

# Beckett and Politics : Power and Resistance in Catastrophe

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## Beckett and Politics: Power and Resistance in *Catastrophe*

Reiko Taniue

### Introduction

The Catholics in Ireland and England have had a long and troubled history. The Irish have been unjustly dominated, oppressed and exploited by England. Although Samuel Beckett, the writer of the absurdity, was born in Dublin, it was often said that he did not write political works at all. But it is not true that he had nothing to do with the struggles of power. As an Irishman, Beckett could not be a complete stranger to politics and violence. To be sure, as he lived in the confused and fearful times from World War II until the Cold War, no work could be created without a cultural, religious and political bias. Because he had to face severe oppression in the Logos World of the struggles, usually violence, for power either to win or to lose power, he could not shut himself up in his daydreams, ignoring the reality of time and space. From the point of view that Logos is God, the absolute dictator, power and the Establishment, the Logos World means the competitive world ruled under the class system of power. It was Beckett who embodied resistance against oppression or violence in literature, especially in drama. He was a brave resister, who prosecuted the abuse of Logos in each work.

During World War II, the hellish battles for Logos (power)-acquisition, he belonged to the French Resistance in Paris. After the war, as a member of the Irish Red Cross, he took part in postwar management for about six months, beginning in August 1945 at Saint-Lô in Normandy. These acts won him *Croix de Guerre* and *Médaille de la Reconnaissance*. In "A Political Perspective on *Catastrophe*", Robert Sandarg declares "These social shadows, these historical and political resonances cannot be ignored. Literature is a social act".<sup>1</sup> Or quoting the words of A. A. Mendilow, George Bluestone asserts that even the most independent writer "is grappled to the

soul of his times with hoops of steel”.<sup>2</sup> Both literature and its authors cannot but be buffeted by the waves of Logos-acquisition in their times. Therefore, Beckett’s work must be seen to have been strongly connected to his social environment.

In *Catastrophe* (1982),<sup>3</sup> he expresses his political opinion about Logos, power or violence more strongly than usual. In this play, he discerns three kinds of friction and resistance against the power of Logos; first, political power and dictatorship; secondly, all artistic power and its class system, including the theatrical field; thirdly, human existence itself. What does “to resist the power of Logos” mean? In the long, discordant history between Ireland and England, this is the everlasting, serious theme, which they can never ignore. Analyzing *Catastrophe*, which has the dramatic technique of double structure called “metadrama”, I will study the heroic struggle of the courageous warrior against the absolute dictator, like Satan against God in *Paradise Lost* (1671) by John Milton.<sup>4</sup>

## I The Creative Process

The Irish literary critic, Terry Eagleton, insists in *Literary Theory* (1983) that the theater and literature must recognize and accept social and historical reality, as they are complexly intertwined with living society. When Eagleton prescribes “My own view, as I have commented, is that literary theory has a most particular relevance to this political system: it has helped, wittingly or not, to sustain and reinforce its assumptions”<sup>5</sup> as a code, he emphasizes not only the relation but also the interaction between the social and artistic codes. In this meaning, as literature has a complicated relevance to the social situation of Logos, it never cuts its bond. Besides, a writer must grasp the atmosphere of his time precisely and express it calmly. Beckett did not deliver incisive and political criticism in his works directly, because his political consciousness was latent in his deep mind. He is never a humble person who escapes from the real world. In “Schneider directs Beckett”, Diana Barth defends his political attitude:

He’s always had that. . . . He just didn’t write plays with obviously political subjects. . . .  
He’s not a man removed from reality.<sup>6</sup>

1) *Catastrophe* is the work which Beckett dedicated to Václav Havel, the Jewish dissident writer and the present President in Czech Republic, who in those days was imprisoned at Pankrac Prison in Prague by the old Communist government for insisting on the protection of Fundamental Human Rights. *Catastrophe* was first written in 1982, in French. On July 21, 1982, it was performed as one of many plays honoring Havel, who was in jail at the time, at the Avig-

non Theater Festival under the sponsorship of the AIDA (the French acronym of the International Association for the Defense of Artist) in Provence, France: Stephen Meldegg directed it, Pierre Arditi played the actor P, Gerard Desarthe the dictator D, Stephanie Loik the assistant director A. Many other plays for Havel's protection were performed by other writers; for example, Arthur Miller and Eugène Ionesco, who is a French writer from Rumania and the standard-bearer of the anti-Establishment Theater.<sup>7</sup> Although there were a limited budget and many difficulties, the festival was a great success.

In "Beckett's *Catastrophe*", Antoni Libera explained the fear of Logos-struggles within Communism, the most powerful ideology in those days:

... it has its roots in a very concrete reality, the reality of Communism which reigns in the countries of Eastern Europe. This parable is Beckett's evaluation of that reality. In Beckett's view, then, Communism is an ideology which results in the final downfall of man.<sup>8</sup>

Beckett reveals his aversion to the fearful ideology of Communism, which in the end dehumanizes both its adherents and oppressors. The translation of this drama was published in *The New Yorker* of January 10, 1983. In the same year, Alan Schneider directed it in New York. The first performance in Paris was on September 15, 1983. After that, at the Edinburgh Festival in August 13, 1984, the first performance in England was held.

