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Absurdism and the Canadian Picture of a Communist Dictator

Abstract

The paper sets out to define absurdism and then to explore the complex use of intertextuality and ambiguity in Canadian dramatist Sheldon Rosen's play ***Dying after Beckett: A Series of Arias and Interruptions***, a drama centred on the Ceausescu couple. The paper will discuss absurdist aspects of this play, mainly Beckett's influence on Sheldon's vision and techniques dwelling on ***Waiting for Godot***, but it will also analyze such intertexts as Shakespeare's ***Hamlet***, ***Macbeth***, ***The Tempest***, Lewis Carroll's ***Alice in Wonderland***, Wagner's ***Tetralogy*** and piano pieces by Schumann, as well as cultural allusions to the Bible and Christianity and the lay creed of communism.

Résumé

L'étude essaie de définir l'absurde et explorer l'exploitation complexe de l'intertextualité et de l'ambiguïté dans la pièce du dramaturge canadien Sheldon Rosen ***La mort après Beckett: Une série d'airs et d'interruptions***, drame centré sur le couple des Ceausescu. L'étude aborde les aspects absurdes de cette pièce, surtout l'influence de Beckett sur Sheldon en ce qui concerne sa vision et technique en insistant sur ***En attendant Godot*** , mais analyse aussi l' intertextualité avec ***Hamlet***, ***Macbeth*** , ***La Tempête*** de Shakespeare, ***Alice au pays des merveilles*** de Lewis Carrol, la ***Tétralogie*** de Wagner ou les pièces pour piano de Schumann, de même que les envois culturels à la Bible et à la Chrétienté ou au credo communiste.

Introduction

This paper[1] will focus on Canadian dramatist Sheldon Rosen's[2] ***Dying after Beckett*** (1994), a postmodernist play centred round the Romanian communist dictatorial couple Nicolae and

1) This paper is an expansion of the paper "Sheldon Rosen, Beckett and Ceausescu" presented at the British and American Studies XXII Conference, University of the West, Timisoara 17–19 May 2012.

2) As Cynthia Zimmerman's Profile in *The Canadian Theatre Encyclopedi*a says, Sheldon Rosen started his career in 1972 by writing three plays in the absurdist vein, namely one-act comedy, *Love Mouse* ; surrealist one-act play *Meyer's Room* and *The Wonderful World of William Bends (who is not quite himself today)*, which explores the inner life of a mentally disturbed protagonist.
Although Rosen claims to prefer writing abstract and absurdist drama, his most successful work to date is the naturalistic play *Ned and Jack* (1978), set in New York in 1922, and dramatizing a late-night encounter between the popular American dramatist Edward Sheldon and his close friend actor John Barrymore. Yet, this paper tries to demonstrate that *Dying after Beckett* is a remarkable play even if it has passed more or less unnoticed.
I would also like to mention that absurdist drama seems to have experienced revival in Canada in recent years. Rosen appears to be among the initiators, together with Beverley Simmons' *Crabdance* (1969). Among the recent creations in this vein we can mention Vern Thiessen's black comedy entitled *Lenin's Embalmers* (2010), Anita Majumdar's *Fish Eyes* (2012), Jules Lewis's *Tomasso's Party* (2012).

Elena Ceaușescu, executed in December 1989 in the wake of a spontaneous popular uprising possibly superposed on a ***coup d'état***.

When reading the title of the Canadian dramatist's play ***Dying after Beckett***, one would not suspect a topic evoking the Romanian communist dictator, but it is a title that does create certain horizons of expectations which are met. Thus Samuel Beckett ***is*** present in the drama: absurdism is a frame of reading at the structural and stylistic levels, but Beckett is also literally one of the main characters.

