

THE SHIFTING SANDS. GIORGIO DE CHIRICO, SAMUEL BECKETT, HAROLD PINTER

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I often have been tempted to write about the relationship between writing and painting. I have discussed various similarities in perspective and portrayal one might find among the works of these two linked forms of expression.

In this paper I will try to find the relationship between three famous artists of the 20th century- the painter **Giorgio De Chirico**, and two Nobel prize winner for literature and drama **Samuel Beckett** and **Harold Pinter**. They shape traditional signs and symbols into a new structure of bricolage and produced an effect that postulate a question for which there is no answer, because the mystery of life fascinates them most of all- what happens between the words, between the shadows.

Is there something in the nature of their works itself that frustrates all articulate interpretation? I would argue that there is. Their art does confront us with inscrutable demands and omnipresent sense of paradox. I myself have found a key to their work`s power and potential to obsess and fascinate and I named it – *the effect of the shifting sands*. They weave an intricate surface pattern that encourages us to look behind it. But we go back at our own risk and failing to find the sources of the pattering, we stand amazed once again at the surface and in front of more questions than answers. It is a texture which is immediate and visual, offering an insight only in the possibilities which the unexpected images engender. The effect of the shifting sands is produced by shaping traditional signs and symbols into a new structure or bricolage to postulate a question for which there is no answer. It takes place within the examination of the memories, that generate another memory. This search does not lead to the solution, but it makes the ambiguity more precise. Cold sun, dark sky, indifference, lack of love, loss of oneself, anxiety and menace: those images and feelings are projected like from nowhere- chance liberates the mute connection between objects and creates a multidimensional labyrinth.

There are no crucial events in Beckett`s and Pinter`s plays. The audience has been left out of traditional knowing position, struggling to interpret the events without the

author's help. The figures in De Chirico's paintings like Beckett's personages are usually passive. Often they are little silhouettes in the distance, dwarfed by their own shadows as in *The Nostalgia of the Infinite*. Yet even when the characters are in the foreground, such as in *The Enigma of the Oracle* or *The Melancholy of a Beautiful Day*, they are faceless, androgynous figures. They seem not to participate or even be particularly aware of the world around them. They are but visitors, incidental characters in the strange world that De Chirico paints.

I would explain what is the feeling provoked by the effect of shifting sands with Giorgio De Chirico's words:

Inside a ruined temple the broken statue of a god spoke a mysterious language. For me this vision is always accompanied by a feeling of cold, as if I had been touched by a winter wind from a distant, unknown country. Giorgio de Chirico, 1912

The purpose of this paper is to show how a system of signs and symbols activates the intuition and enters directly into the bloodstream of the unsuspecting viewer and reader and produces *the effect of the shifting sands*.

We who know the signs of the metaphysical alphabet know what joys and sorrows are present in a portico, on a street corner within the walls of a room, or inside a box.

Giorgio de Chirico

De Chirico, Beckett and Pinter often structured their works using a collage of units that carries a meaning of its prior function (for example Ariadna series by De Chirico). The investigation of that meaning will not logically lead us to the next patch which formerly was part of another conceptual whole. The kind of zeugma¹ which the Dadaists did by making a fur-lined teacup refers to one's prior knowledge of both fur and teacup. The result defeats or contradicts the function for which a teacup was formed. **The Song of**

¹ Zeugma – (Greek, yoke) A figure of speech in which one term links two others in a sentence. This may be perfectly correct ('let me hear the people and their demands') or it may generate a syllepsis, in which case the linking term is only grammatically or semantically appropriate for one of the others ('she went home in a flood of tears and a taxi'). Opponents may charge that certain philosophical positions construct such zeugmas, e.g. if one holds that we see both real daggers and hallucinatory daggers.

Love (1914) is one of the most famous Chirico's paintings and marks the point in his evolution where he begins to embrace a new concept though implausible juxtaposition. This painting brings together incongruous and unrelated objects: the head of a Classical Greek statue, an oversized rubber glove, a green ball, and a train shrouded in darkness, silhouetted against a bright blue sky. By this zeugmatic effect De Chirico created what he termed "metaphysical" paintings. In the works of this period De Chirico strove to discover new relationships between objects, to reveal the secret connections that can exist between them.

In drama, however, the zeugmatic situation is presented within a closed universe. In Pinter's drama the author seems to be in an unknowing position and this distance enables him to embrace all the contradictions which his characters present.

