

## Reading *Breath* as the Sublime.

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‘The aesthetics of the sublime is still more indeterminate: a pleasure mixed with pain, a pleasure  
that comes from pain.’<sup>1</sup>

‘Optical pleasure, when reduced to near nothingness promotes an infinite contemplation of  
infinity.’<sup>2</sup>

In *The Critique of Judgement*, Kant defines the mathematically sublime as, ‘the name given to what is absolutely great.’<sup>3</sup> The simplicity of this statement belies the complex nature of the sublime; if we are to even briefly linger over one element of Kant’s claim—the word ‘great’ for example—then our instant comprehension begins to disintegrate. What exactly does ‘great’ mean? In contemporary society, it is commonly used for its presumed positive connotations; great as fun or exiting or amazing. Sometimes, although less frequently since it sounds a little archaic, it is used to describe huge physical presence and magnitude, this is closer to Kant’s understanding of the term. Samuel Beckett’s 1969 play *Breath* does not adhere to either of these standards of greatness.<sup>4</sup> Just fifteen seconds long, the play is entirely empty of actors, the only gesture towards visible action comes from the lighting which renders the scene dim then slightly less dim then back to dim again. The mathematical sublime denies the subject the totality of the object by virtue of its grand physical

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<sup>1</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘The Sublime and The Avant-Garde’ in *The Inhuman* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 98.

<sup>2</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 98.

<sup>3</sup> Immanuel Kant, ‘The Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement’ in *The Critique of Judgement* (Radford: Wilder Publications, 2008), 57.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘Breath’ in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 369-371.

presence.<sup>5</sup> *Breath* can be apprehended with the intake of air and missed in the event of expiration, this surely makes fulfilment of the mathematical sublime impossible. There is, however, some promise in a reading of Beckett's work which relies on Kant's dynamically sublime and the later writing on the subject by Jean-Francois Lyotard. The subject collapses and pulls away in the face of the dynamically sublime, this forces the consciousness into a state of happy anxiety. This sublime, one of superior aesthetic might, expresses a threat rather than poses one.<sup>6</sup> According to Lyotard, such affective aesthetic force can be found in the artwork which alludes to an unrepresentable quality which resides within the sublime thing, whereas the artwork which simply mirrors the object will miss the point entirely.<sup>7</sup> Following this argument, we must shift our focus away from the image of the sublime in order to bring the experience of it into focus. At this point we may begin to fit Beckett's *Breath* into a paradigm of the sublime as negotiated by Kant and Lyotard.

‘The inexpressible does not reside in another there, in another word, or in another time, but in this: in that (something) happens.’<sup>8</sup> From this particular Lyotardian perspective, theatre may be understood as the medium of the sublime—a play is not singularly produced but, with each performance, it happens. The slightness of *Breath* and the competing sensations evoked by it speak further to the experience of the sublime. Each sublime happening is comprised of the two opposing binaries. The first, agitation, holds a negative valency and is felt in the event of an event which cannot be apprehended at the time of happening. Suspended in a void between the anticipation of a happening and the reflection upon action just past, the event of the sublime can only be understood in *antemortem* or *posthumous* terms but can be felt in neither. As a fracture or break, it shakes the temporal linearity of everyday life. Lyotard terms this simple but indescribable happening as ‘the

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<sup>5</sup> Kant, *Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> Kant, *Analytic of Aesthetic Judgement*, 66.

<sup>7</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 89.

<sup>8</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 93.

