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Reading Badiou, Reading Beckett: The Postmodern ‘Event’ in *Waiting for Godot*

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Abstract:

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* has always been identified as revealing existential tenets and is labeled as one of the prominent examples of the ‘theatre of the absurd’, where ‘nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes’. (I, 34). However, even after almost repudiating any chance of happening, the play unfailingly contains some interesting instances of happening, and that is the point this paper tries to explore. This idea of happening/non-happening will be explored taking cues from Alain Badiou’s idea of ‘event’ and ‘truth’, and Linda Hutcheon’s theorization of the postmodernist paradox of the ‘decentering’. The paper highlights the link between this idea of the decentered center and the play’s uneventful event or eventful non-event. This paper will also draw insight from Jacques Lacan’s idea of ‘symptom’ and ‘unconscious’ as and when necessary.

Keywords: Event, Truth, Decentering, symptom, unconscious

Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* has time and again been the center of critical attention since its publication in 1952. Various readings have been assigned to the play, ranging from reading the subtle homosexual references in the pairing of Vladimir and Estragon, to the Hindu philosophy underlined in the text. But the most worked upon critical analysis on *Waiting for Godot* is certainly categorizing the drama in the canon of absurdist theatre and finding existentialist tenets in it. Moving away from these popular readings, this paper attempts to offer a reading on the obsession with the non-happening or the non-event in the play, linking it with the postmodern idea of decentering. The paper will also show that the play, obsessed with decentering, finally ends up in coming up with a center and the absence of event in the play becomes an event itself.

Waiting for Godot is a play, where ‘nothing happens, nobody comes and nobody goes’. (I, 34) These line from the play itself is an indication of the non-event or non-happening in the play. In this context one can refer to Alain Badiou’s idea of ‘event’ and ‘truth’ from his *Being and Event*. Badiou’s philosophy is a kind of phenomenon that produces ‘truth’ and he holds the opinion that this ‘truth’ can be reached only through a process that breaks decisively with all established norms for judging the validity of opinions. Each truth can only begin from an event or discovery. Badiou explicates this concept further in his ‘preface’ to *Being and Event* :

A truth is solely constituted by rupturing with the order which supports it, never as an effect of that order. I have named this type of rupture which opens up truths ‘the event’. (*Being and Event*, xii)

Badiou, in his seminal work *On Beckett*, even though he disputes the tradition that has considered Beckett an absurdist or existentialist, considers *Waiting for Godot* as a play that is untouched by any event. Throughout the play, there is an obsession with non-happening. Delved deep into this idea of nothing happening, the play begins with this very notion of non-event:

Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again. As before. Enter Vladimir.
ESTRAGON:
(*giving up again*). Nothing to be done. (I, 1)

There is a deliberate attempt on the playwright's part to emphasize that the characters have nothing to do apart from keeping up with their futile endeavour of doing nothing:

VLADIMIR:
Sometimes I feel it coming all the same. Then I go all queer. (*He takes off his hat, peers inside it, feels about inside it, shakes it, puts it on again.*) How shall I say? Relieved and at the same time . . . (*he searches for the word*) . . . appalled. (*With emphasis.*) AP-
PALLED. (*He takes off his hat again, peers inside it.*) Funny. (*He knocks on the crown as though to dislodge a foreign body, peers into it again, puts it on again.*) Nothing to be done...Well?

ESTRAGON :
Nothing.
VLADIMIR :Show me.
ESTRAGON:
There's nothing to show. (I, 3)

Nothing is fixed in the play, that one can adhere to. Nothing is same, complacent. Nothing could be hold on to. Vladimir and Estragon cannot even remember if this is the same place where they are supposed to meet Godot :

ESTRAGON:
We came here yesterday.
VLADIMIR:
Ah no, there you're mistaken.
ESTRAGON:
What did we do yesterday?
VLADIMIR:
What did we do yesterday?
ESTRAGON:
Yes.
VLADIMIR:

Why . . . (*Angrily.*) Nothing is certain when you're about. (I, 7)

A good deal of exhaustive research has been done on trying to establish at least an etymology for Godot's name. It has often been suggested that Godot is a weakened form of the word 'god', highlighting the disbelief in religion or in God. Godot's arrival in the play is much awaited and also anticipated that his arrival might miraculously save the situation. But does not Beckett subtly indicate that there is nothing called God? One can wait forever, but no one will turn up, further implying the meaningless waiting of the two tramps as a kind of a non-event. The two tramps do not even know how Godot looks like or maybe they do not have any idea of what Godot will do for them:

VLADIMIR:

I'm curious to hear what he has to offer. Then we'll take it or leave it.

ESTRAGON:

What exactly did we ask him for?

VLADIMIR:

Were you not there?