Max in *The Homecoming*, sets up a zeugmatic situation by recalling his dead wife, Jessica, first as *a woman at home with a will of iron, a heart of gold and a mind*² and later as a slutbitch of a wife³: The memories which push and pull at one another draw the audience even closer to the immediate events, to the actual and visual situation; mistrusting the past in any form, the audience clings to the present.

The Pinter's and Beckett's personages are in no way diabolical nor they are playing elaborate games meant to confuse. They are, in the end, operating on the same shifting sands as the audience in their search for stability. The characters and objects in works by Pinter, Beckett and De Chirico are merged within a common pattern, destroying the dependence of objects on characters, provoking *the effect of the shifting sands*. Sometimes these objects acquire such self-importance as to seem ominous and tend to generate something like awe: for instance, in Pinter's *The Dumbwaiter*, the inanimate object for which the play is titled, contains the central authority. In Beckett's drama *Happy days* the bell is transcendental. The world of Beckett's characters is not an immanent world, it is always regulated from the outside: outside the world of Winnie there is the bell and all the things in her handbag that create their world.

The very first line of *Waiting for Godot* is:

Estragon: Nothing to be done.

² Pinter, H. *The Homecoming*, Grove Press, 1994. p.46.

³ *Ibid.* p.47.

We think at first that Estragon is talking about his inability to pull off his boots. But it is also a comment about the play in general, about plays in general, may be about our place in the world in general.

The autonomy and often aggressiveness of objects is peculiar to Pinter's and Beckett's theatre and De Chirico's painting. One reason for this is that they form, along with the characters, the visual pattern, which is the source of interpretation. Chirico's objects, plaster statues or heads, vegetables or fruit, faceless mannequins, rubber gloves and dry biscuits, are all represented with absolute indifference. They are so impersonal that they lose all their natural meaning. Their grouping creates limitless possibilities of elusiveness and mystery and is comparable to that visual pattern between language and silence which exists with Pinter's and Beckett's characters and objects. By juxtaposition the silence and objects (whose role, as a character in Beckett's *Molloy* said is *to restore the silence*) authors create the zeugmatic effect.

Just as there is an intrinsic tension between silence and words, so there is an intrinsic tension between immobility and movement. In Beckett's theatre and De Chirico's art, the human body is considered with minute attention. They approach it just as they approach space, objects, light and language – as a genuine raw material which may be modified, sculpted, shaped and distorted for the stage. The body is immobilized like a statue, anonymous mannequin, hidden from the spectator's view, covered. The Beckettian and Chirico's human body is not only fragmented to the viewer, eroded by shadows, covered and closed in, annulled or annihilated; it is also, in its most typical manifestation, deprived of the faculty of movement. One of the peculiar properties of immobility is that it can acquire further tension and anxiety. Because of that the smallest gesture by Hamm, Clov or Winnie, the very moment of silence is invested with immense significance. We could remember and compare Winnie in *Happy days*, buried up to the neck and the woman's body in De Chirico's *The Uncertainty of a Poet*. Here the zeugmatic effect generates almost immediately a feeling of uneasiness.

In *The Lassitude of the Infinite* (as in many other paintings from the period between 1910-1920) long shadows project from two tiny figures at the far end of a vast piazza at an angle to the reclining stone Ariadne in the foreground, gigantic in comparison. The two archetypal figures stand or walk, mostly in silence, because there is almost always space between them. So thinly has the artist painted them that they appear to be two spirits

who have materialized from the ether, or two shades who have accidentally wandered from the underworld. Space absorbs them: they are just vanishing shadows in this dimension of existence. Therefore the image of train in Chirico's painting attracts so much attention: like object train is a repeating motif in his paints: trains are a metaphor for the journey (also into the unconscious mind), movement, dynamic and progress. But this symbol is often quite ambiguous. Sometimes the movement is also arrested or impossible, journey stops in the middle of the nothing and dynamic is transformed in menace and tension. In some paintings the train railings finished in the center of square just like Didi and Gogo do not move, even they talk all the time they do.

In De Chirico's *The Arrival*, movement plays a significant role. The ship here and the train in some other paintings seem to be moving in the opposite direction of the majority of the painting – a movement against movement; a cold gust of change on this somnambulistic morning.

Movement and immobility operate reciprocally and dynamically, each enhancing the dramatic effect of the other. By *arresting* the minimal movement De Chirico and Beckett focused viewer's attention on details making the familiar to become unusual, endowed with an uncanniness which elicited menace and wonder.