Wondering how this original idea occurred to Rosen, one can be struck by the coincidence that may have played a role in it: Beckett died on 22 December 1989 and the Ceaușescus were executed on 25 December, and their obituaries appeared in most newspapers on the same day. Moreover, Sheldon Rosen manifested his attraction to the Theatre of the Absurd as early as 1972 with his first three plays: ***Love Mouse***, ***Meyer's Room*** and ***The Wonderful World of William Bends (who is not quite himself today)***, where out of its main representatives – Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Fernando Arrabal, Jean Genet, Harold Pinter, Athol Fugard, Boris Vian, Edward Albee, Slawomir Mrożek, Vaclav Havel – it is the influence of Beckett that looms large.

The idea of the Absurd preceded its literary representation referring to a (philosophical) attitude to existence, to the world and to cognition: something is absurd when it contradicts the rules of logic or when it embraces/includes the irrational. Philosophical irrationalism maintains the impossibility of a rational understanding of the universe and of existence. Anticipated by the Greeks Anaximandrus, Heraclites, Democritus, it was clearly formulated by Schopenhauer, Dilthey, Spengler, Heidegger, and existentialist philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Sartre, Berdiaev, Gabriel Marcel and Jaspers. Philosophical irrationalism is just one aspect of the wholesale attack on reason and materialism and on established truths and values, both scientific and artistic, that took place at the end of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century (Einstein's theory of relativity dealt a deadly blow to Newtonian physics, chemistry departed from Lavoisier's views, geometry from Euclid's, logic from Aristotle's; painting abandoned perspective and became more abstract, music abandoned harmony, poetry cultivated ambiguity or abandoned sense altogether, narrative discourse abandoned plot and unity of character. And the 1950s the theatre of the absurd introduced the discourse of inaction and fragmented characters.

The subtitle of Rosen's play ***A Series of Arias and Interruptions*** also suggests another frame of reading: music,[3] which is present on several planes, a specific syncretic aspect of many absurdist plays (Rusu 115–17). At the empirical level there is a musical background to the play: a Robert Schumann piano piece (a romantic intertext, which may be only decoded as ironic), and many bits from popular songs (e.g. the tenor's aria from ***My Fair Lady***). At a certain moment Elena also starts tap-dancing, another element of artistic syncretism specific to the anti-theatre show[4]. A piano is pushed on stage in Act I (34) and at the beginning of Act

3) Music always plays an important part in Beckett's drama becoming a real character in *Paroles et Musique* and in *Cascando*.

4) The theatre of the absurd has also been designated as "anti-theatre, avant-garde theatre, experimental/critical/protester drama, meta-drama, tragic farce, dark comedy, metaphysical farce, modern tragic-comedy, human condition drama, apocalyptic theatre, a-theatre" (Rusu 94, my translation).

II Ceauşescu springs out of it in the guise of Count Dracula. When Beckett starts playing the piano in Ceauşescu's presence, "instead of piano notes, the sounds of human suffering and moaning emerge" (41). At a deep structural level the characters seem to stand for certain archetypal human attitudes, emotions and actions that interweave like Wagner's ***leitmotifs***. In addition, the word "interruptions" in the subtitle also announces another important structural aspect – the typically postmodern fragmentariness of the action where the law of cause and effect frequently does not operate, illustrating Anna and Henry Paolucci's remark about the language of absurdist drama:

> For the early dramatists of the Absurd – Pirandello, Sartre, Camus, Samuel Beckett, Eugene Ionesco – realism no longer served either as subject matter or form. Or, rather, a new reality emerged, a fragmented world with individuals who expressed states of being, paradoxical insights, conflicting emotions rather than logical perceptions based on cause and effect, action and reaction… The language of the Absurd emerged as musical reprises, fugue-like repetitions, images and symbols, non-sequiturs, paradoxical inversions. (Paolucci and Paolucci 81)

The play opens with a young man dressed in his mother's prom garment about to hang himself. With his final kicks of life he suddenly turns into a woman (much later in the play we find out he was a homosexual when alive), more exactly into a female Angel, thus introducing the first instance of metamorphosis or change of identity, a phenomenon specific to postmodern characters anticipated by Virginia Woolf's *Orlando* (e.g. sex-changing Myra/Myron Beckenbridge in Gore Vidal's *Myra Beckenbridge*, 1968 and *Myron*, 1975; the protagonist in Brigit Brophy's *In Transit*, 1969; Henry, the protagonist of the postmodern half of Julian Mitchell's duplex novel *The Undiscovered Country*, 1968 – cf. Lodge 279). Rosen will use metamorphosis as a structural device throughout the play. Thus Angel will undergo other metamorphoses: she will change into Peggy (37), an Irish girl Beckett used to be fond of in his youth and then into Billy's mother (67).

