regain a universal truth, symbolized by Godot, which they think will validate their lives and their utterances, thus legitimating their society. All their games refer to one metagame (or what Lyotard, in his analysis of modernism, describes as "grand Narrative"): waiting for Godot. Their situation seems like the discourse of modernism, which "legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse... making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative," some universal metaphysical philosophy such as Platonism, the Christian God, the Hegelian dialectic of spirit, transcendent subjectivity, or the hermeneutics of meaning. These grand narratives, upon which modernism is built, have all collapsed, giving rise to a postmodern society which is represented by distrust in both metanarratives and legitimation by them. In postmodern society, it is exactly through the social bond of language and language games that we are able to legitimate our own society. In this postmodern society, people have repudiated the faith in a metaphysical, trans-historical, absolute basis for their existence. For them, it appears that no such philosophy exists, but this does not bring postmodern society to the point of savagery and disorder, as the modernists thought it would. Postmodernists engage in themselves and their communicational interaction in society to legitimate their existence.

It is such a communicational society that is of most concern to us in Waiting for Godot. It is important to note that Vladimir and Estragon are living in such a communicational society but they are not aware of it because of their deeply rooted desire for legitimation by Godot. At the beginning of
play we can observe how this faith in a rigid metaphysical grounds discards any postmodern idea of society:

**ESTRAGON:** Charming spot. *[He turns, advances to front, halts facing auditorium.]* Inspiring prospects. *[He turns to VLADIMIR]* Let’s go.

**VLADIMIR:** We can’t.

**ESTRAGON:** Why not?

**VLADIMIR:** We’re waiting for Godot.⁷

Six times in the play this verbal pattern repeats. It always happens after a long pause and follows the final “trick” played in a language game. All the time, Vladimir and Estragon return to their metagame (metadiscourse), Godot, when their games lose their vitality or collapse. It is evident, at the end of the first act, when Pozzo and Lucky leave the stage:

**POZZO:** Up! Pig! *[Noise of LUCKY getting up.]* On! *[Exit POZZO.]* Faster! On! Adieu! Pig! Yip! Adieu!

*[Long silence]*

**VLADIMIR:** That passed the time.

**ESTRAGON:** It would have passed in any case.

**VLADIMIR:** Yes, but not so rapidly.

*[Pause.]*
ESTRAGON: What do we do now?
VLADIMIR: I don’t know.
ESTRAGON: Let’s go.
VLADIMIR: We can’t.
ESTRAGON: Why not?
VLADIMIR: We’re waiting for Godot.8

In the eyes of Vladimir and Estragon, the grand narrative of Godot sets a static metaphysical limit on their gaming. Beckett makes use of a spatial metaphor in order to indicate these limits. They are not able to “go” anywhere (to exceed the limits of their gaming). So, it becomes clear that they have confined themselves to the limits of one rigid, metaphysical metagame, to which they always come back when their smaller games have ended. They play at ease within these limits, but never try to violate or disturb them. To put it briefly, they play modern language games, not postmodern ones.

The important aspect of postmodern language games is the idea that the limits of the game are not taken root from outside of the game. The overall vision provided here is that “the limits themselves are the stakes and provisional results of language strategies.” The aim of the game in postmodern language games is to make moves which extend the limits of the game, subverting perpetually its margins. This subversion and extension of the limits of language games give possibility of a related extension of what can be
regarded as “thought.” Because we think in language and the endlessness of a current language game gives rise to inspired, innovational thought. It is often remarkable that “without a constant misuse of language there cannot be any discovery, and progress.” Here we can simply say that it is not in tune with the ruling model. Thus, contrary to modern gaming, such subversion of limits (the postmodern gaming) does not simply support and regain the grand narratives of the past. It rather improves and supports our capacities to think at, against, and beyond the restraint limits of former thought. We are, then, told by Lyotard in particular that “invention is always born of dissension.” Here Lyotard crystallizes the vital principles of the nature of postmodern language games.

In *Waiting for Godot*, what is particularly attractive about this dissension and movement at the margins of a language game reveals in the speech that is undoubtedly the clue to the whole play: Lucky’s “thought.” Lucky’s monologue can be considered as a violation and subversion of the limits of the universal metagame, namely Western metaphysics, the language game of truth. The main body of Lucky’s speech contains the results of choosing the main works of Western thought, putting them through a paper shredder, and gluing them back together randomly. Beckett leads Lucky’s lengthy monologue against the universal idea that philosophy’s task is to regain unity to man’s knowledge, a job which thinkers can only do by restoring some metanarrative which unites together all stages in human history within a single, constant, universal system. Lucky’s monologue, though,
is a narrative that subverts all ideas of universal, ahistorical, constant metanarrative, all Godots. He meditates:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with a white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell and suffers like the divine Miranda with those who for reasons unknown but time will tell are plunged in torment plunged in fire whose fire flames if that continues and who can doubt it will fire the firmament that is to say blast hell to heaven so blue and still and calm so calm with a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing....

