

**The Rationality of the Absurd: Music as a
Form of Expression in Samuel Beckett's
Words and Music**

**عقلانية الالامعقول: الموسيقى كوسيلة للتعبير
في "كلمات وموسيقى" لسموئيل بيكيت**

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Abstract

Beckett's theatre, in particular, is deeply intellectual and the rationality of the absurd becomes clearer if it is compared to its Latin origin (*absurdus*) which means something that is dissonant, inconsistent, incompatible or harmonious. Thus, that thing becomes unreasonable and absurd. Specifically, what is unreasonable is the position of humans in the universe in which they are as a very small part of atoms. However, the absurd thing is the incompatible relationships, and therefore the inharmonious or dissonant and inconsistent thing is a person's situation with himself full of contradictions, which are difficult to get rid of without knowledge. Beckett theatre is neither absurd nor unreasonable in the common sense of the two words, but rather it is a subjective and objective depiction of the absurdity of life and the unreasonableness of the universe. Thus, *Words and Music* (1962) could be seen as a reflection of Beckett's struggle with writing, which ends with his acknowledgment that music wins because of an inability to express through words alone **Keywords:** Music, Rationality, Meaning, Irrationality, Words

المخلص:

ان مسرح بيكيت على وجه الخصوص، فكري عميق، وان عقلانية العبث تصبح أكثر وضوحًا إذا ما قورنت بأصلها اللاتيني (*absurdus*) والذي يعني شيئاً غير متناسق، غير متسق، غير متوافق أو متناغم. وهكذا يصبح غير معقول. وعلى وجه التحديد، ما هو غير معقول هو موقع الإنسان في الكون الذي نحن فيه كجزء صغير جداً من الذرات. وان العبث هو العلاقات غير المتوافقة، وبالتالي فإن ما هو غير منسجم أو متناقض وغير متسق هو حالة الشخص مع نفسه المليئة بالتناقضات التي يصعب التخلص منها دون معرفة. إن مسرح بيكيت ليس عبثياً ولا غير منطقي بالمعنى العام للكلمتين، بل هو تصوير شخصي وموضوعي لعبثية الحياة وعدم معقولية الكون. وبهذا يمكن تناول مسرحية "كلمات وموسيقى" (1962) على إنها انعكاس لصراع بيكيت الكاتب مع الكتابة، والذي ينتهي باعترافه بفوز الموسيقى بسبب عدم القدرة على التعبير من خلال الكلمات وحدها. **الكلمات المفتاحية:** الموسيقى، العقلانية، المعنى، اللاعقلانية، الكلمات

Introduction □

Samuel Beckett is one of the few who practices almost all kinds of literature. He writes articles, research, poetry, short stories and novels as well. In addition, he has his own distinctive mark in the cinematic field and has written many radio and television dramas, some of which were performed on stage His international fame began with *Waiting for Godot* which was his first long play that premiered in 1952 in Paris. Critics considered it the first spark that blew up many plays by other writers whose works have been called Theatre of Absurd. In addition to *The End of the game* and *Happy Days* and his short dramas, which are as good as his longer works Accordingly, Beckett's works provide conclusive evidence of the absurdity of the human situation in general. Hence, we find that Beckett portrays this through what looks like abstract images or musical tones. Therefore, his dramatic treatment of these crucial topics comes as a poetic abstraction, musical, and formative of the metaphysical ideas that occupied Beckett's mind as a man, poet, and philosopher. Hence, Martin Aslin's in his book *The Theatre of the Absurd* (1961) sees that the difference between the philosopher's approach and the poet's approach to metaphysical ideas like the idea of God becomes clear. He says that the difference between a cleric and a dramatist is as the difference between theory and practice. Esslin compares the style of the Theatre of the Absurd with the absurdity of existential thought, which Albert Camus and Sartre express in a dramatic manner that is not technically compatible with the nature of the same thought. However, it is more appropriate from a philosophical point of view. He says that... While Sartre or Camus express the new content in the old convention, the Theatre of Absurd goes a step further in trying to achieve a unity between its basic assumptions and the form in which these are expressed. In some sense, the theatre of Sartre and Camus is less adequate as an expression of philosophy of Sartre and Camus-in artistic, as distinct from philosophic terms- than the Theatre of Absurd (Esslin, 1961, p.xx). On the basis of Eslin's two previous definitions, Beckett's method of dramatic treatment approaches the same nature of the abstract ideas he expresses. He completely abandons the logical thought with which both Sartre and Camus treat the same ideas through the sober method that is associated with the traditions of the Aristotelian theatre. Through this concept, Beckett appears to have a particular nature and a special concept as well, in line with his formation, which is influenced by the philosophy of the Greeks and the Greek theatre, in addition to his influence by the thought of Kierkegaard and Nietzsche Beckett has a special concept of tragedy that he expresses through his vision of life and his feeling of human tragedy after he analyses the religious perceptions associated with the first sin and atonement and so on. From a

