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Samuel Beckett's rough For Theatre I and II: A Revolt against Absurdity

By Pouria Torkamaneh, Noorbakhsh Hooti
Razi University,

Abstract - Deemed as depictions of dejection intermingled with penetrative multiaccentuality, nothingness, and murkiness, Beckett's multilayered texts lead the mind of the reader/observer into a deadlock in rendering a plausible connotation camouflaged in their sub-texts. As a result, the paradoxical and baffling amalgamation of simplicity and complexity in his works keeps the readers and pundits captivated in the fanciful web of the text. Expectedly, this delusive feature has tantalized a bumper crop of articles to mark Beckett down as a paragon of absurdism and atheism over the past few decades. However, by ploughing new fields and charting new territories of his works, we can redefine and re-delineate Beckett's ideologies as non-absurdist and theist and ultimately he himself as an absurdistic writer rather than an absurdist author. Contrary to the mainstream impression of hermeneutists about Beckett's rationalizations that are fallaciously thought to be absurd and purposeless, his argumentations of absurdity are not a stymie to propagandize absurdism, but an initiative to actuate our consciousness to eschew our absurd life in order to lead us to a new sphere of reality and meaning. Therefore, this paper is to underpin the above-mentioned avowals by re-introducing Beckett as a crusader against absurdity and mental stagnation through a comparative review of Rough for Theatre I and II.

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Samuel Beckett's *rough For Theatre I* and *II*: A Revolt against Absurdity

Pouria Torkamaneh^a, Noorbakhsh Hooti²

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1. INTRODUCTION

Stylistically discrete and mystifying, writings of Samuel Beckett seem to be more labyrinthine and cryptic than most of the works of his contemporary authors and somehow more elaborate and sinuous than how we usually strive to decode his works via our 'interpretations.' Precisely, his literary works seem to pull the rug from underneath the feet of the philosopher or clouding the mind of the reader by substantiating the possibility of decrypting and comprehending his works as a long shot with expressing too much by saying too little. Studying his works, especially his plays, creates the impression that there are multiple nuances of exegeses, underlay and disguised by the main text, which lead any first time reader down to an impasse in dissecting or even understanding the real and intended connotation of the text. Epistemologically speaking, his

works cross-examine the reader in desecrating the preconceived purports of his works, that in pursuing them there appears an amalgamation of umpteen possible denotations and connotations, in which each possible meaning 'defers' and contradicts the other 'different' meanings, which link up and highlight the role of multiaccentuality of the sign effectively. Relatively speaking, this nature of complication in the subtexts, which are interconnected and make each study more serpentine in certain cases, is oscillating in Beckett's works in which truth and language are somehow lost in their ways in becoming an intelligible and coherent text. Absolutely borderless, his enigmatic works make any dilettante reader fail to grasp the meaning of his works if s/he jumps straight in, out of nowhere proclaiming his/her opinions and making rash generalizations. In this regard, Derrida as one of the giant philosophers opines that:

When I found myself, with students, reading some of Beckett's texts, I would take three lines, I would spend two hours on them, then I would give up because it would not have been possible, or honest, or even interesting, to extract a few 'significant' lines from a Beckett's text. The composition, the rhetoric, the construction and the rhythm of his works, even the ones that seem the most 'decomposed', that is what 'remains' finally the most 'interesting', that is the work, that is the signature, this remainder which remains when the thematics are exhausted (Quoted in Royle, 1995: 61)

Beckett is a playwright who only 'presents' absurdity of life and does not 'argue' it. Nonetheless, numerous studies of Beckett's works have vindicated that they still tender a number of areas that deserve exploration, particularly its authentication of anti-absurdism points, which are predominately taken for granted. Accurately, to date, scholars have not yet proffered or consulted a new and state-of-the-art approach in scrutiny of his works' absurdity panorama that limn this vaunted playwright in a contrastive image of how he has customarily been advertised. Insightfully, his works are bolsters of his penchant to knock down all the obstacles of living a rational and hopeful life commingled with his downright endorsement of belief in a metaphysical power and the Hereafter. Therefore, by tracking down the traces of a transcendent belief in the supernatural power and the Hereafter as the highlight of this paper, it endeavors to deracinate and redefine the

^a Author : BA student of English Literature, Razi University, Faculty of Arts. English Department, Kermanshah, Iran.