question mark' between 'in the first place' and 'then.'<sup>9</sup> The structure of *Breath* can be seen as an attempt to represent this logic artistically. We are first presented with a motionless scene which, given its privileged position on a stage within a theatre and in front of an audience, appears set for action. The three 'dramatic' acts pass, quite undifferentiated from one another, in the space of just thirty five seconds. As it finishes we are left with little but an instant past in memory which is difficult to discern from that which preceded it. Nonetheless, there is a distinct and uneasy feeling that something happened, and it did, the lights coming up are testament to this fact. The moment of *Breath* allows three parts, clearly defined by Beckett in his script, to almost coalesce; the play performs the lie of continuity which reality constantly repeats. Given that 'what we do not manage to formulate is that something happens,' any notion of being within the moment should, it seems, be replaced with the affirmation that we are perpetually without it—sublime experience makes this explicit since through it we are taken out of ourselves.<sup>10</sup> Being without suggests a kind of nothingness which is typical of Beckett's work; atemporal, ageographical, ahistorical his plays occur in a nowhere elsewhere. He thus constantly interrogates the nightmare which, according to Lyotard, haunts anyone creative; that is the 'possibility of nothing happening, of words, colours, forms or sounds not coming.'<sup>11</sup> His theatre, *Breath* being paradigmatic, is a representation of privation, a full stop when we expect a comma. Beckett heightens the anxiety which accompanies the idea of nothing but the abyss as he displaces his audience. Viewers of '*Breath*' are forced to take the role of the writer or director who is haunted by the possibility that nothing else exists to be made beyond the play. Given that all theatrical conventions have been negated in favour of non-action, any engaged viewer finishes watching *Breath* with Lyotard's question of 'what now?' still left begging. Of course there is nothing else, you leave and you go home, there is some relief in that. The incomplete experience of the play in its totality is anxiety inducing since the audience is

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<sup>9</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 90.

<sup>10</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 90.

<sup>11</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 91.

left waiting for answers which will never come. There is, however, some pleasure in being taken out of one's own reality and brought into another—surely this is why people go to the theatre or watch television or read books in the first place. With 1314 performances staged on Broadway between 1974 and 1989, *Breath* is the most watched of all Beckett plays. It would not have enjoyed such a run if it were to play only upon the nervous system, there must be something in the wasteland that stimulates the pleasure centre as well. The mixture of enjoyment and horror which accompanies an encounter with *Breath* helps to model it as a proprietor of the sublime.<sup>12</sup>

The formal rhythms of *Breath* and how they may provoke or mimic the movements of sublime experience have been considered through a relatively broad lens thus far. This lens has been set upon the play as performance rather than in its written form. *Breath*, like any of Beckett's theatrical works, is as much a piece of literature as it is a piece of theatre and so the stage directions should be given due critical attention. With rigorously bare instruction, Beckett choreographs each of the thirty five seconds of *Breath* with intense precision. Chance has been eliminated as an artistic force and every slight change in environmental circumstance has been deliberately chosen for its affective quality; there are no words to speak so the visuals and the non-linguistic sounds must talk as if in a foreign dialect. Lyotard, through Boileau (who investigated a sublime of rhetoric), announces that, where the sublime is concerned, 'there is no better figure of speech than one which is completely hidden, that we do not even recognise as a figure of speech.'<sup>13</sup> As already noted, there is no speech in *Breath*. There is, however, oral sound and in the stage requirements Beckett insists that this be an 'instant of recorded vagitus.'<sup>14</sup> From these four words it is possible to interpret a threefold obfuscation of the origin of sound. Firstly, the noise comes from an offstage source. Secondly, this source is not directly human, all humanity has been displaced by technology in the

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<sup>12</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 93.

<sup>13</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 95.

<sup>14</sup> Beckett, *Breath*, 371.

recording process. Thirdly, ‘vagitus,’ meaning the cry of the foetus from inside the womb, is not a living, breathing sound but instead it is a yet to be realised noise made by a being which is both part of the world and removed from it.<sup>15</sup> ‘Vagitus’ is, perhaps, the non-verbal expression of an idea which Beckett posits most succinctly in *A Piece of Monologue* but can be traced back as far as *Waiting for Godot*.<sup>16 17</sup> I am referring to the rather maudlin notion that ‘birth the death of him.’<sup>18</sup> We know not of death until we experience it, by which time it is too late. ‘Vagitus’ or the language of death in life must, therefore, be unrecognisable to the living subject. By specifying this type of cry, Beckett asserts the voice (if you can call it that) of *Breath* as something essentially other or, in Boileau’s terms, an unrecognisable figure of speech. This interpretation is further cemented by the aforementioned physical barriers which Beckett constructs around the source of the cry. By relentlessly separating the speaker in *Breath* from the audience, Beckett declares it definitely hidden and so reaches towards Boileau’s model for sublime communication. Furthermore, if we are to reflect upon the secondary definition of ‘vagitus’ then the contradictions of sublime experience are again evoked. In non-medical terms, this word may refer to the baby’s first audible cry. The initial wail is one of both shock and relief; shock at being in an unknown and hostile environment but relief since independence has finally been achieved (once born the child is wholly itself rather than a subdivision of someone else). Beckett articulates the painful emancipation of birth through a disembodied cry which explores the experience of the dumb child on its own pre-linguistic terms. Language is an instrument of rationalisation and codification so to elicit a non-sensical oral response, such as a cry, is to acknowledge that ‘something happens’ while not insisting on knowledge of what that thing is. Here it is necessary to return to Lyotard and his idea that when the

