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## Chorus in *Rockaby*: Singing Together

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*Rockaby* is a short play written by Samuel Beckett for a mini-festival to honour his own 75<sup>th</sup> birthday at the Buffalo campus of the State University of New York in 1981. As '75<sup>th</sup> birthday' has indicated, it is one of the latest plays in his life (he had kept writing until he died aged 83 in 1989) and the 27<sup>th</sup> one in his whole 32 plays including his actual first one, *Eleutheria*, which he wouldn't permit to be published.

The first performance of *Rockaby* at the festival was directed by Alan Schneider, who was the most important director of Beckett's plays in US and involved in the project, and it was Billie Whitelaw, Beckett's favorite actor, who played the roles of W (= *Woman in chair*) and V (= *Her recorded voice*). According to James Knowlson, 'The premiere on 8 April 1981 was ecstatically received' (663).

Enoch Brater also describes the particulars related to the first performance and reported Schneider's comment: *Rockaby* is 'not about dying' but '[i]t's about accepting death' (175). This interpretation by the director seems to be a view shared by many critics.<sup>1</sup> Actually, the end of the play is that W attired in '[b]lack lacy high-necked evening gown' which looks like mourning dress drops her head slowly, which suggests her tranquil death (273). However, the theme of 'accepting death' is in a striking contrast to those of his other plays, where there are lots of ghosts or ghost-like characters who cannot die completely and continue whispering even after death: the purgatorial sufferings

are a repetitious theme of Beckett's plays.<sup>2</sup>

What, then, makes *Rockaby* differ from the other plays? What is the reason why we can think that only the play has come to the state of 'accepting death'? For one reason, we may simply refer to Beckett's biographical fact: his old age at the time of writing the play, when he was in his closing years. He had not only gone through a lot of deaths of his family members and close friends until then, but also suffered from some diseases: the muscular contracture in his hand, the prostate trouble, the stiffness in his right leg, decline of appetite, the general weakening. Besides, in his letter dated 8 September 1981 to Walter Asmus he writes, 'Physically I am more or less all right—but the mind in [a] bad mess' (660).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, we may say that *Rockaby* is heavily tinged with an air of 'accepting death' as a result of a change in the mind of the playwright, who had felt death more closely.

It is, however, not enough to attribute the remarkable feature to the biological element; we need another ground deduced from the play itself. In order to deduce the ground, I would like to resort to the vocalic dramaturgy. For Beckett was always confronted with voice during creating; André Bernold reports in *L'amitié de Beckett*, a collection of letters between Beckett and himself from 1979 to 1989, when the playwright just wrote *Rockaby*, that Beckett wrote on 5 July 1982 'J'ai toujours écrit pour une voix. . .' (107).<sup>4</sup> The importance of voice in his plays is deserving special attention; He lets voice appear on stage in a different manner in each play. In *Rockaby* we see a vocalic play between W and V produced by a tape recorder. Consequently, I am convinced that the analysis of vocalic dramaturgy is a valid way to clarify what generates the theme or atmosphere peculiar to the play.

## I The Vocalic Dramaturgy

*Rockaby* has two characters W (*Woman in chair*), who is 'prematurely old' and has '[u]nkempt grey hair' and '[h]uge eyes in white expressionless face' and V (*Her recorded voice*) (273); the chair W sinks into is a rocking-chair with '[r]ounded inward curving arms to suggest embrace' (273). The play is divided into four acts, where there are some repetitious phrases and 'she' in V's story comes back from outside into her house with a window and goes 'down the steep stair' to her 'mother rocker' (280). With W's 'More' as a cue V begins her telling while the chair starts to rock:

W. More.

[Pause. Rock and voice together.]

V. till in the end

the day came

in the end came

close of a long day. . . (275)

V's story which W listens in a chair is about searching for 'another creature like herself' or presumably herself, who also seems to be W (275). As the stage direction shows, V is W's own recorded voice; Brater insists 'voice and protagonist can securely be identified as one' (166), though the actor makes a difference to a tone of voice between W and V: Jonathan Kalb points out that 'Onstage Whitelaw uses a voice more raspy and fatigued than the one on the tape, suggesting that the woman is older than the voice. . .' (14).