ESTRAGON:

I can't have been listening.

VLADIMIR:

Oh . . . Nothing very definite. (I, 10)

They cannot even remember what they have asked from him to help them with. It is a 'vague supplication' (I, 10) to them and whether Godot has succumbed to it they cannot even recall that as well. Even Godot seems to do 'nothing', as his messenger, the boy in Act Two has pointed out to Vladimir and Estragon :

VLADIMIR :What does he do, Mr. Godot?

(*Silence.*) Do you hear me?

BOY:

Yes Sir.

VLADIMIR:

Well?

BOY:

He does nothing, Sir.

Silence.(I , 84)

There is also a toying with the idea of death in the play. Vladimir and Estragon contemplate suicide from the very beginning. Vladimir tells Estragon that they should have thought of 'it [Death] a million years ago, in the nineties'(I, 2) and goes on to say that they could have jumped off the Eifel tower then, but now 'it is too late'.(I, 2) They again ruminate over death at the end of Act One as something to adhere to, as a kind of solution:

ESTRAGON:

(*looking at the tree*). Pity we haven't got a bit of rope.

...

ESTRAGON:

Remind me to bring a bit of rope tomorrow. (I, 86)

But they never commit suicide, again ‘nothing’ happens in the play, which is echoed by Estragon saying ‘Nothing happens, nobody comes, nobody goes, it’s awful’.(I, 34) The ruminations on suicide again resurfaces in Act Two, where again Estragon decides to come back with a ‘bit of rope’ next day and then they discuss :

VLADIMIR:

We'll hang ourselves tomorrow. (*Pause.*) Unless Godot comes.

ESTRAGON:

And if he comes?

VLADIMIR:

We'll be saved. (I, 87)

And the idea of suicide finally is put off at the end as the two tramps do ‘nothing’ rather than only contemplating it.

The play, that started with a sense of non-event, comes to full circle at the end similarly with the sense of non-happening. Both Vladimir and Estragon prepare to go ‘but they do not move’(II, 87) and with that the curtain draws.

But if observed closely, in the apparent context of non-happening, there are some happenings that take place in the play. They are implicit and often are not directly hinted at, but they coexist with the non-happenings. For instance, Vladimir and Estragon meet each other, talk, meet Pozzo and Lucky, swap hat and so on. So there is a certain amount of action in the play. One might also assume that one sees the same outline of thing, happening again and again, which is not true. Same thing does not happen over and over again. The pattern is same, but every time the details are a bit different, they are not similar. For instance, the reference to the Willow tree in the First Act by Vladimir and Estragon :

ESTRAGON: What is it?

VLADIMIR:

I don't know. A willow.

ESTRAGON:

Where are the leaves?

VLADIMIR:It must be dead.

ESTRAGON:

No more weeping.

VLADIMIR:

Or perhaps it's not the season. (I, 6)

There is the reference to the same tree in Act Two, but now ‘the tree has four or five leaves’ (II, 48)

Vladimir and Estragon ruminates over it :

VLADIMIR:

But yesterday evening it was all black and bare. And now it's covered with leaves.

ESTRAGON:

Leaves?

VLADIMIR:

In a single night.

ESTRAGON:

It must be the Spring.

VLADIMIR:

But in a single night! (II, 57)

And any further thought over this happening is rejected, for the obsession with non-event is more emphasized upon throughout the play. But this little change indicates that repetitions are apparent, not exact. They are not repetitions, rather variations. Besides nothing happening, there is also hint at happenings in the play.

There are also some reference to the movements or happening on the part of Vladimir and Estragon. In the very beginning when Estragon says 'nothing to be done', (I, 1) along with that nothingness, there appears a hint of him spending the last night in a 'ditch' (I, 1) somewhere. He further states that he got beaten up by someone there. The play maintains silence on this part afterwards. There is no elaboration on this event in Estragon's life. There is only a hint that the persons responsible for beating him up, may not be the same ones that probably had beaten him the day before:

ESTRAGON:

Beat me? Certainly they beat me.

VLADIMIR:

The same lot as usual?

ESTRAGON:

The same? I don't know. (I, 1)

Similarly, the boy, the messenger of Godot is also not the same one who appeared in Act One, as he lets Vladimir know :

VLADIMIR:

Do you not recognize me?

BOY:

No Sir.

VLADIMIR:

It wasn't you came yesterday.

BOY:

No Sir.

VLADIMIR:

This is your first time.
BOY: Yes Sir. (I, 84)

And again any further elaboration on this little change or happening in the play is diverted with the reference to the message from Godot with the text resisting any happening or event.