metaphysical and philosophical standpoint, he says: Tragedy is not concerned with human justice. Tragedy is the statement of an expiation, but not the expiation of a codified breach of local arrangement, organized by the knaves for the fools. The tragic figure represents the expiation of the original sin, of the original and eternal sin of him and all his 'soci malorum', the sin of having been born (Beckett, 1962, p.25). So, according to Beckett's concept of tragedy and human justice, human relations become nothing but a manifestation of metaphysical anxiety. Thus, man found is a miserable creature who pays the price of a sin he did not commit and cannot be convinced of his responsibility for being born like this. He is a free and shackled man at the same time. Despite the multiplicity of interpretations of Beckett's concept of tragedy and justice, the most important distinguishing feature of Beckett's works is that they sharpen the mind and force it to exert an effort, that should not be less than the effort that Beckett has exerted to create it, in order to reach the realization of the essence of his thought and his hidden motives behind his unique technique. Without that effort, his works may become meaningless from the viewpoints of some readers and nothing more than absurdity or trendy, even from the perspectives of those who work and deal with culture and thought.

1.1 The Rationality of the Absurd

The realization that thinking in poetic images has its validity side by side with the conceptual thought and insistence on a clear recognition of the function and possibilities of each mode does amount to a return to irrationalism; on the contrary, it opens the way to truly rational attitude (Esslin, 1961, p.316). Hence, whoever lives with Beckett in full coexistence through his works turns out that what he presents is not absurd and unreasonable in the common sense of the two words, but a subjective and objective depiction of the absurdity of life and the unreasonableness of the universe. However, what makes life truly absurd, and deepens that meaning, is the dishonest human relationships that destroy individuals, and therefore groups. Unreasonable lies in the unreasonableness of the universe, which is impossible to comprehend with the theoretical mind, but with application, perception and intuition, As Esslin says in *The Theatre of the Absurd*: The Theatre of the Absurd expresses anxiety and despair that spring from recognition that man is surrounded by areas of impenetrable darkness, that he can never know his true nature and purpose and that no one will provide him with ready-made rules of conduct (p.314). Accordingly, Beckett's theatre, to the extent of its ability to indulge in mental and psychological attempts to reach the truth and portrays the human condition and the absurdity of human relations in the universe, becomes unreasonable. In a more specific sense, it is necessary to comprehend Beckett's works and approach their depths and components, tasting and understanding them in the same way in which high-world music is approached and appreciated. Meanwhile, it could be approached Beckett's work in the same way it approached figurative paintings, especially surrealism, abstraction, cubism, and other works of plastic contemporary art. In other, more abstract terms, it is realized the hidden meanings behind Beckett's words by trying to comprehend the system related to the nature of man and the universe, as atoms dominated by a very precise system despite their infinite abundance. Hence, it is noticeable that Beckett's depiction of an extended, wide world without spatial or temporal boundaries. Accordingly, times and places overlap, and the real sense of time and place dims. As Esslin clarify that "a phenomenon like The Theatre of Absurd does not reflect despair or a return to dark irrational forces but expresses modern man endeavour to come to terms with the world in which he lives" (Esslin, 1961, p.316). Beckett also made attempts to show the metaphysical dimensions of man and his relationship to the universe. Thus, it is also observable that most of Beckett's works are a combination of the spirit of poetry, metaphysical dreams, daydreaming, music and figurative art in its broad sense. Accordingly, Beckett was able to make the impact of his works as the influence of poetic poems or musical tones by creating them from a delicately intertwined spider web, rich in intertwined meanings and thoughts. Beckett's style cares about words, such as tones, their composition, transformations, and interactions; he aims to reach change through these words which are his main artistic medium as a writer. Thus, Beckett's theatre represents a vivid picture of the classical civilization in the west and America. Therefore, it is impossible to underestimate the importance of the Absurd Theatre with its ideas and dramatic style, which is still dramatically developing.

1.2 On Music in Samuel Beckett

It might be surprising to hear a Nobel laureate in literature say "Music always wins" (Doran, 2014, para. 1). However, those who knew Samuel Beckett were aware of the importance of music in his life, both as a creator and a consumer. The writer's three-word resignation "Music always wins", was presumably expressed by an incident at the piano with his Romanian composer friend Marcel Mihaioviici when he was