When Beckett first appears on stage in a "Preshow," he is highlighted in an armchair sipping tea, then in the first scene we behold him encased in a tree: "He is a tree. He is the tree from Waiting for Godot. Except that its branches are filled with pages of Beckett's writings and assorted objects and items of clothing from his past" (2). This expressionistic image that turns Beckett literally into his writings also evokes the symbolic valence that the tree may have in *Waiting for Godot,* that of the tree of life. At the same time it recalls another literary archetype, namely the old witch Sycorax from *The Tempest*, thus casting Beckett into the role of a wizard, a word wizard, a crucial role foregrounded by his ironic self-definition: "Spinning my words out. Like a spider, like a bloody spider. I'm going to catch you in them. Them webs of words" (2), a definition echoed later by Angel's words ("A web of your own weaving," 37). Contrasted with the words of his former truthful and life-giving literary productions, Beckett self-disparagingly describes his present web of words as life-drained and lying, inserting Hamlet's famous cue as an intertext: "Oh, words. Words. Words" (65). We shall see that through his use of word play, mockery, playfulness, black humour and wit Rosen reflects the fragmentation and dissolution of master narratives in postmodern times (Hutcheon 124–140).

The next character who appears on stage is Billy Martin, a Yankee baseball player with blood on his forehead, still chasing the ball in the sky. He obviously stands for the American passion for sports. But later he declares his "all-time dream" is "to lead a troop of men into war" (14). This posture of the loyal warrior fighting to death for a just cause is ironically reinforced by Billy's repeated metamorphosis into Joan of Arc. He chivalrously acts on behalf of Elena Ceauşescu when her husband slaps her for crying in public (32). He is attracted to Elena Ceauşescu and falls for her so irresistibly that he confesses to having lost his sense of identity: "I don't know who I am anymore" (72, a cue that enhances the absurdist atmosphere. She gives in to him, but then he also has sexual fun with Angel. When he pulls a sword out of a tree and is ready to kill Ceauşescu with it, Billy is ironically cast into the role of a chivalrous knight. The sword is reminiscent of Siegried's Nothung that plays an important part in Wagner's operas *Die Walkűre* and *Siegfried*, which are thus inserted as intertexts. This episode may also be read as an ironic hint at the justice-dispensing role the US has assumed in the contemporary world.

We soon realize after the first scenes that the setting of the play is the indefinite realm of afterlife, with the stage as bare as in *Waiting for Godot*. If in Beckett's play the characters' lives have a death-in-life quality, here they are granted a life-in-death quality. All the characters have flashbacks which conjure up some of the most emotional moments in their lives. The play thus features eternity as a continual reliving of significant past experiences when alive. The dramatist repeatedly uses the technique of the frozen moment for suggesting simultaneity, probably with the help of light effects, as Arthur Miller does in *Death of a Salesman*.

Nicolae Ceauşescu shows up on stage in the blood-stained overcoat he wore at his execution and Elena also appears wearing a similar overcoat. He puts on airs of authority (8) and poses as "a dangerous man" but to his surprise the others treat him derisively and do not seem inclined to take orders from him. The spouses are in desperate need to pee, a need that pinpoints their vulnerability as sheer human beings, but also his impulse to humiliate others by literally urinating on them.

The oneiric afterlife setting acts as an inhibition-liberating mechanism: Elena meets Billy's sexual advances and Nicolae nearly rapes Angel. Elena also proves to be more femininely feeble than the image Romanians have of her, as she bursts into tears when her husband reprimands her and wants her to hold back her tears (32).

