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Platonic Dramaturgy in Modernist Drama: *Waiting for Godot* as Socratic Dialogues

*Although Plato is usually known as an anti-theatre figure, many studies have been done on his Socratic dialogues as dramatic texts. The dramatic characteristics of Plato's dialogues rely most on its 'diegetic' feature, meaning 'narrative', away from the 'mimetic' or 'imitative' performance. This Platonic dramaturgy was revived in modernist drama due to the resistance against realistic imitation, the prevalence of philosophical concepts, and anti-Aristotelian structures. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is one of the best examples of this modernist 'diegetic drama', which realizes philosophical matters in a dialectical process, through diegetic speech-oriented text, with the least imitative action on stage. It is not that diegetic dramas do not have performance capabilities, but they have the potential to be realized only in the form of dialogues and narratives; a feature similar to Socratic dialogues. This paper seeks to discuss these features of *Waiting for Godot* aligned with Platonic dramaturgy.*

Keywords: Plato, Socratic dialogues, diegetic drama, mimesis, Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*.

Introduction

Plato's dialogues, known as Socratic dialogues, often have a greater value in philosophy than in the dramatic field. Although there have been theorists who specifically focused on the dramatic aspect of these dialogues, these texts are usually not considered very serious as an independent dramatic genre. One of the common reasons for this matter

may have been Plato's negative approach to the issue of mimesis and mimetic arts such as theatre, which has always made him an anti-theatrical figure. On the other hand, even when dramatic focus is placed on these dialogues, they remain largely outside the scope of dramatic studies. Since they rely solely on diegesis and narrative speech rather than elements of stage performance, they deviate from classical or Aristotelian principles of drama.

Mimesis and diegesis were always the main topics of philosophy and literary criticism in classical Greece. Apparently, the word mimesis belongs to the period after Homer and Hesiod (8th century BC), because no trace of this word is found in their works.

The word mimesis is post-Homeric: it does not occur in either Homer or Hesiod. Its etymology, as linguists maintain, is obscure. Most probably it originated with the rituals and mysteries of the Dionysian cult; in its first (quite different from the present) meaning mimesis-imitation stood for cult acts performed by a priest - dancing, music and singing... Another concept of imitation, which acquired greater popularity, was also formed in the fifth century in Athens but by a different group of philosophers: it was first introduced by Socrates and further developed by Plato and Aristotle. To them imitation meant the copying of the appearance of things.¹

However, the concept of mimesis was probably first analyzed by Plato philosophically. He specifically and extensively discusses mimesis in books 1, 2, and 5 of *The Republic* and also in *Ion*. Plato does not limit mimesis to the world of art, but considers the entire material world to be an imitation of the ideal world. Therefore, he considers the realm of imitation to be a low level of truth. In the realm of imitative art, he also

¹ TATARKIEWICZ (1980: 266–267).

considers mere mimesis to be low and emphasizes the diegetic poetry in contrast to it. He paid particular attention to the narrative characteristics of the epic genre such as Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, which were in diegesis, without the necessity to imitate or show the actions:

If the poet should conceal himself nowhere, then his entire poetizing and narration [diegesis] would have been accomplished without imitation [mimesis], (Pl. *Rep.* 3, 229).

In fact, diegesis was Plato's preparation to counter theatrical mimesis.

Aristotle, on the other hand, defended mimesis in his *Poetics*. He gave a positive value to the principle of mimesis by bringing forward concepts such as the human desire for imitation and the consequent occurrence of catharsis. Aristotle presents an aesthetic critique in response to Plato's moral criticism of imitation. In other words, Aristotle's *Poetics* is a defense of mimetic arts:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude... in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of these emotions, (Arist. *Poet.* 23).

According to Aristotle, art in general, in all its forms, by imitating nature and combining it with the artist's creativity, purifies the human psyche. Therefore, the more mimetic an art form is, the more valuable it is. From this perspective, contrary to Plato's view, tragedy is superior to epic.

