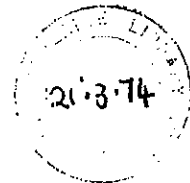


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MODERN EXISTENTIAL PHILOSOPHY
AND THE WORK OF
BECKETT, IONESCO, GENET AND PINTER

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SUMMARY

As its title indicates, this thesis is a comparison of the writing of Beckett, Ionesco, Genet and Pinter with existential thought. The work divides into five major sections. Part one deals with Beckett as follows:

chapter 1: analysis of Beckett's central concern, a reduction of reality to a mysterious negative sine qua non, the Irreducible. The Irreducible is to be examined in philosophical terms. This chapter finds Cartesian and other seventeenth and eighteenth century approaches inadequate for the purpose.

chapter 2: introduction to the basic concepts of existential philosophy, beginning with Husserl and moving to Heidegger and Sartre.

chapter 3: the Beckett Reduction and Irreducible discussed in Sartrean terms. This includes an investigation of Beckett with the aid of the Sartrean concepts of the en soi and pour soi, facticity, nausea, freedom and human relations. The conclusion is that Beckett, while resembling Sartre in some respects, differs from him in fundamentals. The Irreducible is not a pour soi or Sartrean void. In the course of this chapter the inadequacy of a comparison with the Camus Absurd is also noted.

chapters 4 to 6 examine Beckett from a Heideggerian viewpoint. Beckett's world is discussed in terms of being-in-the-world (chapter 4), angst (chapter 5) and the concepts of Existence, nothingness and Being (chapter 6). The essential point of the argument is to relate Beckett's Reduction to the vision of angst and the Irreducible to Heideggerian Being. It is note-

worthy that in the end the quest for the Irreducible or Being leads Beckett beyond the existential, to a quasi-religious and Idealist sphere.

Part two of the thesis tackles Ionesco in the following terms:

chapter 7: analysis of the fundamental characteristic of Ionesco's work, the concern with wonder, the desire to reveal normality as strange. Wonder has two modalities, the poles of the euphoric and the claustrophobic.

chapters 8 and 9 discuss the Ionesco dynamism in terms of Heideggerian angst and the concept of the Uncanny. Euphoria and claustrophobia correspond to the categories of Heideggerian freedom and the stifling, inauthentic "they." The pattern of Ionesco's plays is interpreted as the struggle of the authentic individual against the collective. Inspired by the vision of angst, the Ionesco hero faces the Heideggerian "they" and the problem of death and goes in search of the euphoric experience, which is that of Being.

chapter 10: Romantic and Idealist echoes in Ionesco.

In the third section, on the work of Genet, the emphasis is on a comparison with Sartre. Genet's concern with the metaphysical ideal of solitude is examined as a reaction to the objectifying Sartrean Look (chapter 11). Chapters 12 to 15 outline five Genet attempts to depict this ideal, attempts based on the Sartrean notions of sadism and masochism. Genet offers us five types: the murderer, the "saint," the "image," the revolutionary and the "indifferent." Only the last of these appears successful, and in focussing on this type Genet moves away from Sartre and in the direction of Heidegger. As in Beckett and

Ionesco, there is a final tendency towards Idealism.

Chapters 16 to 20, which constitute the fourth section of this thesis, concentrate on Beckett's, Genet's and Ionesco's approaches to the theory and practice of art. Here the comparison is with the Heideggerian notions of erschlossenheit or disclosedness and "letting-be." In each case the form of the work of art is discussed in terms of the existential concept of "situation." Chapter 20 moves beyond this, however, to argue that Ionesco's plays in particular may be regarded as phenomenological in form in that their viewpoint combines subjective and objective perspectives on reality.

This discussion leads directly to the final section of the thesis in which Pinter's work is considered primarily in terms of subjectivity and objectivity. The analysis of Pinter proceeds in three stages, as follows:

chapters 21 and 22: outline of Pinter's central interests, the verification of truth, the definition of identity, and the examination of patterns of insecurity and human relationships. In his earlier plays Pinter adopts an existential approach to these issues and one which is mirrored in the form of the plays.

chapter 23: where Beckett, Ionesco and Genet seek to escape the existential in the direction of Idealism, Pinter gradually moves towards the empiricist position. The first phase of this shift is defined as "psychological realism."

chapter 24: the movement to objective perspectives leads to an extreme empiricism, reflected in the form of the plays as chosisme. While Pinter's concern with verification and human identity remains, his approach has greatly altered.

In spite of the considerable complexity of its detail, the argument of this thesis is easily summarized. Beckett's, Ionesco's, Genet's and Pinter's fundamental interests owe little or nothing to Camus and the Absurd. While the comparison with Sartre is at times revealing, the real parallel is with the existential as we find it in the philosophy of Heidegger. Beckett's obsessive movement towards the Irreducible, Ionesco's endless search for the experience of euphoria, Genet's search for solitude, are all comparable to the Heideggerian quest for Being. In each case and also in that of Pinter, existential perspectives are mirrored in the approach to art and particularly to literary form. It is interesting to note that all the writers considered in this thesis are dissatisfied with the limits of the existential universe. Thus Beckett, Ionesco and Genet attempt a return to the Idealist, and Pinter a transition to empiricism. The via media of the existential represents an uncomfortable point of rest for a human spirit which craves the greater comforts of more extreme ideologies.