I could illustrate my thoughts till this moment perfectly with Chirico's painting- *The Joys and Enigmas of a Strange Hour* (1911). Here the statue is a fairly faithful replica of the Greek-Roman sculpture, and a new complexity and care are evident in the composition as a whole. From the freestanding, diagonal colonnade at the left, the observer's eye follows to the right the shafts of a V of strong light. The deeper shaft leads past the statue toward two diminutive figures, casting long shadows, and behind them to a remote landscape. The shorter and nearer shaft of light proceeds past the statue toward a crenelated tower with adjoining wall. Behind the wall an old locomotive, brought to a dead halt, emits a frozen puff of smoke. The locomotive is partly concealed by the wall, as is the landscape at the extreme left of the picture. The use of walls for partial concealment is typical of De Chirico's enigmatic vision and served once again to stress over the immobility of space. Absent people throw shadows, silence vibrates. Around these cold, pure architectures the air is charged with mystery and invention. Cloaked in an atmosphere of anxiety and melancholy, de Chirico's humanoid forms, vacuous architecture, shadowy passages, and eerily elongated streets

evoke the profound absurdity of a universe torn apart by World War I, that is the base of the theatre of the absurd and stands in strong relationship with Beckett's and Pinter's drama.

Time. Menace. Silence.

There is one question that we must always ask about Beckett's and Pinter's plays and De Chirico's paintings:

Who or what is speaking or acting on any given occasion?

In De Chirico's and Pinter's work, something is always just about to happen.

De Chirico's horizons are obscured, long brick walls stopped the sunshine, views are blocked by looming arcades and an unseen figure is only given away by the shadow he casts. Behind the wall a ship is waiting to depart. Only the sail is visible. We infer that the ship, like the ocean that rocks it back and forth, is there. A locomotive whistle in the distance, appearing to speed. Signs point in opposite directions, leading us, after great exertions, back to where we started.

And suddenly in those blank-faced piazzas touched by the light of an unseen sun, the viewer lost sense of time and space and a feeling of anxiety came like from nowhere (just the same sense of menace we feel, watching a Pinter's play). What and Pinter give with one hand, they take away with the other. De Chirico's paintings may seem to reassert the clear depths of Renaissance perspective, but they do so in such a way as to make them disquieting and ineffably strange. Their seeming orderliness acts as a kind of lure, tricking us into a space as banal and inexplicable as a half-remembered dream. The destabilization of space and time are some of the means through which De Chirico and especially Beckett submerge the paradigm within which reason orders tangible reality. Space is characterized by sense of incompleteness: perspectives are deficient, temporal markers are imprecise and the animated occupation of space is never overt. De Chirico architectural space is expressed in terms of potentialities rather than assertions. It is a diluted space that falls short of the finite and within which possibilities rather than occurrences prevail. The time is no linear, but cycling.

The place to illustrate this is the painting **"The Delights of the Poet" 1912**. Time, represented by the clock is in the center of the picture. The clock looks down from the

railway station building and across the empty piazza toward its viewer and demands from him to interpret time significance. It is 2.00 PM.

The ghostly ghost in the mid-background, gaze fixed on the ground, is turned toward the place where the sun will set-the distance traditionally associated with death. Time, therefore, both through the angle of the sunlight and the gaze of the wraith, is linked with death. The fountain reemphasizes the theme of a linear time, that the clock shows, by obverse, because it is a symbol of the rebirth and the cycling time. The train once again is in the contrast with everything else. This presents an unresolved temporal alternative and therefore, like in Beckett's drama the sense of time is annihilated, that leads to feeling of a profound loneliness and menace. The menace is an important aspect in Pinter's and Beckett's drama and in De Chirico's art technique. It comes from an unexpected event – that is the “intruder” in Pinter's drama, who occasionally is silent and unknown like the Negro in *The Room*, the match-seller in *A Slight Ache*, Coldberg and MaCann in *Birthday party*. But all those Intruders are finally less external forces or messengers from the void or malign universe than projections of inner fears and emptiness.

De Chirico's trains are one of the most disturbing symbols of malaise invented by artists in 20th century. They cut to the core of ordinary experience. Around these cold and pure architectures, the air is charged with mystery, menace and silence. For example, the figure in Chirico's *The Red Tower (1913)* functions like the **intruder** in Pinter's drama. It is a dark colored, half shown silhouette, placed inexplicably on a higher eye level than us, invoking childhood fears. The shadow of the statue casts itself entirely through the picture which could allude to this concept of negative space – the subtext of all that an individual experience in life. The absence of other figures involves the viewer and casts the viewer as the target of the implied pursuer, and the absence of any other cover apart from our sole hiding place creates a primitive, survival-based fear. De Chirico's unusual associations of images and ideas arouse in the spectator a feeling of subdued but profound anxiety.