With the long-standing predominance of Aristotle's *Poetics* in the realm of theatre studies in Western literature, the concept of diegetic representation and narrativity was gradually moved away from the poetics of dramatic literature. However, modernist theatre, which dis-

tanced itself from mimesis and used the element of speech to create its dramatic world, has many similarities with Plato's dialogues. Modernist anti-Aristotelian dramas, by consciously rejecting the mimetic or imitative aspect in theatre and relying instead on the diegetic or narrative element in literary texts of drama, somehow revived the Platonic dialogues as an independent genre. Samuel Beckett's dramas are some of the best examples in this regard, which will be examined from this aspect in this study.

The Origins of Platonic Drama

As mentioned earlier, Plato portrayed himself as anti-theatrical due to his opposition to mimesis. Therefore, calling his dialogues 'Platonic drama' seems to contradict his own theories on the subject. However, despite this anti-theatrical perception of Plato that has always existed in literary and philosophical discussions, there are clear evidences that Plato's dialogues are not outside the realm of drama and that Plato can even be considered a dramatist. The most important of these evidences are Aristotle's own references to Plato's dialogues as a subgenre of drama. Aristotle presented the first classification of drama genres in *Poetics*. This classification includes the three main genres of tragedy, comedy, and satire. Aristotle, however, goes on to mention two subgenres that have an unconventional prose:

There is another art which imitates by means of language alone, and that either in prose or verse... but this has hitherto been without the name. For there is no common term and we could apply to the mimes of Sophron and Xenarchus and the Socratic dialogues on the one hand; and, on the other, to poetic imitations... in any similar metre, (Arist. *Poet.* 9).

Therefore, according to Aristotle, the first of these subgenres is the mime, a short and satirical play that gained some literary prominence with the writings of Sophron; and the second of these subgenres is the Socratic dialogues, a new genre introduced by some of Socrates' students.

But it was not only Aristotle who officially called Plato a dramatist by including the Socratic dialogues in this classification. Diogenes Laërtius, the biographer of Greek philosophers, described Plato in his biography as someone who was involved in the Athenian theatre throughout his life, even after his tragedies were burned in the fire. Laërtius mentions that: 'Plato also released his dialogues in tragic tetralogies, the way the tragedians used to compete with four plays in the Dionysia'.² It is important to note that Plato himself was a theatergoer.

In the 20th century, with new approaches to interdisciplinary discussions, Plato's dialogues entered the field of theatrical studies seriously, and in the meantime, the emphasis on the dramatic aspect of these works was taken into account. One of the scholars who has conducted detailed and extensive studies on the dramatic aspects of Plato's dialogues in the modern period is James A. Arieti (1948–). In one of his most important books, entitled *Interpreting Plato: The Dialogues as Drama* (1991) Arieti argues that Plato's dialogues are more similar to comedy and tragedy, especially the old comedy of Aristophanes, than to scientific and literary texts of the pre-Socratics. Therefore, Arieti believes that instead of ignoring the dramatic aspects of Plato's dialogues or, as most theorists do, considering this dramatic aspect as secondary to the philosophical one, 'Plato's works should be studied in the same way as the works of Sophocles and Shakespeare'.³ Arieti emphasizes that Plato did not want us to read his dialogues as philosophical treatises, but rather that he wrote his works as prose comedies and expected his audience

² LAËRTIUS (2020: 152).

³ ARIETI (1991: 1).

to interpret them as such. For example, he considers Plato's *Symposium* to be 'an intellectual comedy rather than a serious discussion of love'.⁴

But perhaps one of the most important theorists about Platonic drama is the contemporary literary critic, Martin Puchner (1969–). In his book *Drama of Ideas* (2010) Puchner writes:

It is true that Plato was extremely critical of the entire theatre system... his critique, however, must be understood not as that of an outsider but as that of a rival; he was not an enemy of theatre but a radical reformer. Attacking many features of Athenian theatre, he sought to create an alternative form of drama, the Socratic dialogue, which avoided all of these features: it was mostly read aloud by one person in front of small audiences; it was based on a new subject matter, philosophy; and it lacked the spectacular effects of choral dancing.⁵

Although the Socratic dialogues were a new genre and a rival to the genres of tragedy and comedy, they were not without similarities to them. As mentioned before, Plato lived in the theatrical environment of Athens and was in contact with many playwrights. Therefore, 'the general spirit of tragedy and comedy may have overshadowed him and his works'.⁶

The Dramaturgy of Platonic Drama

According to what has been said, the dramaturgy of Platonic drama has some fixed components: it is a prose dialogue on political, social, and philosophical topics that is rooted in the characters' conversations and not in

⁴ Ibid., 99.