What is significant here is that V is W's own voice whether the tone is different or not. V as W's voice is, in other words, separated from W's body. The separation of voice and body is Beckett's favorite vocalic dramaturgy, which often appears in his plays. For instance, *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) is a good

example: the main performance of *Krapp's* is sixty-nine-year-old Krapp's listening to a voice which was recorded on a tape at his thirty-ninth birthday, and his recorded voice cannot be recognized as his own voice. Namely, separating of voice from body makes him listen to his voice as another person's. This is a very similar situation to W listening to V in *Rockaby*. We can see the separation of voice and body in *That time* (1976) and *Footfalls* (1976) too. The former is also a play where 'LISTENER'S FACE' is set 'about 10 feet above stage level midstage off center' and 'Voice A B C are his own coming to him from both sides and above' (228). Voice A B C uttered at a distance from LISTENER's body tell stories about the memories in his middle years, younger days, and old ages respectively. And Voice A says, remembering his habitual vocalic play in his childhood:

A. or talking to yourself [LISTENER] who else out loud  
 imaginary conversations there was childhood for you ten  
 or eleven on a stone among the giant nettles making it  
 up now one voice now another till you were hoarse and  
 they all sounded the same well on into the night some  
 moods in the black dark or moonlight and they all out  
 on the roads looking for you (230)

LISTENER when he was 'ten or eleven' splits his voice into plural ones, which is called 'imaginary conversation,' that is to say fulfillment of his fantasy, a conversation with others. And it dramatizes the play itself, the situation of LISTENER and voice A B C. In the latter, the protagonist MAY has a conversation with her mother's voice without body, and in addition MAY tells about the story of Amy (MAY's anagram) as 'she had never been' and 'I [Amy] was not there,' playing roles of narrators, Amy and Mrs Winter. It is, thus, obvious that *Rockaby* follows this genealogy of the separation of voice and body.

We have made certain of the analogy of vocalic strategy between *Rockaby* and the other plays, but here we have to ask again what enables *Rockaby* to accept death. Now, we would like to focus attention on an inverted movement of the voices in *Rockaby*: it is a fusion of W's real voice and her recorded voice V in the italic lines of '*time she stopped*,' which is what I would like to call as chorus.<sup>5</sup> Before we discuss chorus in the play in detail, we would like to bestow some consideration from the standpoint of simultaneous vocalization in order to show a difference between chorus and simple simultaneous vocalization in the other plays: *Rough for Theatre II* (1976), *Krapp's Last Tape*, and *Play*.

The following dialogue of two detectives A and B, who investigate a client, is from *Rough for Theatre II* written in the 1950s:

B. [*Together.*] '... morbidly sensitive—'

A. [*Together.*] Keep your hands off the table.

B. What?

A. Keep your hands off the table if it ↗s a connection the least jog can do it.

B. [*Having pulled back his chair a little way.*] '... morbidly sensitive—' (83)

'[M]orbidly sensitive,' which B reads aloud from the investigative report about the client, and A's imperative 'Keep your hands off the table' are simultaneously uttered, and they reiterate the same phrase later to make clear their phrases to each other, which indicates that it is each individual utterance that we should put weight on here. Namely, the utterances do not become chorus, which is reverberating of plural overlapped voices.

The next is from *Krapp's Last Tape*:

TAPE. And the aspirations! [*Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.*] And the resolutions! [*Brief laugh in which KRAPP joins.*] To drink less, in particular. [*Brief laugh of KRAPP alone.*] (58)

The simultaneous vocalization of laugh happens here: Krapp overlaps his laugh over thirty-nine-year-old Krapp's one on tape. But their laughing together does not last long; Krapp ends up laughing alone in his third attempt.