2) The word 'catastrophe' has many meanings. This word comes from ancient Greek, '*katastrefein*' (overturning, misery, misfortune, sudden ruin, calamity, disaster); namely, 'the final event of a dramatic action, especially of a tragedy', which makes configuration and transformation tacit to the reference system. According to *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 'catastrophe' is 'the change which produces the final event of a dramatic piece; the denouement'.<sup>9</sup> Aristotle explains that "catastrophe is an action bringing ruin and pain on stage, where corpses are seen and wounds and other similar sufferings are performed".<sup>10</sup> In *Catastrophe*, the theory of Aristotle's tragedy is staged skillfully, and the main theme is the catastrophe itself as the denouement, including all symbolic meanings. In *Endgame* (1958), Hamm speaks the tragedy of ontology, which is the essential, fatal tragedy that can do nothing with human power: there is no way to resolve it. On the contrary, Beckett believes that war, destruction, unfairness and cruelty break out when ego conflicts with ego because of the struggles of Logos-acquisition. And it is certain for Beckett that there must be some way to escape from them.

Beckett uses the theatrical space of metatheatre as the setting of this play. Hersh Zeifman

points out the overlapping stage of reality and fiction in “*Catastrophe* and Dramatic Setting”:

And, as always, this concept of setting as theatrical space in Beckett’s drama is a signpost of metatheatre: on one level, Beckett is constantly writing plays about writing plays, about performing plays.<sup>11</sup>

It is the most important key that *Catastrophe* is written and performed as a metadrama, which is the same technique as ‘a play within a play’, played by the strolling players in *Hamlet*. The audience is involved in the play without knowing what is happening, and is led to the last great tragedy. Moreover, in “A Political Perspective on *Catastrophe*”, Robert Sandarg insists that this drama is the denouement of human rights and social matters:

*Catastrophe*, the most tangible and powerful of Beckett’s later dramas, is a compassionate testimony to the case of human rights; it marks an undeniable political engagement on Beckett’s part and may lead us to reevaluate his entire canon from the perspective of social consciousness.<sup>12</sup>

Hersh Zeifman also points out that “the play certainly appears to be about political torture and the heartless cruelty of the state’s suppression of human rights”.<sup>13</sup> In reality, this drama is formed by six kinds of oppression or torture.

- 1 The performance itself: the metadramatic development
- 2 The Communist dictatorship: Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union
- 3 The domination and the exploitation of Ireland by England
- 4 The intervention of power in the arts: the confrontation between art and political power
- 5 The power of art itself
- 6 The torture of human existence: a man is only a poor prisoner in this Logos World.

*Catastrophe* reveals, criticizes and impeaches not only the powerful violence of politics, but also the powerful violence existing in every field of art, including the theater; moreover, it questions human existence itself, and resists it.

## II The Stage

A wicked atmosphere is, in Beckett’s works, a setting which takes place in a prison, a torture room, a mental hospital, a camp or an asylum, separated from daily life: for instance, we can recognize the strange feelings in Bentovia Prison in *Murphy* (1938), and the giant prison like a ghostly castle in *The Unnamable* (1953). Vladimir in *Waiting for Godot* (1956), Winnie in

*Happy Days* (1961), and Molloy in *Molloy* (1955), complain of being always watched by someone. In *Eh Joe* (1965), the stage is set as a dreary room, as in a mental hospital, where we can guess that the character, wearing a white gown, is a confined patient watched by a strict guard, looking around as if he were frightened of something or someone. Besides, the weird influence of the cruel camps of the Nazis cast their dark shadows in Beckett's works: Auschwitz, where untold numbers of Jews were sent to the gas chambers, or Mauthausen, where Alfred Péron, Beckett's close friend from Trinity College days, was held (eventually, Péron was set free, but died soon after). Under these fearful influences, people shudder at the thought of death, often expressed by the image of ashes.

In *Catastrophe*, the stage is originally set as a monochromatic world with black, white and gray; there are the gray gowns or pajamas, which are the typical uniforms in a mental hospital or a prison, and the broad-brimmed black hat. First, the four characters (the director D, the assistant director A, the protagonist P, and the unseen, lighting technician L) reveal the composition of power and oppression in the rehearsal. As the director D wears a warm and expensive fur coat, and a fur hat, which make him appear selfish and bold, he reminds us of the dictator, who abuses the matchless power of Logos. Although the assistant director A secretly sympathizes with the prisoner P, she cannot but obey D's orders, in order to protect herself from the class system of the theater, and especially her superior D. We can regard her as a lower person in the pyramidal system of Logos. P also has no freedom at all, although he looks like an artist. As, in reality, Havel suffered from torture and cruelty in prison, and here we can regard Havel as the protagonist P.