The encounter with Pozzo and Lucky is also a curious one. Who are they, where do they come from? The text does not give an answer. Why does Pozzo drag Lucky with a rope? Again, no answer. Why does Pozzo want to get rid of Lucky and want to sell him? What has he done? He just merely states that Lucky can no 'longer endure my [his] presence', (I, 21) though once upon a time he has been of great service to the former and taught him all the 'beautiful things' (I, 26) about life.

In the next Act, when Vladimir and Estragon encounter Lucky and Pozzo, both have undergone a change. Pozzo has gone blind and Lucky has become dumb. Why has Pozzo not sold him in the fair? And most importantly, how have they become blind and dumb respectively? When Vladimir asks Pozzo the reason of their predicament he suddenly becomes 'furious':

VLADIMIR:
Dumb! Since when?
POZZO:
(*suddenly furious.*) Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! It's abominable! When! When! One day, is that not enough for you.(I, 82)

The same happens when Vladimir questions him about his blindness, he retorts back angrily to him:

POZZO:
I woke up one fine day as blind as Fortune. (*Pause.*) Sometimes I wonder if I'm not still asleep.
VLADIMIR:
And when was that?
POZZO:
I don't know. (I, 79)

When Vladimir tries to question Pozzo and try to remind him that they have met yesterday and how he talked about Lucky and selling him off to some fair, and how the two tramps have enjoyed a talk with Pozzo and Lucky danced for their entertainment, Pozzo just dismissively responds 'Let me go'.(I, 81) This incident again thwarts completely the knowledge vis-à-vis any event of Pozzo and Lucky's life.

Compared to the non-happening or non-event in the play, there is hardly any reference to the remarkable event in the play, simply because the text itself exhausts any possibility of a significant event to occur. All these events and actions in the play are insignificant compared to the continuous highlighting of the non-events. They, along with the non-events do not give birth

to truth in the sense that Badiou talked about. The very resistance on the part of the text to curb any possibility of the event to happen, lies in lieu with the postmodernist obsession of decentering every center. Postmodern art and thought favour reflexivity, self-consciousness, fragmentation, discontinuity along with ambiguity and simultaneity. It also puts a special emphasis on the destructured, decentered and dehumanized subject, as Linda Hutcheon in the chapter entitled “Theorizing the Postmodern: Toward a Poetics” (in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*) has rightly pointed out :

Of all the terms bandied about in both current cultural theory and contemporary writing on the arts, postmodernism must be the most over and under-defined. It is usually accompanied by a grand flourish of negativized rhetoric: we hear of discontinuity, disruption, dislocation, decentering, indeterminacy and antitotalization. (*A Poetics of Postmodernism*, 3)

But at the same time what Postmodernism tends to do, is to ‘incorporate that which they aim to contest’. (*Poetics*, 3)

This nature of Postmodernism is something, that Linda Hutcheon terms ‘resolutely contradictory’ (*The Politics of Postmodernism*, 1) and further elaborates that Post modernism possesses both ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ connotations (*Politics*, 1). In her *Poetics of Postmodernism*, she explicates ‘[postmodernism] uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges’ (*Poetics*, 3), thereby becoming a critique of its own self.

The standard evaluation of Postmodernism asserts that it is without a coherent vision, a ‘truth’ (*Politics*, 38). There is nothing called a center in postmodernism. But is it an oversimplified statement denoting the characteristics of postmodernism? Does not a center lie at the heart of every decentering that postmodernism attempts to achieve? At this point, it is fruitful to take cues again from Hutcheon, as she states in her *The Politics of Post modernism*:

Is the theorizing of Derrida, Lacan, Lyotard, Foucault, and others not, in a very real sense, entangled in its own de-doxifying logic? Is there not a center to even the most decentered of these theories? What is power to Foucault, writing to Derrida, or class to Marxism? Each of these theoretical perspectives can be argued to be deeply – and knowingly – implicated in that notion of center they attempt to subvert. (*Politics*, 14)

Thereby postmodernism contains within its own self a paradox, a critique of its own system. Hutcheon further takes cues from Jacques Derrida’s “Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” in the chapter entitled “Decentering the Postmodern : the ex-centric” in her *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. She goes on to say that Derrida, being a postmodern critic himself, never repudiated entirely the idea of a center or said that one could get along without it. Center is a function, a reality, according to Derrida. It is also ‘absolutely indispensable’. (*Poetics*, 60) This is the paradox of the postmodernism, Hutcheon concludes.