*Play*, however, has a little different flavour. The play begins with simultaneously telling stories by the three characters: W1's 'Yes, strange, darkness best, and the darker the worse, till all dark. . .,' W2's 'Yes, perhaps, a shade gone, I suppose, some might say, poor thing. . .' and M's 'Yes, peace, one assumed, all out, all the pain, all as if . . . never been. . .' (147-8). Since the words of W1, W2 and M do not overlap except for their leading word 'Yes,' it is impossible to think of this as chorus. However, it surprises us to know that Beckett gives a stage direction, using the word 'chorus' to the simultaneous vocalization by three in the last two pages. Whether this is chorus in an exact sense or not, it is certain that Beckett cherished an idea of chorus in his mind at the period of writing *Play*. And the idea seems to have matured in *Rockaby*.

## II Chorus

The italic lines of '*time she stopped*' are with a stage direction of 'Lines in italics spoken by W with V' (274); W and V overlap their voices seven times. As a matter of course, it is not enough to conclude that they join in a chorus, a mature form of simultaneous vocalization. Then, we would like to consider the vocalic play now, introducing the other aspects of chorus.

The 4<sup>th</sup> definition of 'chorus' in *Oxford English Dictionary* is

'The simultaneous utterance of song by a number of people; anything sung by many at once'; first of all, chorus is to be a song. Though '*time she stopped*' is of course not a song, Beckett insisted 'it [*Rockaby*] is a lullaby.'<sup>6</sup> And most of the critics have the same opinion that it is a lullaby which makes W sleep the eternal sleep. In addition to that, the play gives the impression of a poem rather than a drama from the style of the text:

V. going to and fro  
 all eyes  
 all sides  
 high and low  
 for another  
 another like herself  
 another creature like herself (275)

Brater states that '*Rockaby* is Beckett's first play in which the language is not merely poetic, but a poem complete in itself,' judging from its use of words as 'to and fro' and 'high and low' 'to imitate the gentle sway of a rocking chair in graceful motion' (170). He also indicates its dramatic aspect from the vocalic play keenly as follows:

In *Rockaby* Beckett therefore uses recorded sound to achieve a very spectacular stage effect. In this short play the special sound of a recorded voice becomes the true voice of feeling, the voice of lyric poetry. Yet its eerie tone modulated but always metallic, is never entirely human. It is only the conflict between what we hear and what we see, the interplay between the "live" voice and its recorded counterpart, that makes the poetry not only lyrical, but dramatic. (172)

Taking these points into consideration, it is possible to regard the play itself as a song though of course it is a song quite close to

a poem.

'An organized band of singers and dancers in the religious festivals and dramatic performances of ancient Greece' is the first definition of 'chorus' in *OED*; Originally a choral band was formed with singers and dancers. The cue 'More' by W for V to start to speak is always accompanied with the stage direction '*Pause. Rock and voice together.*' Rock of a chair, which is '[c]ontrolled mechanically without assistance from W,' continues until V's telling stops in each act, so W is cradled in a chair, listening to V. That is to say, when W and V sing a phrase '*time she stopped,*' song and dance perform one action. Song and dance are now united into a chorus.

Finally, we have to consider the effect of chorus to the whole play. As I have already described, V's story is about searching for 'another creature like herself' or presumably herself, who also seems to be W. 'She' in V's story, who wanders 'to and fro,' 'all sides,' goes back to her house and sits at her window, and at last goes down and reach 'the old rocker,' 'mother rocker' downstairs:

V. so in the end  
 close of a long day  
 went down  
 in the end went down  
 down the steep stair  
 let down the blind and down  
 right down  
 into the old rocker  
 mother rocker  
 where mother rocked  
 all the years

all in black  
 best black (280)

This last scene bears the close resemblance to W in a black evening dress, which is presumably her 'best black,' in a rocking chair on stage. Here, the audience or readers may wonder if V, W's recorded voice, tells her own story and 'she' V talks about is W herself. And we feel that W and V, and 'she' are united into one creature. This sensation is reinforced by a negative 'no' inserted three times. The following is the third one:

V. went down  
 let down the blind and down  
 right down  
 into the old rocker  
 and rocked  
 rocked  
 saying to herself  
no  
 done with that  
 the rocker  
 those arms at last  
 saying to the rocker (emphasis added, 282)

The word 'no' negates the phrase 'saying to herself' and modifies it to 'saying to the rocker.' The negative gives presentness to V's story told in the past tense, by which the story seems to transcend time and space and gain synchronicity with W's situation performed on stage. But we cannot find firm grounds for this feeling. Charles R. Lyons writes as follows:

We exercise our tendency to build a narrative whole out of the fragments displayed and, at the same time, recognize that this created history is a product of our imagination—

ephemeral and unverifiable. In that sense, our futile struggle to deal with the intangibility of the experience duplicates the struggle of Beckett's characters as they grapple with their images of the past in the baffling environment of the present. (306)

I agree with him: we cannot verify the relationship of W, V, and 'she,' and, to put it strongly, we cannot assert V's story is not a lie. We are just left with a feeling that the three are extremely close.

Masato Sawada says about simultaneous vocalization, which is recognized in yelling a slogan, chorus, laughing with others, that it does not care about 'the individuality of voice' and 'classifying the difference of each voice' (231).<sup>7</sup> In *Rockaby*, therefore, a chorus by W and V does not matter the individuality of W's voice and V's. What is important here is the fact that their voices are united into one. W just sings a song together with V, 'another creature like herself' whom 'she' could not find out in V's story, being cradled in the arms of 'mother rocker.' Songs or music need no relationship based on the principle of cause and effect, which is attendant upon narrative and Beckett always looked on suspiciously and resisted.

The chorus reinforces the union of W and V: hearing a song enables them to be in touch with each other. Steven Connor, who argues 'intersensoriality' of the senses, indicates the close relations between sound and touch: 'to be surrounded by sound is to be touched or moved by it' (153). He also says, 'One apparent paradox of hearing is that it strikes us as at once intensely corporeal—sound literally moves, shakes, and touches us—and mysteriously immaterial' (157). Because of this 'immaterial corporeality' of disembodied sound (Connor 157), W and V are assuredly touched by each other's voices. W in the arms of 'mother rocker' alone perceives by the sense of touch V or her

mother, who remains separated from W in narrative, and it enables W to accept death.

### Notes

- 1 See also Knowlson. He writes:

The woman in *Rockaby* is rocked from cradle to grave, as the poem through overlapping cycles of need and disillusionment into a final dismissal of life—"Fuck life" says the woman's voice with startling crudeness—and an acceptance of death. (663)

- 2 For example, in *Waiting for Godot* (1956) Vladimir and Estragon have a dialogue about 'the dead voices,' which surround them or fill the world with:

ESTRAGON. They [all the dead voices] talk about their lives.

VLADIMIR. To have lived is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON. They have to talk about it.

VLADIMIR. To be dead is not enough for them.

ESTRAGON. It is not sufficient. (63)

And also, two men and a man with their faces protruding from 'three identical grey urns,' their necks being 'held fast' in the necks of the urns (147), respectively soliloquize about their triangular love affairs in *Play* (1964), which is as if they had been already dead and underwent a trial in purgatory.

- 3 This is quoted from Knowlson.

- 4 Mary Bryden also quotes these words of Beckett and says, 'Nevertheless, all of Beckett's texts, whether they be prose, poetry, or drama, are the product of one who, by his own account, *heard* them in advance of writing them' in the book edited by herself *Samuel Beckett and Music* (Introduction, 1).

- 5 In *That Time*, A says 'they all sounded the same,' which sounds like the same action as chorus. But this is a result of A's bodily fatigue, hoarseness of his voice, so it is interpreted as just a failure of A's fantasy of 'imaginary conversation' and we cannot regard it as a strategic fusion of voices like in *Rockaby*.

- 6 Brater reports these words of Beckett's in *Beyond Minimalism* (174).

- 7 This is based on his research on the way of phonetic communication of the Efe, a foraging people, in Zaire.

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