Annamaria Sportelli points out that their positions and their clothes are very important, as the real stage is the stage setting of the rehearsal in "Make Sense Who May: A Study of *Catastrophe* and *What Where*".<sup>14</sup> Therefore, although three characters focus the lighting, it is clear that "Age and physique [are] unimportant" (457). This instruction means that characters do not appear as individuals, but as universal and collective, because it is not important for Beckett simply to identify individual existence. As D, A and P are described as "Age and physique unimportant" in the stage directions, their existence suggests 'the trinity of dehumanization in the Logos World.

1) As we have seen before, the letter D stands for the D in "director" and "dictator". In addition, in "Beckett's *Catastrophe*", Libera suggests that D be D as "the incarnation of the Devil".<sup>15</sup> Or D may be D as a "demon". Thus, D as the director seems to be a symbol of foulness

or wickedness in the privileged class within Communism. He wears a gorgeous fur coat and a splendid fur hat, and behaves arrogantly enough to show off his power. D seems to control the action. As well as Pozzo in *Waiting for Godot*, and Hamm in *Endgame*, D is not only the parody of the dictator in the theater, but also the symbol of power in a real dictatorship.

The director D performs strictly, but busily and selfishly, which is a typical characteristic of modern people. That is to say, he is always hurried by time, often feels nervous and irritated, and adheres to making money and possessing material things. As a result, during the rehearsal he hastens the performance of the actor. There is an important reason for doing so. D, as well as the economic animal, is also presented as a political leader, and always strives to seize power in the center of the struggles of the pyramidal system. For after rehearsal, it is said that he must attend a meeting (the presidium of the Communist Party named Causcus). If he is late for it, he may be fired or killed at the very worst. The word "Causcus" is a very fearful word, because it reminds us of "Caucasus", which connects with Joseph V. Stalin (1879-1953), the Soviet Union and the State Spy Secret System, the KGB. Although this play gets on with D's absolute order, through the cold echo of this word "Causcus", we can forecast what a cruel and pitiful result it will be.

After the director D sinks into the armchair on stage, he orders around his assistant, A, constantly and brusquely with an arrogant attitude, as if he were the cruel torturer who presses the prisoner with many difficult questions. Without dirtying his own hands, D forces A to do it. Directing one after another, D makes A correct the poses and forms of the shrinking actor P, who wears the shabby and gray gown of a prisoner's uniform. P is then forced to strip off his wornout gown. Moreover, D robs P of his physical freedom completely, and in the end will take his humanity. After D gets down from the stalls in order to be sure of the theatrical effect, D continues to give cruel directions, which result in depriving P of his belongings. Taking advantage of the power of his privileged class, and abusing through the use of difficult technical terms as the director, D looks down on P and A mercilessly, including the theater itself. That is, D controls not only the stage itself, but also the atmosphere around the back of the stage and the stalls.

Essentially, a director has the role of managing the play by himself, so every other member is only a cog in the dramatic wheel. In this sense, D has political, social and theatrical privilege. In particular, there is the special privileged class in the theatrical world, where the exclusive, stale air of looking down on a powerless person is floating. In the prison of such a theatrical world, the drama itself deprived of freedom, becomes dictatorship. D changes into a God-like

existence, the arrogant Absolute in *Paradise Lost*.

2) Although the assistant director A works busily, she is only a common member of staff. She carries out the cruel inspection and torture by order of the higher reaches of government, which regards the radical anti-Establishment activist as a spy. As A wears cheap, white working clothes which suggest a positive image of harmlessness and fairness, perhaps A will be a research worker or a nurse. Even if A does wear a white coat, she is not always gentle and clean as we might expect an innocent angel in white to be. On the contrary, A is a gloomy, fearful and cruel person, who enacts D's cruel orders on P. Moreover, A administers the merciless treatment, which exhibits enough brutality to be considered equal to that of D: "What about a little . . . a little . . . gang?" (459). We will take another fearful example. When D asks A, "How's the skull?" (458), we must look upon it as though they had performed a surgical operation. On which parts of his body will they operate? As Rosemary Pountney insists in *Theatre of Shadows* (1988), it is an operation on his brain, a removal of the speech center in the head of the prisoner, or lobotomy.<sup>16</sup> One of the victims is P, because of his remaining silent. Therefore, at the beginning P appears to have lost the power to resist, owing to this operation. Why does A act so violently? In order to protect herself, surrounded by Communist spies, and to be promoted from her present lowly position, A has been inhumane without opposing her superior D. Accordingly, we can easily understand that A behaves so meanly to D as if A were his faithful servant or a slave. As a result, however, numberless guiltless prisoners have been deprived of their words and thoughts.

Besides, she always has a pencil, and notes D's directions obediently, as if she were an admirer of the power system, saying "I make a note" (8 times). But she writes down D's orders in a businesslike matter, but not her own original ideas and opinions. Even though her every action is restricted and closely watched, A is given the freedom to 'write'. On reflection, the fact that the writer, Havel, was prohibited from writing in prison, overlaps ironically. As Linda Ben-Zvi points out in *Samuel Beckett*, "her only words are in response to his orders",<sup>17</sup> her words and deeds are only short reactions to D's sharp orders.