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<sup>15</sup> Does the womb force the foetus exist in isolation or is it part of the world by proxy of it’s mother?

<sup>16</sup> Samuel Beckett, ‘A Piece of Monologue’ in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006), pp. 423-429.

<sup>17</sup> I am thinking here of a line spoken by Pozza in ‘Waiting for Godot’ in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber and Faber, 2006) - ‘They gave birth astride of a grave, the light gleams an instant, then it’s night again.’ 83 - incidentally, this line could be read as a kind of pre-emptive synopsis for ‘Breath’ wherein Beckett has managed to crystallise the sentiment into an experience free of language’s muddying force.

<sup>18</sup> Beckett, *Piece of Monologue*, 427.

sublime asserts itself, ‘That which we call thought must be disarmed’—the child is feeling rather than thinking and we cannot think the sublime but can only feel it.<sup>19</sup> Is Beckett employing allegory here?

The term sublime has been used variously throughout the course of this essay; we have encountered a mathematically sublime, a dynamically sublime, a rhetorical sublime and the experience of the sublime per se. My primary theoretical referent, *The Sublime and The Avant-Garde* by Lyotard, circles around the issues and characteristics of the sublime in general before settling on the aesthetics of the sublime and their relation to avant-gardism/minimalism. This discussion will now take a turn in the same direction. Greatness, our introduction to the sublime, with all its excess does not sit well with the material aspect of minimalist art. Lyotard, however, suggests that the sublime may be intensified through the negation of greatness which minimalism performs.<sup>20</sup> However radical or progressive this logic may seem, Lyotard constructs a history for his idea through the Frankfurt School and back to Kant, the origin of the sublime. Lyotard, through the abstract expressionist paintings of Barnett Newman (1907-1970), recognises that -

One cannot represent the power of the infinite might or absolute magnitude within space and time because they are pure ideas. But one can at least allude to them, or ‘evoke’ them by means of what he [Kant] baptises as negative presentation.<sup>21</sup>

Negative presentation is the foremost mode of representation for Beckett and he explores it with repeated attention across his dramatic oeuvre. Given that *Breath* eschews not only the grandiose conventions of theatre but also the most basic formal principles, this absolutely bare production can

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<sup>19</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 90.

<sup>20</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 98.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Francois Lyotard, ‘Newman, The Instant’ in *The Inhuman* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 85.