E-mail : pouriatorkamaneh@yahoo.com, Phone No: +989361901411

² Author : Assistant professor, Razi University, Faculty of Arts. English Department, Kermanshah, Iran. E-mail : nhooti@yahoo.com, Phone No: +98 912 593 5460

unjustifiable labels of absurdity from Beckett's works via a comparative review of *Rough for Theatre I* and *II* as two samples of his countless works. However rather than simply providing answers or decoding and deciphering a text or even solving conundrums, this study strives to introduce a new dimension of Beckett's multifaceted works through these two long-forgotten plays. In fact, to engage effectually with Beckett's works does not mandatorily mean to decode their underneath obscurity, but it is to first inhumane our ego and judgment before appraising the play and then to fuel all expositions espoused by various attitudes as an appreciable and 'possible' vista, as Beckett once said, "the key word in my plays is 'perhaps.' " (1979: 220)

Although *Theatre I* and *II* have received inadequate attention, due to other apocalyptic works of Beckett, we cannot disavow the appreciative dexterity of thought, perplexity of dialogues, and idiosyncrasy (although fascinating) captivation of the words, which have been interpolated in these two works premeditatedly. Like his other works, melancholy, prorogation, skepticism, and ambivalence, just to name a few, are the oozed and prima facie flavors of *Theatre I* and *II* as well.

However, with these well-expounded and oft-proclaimed life-is-meaningless doom and gloom catchphrases, the real tenor of his works still seems obfuscating. At the very beginning, he plunges the audience into the terra incognita atmosphere of the play so adroitly that consequently the perplexed readers that are wavering on a contour between the eyes that see and a heart that feels, are gradually dissociated from the real and contrived orientation of the play.

Thereby, those who criticize Beckett's works through pessimistic spectacles tend to miss this fundamental difference that as long as things are in the process of ending, they have not yet ended (and perhaps never will), as Rathjen notes, "[his works] deal with the process of ending but seldom or never with an actual end." (2006: 163)

II. ABSURDITY ARGUMENT

Though a contrapuntal anatomization of both plays, it seems that the quintessential stream of storylines are after the desire to catch up on the pathetic and piteous living condition, afflicted upon the main characters, in a simple but pre-tailored condition. Critical analysis of the characters in both *Theatre I* and *II* illuminates and functionalizes the radix of debasement and reclusiveness, engaged in their crestfallen life in their own attitude and reaction toward the exterior world. *Theatre I* sets out a character that sustains the ramifications of living a fallaciously irrational, apathetic, and fantasized life of his mind and how it leads him to a poignant living condition and unimagined hell. Settled in the corner of a street with a couple of roads intersected upon it; Billy's chosen position of living is the first

impetus to his stagnant and monotonous life. Though he encounters two different paths to explore new experiences and opportunities of life, de facto two 'life-affirming' options, he spares no efforts to change his atrocious living condition. He is glued to his seat with no penchant of action, and stuck-still like a zombie till he becomes "unhappy enough to die." (Beckett, 1958: 69) The blind man reveals the reminiscence of how his wife deserted him and he is expectantly, although illusively, hearing her back now and again.

You were not always as you are," asks the other character curiously, "What befell you? Women? Gambling? God? " but he retorts that, "I am always as I am, crouched in the dark, scratching an old jangle, to the four winds." (68)

Although he used to have a euphoric life with his family and 'woman', but he missed her as the chance to be his companion and blames the world for his loneliness. Interestingly the other character appears to be a logical person, and who has had the same experience, berates and wakes him that, "We had our women, had not we? you yours to lead by the hand and I mine to get me out of the chair and back into it again and eventually to help [us], but [we] lost them." (ibid) Therefore, it is demonstrative of how their harrowing life has been (mis)shaped by their own pitfalls. To consummate their collection of altering a hopeful life into a hopeless one (absurd), they miss the most perceptible glitter of hope or window of opportunity of companionship, provided for them by rejecting to help one another reciprocally. Clearly put, these two physically incapacitated characters come to know each other fortuitously and their diametrically opposed deficiencies dispose them to join forces in order to help and make up for each other's impairment. Practically, Billy could simply help the other walk and push his wheelchair and the other could role as the eyes that Billy never possessed, but they dither and rebuff mutual support and finally never get together as a pair.