What Ceauşescu craves is absolute power and control (62). But he is also gradually revealed as a sadist: he reminisces about remorselessly torturing and killing thousands of victims: anti-communists, Gypsies and Jews (61). I have reversed the order in the text, since the "re-education" and extermination programmes in the famous prisons of Piteşti and Gherla targeted the anti-communists of all races and political conviction. Even if he did not rip out his victims' tongues himself (there were always "overzealous" persons around ready to do it, 27), Ceauşescu's cruelty is represented on stage: in Act I he torments Beckett personally in his half- human half-tree avatar, kicking him savagely while the latter is screaming with pain; moreover, at the end of the play he is ready to rip Beckett's tongue out when he loses patience with him (96).

Ceauşescu's megalomania (and here in the possible film archetype of Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator*, 1940, comes to one's mind) can be inferred from his description of his execu-

tion as "a bon voyage party. A twenty-one gun salute in my honour" (13), a typically indeterminate postmodernist passage. It is hard to tell if he means it, if he tries to lie to save face or is self-ironical, since he haughtily refuses to answer Beckett ("I will only answer questions before the Great National Assembly," 13). The dramatist represents him as a mixture of conscious defiance and uncontrollable fear: when Elena relives the scene of their execution and abjectly begs the squadron on her knees not to shoot them, he demands her to show courage, but then wets his pants unawares (29–30).

Ceaușescu confesses that he began with communist dreams and ideals (77), which is possible as the Marxist theory may sound idealistically fair, though not when it advocates dictatorship, the dictatorship of the proletariat ("a workers' new order," 76). But we consider that, like Ceaușescu, any communist leader could not fail to discover that in order to be preserved, the system needs an absolute control which can only rely on force, violence, torture, betrayal, lies, all the vices and cruelty that human nature is only all too prone to. And this can only lead to the cynical view that Ceaușescu puts forth, also recalling a sort of social Darwinism: "we are all worms. Crawly slimey worms. And the big worms eat the little worms. And the best thing a worm could ever hope to become is a snake. The noble order" (78).

This cue corroborates the description that Elena utters in front of the firing squadron, which portrays the dictatorial couple as an embodiment of the principle of darkness, of the Anti-Christ accumulating and carrying all the sins, vices and rottenness of (Romanian) humanity, posing at the same time as a scapegoat:

> How can you not appreciate what we have taken on our shoulders for you?! … We are the living sewers to your worst impulses. We swallow the venomous psychic waste from your collective animal-peasant psyches. Without us you would choke on your backed-up vileness. You would overflow with putrid blackness. WE TAKE IT ALL FROM YOU. … That is not heaven beating in your hearts. That power beating inside you is the devil's dance. (30)

Ceaușescu's dramatic discourse appears fraught with ambiguity, since in a moment of greater sincerity he discloses that it was not any dream of social justice that actuated him but sheer wish for revenge:

> E: Revenge?
> C: Against injustice.
> E: Which injustice?
> C: Of being born into what we were born into. Of being made to feel minuscule and stupid and worthless. Of being born ugly and humourless. (51)

This is actually an inferiority complex, or what we might call beauty (moral and otherwise) and intelligence envy, or rather class envy, if we extrapolate from Freud and from Marx's explanation of historical progress. But we should also remember how the communist ***apparatchik***s took the place and privileges of those they overthrew (a mechanism satirically foregrounded in the last scene of Orwell's ***Animal Farm***), and the contradiction between the official communist discourse of freedom, equality and social justice – ***and*** the real practice of controlling and

arranging everything apparently according to party interests but actually with a very personal motivation (Ceaușescu discloses to his amazed spouse how she used to watch stuffed birds whose song was imitated by a man or how she was elected communist Queen of the Ball because ***he*** was the party leader, that is the boss).

We can say that Ceaușescu consciously assumes the role of the snake, the archetypal Biblical symbol of the Devil or pure evil delighting in absolute power ("'Come fuck the Devil,' he beckons to Angel," 63). He even philosophizes about being called a murderer by Angel, mockingly echoing Polonius' advice to Laertes in ***Hamlet***: "Look at what the world teaches us. That we are either worse than everyone else or better than everyone else. … So, if I am beaten, I must beat. As night follows day so is that true" (Shakespeare 60).