Where someone could escape from this increasing anxiety? This is the Pinter's room(the room as surrogate womb). That is De Chirico's tower image – huge and lit by the sun and the incessantly talk of Beckett's personages.

Those confined spaces appear, at least initially, to welcome us back from the black abyss of modernism to a sense of security and familiarity promised by solid walls.

But this is a self-deception. The room, the tower, the empty words are the strongest image of self-prisoned man in their art: the human alienation from the transcendent and human society is overwhelming.

The menace in De Chirico and Pinters work arises from an everyday life. They slowly and unpredictably create a sense, that a catastrophe is about to happen and nobody knows why and from where. What we feel is uncertainty. *The Mystery and Melancholy of the Street* is one of the most famous pictures by the Italian painter. A city street, tilted toward us, dominated on either side by the impassive arcades of anonymous buildings. Nothing happens, nothing much. A shadowed girl rolls her hoop past a wooden cart, also in shadow. Like the girl, it is turned away from us, the open doors in back permitting us to glimpse an interior that is perfectly empty, at least as far as our vision can reach. By their attitudes, the running girl and the undistinguished cart draw us toward another shadow: a silhouette fallen across the street. This figure elongated by the sun seems to be waiting for, or heading toward the girl, the cart and us.

In *The Enigma of the Oracle* De Chirico has made a general statement about that. The deep sense of loneliness is shown by cutting off from human the city is below and far away. De Chirico's city is a fantasy town, a state of mind, signifying alienation. The central figure (like in the most pictures) is turned back to the spectator's viewpoint.

We see the same figure, depicted shrouded in *The Melancholy of a Beautiful day* (1913), duplicated as tiny figures in *The Lassitude of the Infinite* (1912), the wraith of *The Delights of the Poet* and in many other paintings by De Chirico from his "metaphysical" period. Those figures like the Oracle's one suggest the silence of world, the silence by God and men indifference. This total indifference is embodied in death itself.

The drama of Beckett and Pinter are distinguished by their shocking retreat from the word and their yielding to the temptation and authority of silence to express the unspoken and unspeakable. The both use silence as a dramatic, rather than a rhetorical strategy. When language is fragmented and thoughts are incomplete -it generates anxiety, because silence means loss of existence. The feeling of incompleteness in De Chirico's paintings is provoked by the image of the walls, that is typical for his enigmatic vision.

Silence and shadow are signs that have too much in common. Their connotation is absence, lack of something. And while Beckett uses silence, because language fails to express the most important things and feelings in human life, Pinter describes silence as a result of human alienation and loneliness and *as a desperate rear guard attempt to keep ourselves to ourselves*⁴.

The Unnamable. The Self loss. The Death.

Like in De Chirico's paintings the semantic polyvalence in famous Beckett's plays *Waiting for Godot* and *Endgame*, may be a way to put the unrepresentable and the unnamable— melancholy and death into signs: the two common components of deep loneliness and Self- loss.

De Chirico painted a number of very powerful and often beautiful canvases focusing on the theme of melancholy through destructive linearity of time. Timelessness is linked with melancholy, with a profound boredom, loneliness and sense of loss. This is the sense projected by the empty and eerie piazza and its shaded colonnades. With such an emotion could be associated many of Chirico's paintings of Metaphysical period. *The nostalgia of the infinite is revealed beneath the geometric precision of the piazzas*⁵, wrote De Chirico when describing Turin.

Often in Chirico's paintings melancholy is represented like Ariadne statue.

Who apart from myself knows what Ariadne is? – Nietzsche wrote in *Ecce Homo*. For him, the story of Ariadne is the story of the soul, abandoned by reason and logic. And melancholy, among other things, is an indistinct sense of being stuck in the center of something over which one is powerless. De Chirico was much influenced by Nietzsche. In this series the statue of Ariadne is placed in the center of the town squares, away from everything else in the paintings, leaving it to be the center of attention, stressing on her loneliness. We see some men taking a walk in the sun, their shadows fall on the ground and on a tiled wall behind them – a low and long wall. The horizon is empty. The wall seems to mark the limits of the world; there is nothing behind it. The sense of

⁴ Pinter, H. *Writing for the Theatre*. Speech made by Harold Pinter to the National Student Drama Festival, in Bristol in 1962.