Scrutiny of *Theatre II* homes in on the same root of calamities through character's own decisions and standpoints toward the world as well. Through torrent of catastrophes of "Sick headaches, irrational fear of vipers, ear trouble, fibroid tumors, pathological horror of songbirds, need of affection, morbidly sensitive to the opinions of others" (82) and many others, there does not exist any cruel reason conclusive to any sign of irrationality from the probable absurdity of life. However, the following incentives emphasize how stimulants like his youth's mischief along with many others initiated, instantiated and precipitated his dispirited life instead of a serene one and eventually probable act of suicide as a means of a gateway out of his life:

Age ten runs away from home for the first time, brought back next day, admonished, forgiven...aged seventeen, runs away from home for [fifth and] the last time, crawls back a year later on his hands and his knees, kicked out, forgiven. (84-5)

Mr. Peaberry testifies that, "of our national epos he remembered *only the calamities*, which did not prevent him from winning a minor scholarship in the subject." (80) It is the substantiation of how he has taken the role of hope for granted in certain sections of his life, and the justification of how he was plunged into melancholy that he became unable to alter his desolate state of mind. Completely and successively deteriorated by living as a leashed slave of despondency and nonchalance, arising chiefly from his deep-seated sense of self-alienation; Croker's wrong actions one after the next pile up his hoard of misfortunes and are to lead him to new territories of bad luck. They tangle him in a life bereft of transcendent hope and pessimism, just like the characters in *Theater I*. As a result, Beckett (with morbid sensitivity to the opinions of others about his works) who has the courage to confront us with how we have sabotaged our living circumstances, revolts against this type of absurdity and presents an analysis of the fundamentals: the core, or 'essence' of what maps out human experience. Accordingly, he abrogates the unjustifiably guided hallucinations about his works that "[his] works are a matter of fundamental sounds, no joke intended" (Harmon, 1998: 24), which are the sounds of our well-structurally pathetic life. Still and all, we erroneously gauge him and his plays or novels as paragons of absurdism, although he only presents our self-made absurdity in confrontation with the world.

These two interconnected, perfectly conflated, and well-crafted plays seem to contribute more than it initially meets the eyes. Predeterminedly, Beckett has supplemented and integrated certain ingredients of both plays to convey a designative point. In *Theatre I*, Billy has practiced segregation that he seems to have lost his sanity and asks, "if it is day or not", "how the trees are doing" or if "there [is] grass anywhere?" (Beckett, 1958: 68) It seemingly anchors his apathy and obvious ennui, which stems from his immobility. Having considered that, the second layer of this utterance qualifies itself in that, apart from Billy's indifference, this excerpt is also indicative of Billy's metaphysical desire for time and peace in which allegorically we, people, look for peace only in the appearance of night. This idea of lack of order and peace that Billy is troubling to regain endlessly to put an end to his perpetual sufferings does not end in that pronouncement. In fact, Beckett does not only suffice it to shed light on how we are making a mess out of our personal lives, but he also takes one more step ahead and underlines how we have managed to traumatize each other's life and destabilize its balance. In the latter parts of *Theatre I*, Billy needs to know the time and if it is day or night and therefore asks: "Will it not soon be night? which seems to be a simple question. However, the other character provides a relatively knotty respond that "Day...night... sometimes it seems to me the earth must have got stuck...one sunless day...in the heart of winter...in the grey of the evening." (72)

III. GOD AND THE HEREAFTER

A rigorous and attentive exploration of the play's unique textual characteristics reveals Beckett's beliefs in something metaphysical and supernatural, which mysteriously has been seeped 'indirectly' through the text. A detailed inquiry at the linear development of both plays uncovers that the incidents, dialogues, and the plot of *Theatre I* is proceeded by some pertinent and corresponding coincidences in *Theatre II*. In fact, *Theatre II and I* seem to be complementary and interdependent. In truth, Beckett keeps drilling his creeds, argument, and revolts against absurdism by moving into a further sphere of his beliefs portraying and emphasizing the end and after life. *Theatre I* seems to stage the life of two elderly men who are spending the twilight days of their lives in the secular world and thus *Theatre II*, in continuity of *Theatre I*, is sketching out the trial of Croker, probably in the other world, who can be considered samples like the characters in *Theatre I*. Croker who is catatonic or probably dead is standing in the window, suspended between the earth and the night sky, probably entangled between this world and the other, and therefore, analogous to being judged by Morvan and Bertrand. It can be surmised that he is supposed to be positioned in that location premeditatedly in order to foster the audience have the opportunity to draw conclusion about his life and destiny. Indeed, being scrutinized by two bureaucrats in a gloomy room and being ensnared in time and space, Croker and his life are reckoned to be the tool that Beckett has utilized to influence the audience and let them envisage the last of Croker or even the last of human condition on themselves. Beckett tries to elucidate this freedom of judgment and suspension of Croker simply by putting him on the centre of a high double window, probably closer to the sky (sixth floor), Jupiter planet, and the moon, which highlights the practicality of the notion of the 'theatre on trial'. It somehow feels like Beckett has deactivated the passage of time in order to commingle our consciousness and emotions with a person who is about to take a giant leap into the other world and entitle the reader to speculate and judge about Croker's destiny as a sample human being. McMullan confirms this feature of Beckett's works as follows:

The elements of performance in Beckett's plays foreground the interrelated processes of production, perception, and judgment: both through his characters' attempts to represent and perceive their existence as an image or a narrative and through the structure and texture of the plays, which foreground the production of visual and verbal signifying material for perception and judgment by an audience. (1993: 10)

Similarly enough, it is now possible to postulate that *Theatre I* and *II* can be viewed as a supplementary two-episode televised serial that never ends as Croker never commits suicide, and therefore Beckett delegates

the final assessment of everything upon the observer as the astute director of this bizarre movie. Accurately *Theatre I* can be read and considered an illusion to the ending days of each human being's life in mundane world (Billy and his only companion), and respectively *Theatre II* can be deemed as the viaduct or window to transfer humans (*Theatre I*) to the other world and Croker is an example of this transference.

Precisely, Bertrand and Morvan, who create the impression that they are not from the mundane world, are providing service to someone out of this ordinary world, and just before starting reading the testimonies Bertrand says, "I still do not understand, why he needs our services? A man like him...and why we give them free...men like us...mystery." (Beckett, 1958: 77) This terse but expressive dialogue indicates someone other than what we initially assume of the antecedent of 'him'. Simply put, it comprehensibly feels like all three characters in *Theatre II*, (second episode after *Theatre I*) are beyond our perception of life and this world. Plainly defined, "Beckett places the[se] 'characters' in locations that are beyond life and death." (Boulter 2008: 8) Considering the bureaucrats as two divine beings, who are supposed to be agents, checking and evaluating people's afterlife, they are mentioning someone whom they are providing service for and it can be presupposed that they are talking about a metaphysical power.

Billy who was formerly characterized as a chimerical character describes his feelings as if he sometimes hears people around him whispering. Although both Billy and the other character along with the audience are fully aware that there is no one around who wants to reside in that place, he utters, "Sometimes I hear steps and voices. I say to myself they are coming back, some are coming back, to try to settle again, or to look for something they had left behind, or to look for someone they had left behind." (Beckett, 1958:69) This section of Billy's dialogues can be decoded that if we take the derelict road in which they are residing in, as an allusion of this secular world and its ephemerality, and on the other hand postulate the people who are coming back as those who are living in the other world (afterlife), we can respectively reach the conclusion that Beckett is warning us about something forgotten. Specifically, they are coming back remorsefully for what they lost and ignored, that is living a conscious and objective life; in lieu of spending it improvidently and disgracefully, thus it feels like these two characters are somehow neither in this world, nor in the other. As a hypothesis, they are entrapped between 'Inferno' and 'Paradiso', which is intermediary and is precisely called 'Purgatorio', and are somehow narrating everything from an exterior/dominant panorama or vantage point. These three terms are undoubtedly the three Canticas (sections) which are allegorized by Dante in *Divine Comedy*, which reveals Beckett's inclination to make use of these metaphors in

his own works. According to McDonald, "throughout his works vivid images of suffering from Dante's masterpiece often resurface. His student copy of *the Divine Comedy* would be at his bedside when he died in 1989." (2006: 10) Moreover, Beckett's apprehension of other world can be justified through Palacios (1919) argumentation that Dante derived many features of and episodes about the Hereafter from the spiritual writings of Ibn Arabi and from the *Isra and Mi'raj*. Therefore, it demonstrates Beckett's awareness of these phases of life and how deliberately he has sketched out these images and stages. Contrary, a bumper crop of articles have constantly been titled and resonated with the idea of a non-religious Beckett, however, the above-mentioned avowals seem to inoculate him against the encroachment of a presumed disbelief in someone or something other than what we are cognizant of. As Cronin attests,

