Towards a Beckettian Minority of Theatrical Event

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This essay will analyse Samuel Beckett’s subversive handling of theatre’s fundamentally evental dimension as a medium where things happen on stage against the backdrop of the Deleuze–Badiou philosophical debate (for example, Badiou’s commentary on the Deleuzian theory of the event in The Logic of Sense, in his own Logics of Worlds) over the event’s relation to language. Does the event belong to language? Does it pre-exist language? Can the event be represented by language or does it bore a hole in linguistic representation? As I would argue, these are important questions for Beckett’s theatre when we explore the way in which theatrical speech relates to the missing event it attempts to describe. Whether the event is enclosed within the speech act itself or whether it is doubled by the attempt of speech to describe it is, as we shall see, a vital question for Beckett. Although both Deleuze and Badiou take a stand against representation, the former makes a complex argument about a constitutive relation between the event and language while the latter argues in favour of a schism between the two. Placing these philosophical questions in the arena of theatrical performance, I would argue that instead of inverting the standard theatrical primacy of event over speech by having the text lord over performance, Beckett in his plays reconfigures the theatrical event and gives it a Deleuzian ‘minor’ agency. Beckett’s consistent emphasis on the offstage as a ‘minor’ evental locus in his plays opens up the spatial complexity in the speech-event relation, which, as we shall see, is not without its temporal dimension either, and I propose the Deleuzian ‘counter-actualization’ of event as a useful conceptual framework for the study of this minor agency in Beckett.¹

Here, I will argue that Beckett’s subversion of theatre’s definitive and identificatory rapport with eventfulness discloses the representational...
mechanics of power in the theatre and, without relegating the event, his work emphasizes its minor interruptive agency in going against the order of things. Beckett's use of the spoken text in theatre unravels a narrative function in which the denial of the first person does not represent but alienates the event in the speech act. Beckett’s theatre progressively foregrounds the function of storytelling on a stage where narrations go in circles around the spectral centre of missing events, dividing the present as a perennial hesitation between the past and the future. Conjuring events in absentia, the storytelling act pushes the performance away from the centre of the stage, which is the standard locus of theatrical representation, and we encounter the offstage with its handsome repertoire of events and voices. The minor agency of the offstage as the exterior of representation provides Beckett with an anti-representational localization of the event.

The event: From premise to promise

In *Play*, three figures in three urns are compelled into the speech act by the single spotlight which keeps shifting from one to the other and the whole performance becomes an extension of torture. The actors reduced to heads protruding from deathly urns are seen as ‘victims’ of the light, which embodies the mechanism of theatrical representation (Beckett, 2003, p. 307). Not only does this spectacle expose the latent power dynamic of theatrical representation by harping on the compulsivity of performance at the beck and call of the interrogative searchlight, but it also transforms the performance into alienation and not representation of the text. The tormenting light extracts vocalization against the speaker's will. As a result, the words are delivered so briskly that they can communicate more on the level of cadence than meaning and this alienates the representational function of theatrical speech. As in MOUTH’s logorrhœa in *Not I*, Beckett exploits the speed of delivery to complicate the content of the text. In *Catastrophe*, he exposes the power of theatrical representation in a more explicitly metatheatrical fashion by depicting the manipulation of an actor by his tyrannical director and this manipulation borders on absolute objectification of the actor. But once again Beckett does not stop with this exposition of theatrical power; he traces a trajectory of retaliation when the wordless actor at the end of the play flouts the director’s commands by raising his head and ‘fixes the audience’ (Beckett, 2003, p. 461) with his gaze. This gaze has the agency to ‘fix’ the audience and it is our minimalist denominator for the event's liminal efficacy pitted against the representational