⁵ PUCHNER (2010: 5).

⁶ NIGHTINGALE (1995: 92).

their actions; the dialogues that are written with the aim of being read to a relatively small audience and not to be performed in public places.

The audience element for Greek comedy and tragedy was a crucial matter. More than fifteen thousand people participated in the Theatre of Dionysus. Citizens formed the chorus and playwrights performed their works in front of the public. But Plato was against such an approach to theatre. He considered this kind of widespread audience 'a kind of mob rule caused by playwrights who, without proper philosophical knowledge, incite the baser emotions of the audience'.⁷ This means that, in Plato's view, the audience of his writings should be free from emotion, meaning that he wanted the process of interpreting his works to be a contemplative-philosophical process, rather than simply evoking emotions and feelings in the audience. For this reason, he could not attract the general public, although the doors were open to everyone.

Plato's critique of theatre contains a powerful critique of passive audiences. His ideal is closer to what one might describe as participant observers. Bystanders, in Plato's dialogues, often enter the argument, the action. This is why the technique of role switching is so central.⁸

In classical Greece, where the established form of theatre included tragedy and comedy with the presence of a chorus and the masses of spectators, a literary form with such dramaturgy seemed strange and unconventional. However, this style of dramaturgy has many similarities with the structures of modernist anti-mimetic drama. The participant observer reminds us of Brecht's Epic Theatre, which was also produced with the aim of performing for a smaller audience. Or the dramas of the 20th

⁷ PUCHNER (2010: 28).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

century dramatists such as Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, and Samuel Beckett, whose main subject always included philosophical issues.

Diegetic Drama and Platonic Dialogues

In *Stage Fright: Modernism, Anti-Theatricality, and Drama* (2002), Puchner applies the exact term 'diegesis' to describe such anti-mimetic plays:

I propose a term to designate the descriptive and narrative strategies through which modern drama tries to frame, control, and interrupt what it perceives to be the unmediated theatricality of the stage and its actors/actresses. This term is 'diegesis'.⁹

According to modernist scholars, Plato's texts can be considered the first examples of diegetic dramas. Therefore, diegetic drama, by definition, is not merely a narrative drama, but an 'anti-mimetic' (and not necessarily 'non-mimetic') drama, which is based on words and speech (not only by the narrator but also in dialogue or even by stage directions); independent (but not incapable) of mimetic actions; containing abstract and philosophical concepts. Diegetic drama celebrates solitary readings and contemplations and is away from (but not incapable of) the collective reception of theatrical performances. The essence of diegetic drama is its resistance to mimesis. So, in diegetic drama, any component that reduces the mimetic representation, adds to the narrativity of the text; components such as: descriptions by the characters, prologues, epilogues, narrators, direct addressing to the audience, the introduction of the actor/actress by himself/herself, abstract scenes and spaces, change of perspective from the first-person to the third-person, reports of the events behind the scene, monologues in the form of soliloquy or aside,

⁹ PUCHNER (2002: 21–22).

the existence of messengers or similar roles, non-human characters such as animals, objects or anything that cannot be staged.

Modernist Diegetic Drama

In modernism, when the path of drama underwent fundamental changes compared to the classical period due to various factors, attention to Platonic dialogues as dramatic texts gradually increased. As a result, the long-held consensus in theatre and philosophy that viewed Plato as an enemy of theatre gradually weakened. Playwrights also became familiar with Plato's dialogues as a unique dramatic form. This kind of drama, which can be called Platonic drama, became the standard-bearer of modernist anti-mimetic drama. But how does modernist drama trace its roots to Platonic drama? In fact, where exactly is the intersection point of Platonic diegetic drama with modernist anti-mimetic drama?