Beckett always possessed a Bible, at the end more than one edition, and Bible concordances were always among the reference books on his shelves. He certainly knew the book backwards and as a boy he won a prize for knowing it in the diocesan synod examination (1996: 21)

Beckett also tries to claw at deeper and greater levels of intuition and experience by stimulating and activating the readers' five senses in certain parts of his plays in an intangible method, although unfortunately, most readers do not get the learning curves of identifying these momentous moments. In one of these instances, he tests the readers' eyesight and consciousness in which he displays something that is not mentioned in the screenplay. He has deposited a pole with a sign submitting a pair of crossed lines in which they put embargo on some sort of an action in that certain part of the street. Crucially enough, that pole has been set right in front of Billy's place of living, which signifies something of great import. It is weird that the street betokens of nothing but deterioration. It shows that how beautifully Beckett has delved into the world of those individuals who have drowned themselves in the convulsive ocean of absurdity and pessimism. However, there seems to be a kind of bamboozling misconceptions on Beckett's notions on absurdity, but Beckett does not give an absurd picture of life or existence as a totality. Indeed, he tries to show the innermost layer of those individuals who find themselves too weedy to break the crust of pessimism, the pessimism, which has become a mind blocking obstacle of entering the new arena of the current dominant circumstances of life, which portray the epistemological truth of existing existence of the individual. The tragic and heart lacerating point of the modern man is that he depends on what he was more than what he is now.

We should not take life as a totalizing sequel, but as fragmented forms, and if we do so, we will never

grow the sense of absurdity and cynicism within us, because each fragmented episode of life has its own birth and death, which does not affect the birth of a new episode of our life. Each footstep of life has its own melody, and if one melody sounds off-key, it does not mean all the coming tones are bound to be off-key as well. Beckett in his play shows the inner world of those individuals who look at life as a totalizing sequel with a fast moving off-key rhythm. Indeed Beckett is jarred to see such dead but moving characters, who contaminate the world with their frustrating and dejecting dormant notions. Hence, Beckett tries to awaken man from the deep slumber of absurdity, which has grown to be a terrifying nightmare. He wants to say that if we break the fossilized shackles of the nightmare of absurdity, we can enjoy the sweet heartbeats of the moving moments as well.

Turning to *Theatre II*, this idea of credo and faith about the different phases of existence in different moves of life is alluded from the characters' dialogues as well. When Morvan is giving a rundown of another testament about Croker's misfortunes, they drop a hint about somewhere other than his home, since each home represents a different nature of existence.

To hear him talk about his life, after a glass or two, you would have thought he had never set foot outside of hell. He had us in stitches. I worked it up into a skit that went down well, Testimony of Mr. Moore. (Beckett, 1958: 80)

First, it simply points to his adverse living condition, but Bertrand clarifies that, "you see! This is not his home and he knows it full well." (ibid.) This perplexing dialogue can be interpreted from various dimensions. First by his home, he means either this place or this world, which indicates the notion of 50/50 chances in Beckett works (uncertainty or multiaccentuality). Croker does not live in that home; instead, he lives in a barge. Therefore, we may deduce that by his home, he is talking about the current context of existence and that sooner or later his present life will die and consequently a new life will be born.

Through taking Croker and his heart-rending life into consideration, we may claim that croaking and dying are not necessarily about the declining years of our life or the death itself, but about imprisoning ourselves within a murky dungeon of a paralyzed world, which by itself is dead.