Moreover, whenever the fire of D's cigar goes out, she soon lights it again and again. As well as the cigar of Mr. Endon in *Murphy*, D's cigar also suggests richness and extravagance. But, no sooner is his cigar lit than it goes out. This reveals that his higher position and power will disappear before long. Besides, there are some scenes where she timidly states her opinions to D, although they are always rejected too easily by D. For instance, when she advises "What if

he were to . . . were to . . . raise his head . . . an instant . . . show his face . . . just an instant” (460), D flatly refuses, saving “For God’s sake” (460). Therefore, A always tries to adjust P’s performances as A is told by D. To be sure, A and D are not equals, sharing their opinions without reserve, but are in a flattering relationship of ‘master and slave’ and ‘high and low.’

As we have seen before, D always worries about time in order to get to the Communist meeting “Caucus”. So we can understand that D does not feel interested in his own original work, the directing of the play. As D is not devoted to directing, A must always explain the condition of the play’s progress many times and sometimes offer her indirect opinions, even though all her proposals are rejected. A neither respects him nor is she his faithful subordinate. She hates him at bottom. For instance, after he goes down to the stalls to check the performance, she unconsciously sits in the director’s armchair in an instant. But as soon as she sits, she not only springs up, but also frantically wipes the seat with her handkerchief, as if it were contaminated. Katharine Worth comments on her jump from the chair as owing to “hell fire” in *Samuel Beckett’s Theatre: Life journeys*:

. . . ; a suggestion of hell fire when the Assistant who has perched on his chair in his absence jumped up as from a very hot place indeed.<sup>18</sup>

This shows her physiological and violent hatred of D. But she never reveals her secret disgust for D in front of D. After that, she throws the handkerchief away, and she sits on it deliberately.

But even if A hates D, there always remains the relationship of master and slave in the political and theatrical worlds. As we have guessed in the case of ‘gang’, A cannot help obeying him, flattering him, and pretending to be faithful to D. A is a powerless worker, D’s underling. In order to survive in the complex system, both publicly and privately, she must be a robot, executing each merciless command unconcernedly. In a sense, she is also a helpless victim.

Meanwhile, she may have hidden her ambitions, under which A will try to usurp power from D before long, and rise to the dictatorship of the theatrical system. It is natural for her to think this in the competitive Logos World. From this point of view, although A’s speech “Once more and he’s off” (460) apparently refers to D’s departure to the meeting, it may suggest D’s disappearance or death. D may be murdered at the meeting without clear reason. In all cases, the dictator D will disappear from two stages; the stage of the theater and the stage of life. Even the top members do not know the exact day and time when they will be arrested and slaughtered under the Communist Party. As there were many networks of spies, everyone is always exposed to such a fearful situation.

3) P is not only the 'protagonist', 'player', and 'political prisoner', but also is typical of all 'protagonists'. Or P may be P of 'Prometheus' in *Prometheus Unbound* (1820) by P. B. Shelley: Prometheus is the symbol of the Resistance against oppression or power, like Satan. From this point of view, *Catastrophe* is the symbolic drama which presents the existential, hopeless plight of human beings.

Moreover, 'protagonist' has two meanings in ancient Greek. One is the actor playing the leading part, and the other is the central hero in the work. Although the stage setting is not ancient in *Catastrophe*, P is not only called 'the actor or player', but especially 'the protagonist'. In this case, P is not only the person playing a role, but also must be the leading part and the hero promoting the play. Accordingly, if P is called not 'the protagonist', but 'the actor' or 'the first player', the leading part in *Catastrophe* will be the director D, not P. For D has more active performances, and many more speeches than P, and at the same time holds a more important post than P in the competitive Logos Society. However, his exaggerated actions and words are quite empty. On the contrary, although P is the least person on stage, and remains standing on the small black box (55 centimeters high) without speaking words at all, P is of great worth for simply existing here. As Beckett explains in his poem, 'something is there/ . . . / not life/ necessity',<sup>19</sup> P appears to be not only a powerless and poor thing, but a living man. Nevertheless, P gives an overwhelming sense of existence floating in theatrical space. By appointing P as 'the protagonist', Beckett emphasizes P's severe exquisiteness through his exact stillness.

Why is P the important 'protagonist'? On stage, P is completely separated from other persons as if the strongest barrier of electricity were stretched around him. It is as if P were an unwilling statue, a perfectly controlled puppet, or a show exhibited in the exhibition hall, rather than a living person. He remains quite still, standing on the block, like a frozen figure of the tragic queen, Hermione, before moving into life again after long years in the ending scene of *The Winter's Tale* (1610). His figure seems not to be the proud actor, but the powerless victim in fear and trembling. Although P's action is restricted to a minimum, P must give a physical, calculated and delicate performance, which is a most difficult movement that must crush his feelings even unto death.