Lucky’s thought is a direct attack on the grand narratives of Western thought and metaphysics, which establish themselves in discourses laying claim to be: referential and self-legitimizing (“quaquaquaqua”), ahistorical (“outside time”); metaphysical or transcendental (“for reasons unknown”); teleological and revelatory (“but time will tell”); and guard against orthodox skepticism (“a calm which even though intermittent is better than nothing”).

Lucky’s thought uncovers the limits set by all earlier objectivist
thoughts. It is a completely postmodern language game that acts at the limit of what has been thought. It is also a speech of freedom opposed to the metaphysical oppression of limits on thought set by limits on language. Here, Wittgenstein proceeds to set forth these limits:

... in order to be able to set a limit to thought, we should have to find both sides of the thinkable. It will therefore only be in language that the limit can be set, and what lies on the other side of the limit will simply be nonsense.13

Lucky’s speech, here, exactly includes the thoughts on the other side of the limit. However, it cannot be conceived of as non-sense. Simple non-sense would still be thought imposed by the dialectic of reason. It may include a simple passing across the other side of the dialectic. To put it differently, we can do or say the *un*-reasonable thing, leaving its limits inviolated. But Lucky’s thought is not *unreasonable*. At this point, it is better to invent the term *transreasonable*. Lucky’s speech does not simply suggest the other side of the dialectic of reason, but passes the margins of the dialectic and moves beyond the limits that have been imposed upon language. In Lucky’s speech, Beckett reveals and exceeds these limits, blending pieces of grammatical sense (inside the limit) and transgrammatical nonsense14 (outside the limit) to the degree that the limit itself is removed, widening the area of what can be “thought.” In Lucky’s long monologue, Beckett tries to demonstrate
that there is no feasibility that language games can be totalized in any metadiscourse. Through Lucky's speech, Beckett places emphasis on new moves and even new rules for language games, having exceeded and subverted the old rules and limits.

The other characters on the stage, though, deal Lucky's thought with less warm response. Vladimir, Estragon, and Pozzo become more and more angry during Lucky's sharp remarks, until "all three throw themselves on LUCKY who struggles and shouts his text." At the end, after Lucky has been assaulted and silenced, Pozzo takes his hat (his "thinking cap") and walks over it, saying "there's an end to his thinking!" This "intellectual" violence indicates the physical violence that Lucky undergoes all through the play. For the French ethical philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, there is a particular violence which is essential in the construction of objective metaphysical systems. As it is evident throughout the play, Vladimir, Estragon and Pozzo forcefully prevent other possibilities, namely other forms of life. Therefore, Lucky's speech can be considered as a peaceful words which exceed the limits of an essentially violent unity in objective metadiscourses. Jacques Derrida, here, ascribes particular importance to Levinas' point:

This coherence (unity) in ontology is violence itself for Levinas: the "end" of history is not absolute Logic, the absolute coherence of the Logos with itself in itself, but peace in separation, the diaspora of absolutes.... Is not peaceful discourse
the discourse which respects separation and rejects the horizon of ontological coherence?

Lucky's humorous, "peaceful" discourse is confronted with violence, appeared in both intellectual and physical ones. Because it undermines the modernist idea of unity and coherence in the grand narrative. As a matter of fact, it subverts the narrative on which Vladimir and Estragon have grounded their existence, Godot. Lucky's monologue is basically peaceful because it discards the idea of objective knowledge which always happens with power together. Knowledge is power, and objectivist modern knowledge is an essential instrument of constructing or supporting a violent power paradigm. Levinas argues:

In history understood as the manifestation of reason, where violence reveals itself to be reason, philosophy presents itself as a realization of being, that is, as [philosophy's] liberation by the suppression of multiplicity.

Lucky's monologue, though, signifies a new, postmodern idea of knowledge. Lyotard defines postmodern knowledge as:

Postmodern knowledge is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, non-rectifiable, and paradoxical.
It is changing the meaning of the word knowledge.... It is producing not the known, but the unknown.19

Postmodern knowledge is not a support for the strengthening of the dominant power paradigm. It rather moves at and beyond the limits of this paradigm. It develops new ways to weigh up things. Postmodern knowledge does not simply provide data for supporting and regaining the old ways of thinking. With regard to the dominant structure(s), a bulk body of this postmodern knowledge (Lucky's knowledge) may appear to be complicated, but this is exactly the focal point because the postmodern motive is to put pressure on the limits of the old structures. Vladimir and Estragon are at least on the right path when Vladimir says "This is getting really insignificant," to which Estragon answers "Not enough."20

These quotations, though, are not the only evidences in the play which reveal that Vladimir and Estragon are near to a Lucky-like postmodern revelation. In the course of the play, regarding Godot, it becomes more and more clear that Vladimir and Estragon are at the same humble situation as Lucky is. This situation is observable in doubly-violent end to Lucky's thought. For instance, nearly at the end of the play, after the boy has informed Vladimir and Estragon that Godot will again not come today, the following exchange occurs:
ESTRAGON: Oh yes, let's go far away from here.