⁵ Giorgio de Chirico, 'Introduction to an Exhibition in Prague,' 1935, quoted in P. Baldacci, *Giorgio de Chirico: The Metaphysical Period: 1888-1919*, London, 1997, p. 128.

boredom and infinite apprehension, the somewhat interrogative feeling that is produced by the horizon's line—permeate the whole picture, thanks to the figures, the ground, the shadows, the light.

The scenery in *The Arrival* feels like a theatrical set. And here, the mood suggests a tragedy. The painting has at its center a morose, truncated triangle of caramel-colored vacuity. In the center of this triangular, perspectival vacuum is the sculptured figure of a man with his back to us; the sole actor on this stage. The scene just like in Ariadna series is abandoned, save for this carved man, with his fatigued and stooped pose, backwards to the viewpoint. He is a melancholic watcher of the sea; a sufferer of ennui; stuck in time; indecisive.

I examine the melancholic elements in both Beckett's and Pinter's play and consider their ability to either curb or spread melancholy. They resist being encapsulated by a definitive, unifying interpretation. What makes the plays enigmatic is that they suggest a multiplicity of possible meanings, overall, and with respect to particular signifiers. For example, In Beckett's *Endgame*, there is a tension between a desire for the end, for silence and stillness, and a desire to prolong the end by talking—by repeating the same old jokes and stories, by repeating the same old questions and answers.

The outside world is perceived as dead and empty, a feature Freud attributes to both mourning and melancholy. Clov and Hamm describe the world outside as dead, another hell, nothing stirring, no sun, no light, no darkness—just gray. It is characterized by nothingness and timelessness—time is zero and everything is zero.

The fact that the characters are wounded and incomplete is visually and externally represented by their physical disabilities.

Even one of his personages imagines the end, it is not the end. They go on thinking. The only way there will be silence and stillness, hence—the death, is if one sits quietly. But they never do. Despite the desire for the end and for silence they continue to talk – to fill the emptiness of death with words, even though this is a deception—a necessary deception. Beckett's plays illustrates the inadequacy and arbitrariness of words.

While there is an attempt made to name suffering in *The Endgame*, to put death—the unnamable and the unrepresentable—into signs, there is much in the play that evokes an impossible melancholy. Beckett's silences draw into a place we don't want to go, yet feel we belong, and we respond to this recognition with uncomfortable laughter.

Pinter does not offer Beckett's sad but deep perspective of the man on the road, waiting for an unexciting God. Instead Pinter focuses on everyman who exists in his ordinary room with ordinary activities, making insignificant decision. In Pinter's dramatic world the everyday habits of daily life are seen at one and the same time as comic and ineffectual, and as tragic and pathetic. Their emptiness is exposed with all the intellectuality of Ionesco's kind of irony. Pinter's melancholy arises slowly, during an ordinary breakfast, combating a bee in his morning tea, the man confronts the emotional turmoil of everyday life. The isolation of Pinter's characters within themselves renders what they say essentially unreliable. Above all, motive is disguised; the inner core of the person hidden and masked before others. Pinter is not being purposefully ambiguous. On the contrary, it is one of Pinter's basic views of life. Human relationships are always guarded because his character's fear to reveal themselves or, if they do, one can never be absolutely confident that they have.

In this existential dilemma the man, seeking order, is confronting the chaos that ultimately overwhelms him.

There is no use citing history and the causes of this and of that; this describes, but it explains nothing for the eternal reason that there is nothing to explain, and yet the enigma always remains.

This De Chirico's statement in year 1913 is one of the most exactly characteristic, that we could make about Pinter's characters.

And I conclude my paper summarizing my idea. A strange pain rises through the eye and words after we met works of De Chirico, Beckett and Pinter, because the unseen is more powerful than the seen. There is no way through or out of the beyond. There is an unseen presence that manipulate events. The strange artistic process that produces the effect of the shifting sands curves the time and space, words and silence, shadows and objects, images and personages, memories and forgetfulness so that, at the end of a long voyage, we find ourselves in the same autumnal square, under the same tree, facing the enigma, waiting of Godot, wrestling with a shadow that does not permit us to escape? The dream turns on itself. It has no beginning, and will have no end. Omnipotence returns – as a symptom. The anxiety that created our mind can never be too directly questioned or approached. By unsettling the sign-referent relationship and

by building a plurality of connotations around the sign – *the effect of the shifting sands* like an artistic device by De Chirico, Beckett and Pinter allows the subject to imagine the meaning or nonmeaning of the Thing; to feel the Unnamable and most of all it allows the subject to secure an uncertain but adequate hold over the Thing.

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