As well as Mouth in *Not I* (1972) or Head in *That Time* (1974), this block also plays an important part in creating a delicate and complicated image. That is to say, it is deliberately arranged for P to make a display of a torture scene involving the traitor or the prisoner as a warning to the audience. In order for this artificial scene to succeed, it is necessary to show more clearly the poor image of the hopeless prisoner. At the same time, this torture or mental

violence is one of the key oppressive actions in the dictatorship of Logos. His poor existence implants the fearful lesson of the dictatorship in the minds of the audience.

The stage, like the torture room, reminds us of the Concentration Camps of the Nazis. At first, P is forced to wear a black large-brimmed hat to hide his face, and a black gown reaching to his ankles to hide his whole body. In this case, if the costume can extinguish who P is, it will be considered successful by the director. P is not a human being, but only a thing. It is possible to substitute P for everyone or everything. In order to emphasize the dark image of P's spiritless inactivity as a prisoner, enduring cruel torture, he is compelled to be bare foot, droop his head, put his hands in his pockets, and stoop down. Next, after P is forced to take his hands out of his pockets at D's direction, D makes P's hands open. D prohibits the clenched fists of his hands because they convey the image of both strife and anger. P is not permitted even to show this apparent anger. Accordingly, at last he is compelled to cross his hands on his breast. This pose implies absolute obedience, or wretchedness, the humiliating form of a captive pleading for his life.

Besides, P is deprived of words, so he remains silent from beginning to end. In this sense, P is the representative of the common people, deprived of freedom of speech in a totalitarian society. His clothes are taken one by one on D's orders: first, the black gown is taken away; secondly, the breast of his pajamas is opened carelessly; and thirdly, his pants are rolled up to his knees. As D says, we "Could do with more nudity. . . . Bare the neck. The legs. The shins. . . . The other. . . . Higher. The knees" (460), his hands, head and feet are laid bare. What is worse, D orders all bared parts of his body painted white, such as his hands, feet and head, "Whiten cranium. . . . Whiten hands" (459) and ". . . Whiten all flesh" (460). P's head is also painted white; which reminds us of the lobotomized patient with a white bandage on his head. To lobotomize someone is to remove his authentic existence, naturally his humanity and energy for life will be taken away.

Furthermore, what does P become if he is painted all white? Why is white needed here? Because 'to make his whole body white' symbolizes his dehumanization. That is to say, he is no longer a human being, but has become a breathless robot, or a silent stone statue. In a sense, he is the dead itself. This reminds us of Hamm in the last scene in *Endgame*. Speaking the words "We're coming" (133), Hamm spreads out his white handkerchief and puts it on his face. Just then Hamm becomes very dead. In *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (1988), Steven Connor points out, "the protagonist in *Catastrophe* (whose gradual exposure seems to fulfill the function of a dismemberment)" means that his body, his nature and his private history will dis-

appear.<sup>20</sup> The skillful way, which this reduction is achieved, is Beckett's ironical dramaturgy of accusing those in power of the abuse of power.

Moreover, when A answers D's questions on colour,

A: His night attire.

D: Colour?

A: Ash. (457)

D: How's the skull?

A: Moulting. A few turfs.

D: Colour?

A: Ash (458)

P's head and hands are ashen, and his body will also be ashen. Accordingly, P is identified with the image of ash. His mind and body will be reduced to ashes. And ash belongs to white and gray. As in "*Catastrophe* and Dramatic Setting" Hersh Zeifman refers to "a figure in pain, physically degenerating, dressed in black over ash, the colours of death."<sup>21</sup> Ash is the colour of death: ash is also the cremated remains of a human body. It is expected that P will be burnt to ash by the horrible fire of the monstrous incinerator. Especially, 'to burn to ash' must suggest the numberless Jewish massacre at the Concentration Camps, the Holocaust, as well as P's own death. Moreover, this may express the fearful strategy of burning and killing unknown common citizens who were fighting for the protection of fundamental human rights and freedom.

Furthermore, A lights D's cigar, whenever it goes out (three times). What does the fire of the cigar mean? It is not so firm and blue as the fire of a shepherd's pipe in *Molloy*. It may mean the fire of destruction by atomic weapons. If so, the ash results in radioactive fallout. In *Endgame*, Hamm speaks of an ashen spectacle, which is burnt out all around by the nuclear bomb, "All he had seen was ashes" (113). In the dying gray world after the nuclear war, Nagg and Nell are in the cinerary urn. Moreover, we are reminded of the last scene of *Murphy*, whose funeral ashes are not ashes produced in the dignity of death, but only worthless dust to be thrown away into the spit and filth of the floor of the bar at midnight. In *Waiting for Godot*, the dead voices are expressed as the noise of ashes and leaves:

Estragon: All the dead voices.

Vladimir: They make a noise like wings.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like sand.

Estragon: Like leaves.