be, and has been, read as the high point of Beckett's drive towards minimalism. The temporal brevity of *Breath* has already been discussed but there is a visual of near nothingness that has yet to be addressed. The physical scene is set only with rubbish which has 'No verticals, all scattered and lying.'<sup>22</sup> Beckett, in his short story *Lessness*, tells us that the 'Little body [is] same grey as the earth sky ruins only upright.'<sup>23</sup> In *Breath* we are not even granted this vague differentiation between body and broken world. Flatness, therefore, pre-emptively sterilises any narrative interpretation since we are, from the start, denied the luxury of reading human figures into upright objects. The undifferentiated environment which Beckett creates is an extreme example of avant-garde minimalism, he pulls everything back and conceals it (as already noted, both form and content are involved in this secrecy). The result of an unknowable nothing dislocates the viewer by exposing the impotency of their critical faculties. However, as this essay and the hundreds which came before it will confirm, this does not stop attempts to understand what is happening in *Breath*. The incomprehensibility of the piece forces the critic to perform the final words of *The Unnamable* (interestingly, this is also term that Lyotard uses for the sublime) through their practice—when critically responding to *Breath* the feeling is always, 'I can't go on, I'll go on.'<sup>2425</sup> The active imaginative tension which *Breath* incites is, it seems, analogous to the 'double pleasure' which Lyotard understands to be a consequence of successfully sublime minimalist art. The pathos which defines sublime experience asserts itself through the strange duality of confusion and imagination—'imagination thus aims to harmonise its [the sublime's] object with that of reason—and that furthermore the inadequacy of images is a negative sign of the immense power of ideas.'<sup>26</sup> Visuals intentionally fail in minimalist art and so the viewer must look elsewhere for understanding or

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<sup>22</sup> Beckett, *Breath*, 371.

<sup>23</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'Lessness' in *Samuel Beckett: The Complete Short Prose, 1929-1989* (New York: Grove Press, 1995), 199.

<sup>24</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 90.

<sup>25</sup> Samuel Beckett, 'The Unnameable' in *The Trilogy: Molloy, Malone Dies, The Unnamable* (London: John Calder, 1959), 418.

<sup>26</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 98.

affect; the outward glance can only be replaced here with introspection. The dimness of Beckett's stage seems to be an ironic play on the futility of representation. Even the most well trained eye would struggle to decipher anything in a light which is 'Not bright. If 0 = dark and 10 = bright, light should move from back 3 to 6 and back.'<sup>27</sup> The initial helplessness of the subject may, however, be overridden by cognitive function which affirms thought and its ability to reach far beyond sight; this revelation can be the source of boundless freedom as the work becomes a catalyst rather than end point. Shifting agency from the material of the object to the "'addressee" instance' creates an open ended experience of the art object which in turn asserts the life-force of the addressee, since it is through them that something happens.<sup>28</sup> The impotency of cognition has been inverted and now it is the minimal artwork which nobody regards that is impotent. *Breath*, by giving nothing away, forces the imagination into overdrive; the emptiness invites the viewer into dialogue with the play and so the experience is never one of complacency. Instead of being the sublime, Beckett's play seems to be making space for the sublime and so follows Lyotard's revelation that, 'Sublimity is no longer in art, but in speculation on art.'<sup>29</sup>

Any encounter with *Breath* will no doubt evoke a confused response. Beckett appears to have taken the themes he consistently reflects upon and, through this work, has reduced them to their very essence—language which says nothing has become a cry and a sigh, trashed and mutilated bodies are merely rubbish, disembodied voices exist at an extreme remove and representation is a constant grey area. What are in other works linguistic or bodily or environmental acts have been restaged as ideas carried out of complete obscurity by the smallest theatrical gestures. Beckett pushes his artistic enterprise to its limits so are we pushed to ours. Through

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<sup>27</sup> Beckett, *Breath*, 371.

<sup>28</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 97.

<sup>29</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 106.

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*Breath* we see not just a fractional change in light-scape synchronised with a recorded cry but a performance of Lyotard's requirements for the experience of the sublime in the avant-garde:

The artist attempts combinations allowing the event. The art-lover does not experience a simple pleasure, but expects an intensification of his conceptual and emotional capacity, an ambivalent enjoyment. Intensity is associated with an ontological dislocation.<sup>30</sup>

The sublime is 'indeterminacy' and so I can offer no firm conclusions.<sup>31</sup> The intersections between *Breath* and the sublime which I have noted, the further constellations of ideas which I have constructed, may be nothing but the rubbish which litters Beckett's stage. However, the thirty five seconds of *Breath* are thirty five seconds of suspended tension, thirty five seconds which allude comprehension, thirty five seconds of pleasure and pain. If no other reading presents itself, why shouldn't this be read as an extended experience of the sublime?

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<sup>30</sup>Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 101.

<sup>31</sup> Lyotard, *Sublime and Avant-Garde*, 97.

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