Beckett as a dexterous and astute playwright does not leave the subconscious territory of the reader/observer's mind at rest. *Theatre II* represents how with terse but pregnant and meaningful dialogues, Beckett indoctrinates his beliefs into the innermost section of the audience's mind. Walking in the dark room, Bertrand approaches Croker, who is rooted to that spot and is about to throw himself out of the window, looks at the hopeful bright sky and utters out, "full moon" but Morvan corrects him and says that it is

"tomorrow". Then Bertrand asks, "What's the date?", and Morvan responds that, "twenty-fourth...twenty-fifth tomorrow." (78) Why does a person who wants to commit suicide in order to abandon the world, choose a place to throw himself under the bright night sky, the full moon (24th and 25th of the month) and on the sixth floor of an apartment? First of all, sixth floor of an apartment is much closer to the sky which symbolizes Beckett's yearning to depict his attention to the celestial bodies. This extraterrestrial depiction is not labeled only with full moon, but also with presence of Jupiter, twinkling in the sky. By resting in the central orbital line of planets, with four planets preceding and four planets extending past it, Jupiter and its position are idealized for justice, central power, and perfect order, which are rarely found on planet Earth. More importantly, the full moon has something to do with creation, manifestation, birth, and rebirth. The full moon completes the cycle, representing death, change, or tying up loose ends. It symbolizes the end chapter, shedding light on the things that we no longer need to hold on to. Full Moon is an opportune time of the month for purging 'rituals' to take place. The light of the full moon illuminates those things that are interfering with our spiritual advancements.

Once we have become enlightened to ways that are blocking us, the easier to let go. The full moon occurrence is for releasing or purging the things in our lives that no longer serve us good such as addictions to food, drugs, or sex, relinquishing suffering involved in hurtful relationships, discharging physical and emotional pains, and eventually cleansing our soul as the new moon appears. Respectively, this image of full moon in *Theatre II*, is echoed in *Waiting for Godot* clearly in which it snags our attention toward revitalization that is mingled with surrealistic replacement and renewal of day and night. Schneider states that, "when the highly stylized 'moon' suddenly rose and night 'fell' at the end of that first act, a simple representation of *rebirth* affected me beyond all reason." (1958: 192) Accurately, it manifests how Beckett tries to alert us about another world of existence by utilizing full moon, sixth floor of an apartment, Jupiter, and bright night sky, intermingled with hope, and how those can bring us elation and salvation. It authenticates Beckett's endeavors to seek sanctuary in somewhere other than the current existence, from the cruelties and absurdities that we have set up in the world unjustly.

However, it should be strongly reminded that though the coruscating moon is the harbinger of hope and rebirth, it does not necessitate this redemption through suicide as a *dues ex machina* or any other fallacious ends, but it can be implied that this is gained through natural death and purposeful life. Thereby, it highlights and underpins Beckett's desire to prove redemption, equilibrium, and justice through something apart from the current fragment of frustrating life, but from each upcoming episode, which has its own pros

and cons. Hence, Beckett looks at life with both appreciation and depreciation, which are the integral parts of life. Indeed, Beckett's main worries and concerns are on those individuals who are dressed in the black shroud of darkness and have buried themselves in a marooned island of just depreciation and absurdity.

IV. CONCLUSION

Rough for Theatre I and II as two convoluted, riveting, and epigrammatic, however forgotten works in Beckett's oeuvre, welcome the opportunity of detaching some of the hasty and predisposed generalizations about his doctrines. Absurdist, atheist, existentialist?, atheist existentialist and many other inequitable labels, encrusted with 'nothingness' are the common but unmerited adjectives affiliated to his works. However, "the whole 'negative way' of Beckett is a 'defiant creation from nothing,' an outpouring of 'reproductive and inventive energy,' which in turn tropes 'the generative power of what is as against the realm of what is not.'" (Wolosky 1991: 228)

Scrutinizing every single phrase of these two encoded plays and their gnomic dialogues, this paper attempted to re-introduce Beckett as a tactfully absurdist, and insightful author and philosopher who only tries to exhort us about some overlooked values and aims of life. The study further tried to unpick how Beckett in *Rough for Theater I and II*, unravels the mental stagnation of those individuals, whose disappointing *Past* is always present and the *Present* itself is never born and consequently no future can come to existence. Hence, such characters who are wedded to a world, which is no more, may not find the physical death or a reclusive life a shift from existence to non-existence. Indeed, such a shift may mean a move from one dungeon to probably a much darker one. Therefore, darkness for them does not mean really darkness since they are not familiar with beauty of light and illumination.

To put it in a nutshell, the veiled and sheathed layers of *Theatre I and II* tend to insinuate that Beckett wants to push us toward a logical, purposeful, and humanistic life and fight against the absurdities brought about by our own actions as human beings. Ergo, *Theatre I and II* are the apparatus that Beckett uses in order to revolt against this absurdity, even though only unprejudiced readers will uphold this uprising.

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