VLADIMIR: We can't.

ESTRAGON: Why not?

VLADIMIR: We have to come back tomorrow.

ESTRAGON: What for?

VLADIMIR: To wait for Godot.

ESTRAGON: Ah! [silence.] He didn't come?

VLADIMIR: No.

ESTRAGON: And now it's too late.

VLADIMIR: Yes, now it's night.

ESTRAGON: And if we dropped him? [Pause.]

If we dropped him?

VLADIMIR: He'd punish us.\footnote{21}

We can, here, observe that Vladimir and Estragon are near to a revelation, but again their reliance on the metadiscourse of Godot prevents them from advancing. In this extract, the violent nature of limits, both physical and intellectual ones, appears in a faith in Godot, imposed upon Vladimir and Estragon. If they “dropped him” he would “punish” them. Imprisoned in the inflexible, violent limits set on both their actions and their thought by modernist metadiscourse symbolized by Godot, Vladimir and Estragon are not able to quit the place. Their minds are slaves to Godot as Lucky’s body is a slave to Pozzo. As it can be seen, up to line seven, both Estragon and
Vladimir are engaged in modern language game of waiting, but from line eight onward, the game is shifted to postmodern one.

*Waiting for Godot* presents Beckett's desire to attack sharply on the modernist world view. The idea that tries to "stabilize the referent, to arrange it according to a point of view which endows it with a recognizable meaning." Beckett, here, repudiates the reading of *Waiting for Godot* as a lament for the lost grand narrative. In fact, he challenges the assumption that his play centers around a lack of meaning and possibilities. On the contrary, in *Waiting for Godot*, issues of excess of meaning and possibility are placed center stage. The most spectacular demonstration of this notion can be found in Derrida's analysis of center:

[A] play whose other side would be the Nietzschean affirmation, that is the joyous affirmation of the play of the world and the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of a world of signs without fault, without truth and without origin which is offered to active interpretation. This affirmation then determines noncenter otherwise than as loss of center. And it plays without security.  

Central to the separation of the postmodern from the modern is this assertion of a decentered world, this refusal of the grand narratives, this celebration of play and language games. In *Waiting for Godot*, Beckett
demonstrates the idea that Vladimir and Estragon are entangled in a labyrinth by their modernist nostalgia for legitimation in Godot. They possess a totalizing, modernist world view in an incommensurable postmodern world. From the beginning of the play, we can notice that Beckett places a particular weight on the notion that such a legitimation always already exists in the play of language games. Beckett, throughout *Waiting for Godot*, constantly asks his readers/audience to have an active interpretation of the postmodern, decentered world. Such an issue demands the rejection of the passive, annoying waiting for the return of an objective metanarrative that never gives any metaphysical support truthfully. Derrida, here, extends this analysis of the postmodern world remarkably to argue that:

[A world that] is no longer turned toward the origin, affirms play and tries to pass beyond man and humanism, the name of man being the name of that being who, throughout the entire history of metaphysics of ontotheology— in other words, throughout his entire history—has dreamed of full presence, the reassuring foundation, the origin and the end of play.

The depiction of this postmodern world view is nicely exemplified in *Endgame*.

**Clov:** (imploringly) Let’s stop playing.

**Hamm:** Never.
Postmodernism suggests that "power" is a fundamental and unavoidable dimension of social life. The postmodern analysis of the scientific standpoint is also related to the issue of power. Structuralism did not regard cultural and social structures as products of power, but rather as results of social bonds, human demands, and a transcendental collective unconscious.

In its Marxian forms, as supported by Althusser, cultural structures could be conceived of as outcome of an objective and underlying capitalist system. Poststructuralists can be understood as constructing on the Marxist view of culture as a product of power, but also as refusing the metanarrative of Marxism as a credible narrative of history and society. Instead of deciphering unified, class-based ideological systems, as Althusser does, they indicate the growth and bilateral interaction of discourses and power/knowledge structures. These may have been characterized by race and gender, by colonialism or by conflicts attracting the attention of professionals and experts. Again an important concept here has stemmed from Nietzsche and his notion that social life is directed by a "will to power."

The postmodern view of power can be outlined as:

I. It is distributed network.

II. It is delocalized (virtual).

III. It is decentered, signifying that no subject is a "power center," every "one" divided and distributed
in the different area.

IV. It is rhizomatic (versus rooted).

V. It is sometimes disorganized as "swarm" or pack.

VI. It is sometimes leaderless or with temporary leader.

The postmodern notion of power is an evolutionary idea of power. Because it deals with ideas that reconstructed and propagated through media, images that propagated in order to absorb the public attention (publicity, advertising, movies, tunes).