The relationship between modernism and theatre is complicated. After the revival of mimetic arts in the Renaissance, with the onset of modernism, art once again moved away from mimetic representation and went towards abstraction. A variety of different art schools such as Surrealism, Expressionism, Symbolism, etc. relied on anti-mimetic representations. Modernist art not only moved away from imitative representation, but imitative art was generally condemned and considered devoid of aesthetic value. According to Adorno:

Ever since the beginning of the modern age and the emergence of the self-reflecting diremption of subject and object, bourgeois reality -in spite of the limitations set by its incomprehensibility- has had a trace of unreality, of the illusory, just as in philosophy reality became a web of subjective determinations.¹⁰

¹⁰ ADORNO (1997: 281).

In this anti-mimetic modernism, theatre no longer relied solely on the stage performances. The main material of the performing arts, unlike other arts such as painting and sculpture, whose main materials are paint, canvas, wood, or metal, has always been humans. Even cinema had the ability to create a film with images without the presence of humans in them. In such arts, when these materials imitate something in the real world, the result is a realistic mimetic work of art. And when they move away from the objective imitation of nature and create an abstract work, the result is a non-mimetic work of art. However, in theatre, the issue is not so simple. Theatre, in its most abstract form, is always considered a mimetic art because of the presence of a living human on stage. Therefore, when modernist art questioned the principle of mimesis, theatre was in trouble. In other words, theater is inherently in conflict with the critique of mimesis.

However, modernism never stopped its mimesis criticism of theatre. Modernist theatre came into being with all the conflict it had. 'The success of modernism in the theatre depends on the theatre's ability to resist the personal, the individual, the human, and the mimetic'.¹¹ The theatre's reliance on acting on the stage was an obstacle to the modernization of the theatre. Modern playwrights and theatre directors each crossed this barrier in their unique ways. For example, Bertolt Brecht's Epic Theatre, through the method of distancing and presenting the actor/actress as a reporter or narrator, reduced the mimetic aspect of the theatre. Epic Theatre combined epic or diegetic narrativity into the classical dramatic structure in order to activate the spectators' minds, and finally, it broke the Aristotelian structure. Perhaps it is for this reason that Brecht himself changed the title of his Epic Theatre to Dialectical Theatre after a while. Brecht explicitly referred to this shift in his theoretical writings, particularly in his notes and essays about Epic The-

¹¹ PUCHNER (2002: 4).

atre from the late 1930s and 1940s. For instance, in *A Short Organum for the Theatre* (1948), Brecht elaborates on his concept of theatre and emphasizes its dialectical nature: 'This technique [alienation] allows the [epic] theatre to make use in its representations of the new social method known as dialectical'.¹² Brecht later wrote a number of appendices to this essay and linked it to his last collection of notes *Die Dialektik auf dem Theater* [Dialectics in the Theatre].

Samuel Beckett is another brilliant example of this anti-mimetic effort in modernist theatre. Beckett struggled with this barrier more than any other modernists and depersonalized dramatic characters with brutal attacks on the presence of real and objective human beings. The scenes of Beckett's theatre are full of gestures, symbols, narrators, voices with a non-human source; all of which are away from mimetic humans, so that they can perhaps deal with the mimetic human dilemma. Therefore, since modernism, anti-mimetic and anti-Aristotelian theatre led to the revival of diegesis in drama.

Beckett and Platonic Dramaturgy in *Waiting for Godot*

Beckett challenged mimetic theatre in a way that led to a revival of Platonic dramaturgy. In line with his philosophical approach, Beckett created dramas that overturned mimetic representation, and in this respect, they can be considered among the best examples of diegetic drama. The diegetic nature of Beckett's dramas is evident in the aspects of both form and content.

There are many diegetic elements in his dramas; such as third-person narrations, direct address of the audience, dialogues with philosophical references and abstraction. For example, in the play *Waiting for Godot* (1952), the abstract setting and discontinuous narratives of the

¹² WILLETT (1978: 193).

characters are completely far from imitating the external objective world. *Waiting for Godot* is a play in two acts with two main characters Estragon (Gogo) and Vladimir (Didi). They, along with Pozzo and Lucky, discuss a variety of issues while awaiting Godot, who never comes.