As we have already mentioned, the play further deconstructs the apparent devotion of the couple to each other and Ceaușescu's values are opposed to the humanistic ones: hatred/love, revenge/forgiveness, lying/truth, paranoiac suspicion/trust, absolute obedience/freedom, absolute control/free choice and blood thirst (murder)/social harmony. Even in making love he seems to be driven by a cannibalistic drive: under his stare Angel feels like "something to be killed and eaten" (58), he is excited by hatred and takes pleasure in death (accidental, or murder). Seeing the look in Angel's eyes when he assaults, he is carried back in time by association:

> Another woman. Like you, very beautiful. We were beginning to make love. Oh my goodness, yes. Our eyes met. Very electric. In her eyes was that look of hatred of men. And in mine of women. Both of us at the same time. It was so arousing. For both of us… Yes… Somehow her neck got broken. Her beautiful, slender neck… Ah, me. One must never try to recapture a perfect moment. (64)

He denies the existence of love and hates those who believe in it, while the other characters such as Angel and Beckett yearn for it, though it has become impossible to find, as Angel states:

> Big talk. Love. There's no one left on the whole goddamned planet who remembers what it means. Just a bunch of pigs stuffing themselves. Don't look at me with your big gooey eyes. There is no love to be found here. (72).

It is a world where spouses frequently hate each other like Beckett's parents, children hate their parents (as Angel's mother apparently hates her mother until her death scene) and make them suffer (as Ceausescu confesses), mothers do not really love their children (Joyce's mother describes him as a boy "squirming like a worm on a hook," 95; and Billy's mother expresses her contempt for him calling him "a faggot," 68).

In the last scenes of the play Ceaușescu flies into a rage as he thinks Beckett refuses to tell them "the one more thing" hinted at by his mother and menaces to rip out his tongue. The motif of the bloody tyrant is reinforced by the intertextual insertion of ***Macbeth***, which also evokes the Weird Sisters' apparently absurd reference to a walking wood by Beckett's allusion to Dunsinane, 35). It is Billy who reacts to Ceaușescu's rage by wanting to kill the tyrant 'springing' with his new sword in Beckett's defence, but the latter refuses to "say the word," to give him "the hit sign"(98). Beckett wants to give Ceaușescu a chance to redeem himself. Elena

and Angel are both all for Ceaușescu's murder, but Angel and Billy squirm over who is to do it, so the dictator manages to get the sword by ruse and false promises and savagely kills Billy and then stabs his wife over and over, gloating over his godly attributes in words that somewhat caricature Christ: "I am the truth! I am the power" (102). But as they are already dead the characters keep "reviving" and the infuriated dictator stabs them again and again turning a tragic action into a farcical one, again in a way characteristic of absurdist drama; Ceaușescu seems to become a dark version of what some critics have called the "Beckettian clown" (Rusu 127). Rather inconsistently with his former attitude, but in keeping with his name, Angel forgives Ceaușescu on the "murdered" characters' behalf, which causes him to pitilessly kill her too. Left only with Beckett, Ceaușescu declares his plan to rule the world with him. But to his amazement, Beckett, whom he knows not to have forgiven anyone in his life, tells him that he forgives him everything. This madly enrages Nicolae who is about to thrust the sword into Beckett's heart, but stops short. He cannot do it because he would not bear it be left all by himself. The taunting retorts are repeated and then the two characters freeze into a tableau, with the other "murdered" characters heard in the distance Angel advocating forgiveness, Billy crying for revenge, Elena promising to dedicate all her time to tormenting Ceausescu (although she could forgive general Stanculescu, Gelu Voican, Malutan, Captain Dabija, Major Florescu and the soldiers of the firing squad[5], 84). Two camps fighting for eternity, juxtaposed: hatred and revenge versus love and forgiveness, Luciferian versus Christly values. The characters keep doing the same gestures for eternity, the conflict gets no resolution, but ends in eternal repetitive gestures. Yet evil seems to have the upper hand since, as we have seen, Ceausescu "murders" all the other characters except Beckett. Rosen makes Beckett the promoter of the forgiving creed and also inserts an intertext that gives him a Christly aura ("I forgive you, you know not what you do," 108). We can read this only ironically for, as we learn from Mitchell Morse, Beckett was an atheist and antitheist (512). The ending confirms Martin Esslin's remark about the theatre of the absurd: "all certitudes and unshakable assumptions of former ages have been swept away … and discredited as somewhat childish illusions" (xviii).