The concept of "authority" is of great importance in that it provides a key way of thinking about power. The postmodern approach towards authority is described by the questioning of all endeavors to base authority on any absolute foundation, whether that of religion or reason. In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-François Lyotard characterized postmodernism as an "incredulity" toward metanarratives, a rejection of having faith in modernism's encompassing narratives of truth, progress and freedom ground on the autonomy of human reason. One aftermath of postmodern incredulity is what Jürgen Habermas called "legitimation crisis." According to modernism, the logical justification of authority creates the legitimate situation in which the task to obey authority is necessary. The modernist discourse of legitimacy, however, gives consideration to a collective and constant chain of cognitivist paradigms in order to dictate the process of legitimation itself. The postmodern crisis of the delegitimation
of authority accords with the weariness of these cognitivist models. The narrative function is losing its strength by autocracy, genocide, and technological destruction of the environment throughout the course of the twentieth century. Michel Foucault depicts the analysis of legitimation as not only skepticism about Enlightenment paradigms but as perception that reason and power are not basically different. An important aspect of postmodernism is its uncovering of the questionable modernist belief that legitimate authority is essentially hostile to domination and autocracy. Foucault is still meticulous to mention that this does not mean there is no difference between authority and domination. Here, what must be understood clearly is that there are different and heterogeneous paradigms of exercising power which is essential quality of authority as well as of liberation and domination. Therefore, authority cannot be considered either as a form of action against power or as an institution that only exercises power. But it can be seen as a mechanism of political management that is formed by the unstable exercise of power of all over society. There is no justifiable grounds for authority to outrank power thoroughly, and no certainty for the fact that the exercise of authority will be controlled by the force of a universal rationality. The general urge of postmodernism, then, is not the effacement of authority, because it would be thought of as the effacement of power. More truely, it is the perception that authority is formed through the unstable and contextual use of power. As such, we can say that its legitimacy does not simply stem from either natural right or rational consensus.
The title of *Endgame*, mimicking the last few moves of a hopeless chess match, proposes a vigorous sense of waiting as reality and as a metaphor for infinity. Beckett's own lead, here, seems to be of great importance:

Hamm is a king in this chess game lost from the start. From the start he knows he is making loud senseless moves. That he will make no progress at all with the gaff. Now at the last he makes a few senseless moves as only a bad player would. A good one would have given up long ago. He is only trying to delay the inevitable end. Each of his gestures is one of the last useless moves which put off the end. He is a bad player.

All Beckettian characters try to postpone the end and are "bad players," but it is necessary to regard Hamm as a king in a chess game. When two kings are put on the chess board (it happens only when two bad players are playing!), they can never put an end to the game but only become involved in an infinite chain of movements on the chess board. Beckett's metaphor indirectly indicates that Clov is a king, as well as a pawn. This presumption presents the fact that their relationship is one of master and slave / servant. Such relationships have absorbed the attention of thinkers as diverse as Aristotle, Hobbes, Hegel and Nietzsche. The best reason is that these relationships are ambiguous. Although the master enjoys
social supremacy, the servant is really more powerful, because his master is more dependent on him than vice versa. Hence we can say that Clov is stronger than Hamm, since he makes Hamm’s existence possible, exactly in the same way that Lucky is stronger than Pozzo because his outward obedience and weakness provide the support on which Pozzo continuously bases his sense of authority. All of Beckett’s pairs are yoked in friendships which are necessarily power-relationship. Most importantly, each partner has to know that the other is there: the partners produce proof that they actually exist by answering to each other.

In Beckettian dramas, the postmodern notion of power is interwoven with language. Beckett’s first two published plays form a central stage in the growth of modern Western theater. They repudiate both the psychological realism of Chekhov, Ibsen and Strindberg and the pure theatricality of the body supported by Artaud. The pivotal issue, put forward by them, centers around what language can and cannot do. Language does not appear as a means of direct communication any more or as a screen through which we can observe vaguely the psychic actions of a character. Strictly speaking, it is put to use in all its grammatical, syntactical, and particularly intertextual force in order to aware the reader/audience of the fact that how much we rely on language and how much we have to be careful of the codifications that language sets upon us.

*Endgame* depicts four characters confined in a room; two of them, Nagg and Nell, are in ashbins; Hamm their blind and invalid son, sits in a
wheelchair and is taken care of by Clov, a servant. These characters are not performing anything in particular; they are only there, living in isolation, old age and weariness. Hamm attempts to sustain his authority over his servant Clov and his parents, Nagg and Nell. Like all Beckett's characters, Nagg, Nell, Hamm, and Clov talk to each other, and making utterances is their main activity.

A remarkable feature of the pattern of dialogue in Beckettian drama is the gap between what is said and what is meant. In *Endgame* what is uttered and what is conveyed together constitute the meaning of the utterance in its context.

According to Cavell, the play demonstrates three levels of meaning emerged from a single text through the characters' utterance. They can be outlined as:

I. The referential level of the play, namely, what the characters talk about.

II. The strategies applied by the characters in their dialogue and the effects of these strategies.

III. The diverse manipulations and delicate arrangements happening in the characters’ speech, which are the constituents by which three levels of meaning are constructed.