In *Waiting for Godot*, there is no external narrator to guide the audience or provide explanations. The story exists entirely within the characters' dialogue, and it is the characters themselves who enter the third-person point of view with their narratives and take on the role of narrator. The audience learns about the world, the characters' past, and their existential dilemmas through what they say and what they hide in their speech. For instance, the nature of Godot and the reasons for their waiting are never explained outside the characters' speculations, leaving the interpretation open-ended.

The play relies heavily on dialogue to convey its themes and structure. The characters' repetitive, fragmented, and often circular conversations form the backbone of the drama:

VLADIMIR: Let's go.

ESTRAGON: We can't.

VLADIMIR: Why not?

ESTRAGON: We're waiting for Godot.¹³

This brief exchange exemplifies how the dramatic world of the play is realized without performing the mimetic act (going), but solely through diegetic way of articulating the words.

Estragon and Vladimir share anecdotes, debate philosophical ideas, and engage in trivial jokes, which contribute to the diegetic pattern. For instance, Vladimir's story of the two thieves crucified with Christ illustrates how narrative layers are embedded in their discussions:

¹³ BECKETT (1954: 14).

VLADIMIR: One of the thieves was saved. It's a reasonable percentage.¹⁴

This anecdote is diegetic because it describes an event external to the play's immediate action, interpreted through Vladimir's philosophical musings. Or in act 2, Pozzo speaks about time and memory, reinforcing existential despair:

POZZO: Have you not done tormenting me with your accursed time! ... One day we were born, one day we shall die, the same day, the same second...¹⁵

Here, Pozzo is not acting but telling a reflection about time, making this passage more diegetic than mimetic.

The setting—a barren landscape with a single tree—offers little context or external mimetic cues. The minimalist environment forces the audience to focus solely on the characters' interactions and what they reveal about their inner worlds. On the other hand, scene descriptions are part of the diegetic components. In Beckett's dramas, the scene descriptions go far beyond guiding the performer and creating a stage atmosphere. These narrative and descriptive pieces are always the main complement to the overall concept of the play and are embedded in the dialogues in such a way that it is as if the main concept of the play can be realized simply by reading the scene descriptions alongside the dialogues.

Memory functions as a diegetic element that shapes the characters' understanding of their reality. For example, the characters repeatedly refer to past events (e.g., meeting Godot before, or being beaten), but

¹⁴ Ibid., 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 109.

these references often contradict each other or remain ambiguous. Therefore, the characters often engage in discussions that are self-referential, acknowledging their repetitive existence and lack of progress:

VLADIMIR: Who beat you? Tell me.

ESTRAGON: Another day done with.

VLADIMIR: Not yet.

ESTRAGON: For me it's over and done with, no matter what happens.¹⁶

This is a classic example of diegesis; Estragon tells us about the beating, but we never witness it. The lack of detail and the ambiguity of who beats him reinforce the absurdity and unreliability of memory. Also, Estragon and Vladimir's discussions about leaving but never actually departing highlight their awareness of being trapped in an endless loop, a hallmark of Beckett's absurdist style.

Pozzo and Lucky's dynamic interaction introduces a secondary layer of diegetic storytelling. Lucky's monologue, while chaotic and nonsensical, serves as a dense, fragmented narrative that contrasts with the sparse dialogue of Vladimir and Estragon. Their arrival and departure disrupt the monotony but do not fundamentally alter the diegetic world, reinforcing the static nature of the play. Pozzo recounts how Lucky used to be a great thinker before falling into his current degraded state:

POZZO: He used to dance... He capered. For joy. Now that's the best he can do.¹⁷

¹⁶ Ibid., 70.

¹⁷ Ibid., 48.

Here, Pozzo tells a story from the past, contrasting Lucky's former intellectual life with his current pathetic condition. The audience does not see Lucky's past; they only hear Pozzo's subjective account.

The diegetic pattern of *Waiting for Godot* leaves much unsaid, requiring the audience to fill in gaps and interpret meaning through the characters' experiences. For instance, when Estragon attempts to share a dream, but Vladimir refuses to listen:

ESTRAGON: I had a dream.