The same paradox can be found in *Waiting for Godot*. In order to decenter every possible center in the play, the play finds a center amidst its own decentering and gives birth to what can be called a decentered center. An ability to completely do away with any kind of event in the play, itself questions the deliberate attempt of absolute eventlessness. 'Nothing happens'(I, 34) itself becomes a happening in the play, the non-event becomes an event. Simply because here can be no definite closure, the process of decentering or non-happening is a continuous process in postmodern sense. Influenced by one of the prominent postmodern theorists, Ihab Hassan, Hutcheon goes on to claim that Postmodernism is a never ending process that always tends to make a 'product' :

The same is true of all his oppositions: postmodernism is the *process* of making the *product*; it is *absence* within *presence*, it is *dispersal* that needs *centering* in order to *be* dispersal; it is the *idiolect* that wants to be, but knows it cannot be, the *master code*; it is *immanence* denying yet yearning for *transcendence*.(*Poetics*, 49)

Postmodernism questions centralized, and totalized systems, but does not destroy or absolutely reject it. While deconstructing and decentering, it comes up with a new notion of center.

Now, if the non-events are an indication of an event itself, does this paradox produce any kind of truth, that Badiou refers to in his *Being and Event*? It will be fruitful to take into account what Badiou's proposition is regarding truth in this book. Badiou holds that there are four conditions in which four kinds of events may take place. They are – art, politics, science and love. According to him, each of these four conditions is capable enough to produce a truth. Every event in this sense becomes a 'truth procedure' implying through these events one can arrive at a particular truth or a number of truths. Now there are clearly no political, scientific, or truth related to love that emerge in the play. What remains of Badiou's thesis is artistic or aesthetic truth. So can it be possible that there a truth emerges in the play, which can be labeled as the artistic truth?

What exactly is this artistic truth that Badiou talks about? Is there any kind of possibility to discover a relation between art and philosophy? How much truth can art contain? Badiou's philosophy appears to be a defense positioned against traditional philosophical aesthetics, going back as far as Plato. Under the interesting term 'inaesthetics', Badiou proposes to define a new relationship between philosophy and art. This new relationship would neither transform art into a particular application or object of philosophy, nor would it reduce philosophy to a spectator responsible for revealing what constitutes an art work. Badiou offers the following definition in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* :

By "inaesthetics" I understand a relation of philosophy to art that, maintaining that art is itself a producer of truths, makes no claim to turn art into an object for philosophy. Against aesthetic speculation, inaesthetics describes the strictly intraphilosophical

effects produced by the independent existence of some works of art. (*Handbook of Inaesthetics*, 2)

Inaesthetics defines less a particular discipline or a sphere of philosophical reflection, than a certain relationship between philosophy and art. It completely removes philosophy's usual hold over art. Philosophy will no longer transform art into its object or try to decipher the value of an artistic work. In other words, philosophy will no longer apply to art ordinary processes of judgment which is the normative category of judging a particular art work and its value. Truth is heterogeneous and though one truth cannot be reduced to another, they are interdependent. On the other hand, the artistic truth needs to be understood in relation to other truths.

But what artistic truth can one find in *Waiting for Godot*? If the non-event itself becomes an event and gives birth to a paradox, what artistic truth does it produce? Does this paradox of non-event becoming an event itself becomes the artistic truth? This is true for *Waiting for Godot*, because the play becomes a space where norms are emancipated. The paradox itself becomes an artistic truth, born from the uneventfulness of the event and vice versa, similar with the postmodern way of the emergence of a decentered center.

The obsession of postmodernism to contradict fundamentally its own characteristics that lead up obviously to a paradox, is something that can be interpreted borrowing terms from Jacques Lacan. Is the desire of postmodernism to create a paradox and contradiction of its own kind a result of its unconscious? In the form of subverting the very notions that it wants to discard, does it try to give a free rein to what it cannot express explicitly? Dylan Evans in his *An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis* gives an analysis of Lacanian concept of 'unconscious':

in addition to his conscious plans, the subject also has unconscious intentions. Hence someone may well commit an act which he claims was unintentional, but which analysis reveals to be the expression of an unconscious desire. Freud called these acts 'parapraxes', or 'bungled actions' (*An Introductory Dictionary of Lacanian Psychoanalysis*, 2)

Relegating the unconscious desires 'does not destroy the ideas or memories that are its target'. (*Dictionary*, 168) They can resurface, obviously in an implicit way, as Evans elaborates:

the repressed material is always liable to return in a distorted form, in symptoms, dreams, slips of the tongue, etc (*Dictionary*, 168)

Borrowing from Lacan, what he terms as 'symptom', it can be said that this finds expression in postmodernism in the excessive obsession with decentering. The return of the 'repressed material', (*Dictionary*, 168) that is the tendency to disbelieve in a center, resurfaces as a 'symptom', which gives birth to paradox.

It is curious that the eventfulness of the non-event becomes the non-eventfulness of the event or vice versa in the play. Ironically, the possibility of the center or happening that the play

tries to exhaust with the repetitions of non happening itself becomes an event and the paradox becomes the artistic truth, highlighting the postmodern sense of event and truth in the play.

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