Beckett has the power critically to view human anxieties through his
characters, the situations he creates, and the language he uses. We can infer from the humorous exchanges of the play the bitter censures of a zealous thinker on modern man’s plight in the universe, created by his drive to recuperate a transcendent principle which he feels will give meaning to his life and his speech, thereby legitimating his society. Dialogue in Endgame is visualized as sharp criticism of modern man’s situation in the world, while simultaneously being comical.

The characters are mostly engaged in constructing statements, asking and answering questions, commanding, adding insult to injury, and uttering exclamations all of which do not devote to a story or to a plot, but rather mark and make tense their daily modernist routine.

The following typical utterances of the play are good instances of the irksome modernist everydayness: "Is it not time for my pain-killer?" "What’s the weather like?" "Is it night already then?" Paralyzed Hamm breathlessly seeks information on what is going on outside, the time, and the weather; and Clov is the one to answer. Clov also questions Hamm from time to time: "I never refuse. Why?" Nell and Nagg, in their sawbins, also speak to each other and make interrogatives: "Our sight has failed" said Nagg to Nell, "Do you want to go in?" asked Nagg. These trivial exchanges of shallow information generate the referential level of the play. But this level reveals something more significant and tantalizing, the characters imitate what people in non-theatrical real modern life are involved in saying all day long.
Dialogue, at the referential level, plays a vital role in this play because it conveys the artful imitation of the modern rituals of everyday interactions, and betrays the banality of these routine exchanges, the modern language games, “Why this farce, day after day?” “All life long the same inanities.”

The characters on stage signify by their talk, by their wretched condition, by what really they are, and the play as a whole has been seen as a metaphor of modern man’s miserable situation in the world, made by an explicit appeal to some metaphysical system:

HAMM: We’re not beginning to... to... mean something?

CLOV: Mean something! You and I, mean something! [Brief laugh]

Ah that’s a good one!

HAMM: I wonder. [Pause] I imagine if a rational being came back to earth, wouldn’t he be liable to get ideas into his head if he observed us long enough.

A Beckettian postmodern approach to language can be seen as a rejection of language as a transparent means of communication. This strategy regards language as a means of passing the time.

Hamm and Clov, locked in a closed room, display a firm linguistic game in which utterance signifies more than it says. Hamm and Clov: the two companions rely on each other to establish conversation, to keep each
other’s partnership.

Hamm reflects, “We are getting on.” Several times in the course of the play, when Clov has left the room for his kitchen. The repetition of this monologue illustrates that he is so obsessed with “getting on.” He engages in verbal activities because he needs to occupy time. His questions may not be replied, his orders may not be executed; this does not matter. What is important for him is to make time go by, by talking. When Clov asks Hamm: “What is there to keep me here?” Hamm answers: “The dialogue.” Talking for Hamm, then, is a means to go on, to make time go by. So he needs Clov as a person needed to talk with.

Another postmodern strategy of language, used by Beckett, deals with language as a means of refuge.

Paralyzed Hamm, in his wheelchair, terribly needs Clov in order to be in touch with the outside world. If Clov deserts him, he will be alone, and his situation will be intolerable. So another reason why Hamm literally attacks Clov with interrogatives, orders, and statements is that he needs company. As a matter of fact, Hamm takes enjoyment out of his own storytelling, or rather, his reciting, as he meditates: “Nicely put, that, ’There’s English for you.’” But reciting is also another alternative to Hamm to keep someone in his company. And when Clov abandons listening to him Hamm bribes his father:

CLOV: He doesn’t want to listen to your story.
HAMM: I’ll give him a bon bon.¹³

Hamm cannot tolerate being alone and idle in a room. So he constantly asks for the attention of Clov in order to prevent him from going into the kitchen:

CLOV: No. [Pause.] I’ll leave you, I have things to do.

HAMM: In your kitchen?

CLOV: Yes.

HAMM: What, I’d like to know.

CLOV: I look at the wall.

HAMM: The wall! And what do you see on your wall?

Mene, mene? Nacked bodies?¹⁴¹

Even Nagg takes refuge to the same strategy:

NELL: Are you quite sure? [Pause.] Then I’ll leave you.

NAGG: Do you not want your biscuit? [Pause.] I’ll keep it for you [Pause.]¹⁴²

Hamm tries to escape from panic and loneliness by talking alone, to himself. In a significant monologue, Hamm sheds light on his situation:

HAMM: There I’ll be, in the old refuge, alone against the
silence and... [he hesitates]... the stillness... Then babble, babble, words, like the solitary child who turns himself into children, two, three, so as to be together, and whisper together, in the dark.46

Talking, namely, asking questions, commanding, and reciting is then the strategy to keep somebody in one’s company and elude loneliness and anguish.