preparing for his radio play *Words and Music*. Nicolai Mihalovici and Beckett were both working on Beckett's libretto for Krapp's last tape, which Beckett had agreed to write. It was challenging for him to reengage with his words in response to music. However, that inspired him to write two radio plays where music was the main character, in addition to *Words and Music*, there is *Cascando*. Irish families were captivated by music as if it were a natural instinct: Samuel Beckett was a devoted concertgoer, whether he lived in Berlin, Paris, London, or Dublin. Beckett would also write critically about the concerts he heard. When, under Wilhelm Furtwängler, the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra gave a disappointing performance of Beckett's favourite Beethoven symphony, no 7 ... , he reportedly said of the conductor: "what can one expect from a recent convert to nazism but an absence of mystery and a disintegration of formal structures?" (Doran, 2014, para. 6). Considering Beckett's passion and knowledge of music, it is not surprising that he references music in his works many times. Despite the fact that many authors have musical expertise. Beckett is one of the rare writers who combined formalism and musical spirit. Beckett's work reveals a musical framework; he uses da capo, theme and variation, reprise, and counterpoint. Beckett writes "to find a form that accommodates the mess, that is the task of the artist now," (cited in Driver, 1961, p. 23). Words might fail him, but the music never did. As V says in *Ghost Trio*: "Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. [Pause.] ... Mine is a faint voice. Kindly tune accordingly. [Pause.] It will not be raised, nor lowered, whatever happens. [Pause]" (Beckett, 1948, p. 248) In contrast to Beckett's perspective on language and its expressive limitations, when he had asked about his play *Words and Music* and the conflict between the two, he was clear: music is the absolute winner, as it "is the idea itself, unaware of the world of phenomena existing ideally outside the universe, apprehended not in space but in time only" (Beckett, 1965, p. 92) This is true because, at least in the form that language has, music, especially abstract music, lacks any signified meaning. Since there is no established code associating certain meanings with particular sounds, music survives and might be interpreted as a signifier to the unaware listener even when an extra-musical notion or text is conveyed through the music. Thus, is this autonomy a strength or a weakness in a live musical performance? Is the absence of the signified a desired aspect of music, especially when multiple artistic domains are involved and a clear or unclear message needs to be conveyed? In the end, it appears that this principle must exist. So, rather than asking how to alter the essence of music, the question is about altering how it is perceived. To think about Beckett's Note: why does music usually triumph? Why is language or its depiction in visual form, inferior to music?

2.1 The Search of Meaning

Bram van Velde once says that "every phrase that Beckett writes is something he has somehow experienced" (cited in Law, 1996, 13). The claim that Beckett's works have an importance that, to varying degrees, transcends the referential does not discount their essential connection to experience; rather, it raises the issue of how meaningful experience is created. Thus, the significance of Beckett's literary and philosophical heritage can be seen particularly in his early work. As Richard Ellmann states, "reading Wilde, Yeats, and Joyce does not make the coming of Beckett predictable. Yet once he fills the scene we cannot help but consider or reconsider the writers who preceded him" (Richard, 1989, p. 94). Consequently, the extraction of the core meaning of Beckett's literary, Irish and personal plays a significant role in dismantling established concepts and structures. Correspondingly, Beckett's latter works immerse the reader in the actual attempt to build identity and location, whereas his earlier works expressly examine the validity of certain philosophical stances and particular approaches to ideas and their expression. Given this, it should come as no surprise that Beckett made references to music in his early works. Beckett was perhaps the first critic to grasp Schopenhauer's idea of music and aesthetic valuing as an exploration of the essence of the world independent of reason "The purpose of all art is the communication of the apprehended Idea" (Schopenhauer, 1969, p. I, 237). However, according to Schopenhauer, Music is the superior art form as a much more potent medium. "Music is by no means like the other arts, namely a copy of the Ideas, but a copy of the will itself, the objectivity of which are the Ideas" (p. I, 257). Since the composer can expose the true nature of things; Music does not express this or that particular and definite pleasure, this or that affliction, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment or peace of mind, but joy, pain, sorrow, horror, gaiety, merriment, or peace of mind themselves, to a certain extent in the abstract, their essential nature, without any accessories, and so also without the motives for them (p. I, 257) Such claims are unmistakably consistent with the opinions Marcel voiced in the last significant discussion of Vinteuil's works, the point at which Marcel is developing a broader understanding: For the vague sensations given by Vinteuil, coming not from a memory but from an impression ... one would have had to find ... not a material explanation, but

the profound equivalent, the unknown ... the mode by which he 'heard' the universe and projected it far beyond himself. Perhaps it was in this, I said to Albertine, this unknown quality of a unique world which no other composer had ever yet revealed, that the most authentic proof of genius lies, even more than in the content of the work itself. 'Even in literature?' Albertine inquired. 'Even in literature.' (Law, 2013, p.39).