It is noteworthy that, like Vladimir and Estragon who cannot decide to hang themselves because then one would remain alone, Ceaușescu cannot stand the idea of being left alone either. Loneliness haunts and oppresses the other characters too:

> Beckett: I feel more lonely now than when I was alone Billy: I know that feeling, that's for sure. When I'm on the team plane after a game. After the glow is gone and I don't feel part of anything anymore. You understand what I'm saying? (7)

As the title has made us anticipate, the influence of Beckett is all pervasive in the play. His mentor Joyce appears on stage and is referred to as a Man, a protean character that everybody takes for somebody else (89). He proffers typical puns ("to stop now would be fetal, my already born," 92), laughs at the last chance for human freedom, looks on what is going on stage as if he were at the theatre, and mocks at the way men try to fill the void of their lives.

5) Here, as in many other passages of the play, Rosen displays a very good knowledge of the Ceausescus' lives and the circumstances of their execution.

As in every absurdist drama the characters become tormented by a sense of the futility of life (Crețu 126). "What was it all for, Nicky ... our lives," Elena wonders in afterlife (50). Like Hamlet, she is frightened of the unknown, would like to find out more from the Man/Joyce about what is beyond her range of vision. He depicts "the big world out there" as "Fairly flat. No mountains to climb Straightforward. Darkish. A trifle damp. No people" (91), a description strongly reminiscent of setting in *Waiting for Godot*.

Rosen also uses contradiction, in a passage that "cancels itself out as it goes along" (again echoing Beckett's masterpiece), a specific feature of postmodernist texts according to David Lodge (209):

> Angel: Don't go.
> Man: I won't. (He exits) (92)

Another word charged with strong intertextual implications is "Da da," the reply that Angel gives twice (92). It can possibly function as the Romanian affirmative answer, simultaneously also working as an allusion to Dadaism, the first movement that rejected the tyranny of reason and logic in favour of nonsense.

To enhance the atmosphere of defiance of ordinary logic, Ceausescu reverses the well-known idiomatic phrase repeating twice the paradoxical statement that it's not the cat that swallowed the canary but "[t]he canary swallowed the cat" (94). Beckett's remark that the world of afterlife becomes "curioser and curioser"(*Alice in Wonderland*, chapter 2) for the characters (11) represents an intertext that underscores absurdism hinting at Lewis Carroll's immortal masterpiece of nonsense. Rosen also cultivates punning, one of the most amusing instances being Billy's retort to Beckett: "You son of a birch. Your Ma fuck a lumberjack?"(19).

We can therefore conclude as Antonin Artaud maintains that, on the one hand "the dramatic action, like that of the plague, is beneficial since, by pressing people to see themselves as they are it tears away their mask, reveals their lies, their torpor, their nothingness, their hypocrisy" (Artaud 28; my translation). But like many absurdist dramas, *Dying after Beckett* is a tragicomedy, a plurivocal text which at the same time reads like "a reflection upon what seems to be the most representative attitude[s] of this age" (Esslin 4), a reflection on (communist) dictatorship and the "free" world, on parent/children relationships, on love and sex, on revenge and hatred, on war and the heroic stance, on Christ and Lucifer, on metadramatic discourse, all cast in a pervasive ironic mode that makes this absurdist reflection sound half-serious, half-mocking, a mixture of despair and derision.

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