Hamm is obviously man of command. And he imposes his authority and dominance upon Clov by asking questions, giving orders, and he bothers Clov. In order to challenge Hamm’s superiority, Clov makes use of linguistic manoeuver without announcing it so clearly. It is actually a fierce verbal chess-game that is going on between them. Talking is already a game of power, a strategy in real life, so that the metaphor of chess suggested by the title reinforces what is going on in the play.

When Hamm makes a question, Clov gives a spontaneous answer, even if his reply is irrelevant to the question:

**Hamm:** Why don’t you kill me?

**Clov:** I don’t know the combination of the larder.47 [Pause.]

Clov may also give a tautological reply that is a problem of logic, so that Hamm is not informed.
HAMM: A flea! Are there still fleas?
CLOV: On me there’s one. Unless it’s a crablouse.48.

The dialogue may also fall into paradox. Although Clov’s information apparently relevant, in no way a real one:

HAMM: That’s right.
CLOV: If I don’t kill that rat he’ll die.49

In order to jeer at his master, Clov draws on another verbal manoeuvre: he iterates Hamm’s word for word sentences:

HAMM: I’m obliged to you, Clov. For your services.
CLOV: Ah pardon, it’s I am obliged to you.50

Every utterance in the play should thought of as a “move” in chess-game: to speak is to fight, in the sense of playing. Clov, when a “move” connecting with him is made, undergoes a “countermove.” So each “move” basically stimulates a peculiar “countermove.” Hamm knows that a countermove that is only reactional is not a “good” move. Hamm’s reactional countermoves are no more than programmed effects in Clov’s strategy; they play into Clov’s hands and thus have no effect on the balance of power. That
is why it is important for Hamm to increase countermoves in the game, and even to disorient it, in such a way as to make an unexpected move. This does not necessarily mean that Hamm, and even Clov, plays in order to win. The result is nothing but the agonistic aspect of society:

CLOV: [Imploringly.] Let’s stop playing!

HAMM: Never! [Pause.] Put me in my coffin.

CLOV: There are no more coffins.⁵¹

The game turns out to be dog-eat-dog confrontation when Clov frequently makes sadistic remarks:

HAMM: Kiss me. [Pause.] will you not kiss me?

CLOV: No.

HAMM: On the forehead.

CLOV: I won’t kiss you anywhere [Pause.]

HAMM: [Holding out his hand.] Give me your hand at least.

[Pause.] Will you not give me your hand?

CLOV: I won’t touch you. [Pause.]⁵²

By adopting a chess-game like verbal assault, the characters tease each other. Here language is stripped of referentiality, reduced to pure exchange in a brutal struggle for power. So in this level of language, *Endgame*
reflexes what is going on in real life, an unstable game of power.

The characters simultaneously pester each other, ask or answer questions, involve in triviality and toy with language, that is to say, they utilize varied kinds of artful arrangements in their speech in order to produce inconstancy, differentiation, and chaos.

Such artful arrangements give the dullness and the sharpness of wit, and at the other times the dullness and logic of non-sense. They do not simply offer us the other side of the dialectic of reason, but moves at and beyond the margins of the dialectic, beyond the limits that have been placed on language. Clov’s answer to Hamm’s question about his nourishment is a good instance:

HAMM: I’ll give you nothing more to eat.

CLOV: Then we’ll die.\(^5\)

It is quite true that Clov and Hamm were not involved together, but one would expect to hear Clov say, “Then I’ll die.” Since the singular pronoun “you” and the plural pronoun “we” do not construct an integrated unit.

Hamm presents a zeal for an act which is not harnessed by zeal, but takes place naturally:

HAMM: Every man his speciality. [Pause.] No phone calls?
[Pause.] Don’t we laugh?

CLOV: [After reflection.] I don’t feel like it.54

“Don’t we laugh” is an invitation to ponder on an act that is natural and therefore cannot pondered.

In the constituents of the dialogues, non-sensical and mechanical constructing codes are dominant. Antonyms, for instance, bestow toughness and a computer-like tone:

HAMM: Wait! [Clov halts.] How are your eyes?

CLOV: Bad

HAMM: But you can see.

CLOV: All I want.55

A playing of two words and repetition of sounds create the similar quality:

NAGG: It’s lower down. In the hollow.

NELL: What hollow?

NAGG: The hollow! [Pause.]

Could you not? [Pause.]

Yesterday you scratched me there.

NELL: [Elegiac.] Ah yesterday.56
Such arrangements of the characters’ utterances do not enhance any semantic information, but they point to basic problems of living, such as boredom, and repetition, which affect everybody. It is fair to say that they contribute a great deal to the creation of the inertia caused by universal principle.

*Endgame*’s focus is on modern man’s hapless plight in universe, on characters’ menacing postmodern game of power, and on language as well. Language in *Endgame* demonstrates a perpetual sense of chaos. Dialogues empower the characters to exceed behind narrative, and behind linearity. The Beckettian language generates a multi-dimensional atmosphere in which three levels incorporate to indicate that dialogues are the only acts that by means of which the characters can sustain their postmodern social bond and then legitimate their society.