. . . . .  
Vladimir: They make a noise like feathers.

Estragon: Like leaves.

Vladimir: Like ashes.

(58)<sup>22</sup>

Judging from this, we will be able to listen to the dead voices of slaughtered prisoners floating through the strained space of the theater, through P's ashen skull and his white body.

But however hard P is hurt, he endures torture or violence in silence, because he sacrifices himself for his beliefs. P's suffering is that of silenced people, and of artists. At the same time, P exemplifies the existential suffering of human existence in this competitive Logos world. As 'the protagonist', he must be the phoenix, which revives from its own ashes in silence and stands up majestically, like the resister, Milton's Satan, in the hellish flame. 'Silence' is the source of the beginning and the end. P's silence is the best weapon to confront heroically violence and suffering of Logos-struggles.

4) Lighting is as important as is stage setting in this play. The electrician L is behind the scenes, and never appears on stage until the end. Although L is a little curt, weak in flattery and seemingly indifferent to his surrounding, he is a faithful and serious engineer, and the hidden executor, to whom A transmits D's commands in technical terms. Besides, he is an abbreviation of 'Luke', who suggests 'lug' (light itself). Or L may be the L of 'Lucifer', as Libera points out:

. . . , the name of Lug given to the electrician connotes the name of Lucifer, which after all means "carrier of light".<sup>23</sup>

Lucifer means both the carrier of light, and the planet Venus as the morning star.

Or L reminds us of 'Lufu' in Irish mythology. In Ireland, 'Lugnasadh' is one of the four great festivals, held on August 1st every year. 'Lug' is the God of the sun, and comes from 'Ra' in Egypt. The king of Egypt is 'the son of Ra', while High King, 'Ard Ri', reigns over Tara in Ireland. The word 'Ri' derives from 'Ra' in Egypt. Accordingly, L must be the ruler of the shadows on this stage (or the stage of life). As well as A, L is one of the theatrical workers, but L differs from A. While A is always frightened of D and acts like D's slave, L is fearless of D and is indifferent to D's existence and orders. Every time L listens to D's orders, L just innocently answers "What?" (460). In short, L is always independent of others without being involved in the theatrical troubles and in the factional disputes. He does his best to work as an electrician in his own away.

In addition, we never forget another source of the name L, because L may be derived from Luke, who is one of four writers of the Gospels. Beckett takes advantage of a part of The Gospel according to St. Luke (23: 43), and one of two crucified thieves is saved in *Waiting for Godot* (14). St. Luke is not only a friend of Paul, one of the apostles, a doctor, an artist, and a fine patron of the arts, but also continues to shine a helping light on every person sitting in the darkness and shadow of death. Therefore, when D calls L two times but has no answer, in place of L, A answers “Luke’s around” (460), which means that Luke watches not only this play with his helping light, but also all the suffering people. The fire of D’s cigar does not shine on everything, while it is the light of L that shines on stage and controls the dramatic scene. In “New Beckett Plays”, Rosette Lamont points out the importance of L’s light when Alan Schneider directs *What Where* in rehearsal:

The lights are . . . very important, . . . we are lighting poetry, and insist on the importance of the role in the light.<sup>24</sup>

Robert Wilcher also points out the surprising relation between the light and the player:

He [Beckett] achieves this by reversing the usual theatrical convention that the lighting technician is subordinate to the actors. Instead of the light being there to serve the performer, the performer is in bondage to the light.<sup>25</sup>

L’s light leads to the final scene, the catastrophe. In the end, the startled and hopeful light will shine on this stage, and we will be able to meet the catastrophe which we, the audience, are looking forward to.

#### IV Dress Rehearsal to Performance

In this metadrama, the director D directs the actor P in actions through the assistant director A, and the electrician L behind the scenes. At the end of the play, when D moves to the stalls to make sure of the result of P’s performance, D cries, “I can’t see the toes. [*Irritably.*] I’m sitting in the front row of the stalls and can’t see the toes” (459). D is greatly attached to P’s feet in order to ascertain whether the prisoner P is still alive or not. D gives the directions by using the loudspeaker, whose mechanical voice echoes too tensely in the theater, while L’s voice melts softly into the air. The loudspeaker makes us strongly aware that the ruler sits in the seat without being seen, and tries to watch all of them. Enoch Brater echoes this sense of D’s existence in *Beyond Minimalism* (1987):

When the Director leaves the set to check the effect from the stalls, “*not to appear again,*” his offstage voice assumes the frightening impersonality of absolute assertion.<sup>26</sup>

D’s merciless inhumanity is emphasized more and more by using the loudspeaker behind the scenes. D becomes the more fearsome man of power, because he watches closely everything and everyone on stage from a hidden place, controlling and maneuvering them into acting. Enoch Brater explains the power and brutality of the hidden tyrant, who takes charge of everything; “we are meant to be intimidated, to feel the eeriness and experience the terror”.<sup>27</sup> And when D checks the rehearsal from the stalls, he orders P’s clothes taken away gradually one by one. As a result, if something does not happen, P will be stripped naked. And the goal of dehumanization appears to succeed through this cruel violence.