VLADIMIR: Don't tell me!

ESTRAGON: I dreamt that—

VLADIMIR: DON'T TELL ME!¹⁸

This is an interesting diegetic moment that is cut off before it fully unfolds. Dreams are inherently diegetic because they involve recounting an experience rather than performing it. Here, Vladimir's refusal suggests either an unwillingness to confront subconscious fears or an avoidance of further absurdity. On the other hand, the absence of a clear resolution or explanation reflects the philosophical uncertainty that defines the play. The entirety of the play is built without relying on a specific action and solely on the basis of language-based games that rely on narrative techniques, all of which have a philosophical and dialectical basis.

The unparalleled predominance of non-mimetic elements in *Waiting for Godot*, along with the non-Aristotelian narrative structure, strongly place this text in the category of diegetic Platonic dramas. In fact, what Beckett does is a continuation of the path that Brecht began, namely, combining features of the epic genre with the dramatic genre to reduce the excitement of pure drama and instead invite reflection in a Platonic way. In Beckett's dramas, there is no traditional suspense of classical dra-

¹⁸ Ibid., 16.

mas, meaning there is no conflict, climax, or resolution in the traditional sense. Instead, by eliminating the element of suspense and replacing it with repetitive and circular back and forth, his drama traps the audience in a stillness that ultimately leads to more concentration and further contemplation. A feature that, according to Auerbach, is specific to the epic genre rather than the tragic dramatic text. Auerbach argues that:

Yet in both modern and ancient times, there are important epic works which are composed throughout with no 'retarding element' in this sense but, on the contrary, with suspense throughout, and which perpetually 'rob us of our emotional freedom', which power Schiller will grant only to the tragic poet... But the true cause of the impression of 'retardation' appears to me to lie elsewhere, namely, in the need of the Homeric style to leave nothing which it mentions half in darkness and unexternalized.¹⁹

This element of slowing down and reducing emotional excitement in order to combat classical dramatic suspense is a constant feature of the form of Beckett's dramas, giving them a diegetic quality.

In Beckett's dramas, speech does not follow the style of speech in classical mimetic dramas. Dialogues do not serve to represent mimetic action, but rather to propose philosophical concepts and establish a dialectic that emphasizes the process of philosophizing rather than relying on response. Exactly the same as Socrates' style in Socratic dialogues. And this is precisely the true function of Platonic texts, which, instead of proposing philosophical propositions, proposes philosophical processes.

¹⁹ AUERBACH (1968: 2–3).

Philosophical dialogue (unlike technical understanding) is not meant to cause problems to disappear but to gain knowledge about the idea of man as a rational being as well as the idea of a rational life.²⁰

In other words, 'knowledge does not come to those who choose the right teachings, but to those who do the right exercises, so that their minds become strong in the perception of facts'.²¹ Concerning drama, it means that Platonic diegetic dramas are instructions about how to participate in a philosophical conversation.

Conclusion

In my understanding, Platonic diegetic drama is an exercise in philosophizing; no absolute truth is expressed and by establishing a real dialogue, it provides the possibility of thinking to create a new logos. This is what Beckett does in his dramatic texts in general, and in *Waiting for Godot* in particular; he does not attempt to present the definitive answer in any way, he merely raises philosophical questions. When a playwright simply asks a question, he is no longer accused by Plato of having knowledge, which would have led him to expel poets from his ideal Republic. The playwright has simply asked a question without claiming to have knowledge. Also, according to Socrates, posing a question is the basis of the method of philosophizing and an invitation to think.

Viewed through a Platonic lens, *Waiting for Godot* operates as a modern philosophical diegetic drama that reflects anti-mimetic concepts both in form and content. The diegetic pattern in *Waiting for Godot* highlights the interplay between dialogue, abstraction, and dialectic in creating meaning within a self-contained world. By avoiding the structure

²⁰ MITTELSTRASS (1988: 128).

²¹ WOMACK (2011: 13).

of Aristotelian mimetic drama, and relying on diegetic-driven plays, Beckett effectively presents a modern example of Platonic dramaturgy.

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