Through apparent meaningless dialogues, Beckett is the master of showing modern corruption: “The whole place stinks of corpses, the whole universe.” Hamm’s significant monologue echoes the modern man’s miserable hollowness:

In my house. [Pause. With prophetic relish.] One day you’ll be blind, like me... You’ll be sitting there, a peak in the void, in the dark, for ever, ....Infinite emptiness will be all around you, all the resurrected dead of all the ages wouldn’t
fill it,... because you won’t have had pity on anyone and because there won’t be anyone left to have pity on."

In the history of twentieth century theater, Beckett’s first dramas characterize the shift from Modernism with its concentration on self-reflection to Postmodernism with its emphasis on pastiche, parody and fragmentation. Beckett’s plays repudiate the tradition of drama, insisting on the idea that a play should have an exposition, a climax and a dénouement. Instead, they enjoy a labyrinthine structure. They depict images of disorder in which the world and the people populated it are slowly and unavoidably losing their power. In this Beckettian labyrinth with no way out, the characters seek refuge in repetition, repeating their own acts and utterances and often those of others to pass the time. We can take as a central premise the idea that repetition plays a vital role in the formation of certain radical instabilities. This can be observable in non-verbal language of the mime actor of *Act Without Words I*:

He turns, sees cube, looks at it, at carafe, reflects, goes to cube, takes it up, carries it over and sets it down under carafe, tests its stability, gets up on it, tries in vain to reach carafe, renounces, gets down,... A second smaller cube descends from flies, lands.... He turns, sees second cube, looks at it, at carafe, goes to second cube, takes it up,
carries it over and sets it down under carafe, tests its stability, gets up on it, tries in vain to reach carafe, renounces, gets down, takes up second cube to carry it back to its place, hesitates, thinks better of it, sets it down, goes to big cube, takes it up, carries it over and puts it on small one, tests their stability, gets up on them, the cubes collapse, he falls, gets up immediately, brushes himself, reflects.

In a purely deconstructive approach, repetition both supported and subverted the original text. It supported the original, because without an original no copy is supposed to be made: but it also subverted the original, because it cannot be distinguished from the original. The presence of repetition in a text, therefore, significantly upset the stability of the text’s claims to portray a clear truth about the world. For Beckett, as a playwright who is radically mistrustful of language, the notion of repetition owns a powerful influence. This signifies that his dramatic works subvert any idea of authentic and the unitary. Repetition in Beckettian dramas is never hackneyed, because it is aware of the process of writing and the process of reading; and most importantly, because the repetitions were never exact. As it can be seen, in Beckett’s later works there was no “original” for repetitions to repeat. So the works themselves could never be regarded as completed ones. Again Act Without Words I is a good example here:
The man is flung backwards on stage from right wing. He falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects. Whistle from right wing. He reflects, goes out right.

Immediately flung back on stage he falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects.

Whistle from left wing. He reflects, goes out left.

Immediately flung back on stage he falls, gets up immediately, dusts himself, turns aside, reflects."

The pauses in Beckettian dramas are very important. They empower Beckett to picture silences of inaptness, when characters are unable to find the words they need; silences of domination, when they are silenced by the aggressive reaction of their interlocutor or by their feeling that they may be violating a social taboo; and silences of expectation, when they wait for the reaction of the other which will offer them an ephemeral sense of existence. Besides, these pauses give the reader / audience a sense of space and time to fill the blank spaces between the words and hence to become involved inventively and personally in the formation of the play's meaning. Pause, as a textual strategy, fragments the text and creates a chain of speeches and events rather than the continuous presentation of a dominant idea. Beckett introduces chaos into his well-knit structured plays not by dictating his own
idea but by urging the fact that they should be seen or, in particular, interpreted by reader/audience who understands clearly that the form is simultaneously central and suspected. Such crucial roles of pause are nicely dramatized in *Act Without Words II*:

Enter goad right, strictly horizontal. The point stops a foot short of sack A. Pause. The point draws back, pauses, drafts forward into sack, withdraws, recoils to a foot short of sack. Pause. The sack does not move. The point draws back again, a little further than before, pauses, drafts forward again into sack, withdraws, recoils to a foot short of sack. Pause. The sack moves. Exit goad.  