After that, the stage lights becomes darker, and a spotlight is focused on P’s whole body, which suggests successional, obstinate tortures. What is worse, the spotlight concentrates on P’s head; which foretells his hanging in the near future. And as soon as the light goes out, D praises himself, “Good. There’s our catastrophe. In the bag” (460). The dress rehearsal ends with the silence of P, shivering on the block. At last, the final rehearsal begins and D cries, “Stop! [*Pause.*] Now . . . let’s ‘em have it” (461). He tries to show the catastrophic moment in front of the audience. As recorded and mechanical applause thunders from the far space of the theater, D seems to expect this applause for himself. D is greatly satisfied with it. Meanwhile, P seems to be beaten completely. But at the next moment, unexpectedly P raises his head quickly. Are his eyes powerless, hopeless, weak, and pleading? Absolutely NOT. He casts a sharp glance at the audience. Gradually the applause changes from delight into bewilderment, and it dies away:

[*Pause. Distance storm of applause. P raises his head, fixes the audience. The applause falters, dies. Long pause.*] (461)

This is the very moment of the genuine catastrophe, when P is proved to become a human being, not a puppet, a slave or a prisoner. P never despairs. On the contrary, his eyes shine delightfully because of his revolt against violence and oppression. P has transformed the weak prisoner into the brave challenger, who is willing to confront the dictator. Accordingly, P’s face has the real expression of a human being, with his direct anger and suffering in evidence. At this moment, P becomes the true protagonist in *Catastrophe*. David Wallilow explains the difficulty of acting ‘this look’ to Brater:

In rehearsal “that look,” the climax of *Film* as well as *Catastrophe*, proved to be, not surprisingly, the most difficult stage direction to implement.<sup>28</sup>

Beckett emphasizes to Mel Gussow that P is a victorious martyr, not a poor victim:

It was not his intention to have the character make an appeal. . . . He is a triumphant martyr rather than a sacrificial victim . . . and is meant to cow onlookers into submission through the intensity of his gaze and his stoicism.<sup>29</sup>

P’s humanly attitude reminds us of the definition of ‘catastrophe’ in *Malone Dies*:

Catastrophe too in the ancient sense no doubt. To be buried in lava and not turn a hair, it is then a man shows what stuff he is made of.<sup>30</sup>

His sharp silent gaze is more eloquent than any words. His stoic, penetrating gaze with the sharpest eyes are Beckett, Havel, the artists, and all of the people oppressed by the dictator. In this moment, the audience changes from carefree observers and spectators to serious actors. For the audience recognize that, as well as D, they, too, are dictators who severely oppress and interrogate P. P reveals this secret truth at the risk of losing his life.

In conversation with Jonathan Kalb, David Wallilow, the famous actor of Beckett’s plays, confesses that he prefers the role of P to that of D, although he has played both of these difficult roles:

I far preferred to play the Protagonist in *Catastrophe*; that’s a much more interesting role to do, much more interesting. For one thing because it’s sculptural, and there’s an infinite amount of delicate muscular work to be done. It’s also very interesting to deal with the problem of not feeling like a victim. He can look whatever way he looks to the audience, but not to be involved in self-pity while standing on that block is a very interesting task.<sup>31</sup>

In this way, although P only continues to stick to his silence from beginning to end, Wallilow proves that P is a very attractive role, who can create the moment of tragedy by himself. George Steiner, the Jewish scholar, explains the moment of tragedy in *The Death of Tragedy* (1978):

Hence there is in the final moments of great tragedy, whether Greek or Shakespearean or neoclassic, a fusion of grief and joy, or laments over the fall of man and of rejoicing in the resurrection of his spirit.<sup>32</sup>

Judging from Steiner, it is P’s grave gaze that produces the very moment when tragedy is completed, and a hero is created.

## Conclusion

This drama reveals the structure of six layers in the hidden and fearful power of Logos. Even if P must meet his apparent misfortune, his ruin and his death in the end, it is his determined eyes which bring the catastrophe in *Catastrophe*. P gazes not only at D and the real audience, but also at the hidden pressures from the arrogant dictators in the art world and in the Communist Party, England which has been oppressing Ireland unfairly, or God who abuses absolute power. Moreover, as for Beckett the playwright, he must have felt the pressures of creating. That is, as Beckett says in the essay about Denis Devlin, "Art has always been this — pure interrogation, rhetorical question less the rhetoric",<sup>33</sup> he suggests that the creative movement is the interrogation of the artist himself. Therefore, this drama inquires of Beckett himself about his own attitude as a writer in modern society, especially in drama.