2.2 Beckett's Music as a Form of Expression

In *Words and Music* (1962), the one-act play, two characters known as Words and Music or Joe and Bob, as they are frequently called, confront and compete with one another, in order to create songs, musical interludes, and lyric poetry. They are somewhat guided by Croak, a third character who, as his name implies, lies in between sound and sense. From the beginning, it's obvious that Words and Music are not compatible. The play begins with Music, a little orchestra, tuning up, much to the annoyance of Words, who is trying to practice a soliloquy on the unexpected subject of sloth. He gets interrupted by the orchestra both in the middle of his statement and again at the conclusion as he listens intently to see if their master is getting close. *Words and Music* occasionally display moments of resentment and rivalry that appear to be rather overt, giving their relationship additional dimension. As soon as Croak enters the room, Joe and Bob automatically submit to him. There must be many years of history between them. One could imagine them as prisoners who are unable to flee, torturing one another. Croak notices that they are arguing, he gently reprimands them: "My comforts! Be friends" (Beckett, 1984, p. 127) and in an attempt to explain his lateness and he makes the following vague statement: "The face ... On the stairs ... In the tower." (pp. 127,128). At first, he appears to be gracious, but he soon displays his impatience, arrogance, authoritarianism, and rage. Critical analyses of the work have led to a variety of interpretations of what the scene in *Words and Music* might symbolize. Clas Zilliacus suggests that in this piece: "a mental process is unfolding," in which, Croak "instigates two of his faculties, at odds with each other, to provide him with solace and entertainment." Additionally, Zilliacus presents an interpretation of the play based on medieval lyric, contending that the "master and servant motif familiar from other Beckett works here appears in recognisably feudal costume (Zilliacus 1976, pp. 105,106). Vivian Mercier treats the three characters as separate beings, Croak being an "old man who shuffles in asking Words and Music to be friends". (Mercier, 1977, p.154-159). Charles Lyons states that "in Words and Music Beckett provides three characters who seem to represent different psychic functions of a single consciousness ... however Beckett does not integrate them into the image of a specific, whole person." (Lyons, 1983, pp.136,139). Lyons also makes several allusions to the piece's autobiographical content, although he never offers any concrete proof. It is undeniably true that every artist expresses a part of themselves in their work, whether they are aware of doing so or not. In the end, most critics agree that *Words and Music* is a "composition about composition." (Cohn, 2001, p. 168). Of course, one of Beckett's recurring themes in all of his writing has been the inability of meaningful expression through words alone, and Joe doesn't disappoint in that regard. It is Croak's desire to feel, to wallow in that moment of emotion. He neither wants to know nor need to understand. If Croak is a writer or the embodiment of the creative side of a writer, he has remarkably little control over his ideas and emotions. He could be seen as a reflection of Beckett's own struggles with creativity. Words, in the end, are [Beckett's] material – not as literature but in terms of something akin to silence; the desire is not to control or empower but to listen. Words are a function of listening for Beckett, listening within a silence of being where the world is effaced. (Finch, 1977, para.6). According to Beckett, writing is a visual art that strives to attain the ideal status of music: "music is the idea itself, unaware of the world of phenomena" (Beckett, 1958, p. 92). "the ultimate imageless language of emotion." (Sion, 2006, para.12). This makes Beckett's response to Katharine Worth's question concerning the relation between the two characters in this play is less surprising, he responded by saying: "Music always wins." (Worth, 1981, p.210). Likewise, Beckett told Theodor W. Adorno "that it definitely ends with the victory of music" (Zilliacus, 1976, p. 114). However, how exactly? Together, they strive to get to this point, but is it Croak's reawakened emotion or meaning that eventually causes the victory against him? Is this why Words is rendered speechless by the play's conclusion? It seems [Joe] has lost his power to express himself through words and, in contrast to his initial protestations during Music's tuning session, he now implores [Bob] to continue, as if admitting defeat. The play ends with what we might perceive to be our own natural non-rational and immediate expression of hopelessness; the word is reduced to a human sigh in the play's concluding sound. (Words and Music, 2021, para.15).

Conclusion

Absurdity is as unreasonable as the incomprehensibility of the universe and absurd as challenging to understand the nature of the rationality and purpose of the universe. Hence, the Theatre of the Absurd that depicts such universal meanings is the most reasonable possible perception within the limits of human nature, which can be reached by paying attention to every word, especially Beckett's, or any other details that are most accurate. As what makes life truly absurd, and deepens that meaning, is the frivolous and dishonest human relationships that destroy individuals, and therefore groups. However, the unreasonable lies in the unreasonableness of the universe, which is impossible to comprehend with the theoretical mind, but with application, perception and intuition. In *Words and Music*, Beckett expresses the inability of expressing through words alone and by contrasting the concerns of modernism and postmodernism; it is observable that Beckett establishes a connection between the two movements. His concern with postmodernism is in light of the open contingencies of multiplicity. It might even be argued that Beckett successfully moves the music into the postmodern era, where its inherent resistance to definitive interpretation should find it welcomed after its appropriation by modernist literature and Romantic admiration of musical vagueness.

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