Beckett in his plays challenges the modernist idea of “novelty.” What Beckett portrays in his dramas is not completely new. But what he does with his depiction is striking and rebellious. He makes use of his play-texts to state that there is no certainty, no absolute and unambiguous knowledge. He urges us to broaden new horizon and to create a new way of interpretation. This way will provide space for us to lead our participation as well as our knowledge to our reception of the text. Beckett’s works are replete with references to Christian texts and to canonical interpretations. The most interesting reference is perhaps to Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am”. In *Whoroscope* (1930), Beckett made a sharp and pessimistic comment on the
c文化传播 accepted authority of Descartes by saying, “I make mistakes, therefore I am.” Descartes’s statement itself here is an allusion to St. Augustine’s refusal of scepticism, “If I am deceived, I am.” It means that Descartes himself is already become involved in an intertextual manoeuvre. In *Endgame*, Beckett parodied Descartes’s idea regarding Nagg’s emotion:

**CLOV:** He’s crying

*[He closes the lid, straightens up.]*

**HAMM:** Then he’s living.⁶²

What is obvious here is that Beckett’s dramatic works are intertextual. He is perpetually alluding not only to concepts but to the ways in which such concepts have been constructed. The plays abound with allusions to the works of others. This appears as a pile of allusions or parodic quotation. For literate reader / audience, many references are distinguishable, such as Hamm’s frantic cry “My kingdom for a nightman!”⁶³ which parodies Richard’s cry “A horse! a horse! my kingdom for a horse!”⁶⁴ Intertextual allusions fragment the text and make reader / audience not look for meaning, explanation, and enlightenment. All Beckett’s texts are based on the assumption that when we speak or write, we are working on thoughts and language of others. As a matter of fact, we feel impelled to make our identity through the discourses of others, whether we like it or not. And whenever we write, we are rewriting and hence reconstructing what we and others formerly
Beckett subverts both subjectivity and narration. It is, then, clear that any and all communication turns to be problematic. Beckett frequently concentrates on this issue, but he puts a particular stress on the idea that full communication is finally beyond the bounds of possibility:

HAMM: Yesterday! What does that mean? Yesterday!

CLOV: [Violently:] That means that bloody awful day, long ago, before this bloody awful day. I use the words you taught me. If they don’t mean anything any more, teach me others. Or let me be silent.54.

To put it differently, both the denotative and connotative levels of language are depicted as unstable ways of communication. The many references to the objects (symbols) are circular as labyrinth. Amazing in a textual labyrinth with no center, the reader pursues one reference, constructs an idea, and then find another which leads to another idea. The object (symbol) is not just an optional thing in an optional world, nor is it a symbol of anything in particular. But it acts, in its multiplicity, as a sign of the play’s strategies of expressing indirectly, and serves as visual and specific representation of the crucial textuality of the play.

The point here is that an individual concept cannot impose itself upon the text / reader. But that concept always comes after concept; each
suggests something different but also follows and makes reference to another. This type of intratextual (the perplexing network of references within the plays) reference can be thought of as pivotal, as tying up the text together, providing some kind of formal unity or coherence. Yet it does not mean that such references guarantee any safe ground for reader. It calls our attention to the fact that every text must be read as text and not as direct communication or as authority. Symbols should not be considered as a particularly coded means of communicating, but a demand for active participation in the formation of new ideas.

In his plays, Beckett casts doubt on all authority and in particular on the authority of the fundamental texts of Western culture. He tries to allure his reader/audience to think, and to participate in his tense waver between certainty about what is untrue and uncertainty about what might be true. This rejection of authorial power and this demand of the creative participation of reader/audience single out Beckett as one of the most important writers of postmodern era.
Notes on Chapter 3


3 Ibid., P. 15.

4 Ibid., P. 5.

5 Ibid., P. 37.

6 Ibid., P. xxiii.


8 Ibid., P. 46-7.

9 Jean-François Lyotard, P. 17.

11 Jean-François Lyotard, P. xxv.

12 Samuel Beckett, P.42.


14 Here there is perhaps a problematic differentiation between non-sense and nonsense. The terms used here should be taken as the reasonable end of the dialectic; non-sense is the other, unreasonable side. Nonsense locates outside the dialectic.

15 Samuel Beckett, P.42.

16 Ibid., P.44.


Jean-François Lyotard, P.60.

Samuel Beckett, P.64.

Ibid., P.86-7.

Jean-François Lyotard, P.74.


Ibid.


Power is being-able; in the first place, being to exist. According to Deleuze power can be defined as an englobing field or as a multiplicity of nomadically distributed differential elements.
27 Authority is the legitimate capacity to implement and enforce rules governing political institutions.


29 Samuel Beckett, P.95.

30 Ibid., P.105.

31 Ibid., P.107.

32 Ibid., P.113.

33 Ibid., P.99.

34 Ibid., P.100.


36 Ibid., P.114.
37 Ibid., P.108.
38 Ibid., P.96-7, 111.
39 Ibid., P.120.
40 Ibid., P. 121.
41 Ibid., P. 117.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., P.116.
44 Ibid., P.97-8.
46 Ibid., P.126.
47 Ibid., P.96.
48 Ibid., P.108.
Ibid., P.125.

Ibid., P.132.

Ibid., P.130.

Ibid., P.125.

Ibid., P.94.

Ibid., P.97.

Ibid., P.109.

Ibid., P.101.

Ibid., P.114.

Ibid., P.109-10.

"Ibid., P. 203.


^3 Ibid., P. 103.

^4 Richard III. V. iv. 7.