Moreover, his sharp gaze is turned on the absurdity of all human beings. The theme of this play is self-existence and its suffering, which the audience and all human beings must carry on their shoulders. In the prison of this world, from which we cannot escape, we have to accept the absurd suffering of self-existence. By showing us our miserable, grave situation through this form of drama, Beckett interrogates us and himself with serious questions. Until the last moment, it is the protagonist P, the anti-Establishment writer Havel, the proud Irish Beckett, the indomitable Irish, the Awakened that continue to take their determined attitudes against power in order to obtain freedom and to revive the Self. It is at this moment that great tragedy, *Catastrophe*, has been accomplished.

## Notes

- 1) Robert Sandarg, "A Political Perspective on *Catastrophe*", *Make Sense Who May: Essays on Samuel Beckett's Later Works*, eds. Robin J. Davis and Lance St J. Butler (Totowa, NJ: Barnes, 1988), 144.
- 2) George Bluestone, *Novels into Film* (Berkeley, California: U of California P, 1966), 32. See A. A. Mendilow, *Time and the Novel*, London, 1952.
- 3) Samuel Beckett, *Catastrophe, The Complete Dramatic Works* (London and Boston: Faber & Faber, 1989). All the quotations from this play are cited only page numbers.
- 4) See Reiko Taniue, "Where does Logos go in *Paradise Lost*?: Rebellion and Fall of Satan", *Studies of Language and Culture* No.7 (Society for the Study of Language and Culture, 2000).
- 5) Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1983), 196.

- 6) Dianna Barth, "Schneider directs Beckett", *Showbill* (Dec. 1983), 3.
- 7) Moreover, this play creatively influenced *Gangsters* written by the South African writer, Maishe Mapoyna, and it describes Steven Biko, the great leader of anti-apartheid in South Africa, who was illegally confined and killed by torture of the apartheid authority.
- 8) Antonio Libera, "Beckett's *Catastrophe*", *Modern Drama*, Sept. 1985, 341-6. *Critical Essays on Samuel Beckett*, ed. Lance St. John Butler, *Critical Thought Series: 4* (Hants: Scholar Press, 1993), 337.
- 9) *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*, 3rd ed. with addenda (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1966).
- 10) Aristotle, *Poetics*, *The Loeb Classical Library*, eds. T. E. Page, et al., and trans. W. Hamilton Fyfe (London: William Heinemann LTD, 1965), XI, 10.
- 11) Hersh Zeifman, "Catastrophe and Dramatic Setting", *'Make Sense Who may': Essays on Samuel Beckett's Later Works*, 134.
- 12) Sandarg, "A Political Perspective on *Catastrophe*", 137.
- 13) Zeifman, "Catastrophe and Dramatic Setting", 133.
- 14) Annamaria Spotelli, "'Make Sense Who May': A Study of *Catastrophe* and *What Where*", *'Make Sense Who May': Essays on Samuel Beckett's Later Works*, 124.
- 15) Libera, "Beckett's *Catastrophe*", 337.
- 16) Rosemary Pountney, *Theatre of Shadow: Samuel Beckett's Drama 1956-76* (Totowa, NJ: Barnes, 1988), 226.
- 17) Linda Ben-Zvi, *Samuel Beckett* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 180.
- 18) Katharine Worth, *Samuel Beckett's Theatre: Life Journeys* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 56.
- 19) Samuel Beckett, "Something There", *Collected Poems in English and French: Samuel Beckett* (New York: Grove Press, 1977), 63.
- 20) Steven Connor, *Samuel Beckett: Repetition, Theory and Text* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1988), 161.
- 21) Zeifman, "Catastrophe and Dramatic Setting", 134.
- 22) Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot, The Complete Dramatic Works* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1989), 58. All the quotations from this play are cited only page numbers.
- 23) Libera, "Beckett's *Catastrophe*", 335.
- 24) Rosette Lamont, "New Beckett Plays: A Darkly Brilliant Evening", *Other Stages*, (June 16, 1988), 3.
- 25) Robert Wilcher, "What's it meant to mean?: An approach to Beckett's theatre", *Critical Quarterly*, vol. 18, no. 2, 31.
- 26) Enoch Brater, *Beyond Minimalism: Beckett's Late Style in the Theater* (New York & Oxford: Oxford UP, 1987), 142.
- 27) Brater, *Beyond Minimalism*, 150. Beckett's early work, *Act Without Words I* (1956), shows the theme which forces human beings to move with the invisible and fearful power of Logos.
- 28) Brater, *Beyond Minimalism*, 148.

- 29) Mel Gussow, "Beckett distills his vision", *The New York Times* (31 July 1983), section H, 3.
- 30) Samuel Beckett, *Malone Dies, Three Novels by Samuel Beckett: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (New York: Grove Weidenfield, 1991), 254.
- 31) Jonathan Kalb, *Beckett in performance* (Cambridge & New York: Cambridge UP, 1989), 225.
- 32) George Steiner, *The Death of Tragedy* (London & Boston: Faber & Faber, 1978), 10. Steiner is a Jewish scholar, who went over to America from France in 1949, because of pursuing freedom.
- 33) Samuel Beckett, *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and A Dramatic Fragment* (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 91.